

MY SISTER'S EYES:

A FAMILY CHRONICLE OF RESCUE AND LOSS DURING WORLD WAR II

JOAN ARNAY HALPERIN

1938



Yvonne

By June of 1938, the couple were expecting their first child, and as was the custom of many Polish-Jewish women who were living abroad, Hala returned to Lodz several weeks before the birth.

Perhaps the women put more trust in their family's doctors. Without a doubt, they yearned for the comforts of home. Ignas arrived for Yvonne's birth. The new family spent the summer in a cottage in the country near Lodz, where the Kaplan family had a chance to welcome and adore their newest member.

Yvonne and Hala,
June 1, 1938.



Ignas and Yvonne.

40 Private Refugee Bodies Form United Front at Evian

July 8, 1938
EVIAN-LES-BAINS, France (Jul. 7)
Delegations of 40 private organizations interested in refugees created a united front here today, as a deputation of prominent Austrian Jews arrived to present to the 32-nation conference the plea of the Austrian Jews for facilitation of emigration.



Fears of War



ABOVE: Lolek and friend at Ciechocinek Spa, 1938. RIGHT: Renia's postcard, March 2, 1940.



In the early Spring of 1938, Germany invaded the north western part of Czechoslovakia. Polish citizens became very worried. Lolek along with other loyal Polish males his age enlisted in the Polish Army. He joined an infantry unit of the 26th Battalion that was stationed in Skierniewice, a town located between Lodz and Warsaw. Hala's mother and sister Fredza visited Lolek. Renia who kept Hala up to date with family news reported, "He misses home."



The last known photograph of the Kaplan Family, July 1939.

Many Poles gave in to the looming fear of an invasion by Germany, while others, the Kaplan family among them, insisted on going ahead with their lives as usual. Hala's family sent her photos from their annual holiday at Ciechocinek Spa, where they enjoyed the manicured gardens and fresh air that suspense-filled summer.

BELOW: Fredza, Maks and Lily, July 1939. Fredza and Maks would escape the Warsaw Ghetto and become *partisans*.

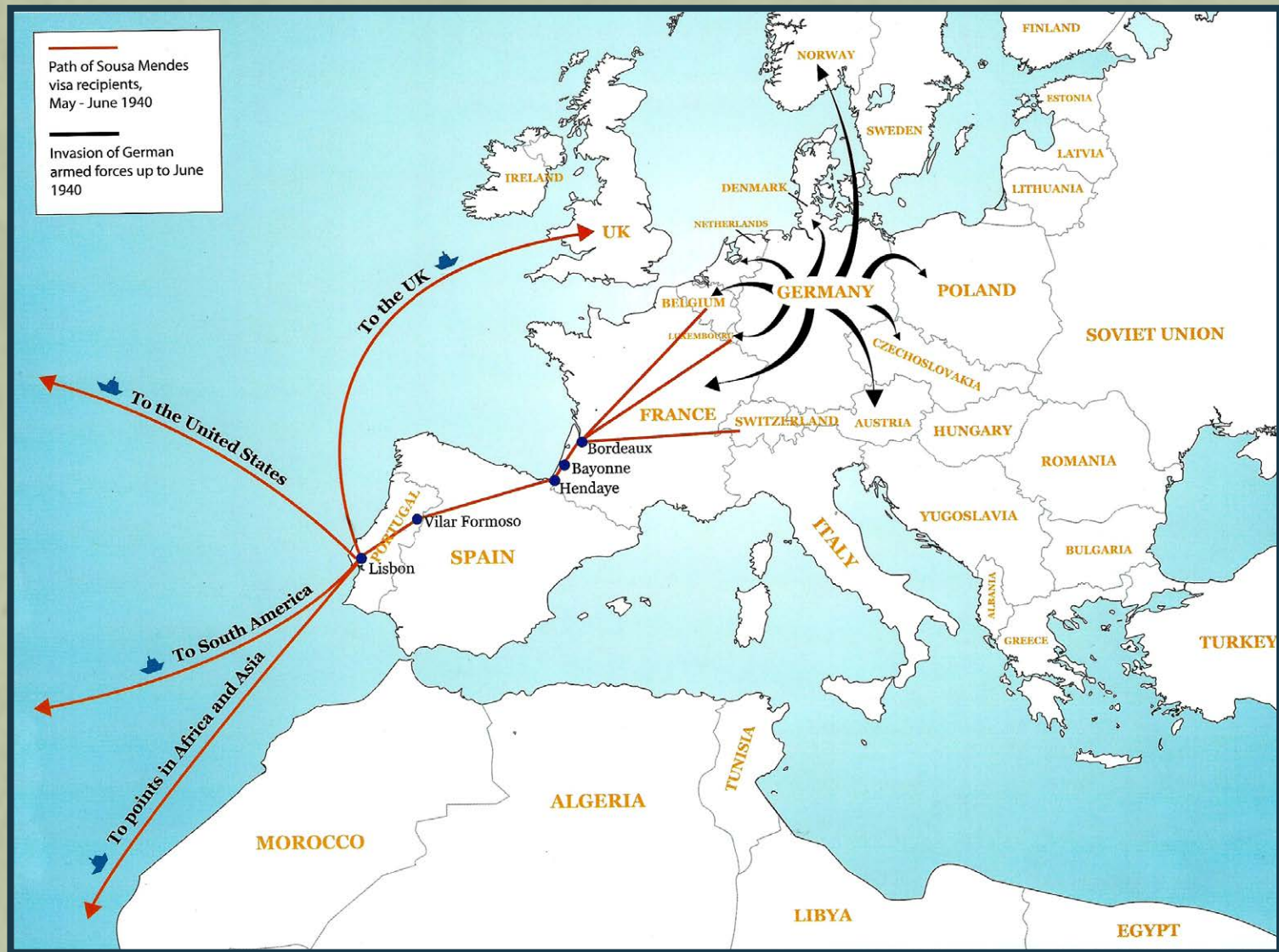


1940



One Step Ahead of the Bombs

Map of Europe, 1940.
Courtesy of the Sousa
Mendes Foundation.



La Panne, Belgium, Friday May 10, 1940

Thousands of desperate people were now amassed on the Belgian coast. They believed that they would be protected, and that the enemy would never penetrate the *Maginot Line*. But, they were worried.

And then their turn came. Ignas and Hala were awoken before dawn by roaring motors. Incredulous, they watched from their balcony as billowing German parachutes streamed down like giant white teardrops. Stunned by the force of the *blitzkrieg*, all they could do as they waited for Ignas's brother Hipek and his wife Zosia to join them from Brussels, was to listen to news reports.

As the day unfolded, the blare of BBC broadcasts and silence would alternate, as a sense of alarm electrified the huddled groups that congregated along the beachfront in front of their apartment. First Holland and now Belgium. The dreaded invasion had begun.

Ignas became impatient and went down to the street to wait for Hipek. It was unusually hot for May. This Friday evening felt like it did in mid-summer, when holidaymakers would arrive in La Panne for a weekend break; except now there were no smiles, no hugs and no kisses on both cheeks. Instead, there were families large and small with suitcases large and small.



Hala, Julia, Ignas and Yvonne in La Panne, early Spring 1940.

1940



The Angel of Bordeaux

When masses of people fled south, a bottle neck formed in Bordeaux. The scene was like an etching drawn in dark browns, grays, and blacks, everyone and everything immobile.

What was the problem? Why were there so many dirty, hungry, exhausted people packing the streets that led to the Portuguese consulate? Why were the doors to the Portuguese consulate shut tight? The refugees could do nothing but stand in line and wait.

Aristides de Sousa Mendes, the Portuguese Consul General stood at a second floor window watching the crowds grow. As the days passed and the situation outside his consulate deteriorated, Sousa Mendes' dilemma became more and more acute.

Should he, a career diplomat, follow the inhumane edict of one man, to not issue visas, or summon the moral courage to stand up against that man, disobey orders, and help his fellow humans in their time of need?

While walking through the congested streets of Bordeaux, Sousa Mendes met a Polish rabbi, Rabbi Chaim Kruger. Kruger told the consul that he and his family had been living in Belgium, when the bombs had begun to fall. Now they were refugees, stranded in Bordeaux along with thousands of others urgently seeking a way out.

Sousa Mendes, a devout Catholic, father of 14 children, invited the Kruger family to his home.

PRAISE FOR “MY SISTER’S EYES”

“My Sister’s Eyes is a charming work written with precision and passion. It tells the story of the Krakowiak family from their prosperous life in Poland and Belgium through the Nazi onslaught and their perilous flight to freedom. The story unfolds so graciously that one does not quite realize its power as we experience the world before in its elegance, the descent into hell, the struggle to find a way out of Europe, the moral heroism of the Portuguese Consul in Bordeaux and then their escape from the inferno and their journey to a new world and a new life. And just as they are about to reach safety, they experience a tragedy – and later freedom and stability, birth and rebirth. The brevity of the work intensifies the depth of the journey, the words that are written and what cannot be written.”

—Michael Berenbaum, Director, Sigi Ziering Institute, Professor of Jewish Studies, American Jewish University

“This book is beautiful and well written. The photos, letters and family timeline are excellent, serving to immediately engage the reader. Depending on the ability of the individual student, it could be a good source for middle school, and equally excellent for high school, college level and teachers alike. This true story of one individual family provides the teacher an opportunity to present the historic background of this bleak period of history. It is a lesson from the past, a confrontation with the present, as well as a message for the future.”

—Marcia Sachs Littell, Professor Emeritus, Holocaust & Genocide Studies, Stockton University



Joan Arnay Halperin is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin at Madison with a BA in Speech and Drama. She earned a Master of Arts Degree in TESOL and devoted many years to teaching, grant writing and teacher training at various New York City Public Schools.

In 2012, while doing research for this book, Joan learned of Aristides de Sousa Mendes and his heroic acts. She now dedicates her energies to the Sousa Mendes Foundation as Director of Educational Initiatives (and babysitting the grandkids).

Joan is working on her second book, a memoir about reconciling her parents’ old-world values with a 1950’s teenager’s need to “fit in”.

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