

How a Southern Baptist and a Portuguese Holocaust hero came together








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Click photo to download. Caption: A performance of Neely Bruce's oratorio, "Circular 14: The Apotheosis of Aristides," named after Aristides de Sousa Mendes's issuing of thousands of lifesaving visas to Jewish and non-Jewish refugees against the Portuguese government's "Circular 14," which made it illegal for Holocaust refugees to pass through Portugal. Credit: Courtesy of the Sousa Mendes Foundation.

considered converting to Judaism after a cousin married a Jew, and he was further exposed to the culture and theology. Though he didn't, his strong interest in Judaism

By Karen McDonough/JNS.org

On the surface, it seems unlikely that an American composer—let alone a Southern Baptist from Alabama—would write a musical treatment about a largely unknown Holocaust hero.

But for musical composer Neely Bruce, creating an oratorio depicting the life of Aristides de Sousa Mendes, a Portuguese diplomat who rescued thousands of Jews from the Nazis during World War II, was a dive into history, politics, and musical exploration.

Bruce, who was raised a Southern Baptist,

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remained.

What pulled him to the project though was the political backstory. “This wasn’t just one man doing a good thing.

He was defying his government, which was not on the right side of history,” Bruce told *JNS.org*. Some of Bruce’s previous work includes a Bill of Rights musical and a Bubonic Plague rock opera.

‘Righteous Among the Nations’

New York City’s Center for Jewish History is hosting a Sousa Mendes exhibition, “[Portugal, The Last Hope: Sousa Mendes’ Visas for Freedom](#),” from April 7-Sept. 9, 2016. It’s likely that many who visit will learn about this unsung Holocaust hero for the first time, despite his recognition by Yad Vashem—the State of Israel’s official Holocaust memorial and research institute—as “Righteous Among the Nations,” the highest Israeli honor given to non-Jews who stood up to Nazi genocide. In fact, Sousa Mendes saved far more people than Oskar Schindler, the German factory owner who rescued 1,200 Jews by employing them in his factory, and whose story is depicted in Steven Spielberg’s movie “Schindler’s List.”

Sousa Mendes was Catholic, but a descendant of the “conversos”—Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity some 500 years earlier during the Spanish Inquisition. He was the Portuguese consul stationed in Bordeaux, France, with his wife and 12 children at the outbreak of World War II. With Hitler’s invasion of France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands in May 1940, thousands of Jewish refugees were forced to flee south, escaping the Nazi march. Their last hope was going through Portugal. That June, Sousa Mendes issued thousands of lifesaving visas to Jewish and non-Jewish refugees against his government’s directive, dubbed “Circular 14,” which made it illegal for Holocaust refugees to pass through Portugal. For his heroic act, Sousa Mendes was harshly punished by his government.

His story is the subject of the documentary film “Disobedience: The Sousa Mendes Story,” a book written by one of his sons, and Bruce’s oratorio, “Circular 14: The Apotheosis of Aristides,” which recently premiered at Los Angeles’s American Jewish University and will be performed at other locations in the United States. Sousa Mendes Foundation President Olivia Mattis, a Ph.D. musicologist and Bruce’s colleague, commissioned the oratorio marking the 50th anniversary of the “Righteous” designation.

“[Presenting history through music] is an effective way to capture audiences who might not otherwise have heard the story,” Mattis told *JNS.org*.

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Click photo to download. Caption: Aristides de Sousa Mendes in 1940. Credit: Courtesy of the Sousa Mendes Foundation.

Escaping the Nazis

Daniel Matuzewitz was 7 years old in Brussels when the Nazis invaded in 1940. His family left by train while his father, who was in the leather business, stayed behind to pay off his debts. The family planned to rendezvous in Paris, but when that city was bombed on June 3, the ensuing chaos made meeting up difficult. Eventually, the family reunited and took a train to Bordeaux, France, where Daniel's father met Rabbi Chaim Kruger, a Polish Jew who migrated to Brussels in the 1920s. He, too, was trying to flee with his wife and five children. Kruger told the Matuzewitzs to go to the Portuguese Consulate for the required visa to leave.

Only a month earlier in Bordeaux, Kruger met Sousa Mendes, who gave the rabbi and his family safe refuge inside the consul's personal living quarters, and the two forged a friendship.

By the time the Matuzewitzs got to the Consulate, thousands of refugees amassed outside, spilling over into a makeshift tent city in the nearby Parc des Quinconces. The refugees needed three visas—a French exit visa, a destination visa (the Portuguese visa Sousa Mendes provided), and a Spanish transit visa to pass through that country.

Sousa Mendes was faced with the heart-wrenching moral dilemma of obeying his country's law or helping desperate refugees destined for death. In a June 13, 1940 letter, Sousa Mendes wrote that the situation in Bordeaux was "horrible," and he was "in bed suffering a nervous breakdown," Mattis said. Sometime around this date, he decided to save them all and issued thousands of visas. But when the refugees got to the French/Spanish border on June 21, Spanish authorities refused to let them enter, creating a huge bottleneck. Sousa Mendes arrived there, and after arguing with the border guards, he lifted the gate himself allowing the people to cross. The crossings went on until the end of June, when the border was sealed.

The Matuzewitzs then took a train to the Portuguese border. Upon arrival, Portuguese officials decided which Jews would be allowed to sail to other countries and which ones had to stay, assigned to “fixed residences” in certain villages. In these temporary quarters, their passports were taken, they were issued identification cards and they were barred from leaving. Eventually, by 1942, all of the refugees got passage out.

Among the lucky ones, the Matuzewitzs were permitted to sail to Brazil, where they stayed for a year before arriving in the U.S. in 1941. Upon entering, their family name was Americanized and shortened to Mattis.

Severely punished

While researching Sousa Mendes’ story for his oratorio, Bruce learned the Portuguese dictator António de Oliveira Salazar, in power at that time, had a personal vendetta against Sousa Mendes and condemned him harsher than the Portuguese legal system. The diplomat was fined \$10,000, a relatively minor punishment, for violating Circular 14. But Salazar stripped him of his job and his social stature, and he was prevented from earning a living to support his children, who were eventually sent away to live with various Catholic families in North America. (Sousa Mendes had 14 kids, two of whom died young, with his first wife, and a 15th child with his second wife after the war.) The family estate and their possessions were taken, and he died penniless in 1954. His last wish was for his children to clear his name.

Many of those children ended up in the U.S., including his son, Sebastian, who wrote his father’s plight in the 1951 book, “Flight Through Hell”—which presents the story as fiction, to protect his father from further persecution.

A few years later, his daughter, Joana, started a vigorous letter-writing campaign to clear her father’s name. She appealed to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion, who ordered 20 trees planted in Israel in Sousa Mendes’s memory in 1962.

In 1966, he was posthumously awarded the “Righteous” honor by Yad Vashem. His descendants then turned towards their homeland, where further clearing the Sousa Mendes name meant Portuguese government intervention.

His son, John Paul Abranches, petitioned Lisbon to reopen the case and honor his father as a hero. With help from northern California’s Jewish community, where Abranches lived, and several Jewish U.S. Congressmen, the Portuguese parliament exonerated Sousa Mendes in 1988 and ordered reparations for the family. The descendants, who never received the money directly, used the funds to start the Portuguese foundation, Fundação Aristides de Sousa Mendes, to reacquire their

ancestral home to create a permanent memorial.

Reconnecting with the past

In 2010, Mattis's father, Daniel, was watching French-language TV when he randomly caught the documentary on Sousa Mendes, recognizing him as the man who saved his family, the Matuzewitzs, 70 years earlier. He was shocked to learn the diplomat suffered and lost everything.

Equally stunned was his daughter, Olivia, who started searching for Sousa Mendes descendants and connected with several of his children on Facebook.

"I never knew he was punished and exiled for saving people like my dad and his family," she said. "It stopped me dead in my tracks."

She realized that partnering with family members to form the U.S.-based Sousa Mendes Foundation could help preserve this part of Holocaust history. A grant allowed the foundation to document the visa recipients' personal stories, which are mostly still held within families and not part of written Holocaust remembrance. More recently, they turned to a crowd-funding campaign that raised \$40,000 in six weeks to continue interviewing aging visa recipients before they die and their stories are lost.

"Olivia has brought all of the elements of this puzzle together—the descendants, the visa recipients, and the people interested in the history," Daniel Mattis, now 83, told *JNS.org*.

In its effort to preserve Holocaust history, the foundation website, sousamendesfoundation.org, allows visitors to search for visa recipients by name, by country, by ship, or by the Portuguese region where they lived. Fundraising efforts include plans to help make the Sousa Mendes ancestral home in Cabanas de Viriato, Portugal, into a museum. The foundation also funded a traveling artifacts exhibit, the oratorio, and a graphic novel for youngsters to learn about Sousa Mendes's actions.

"It's incumbent on the entire Jewish community," said Mattis, "to remember those who saved our lives."

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