

The Consul and Rabbi Kruger

BY TOBY ORLANDER THALER

*The Consul &
the Rabbi*

TWO FRIENDS TRACK DOWN THE
STORY OF A HOLOCAUST RESCUE

Researching your roots is part detective work, and a lot like puzzles of any kind: crossword, Sudoku, or a Rubik's Cube. You need an open mind and patience, some talent and it doesn't hurt to have a professional as a close friend.

Jackie Schwarz and I, both residents of Antwerp, have been on a "roots quest" for years.

She and I met by chance many years ago. Something clicked between us when we realized that our parents were from the same general district of Galicia, Poland.

Jackie has been trying to trace her family roots from Rybotycze and Dobromil; I, my roots in a different part of Galicia.

Jackie began as a researcher for the Sousa Mendes Foundation. She was researching Aristides de Sousa Mendes and the Belgian families he saved during World War II. Aristides de Sousa Mendes was the Portuguese Consul in Bordeaux, France, in June of 1940.

The rescue work of Oskar Schindler and Raoul Wallenberg is well known, but how many of us are aware of Aristides de Sousa Mendes—a hero who saved more lives than Schindler—a man who risked everything to issue visas to some ten thousand refugees? It is my hope to bring his story to the greater public by telling it here.

It is also the story of how Rabbi Chaim Hersz Kruger put his life on the line to help save other refugees. It was he who inspired and helped Mr. Sousa Mendes to carry out his life-saving work.

FRIENDS OF FRIENDS

I recently asked Jackie how she got involved in research, which would eventually help us link Rabbi Kruger's family with the foundation set up in the name of the man Rabbi Kruger had worked with to save so many people.

"It all began," she told me, "when I couldn't find an answer to my own simple query: 'Who was my grandmother?' I was never interested enough and by the time I wanted to know, my parents weren't alive anymore.

"Luckily all was not lost. I had an elderly aunt, a half-sister of my father, and when I questioned her, she opened up a 'treasure chest.' She remembered many things from the *shtetl* in Poland, but unfortunately not enough. She was in possession of photographs—some of which she remembered who the people were, but many photos she couldn't identify at all. I was determined to put together a family tree, perhaps identify the unidentifiable and discover my roots.

"JRI (Jewish Recording Index), an organization that collects and catalogues births, marriages and deaths, and other important Jewish data from many Polish cities and villages, was an invaluable

source of information. I established a wonderful working relationship with Mr. Stanley Diamond, the executive director of JRI Poland."

That relationship led her to the Sousa Mendes story.

"People referred to me by Mr. Diamond contacted me from around the world, asking for help in tracing their Belgian roots. A Canadian woman, Mrs. Andrée Lotey was searching for answers about her Belgian family. She had never known of her Jewish roots until the death of her parents. While clearing their home she found a suitcase filled with letters and documents. She wanted to know who Sousa Mendes was and how he was connected to her parents. It was the first time I heard his name.

"About a year later, thanks to her referral, I was contacted by Dr.

*Aristides de Sousa Mendes
and four of his children*



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Olivia Mattis of the Sousa Mendes Foundation. She asked me to find out what I could about Rabbi Chaim Kruger.

“I was able to uncover all the relevant documentation for the Kruger family in the Royal Archives of Brussels and the Felix Archives in Antwerp.”

But she still didn’t have a connection to the Kruger family.

Jackie and I get together about once a week, and one day the conversation took an unexpected turn. A certain Rabbi Chaim Hersz Kruger and his family were the recipients of visas issued by Sousa Mendes, and she was trying to track down his family. Rabbi Kruger had apparently played a key part in convincing Sousa Mendes to sign visas enabling refugees to find safe passage to Portugal. Jackie was having difficulty finding any trace of Rabbi Kruger. Could I help her find them?

This is where I was able to return her favors. All the hours she had spent helping me find information I was looking for. To Jackie’s surprise, I knew exactly how to find Rabbi Kruger’s family. I knew Rabbi Kruger had a granddaughter, living in my neighborhood in Antwerp, as well I was aware that some of Rabbi Kruger’s daughters were living in Boro Park. I put Jackie in touch with his granddaughter. Thanks to this connection, she was able to speak to Rabbi Kruger’s three daughters, who gave her invaluable information.

ALLIANCES VS. ALLEGIANCES

Rabbi Chaim Hersz Kruger and Mr. Aristides de Sousa Mendes, Consul of Portugal, were unusual allies, an orthodox Rabbi and a Roman Catholic diplomat—but together they saved some 10,000 Jews during the dark and dangerous days of World War II.

In the 1930s when the reign of terror was growing like a cancer in Germany, Rabbi Chaim Hersz Kruger with his *rebbetzin* and five children—Chana, Zysel, Rivkah, Yaakov and Sarah—were living in Brussels, Belgium.

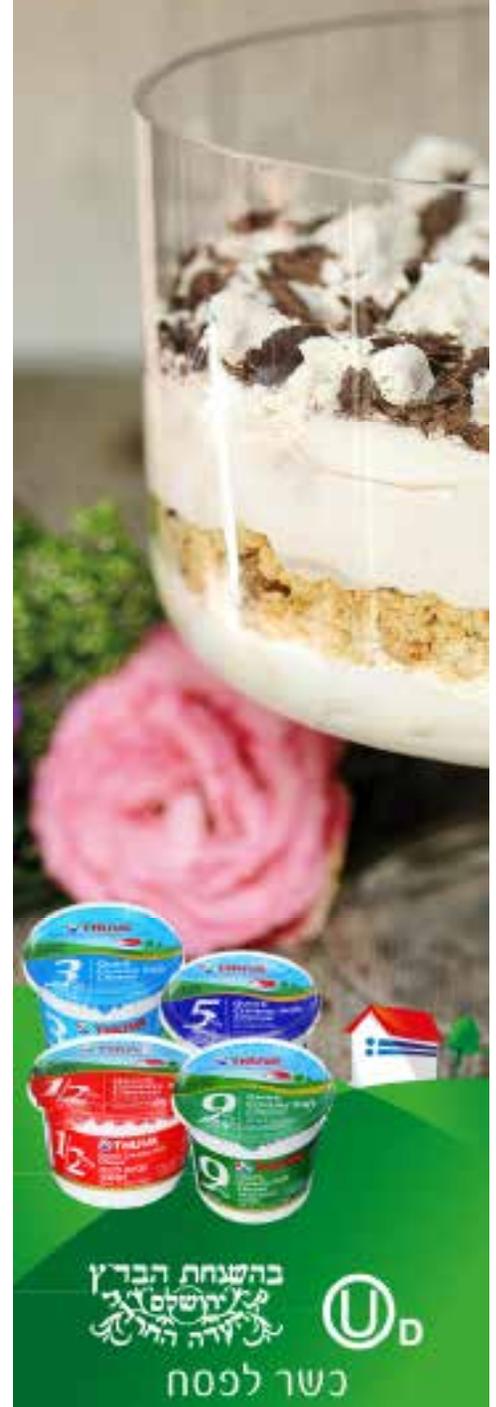
On the 1st of September of 1939, the Nazis invaded Poland. The invasion of the Low Countries took place in May of 1940. When the Germans invaded Belgium on Friday, the 10th of May, there was a surge of thousands of desperate people, including the Kruger family, trying to leave Belgium to find safety in unoccupied France. A dilemma facing Rabbi Kruger was whether it was permissible to flee on Shabbos, under the principle of “*pikuach nefesh*.” The Kruger family waited until Sunday to flee.

The perilous trek led Rabbi Kruger and his family to Bordeaux, France, where the city was crowded with people of all nationalities and backgrounds fleeing the Nazis. The homeless masses of Jewish refugees were camped out in the city square in



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A visa issued by Aristides de Sousa Mendes, Portuguese consul in Bordeaux, France

front of the Great Synagogue; Rabbi Kruger and his family joined them.

The Krugers were surprised when a large black chauffeur-driven car pulled up and stopped right where they were resting. A gentleman exited the car, introduced himself as Aristides de Sousa Mendes the Portuguese Consul, and began a conversation with Rabbi Kruger. After some discussion, Sousa Mendes invited the rabbi and his family to his own home. He explained that he too had a large family, he had 12 children, and he would like to help the Krugers.

The children balked when they saw the Christian icons in the very intimidating and grand mansion so Sousa Mendes put them up in the consulate next door for the night. He assured Rabbi Kruger he will try to do whatever he could to help him further.

The next morning, Rabbi Kruger and his family returned to the square in front of the synagogue. He felt it wasn't fair for him and his family to be recipients of the consul's kindness, while so many Jews were on the streets without food and shelter. Sousa Mendes was very troubled by Rabbi Kruger's decision; he had offered to help only the Kruger family.

At great risk of disappointing Sousa Mendes and losing his family's only chance of escape, Rabbi Kruger respectfully told Sousa Mendes that there was only one way he could accept his offer: if Sousa Mendes would give everyone visas—for all the Jews in the city square.

The only safe haven at the moment was Portugal, from where ships were leaving for the Americas. In order to leave France, traverse Spain and arrive in Portugal, one needed a Portuguese visa, showing that the visa bearer's entrance into Spain was only temporary.

The consul's assistant, José Seabra, overhearing the conversation between Rabbi Kruger and Souda Mendes, cautioned Sousa Mendes in Portuguese, against handing out any visas. It was, he said, in total disregard of the orders of the prime minister of Por-

tugal, António de Oliveira Salazar, whose government was trying to remain neutral in the war. In November 1939, a memo "Circular 14" was sent to all Portuguese consulates in Europe making clear Portugal's position. This memo made it nearly impossible for any Jewish refugees fleeing Nazism to receive Portuguese visas.

Though he did not understand Portuguese, Rabbi Kruger realized that what this assistant was telling Sousa Mendes did not bode well for him or his fellow Jews.

Rabbi Kruger was dismissed, but not before Sousa Mendes told him he would be sending a request to his government. Was this a smokescreen, a cover-up, or a salve for his pain? At that moment Rabbi Kruger felt he had gambled and lost.

When his request to the Portuguese government was rejected, Sousa Mendes set aside his allegiance to his country and took matters into his own hands. Summoning Rabbi Kruger and apprising him of his intentions of issuing visas to him and his fellow Jews regardless of his governments position, the two unlikely allies began planning the unimaginable feat of giving out as many stamped visas as possible.

Rabbi Kruger literally walked the streets asking Jewish refugees, "Yidden, give me your passports," and Sousa Mendes issued thousands of visas that same day. Working side by side, the unlikely team of Mr. Sousa Mendes signing the passports and Rabbi Kruger stamping them, were also aided by Sousa Mendes' son and an aide. The full rescue operation lasted from around June 12 to June 23. The Krugers were among the last to leave.

As was to be expected, the authorities got wind of what was transpiring right under their noses, and with the police on their tail, the Kruger family fled to the Spanish border. There they were detained. Orders had been sent by the Portuguese Foreign Ministry to all border crossings that the visas issued by Sousa Mendes are invalid.

Rabbi Kruger stood at the border begging to be allowed to cross into Spain, when suddenly out of nowhere Sousa Mendes appeared. After prolonged negotiation between the consul and the Spanish border patrol, Sousa Mendes personally lifted the barrier so that Rabbi Kruger and his family and other refugees were able to pass into Spain.

The Kruger family soon arrived safely in Portugal, and while in Lisbon, waiting for passage to the US, Rabbi Kruger was visited

by Sousa Mendes. The Kruger family was devastated to hear that Sousa Mendes had been stripped of his title and dismissed from his post.

Many of the recipients of the visas issued by Sousa Mendes made their way across the Atlantic, settling in the United States, Canada, Cuba and South America.

For his act of defiance against government directives, Sousa Mendes and his children paid a heavy price for many decades. He was forbidden to seek employment and was denied a pension; his children were denied entry to universities, and they were prevented from finding good positions. The family became outcasts in their own homeland. In spite of this, Sousa Mendes did not regret what he did, and was glad to have been instrumental in saving so many people's lives.

Aristides de Sousa Mendes, referred to by some as "The Angel of Bordeaux," died in 1954, a disgraced and poor man. Before his death, Sousa Mendes asked his children to restore honor to their family name. His sons and daughters along with their children, now scattered all around the globe, have fought for decades to have his deeds posthumously recognized. The first recognition came in 1966 when Aristides de Sousa Mendes was named "Righteous Among the Nations" at Yad Vashem.

The Sousa Mendes Foundation was established in 2010. It is dedicated to honoring the memory of Aristides de Sousa Mendes and to educating the world about his good work. The Foundation has a two-fold mission: raising funds for the restoration of the Casa do Passal in Portugal, his abandoned and ruined home that has stood for decades as a symbol of the injustice done to him and his children, and the creation within its walls of a museum and memorial site, as well as projects that perpetuate his legacy.

TYING UP LOOSE ENDS

Jackie says some heretofore unsolved mysteries are slowly being resolved due to the connections we've made.

"The Foundation had been unable to discover which ship the Kruger family sailed on," she told me, "I received a small clue from one of Rabbi Kruger's daughters; she recalled having to spend her first Shabbos in America aboard the ship in the harbor. I was able to look through all the records

until I found the ship's manifest and knew exactly which ship they had arrived on: the *Nyassa*."

Jackie says that there were some surprises during the research.

"The Sousa Mendes Foundation had no idea that so many Jews from Antwerp were also recipients of the visas. Up until my research, it was thought that there was only a handful of Antwerp Jews who escaped via these means, but in fact there were hundreds. Most of those families who left went to the US and Brazil."

There is a mission in the works that Jackie is doing, she tells me—something she is trying to do with her research.

"To be able to give 'a life' to those who perished. We remember how these people were murdered, but don't know about their lives and accomplishments. Each person who perished in the war deserves that respect. There is a strong desire by survivors to get closure by finding out how a family member perished. We want to help them. We also want to help families connect.

Without memory we do not exist. It goes back to oral history and telling a story that will be passed down and will give life.

Sometimes, like in our case, it's the connections between the living that help give life to those who have passed before us. □

Toby Orlander Thaler is the author of "Who by Fire Who by Sword," available in bookstores worldwide.



The ceremony honoring Sousa Mendes at Yad Vashem