

In The News Today!!! - "Portuguese Righteous Gentile"

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UN honors diplomats who saved Jews during Holocaust

(April 5) - More than 80 "righteous" diplomats from 24 countries, including Chiune Sugihara and Raoul Wallenberg, were honored at the opening of a UN exhibition this week for rescuing over 150,000 people during the Nazi era. "We believe there are more than 500,000 people alive today as a result of diplomats who mostly defied the orders of their governments to issue visas to every country in the free world," said Eric Saul, director of the exhibition "Visas for Life: The Righteous Diplomats." The traveling exhibit includes the story of Wallenberg of Sweden, Sugihara of Japan, Hiram Bingham of the US, and Aristides de Sousa Mendes of Portugal, who worked in Bordeaux and lost his job and property after issuing visas to 30,000 families in June 1940, including 10,000 Jewish families. "My father did what he did because, as he said, 'I'd rather be with God against man than with man against God.' That meant that the instructions that he had were immoral, inhumane, and he would not comply with them," said John Paul Abranches, his youngest son. The former diplomat died in poverty in Lisbon in 1954. "

"Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the un-godly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful... he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth its fruit in its season:" Psalm 1, 1:3 Aristides de Sousa Mendes was born in Portugal on 19th July 1885. He came from an aristocratic family, studied Law, and entered the Diplomatic Corps. After postings in the USA, Belgium. Italy and Africa. he was appointed to Bordeaux as Consul General in 1938.

In 1940, as the Germans swept through France, Spain closed its borders to refugees unless they had transit visas to another country. Portugal too, issued instructions to all its diplomats that no visas were to be given to refugees. In Bordeaux in 1940, it was the end of the road for many thousands - Jew and Gentile - desperately trying to keep ahead of the German advance. Without shelter they hoped against hope for a precious visa to enable them to continue their journey south to neutral Portugal and Spain.

Among them was Rabbi Kruger with his wife and family, including six young children. They had fled from Poland to the safety of Brussels, but by May 1940, they were again in danger, and had travelled south to Bordeaux. There in Bordeaux, he found about 100,000 desperate people, all trying to find a route to safety.

Dr Mendes told Rabbi Kruger and the thousands of other wretched souls fleeing death, that the issue of visas to refugees had been forbidden by the Portuguese Government. This did not deter him, he invited the Rabbi and his family to stay with him in the Chancery. The many thousands of desperate people 'touched' him in a very special way.

Was this his Jewish Neshamah calling from the past ? He was proud of his heritage, although a devout Catholic, as the majority of Portuguese, he had Jewish origins. A man at the height of his diplomatic career, a father of ten children, a man who knew his 'connection' to these people fleeing the Nazis. Dr Mendes was determined to do whatever he could, at the expense of his career, his status, because his conscience dictated his decision. For the next three days, the Consul and his sons signed visa after visa, refusing to stop for food or rest. Visas were issued for 30,000 families, 10,000 of these families were Jews.

The Portuguese Government ordered him to stop, but he refused. Escorts were sent to bring him home but even then, he insisted that the frontiers remain open until all those with visas had passed through. Back home, he was dismissed from his post and forbidden to practise law. His brother, an Ambassador, was also dismissed and his whole family ostracised. With no way left to him of making a living, he gradually sold his possessions and his home. Most of his children emigrated - some never to see him again - and he died penniless.

Rabbi Kruger tells that when the two men met again in Lisbon, the Rabbi in freedom, the Consul in disgrace, Dr Mendes said to him:

" If so many Jews can suffer because of one evil non - Jew, one Christian can suffer because of so many Jewish sufferers. I do not care, I could not have acted differently." This great man of Portuguese modern history has been honoured by the State of Israel, France, the United States of America and by Yad Vashem, where he has been honoured as a "Righteous Gentile."

The Cabanas de Viriato - House of Aristides de Sousa Mendes.

It was in front of this house that two American cars and a Ford van laden with furniture and stocks of food unloaded no less than nineteen Jewish passengers on a night in June 1940.

In 1995, members of the Sousa Mendes Society visited this landmark, lost to the family, abandoned and ruined. They shared the hope of the descendants of the consul that the government might restore the mansion as a sort of moral museum. Instead the president of the society, Bernard Bell, has been informed by Lucille Chernack, who visited the site with an elderhostel group, that current plans are to raze the structure and construct a hotel.

In view of the honours heaped posthumously upon this righteous gentile, including the naming of the main street and salutations, they registered, a protest against the desecration of a sacred memory.

Aristides de Sousa Mendes with his family

Front Row: Carlos, Sebastião, Teresinha, Pedro Nuno

Back Row: Clotilde, Joana, Angelina, Luís Filipe, Aristides, Geraldo, Isabel

I had the honour of giving a talk at a meeting of the "De Sousa Mendes Society" in Providence, MA, USA during March last year. Dr de Sousa Mendes is one of our lesser-known heroes of the Holocaust whose story has still not fully been told.

The dedication and lobbying to restore this unsung hero of history has now also become my dream. This society was started by his family and a few of the descendants saved by this great man's deeds. Meeting a group of these people has inspired me to try and get his name known and remembered for what he achieved. The humiliation and poverty he and his family were reduced to - for his righteous deeds, in saving 30,000 lives, of which 10,000 were Jewish families.

One person who has devoted his life to telling this story, is Henri Zvi Deutsch of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Mr Deutsch, a recipient of a de Sousa visa says that although Aristides de Sousa Mendes was a devout Catholic, he came from a marrano background and was very proud of his Jewish heritage.

Mr Deutch, stresses that the usual amount of visas issued during this period, is stated as 30,000, a third of which were Jews. What is not stated is that these visas were not issued to individuals, but to families; in his case, both his father and uncle who were Belgium refugees and had settled near Bordeaux, were issued one visa each that rescued nine individuals. The number rescued by de Sousa Mendes therefore, far exceeds 30,000 and remains unknown.

When Mendes reached Lisbon, he faced a hearing and was brought up on 14 different charges. Although he was an attorney, he was not permitted to defend himself. The outcome of the hearing was the loss of his position and the denial of his pension, despite the fact that he had devoted 32

years to the Portuguese foreign service.

He could not practice law and his adult children could not attend university. He was not stripped of his possessions, but had to sell them in order to provide for his family. The only ones who reached out to help him were the Jews. He ate at the soup kitchen established by the Jewish community of Lisbon and where Isaac Bitton, a Lisbon -born friend of mine met him. Isaac, was a young man of about 16 at the time and helping his aunt Esther when in walked this aristocratic man, well dressed with his wife and children- totally destitute. He was eventually granted a monthly stipend by a Jewish organization. HIAS also paid the fare for three of his sons to go to America and Canada.

Yad Vashem recognized Mendes as a "Righteous Gentile" in 1967, but the Portuguese government has not yet rehabilitated him. In March, 1995, President Mario Soares and the first lady of Portugal hosted some 50 Mendes family members and supporters from America for a tribute to Mendes; Mr Deutsch was the only visa recipient present. Unfortunately, the goodwill of the former president and first lady have not affected the official stance towards Mendes; the Portuguese prime minister informed Pedro Nuno, one of two sons who helped issue visas, that if his father were to disobey his government's orders today, he would be punished just as severely.

Today, I correspond with his grandson who lives in the U.S.A., and continue together with many others, to tell this story.

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