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1954: Portuguese diplomat disgraced for saving refugees from Nazis dies

Aristides de Sousa Mendes prayed for guidance, heard a voice, and to the dismay of Lisbon, opened Portugal's door to Jews, for which he was fired and disgraced.

By David B. Green | Apr. 3, 2016 | 7:40 AM

On April 3, 1954, former Portuguese diplomat Aristides de Sousa Mendes died, aged 68. Fourteen years earlier, he had been recalled from his posting in France and dismissed from the foreign service after defying orders and issuing Portuguese transit visas to thousands of refugees trying to escape Europe, many of them Jews. He died in penury and in disgrace.

Aristides de Sousa Mendes do Amaral e Abranches was born on July 19, 1885, in Cabanas de Viriato, central Portugal. His family was of aristocratic background. His father was a judge, and Aristides' twin brother, Cesar, would in 1932 become Portugal's foreign minister.

Sousa Mendes earned a law degree from the University of Coimbra in 1908, and joined the foreign service soon afterward. That year he also married his childhood sweetheart, Maria Angelina Coelho, who bore the couple 14 children.

A voice — conscience or God

Prior to his critical posting in Bordeaux, Sousa Mendes served in a number of countries, including Brazil, the United States and Belgium. He supported the dictatorial regime that came to power in Portugal after a military coup in 1926, but he also was known for his independent, if sometimes disobedient, professional behavior.

Nonetheless, his assignment to be consul general in Bordeaux was an important one, giving him responsibility for all of southwest France.

Even before the start of World War II, the regime of dictator Antonio Oliveira Salazar had become concerned about the growing influx of refugees, many of them Jews, from other parts of Europe. In November 1939, the government instructed its emissaries not to issue entry visas to Jews without first receiving explicit permission from Lisbon.

The consequences of this policy were devastating for the many thousands who hoped to flee Europe via the Portuguese gateway.

Aristides de Sousa Mendes began modestly defying the order early on. By June of 1940, as the German army extended its control over France, Sousa Mendes, torn between a moral imperative to help people in trouble and very explicit orders from his government not to do so, underwent a personal crisis. A devout Catholic, he prayed for guidance.

On June 17, according to one of his sons, he told his family "that he had heard a voice, that of his conscience or of God... and that everything was clear in his mind." He announced his intention to give visas to all who requested them.

Helping all Jews

One person who influenced Sousa Mendes was Rabbi Chaim Kruger, a Polish Jew whom he had befriended. Kruger told him he would accept a visa only if Sousa Mendes gave similar assistance to all the Jews requesting them. When Sousa Mendes agreed to do just that, Kruger pitched in to help him with the paperwork.

Lisbon quickly heard of its employee's actions, among other channels through complaints from Spanish border officials, who were confronted with thousands of refugees. Sousa Mendes was ordered home, but instead he continued issuing visas, in some cases personally accompanying refugees to the border to make sure they were able to cross.

It's believed that 30,000 people were assisted by Sousa Mendes — one-third of whom are estimated to have been Jews. Olivia Mattis, president of the Sousa Mendes foundation says that her organization's research tends to support a figure of approximately 10,000 Jews, or of "this order of magnitude." For his part, Holocaust scholar and former Yad Vashem official Mordecai Paldiel prefers to err on the side of caution. He notes that 3,500 visa recipients have to date been identified by name, and estimates that the actual number could have been "as many as 7-8,000."

In October 1940, after his return to Portugal, Sousa Mendes was dismissed from the diplomatic corps at the orders of Prime Minister Salazar.

Socially shunned and deprived of even a pension, Sousa Mendes had to sell most of his property and ending up relying on a Jewish soup kitchen in Lisbon for his meals. When he died on April 3, 1954, he was penniless and in a state of public disgrace.

In 1966, Yad Vashem recognized Aristides de Sousa Mendes posthumously for his heroism by naming him a Righteous Among the Nations. Two decades later, Portugal restored his diplomatic rank and decorated his memory with its Order of Liberty.