



# THE ISRAEL PHILATELIST

JOURNAL OF ISRAEL PHILATELISTS INC. SUMMER 2023

DEDICATED to the PHILATELY AND JUDAICA



VOLUME LXXIV NO.3

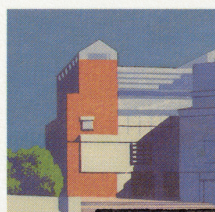
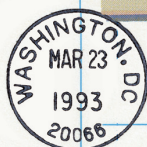
Washington, DC:  
United States  
Holocaust Memorial Museum

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# Two Righteous Portuguese Catholics And The Jewish Scholar Who United Them Across Three Centuries

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DR. ARNOLD WIZNITZER (1896–1975), PROFESSOR AT THE *Instituto Judaico Brasileiro de Pesquisa Histórica* (historical research) in Rio De Janeiro, was a leading authority on the history of colonial Brazilian Jewry. He was also a Holocaust refugee who owed his life and the lives of his wife and son to a Portuguese consular officer who would be among the first to be named Righteous Among the Nations at *Yad Va Shem*.

In 1500, navigator Pedro Álvares Cabral claimed coastal Vera Cruz (“True Cross”) in the name of the king of Portugal. Portuguese colonists, attracted by profits from the sale of native brazilwood trees (for which the territory was later named) followed. In 1630, Dutch forces, backed by the Dutch West India Company, conquered coastal portions of Brazil. “*Nieuw holland’s*” fragile 24-year control of Brazil’s “sugar coast” fostered a haven, however brief, for Jews who were openly permitted to practice their faith. An inventory (1654) of properties owned by Jews took note of “some big houses with stories, on the same side of the river, facing the street of the Jews. Some had served as a synagogue, built with stone and caulk.” Former “*Conversos*” of Portuguese (or Spanish) descent who had openly returned to Judaism during the brief years of Dutch control formed “a large majority” of the Jewish population in Dutch Brazil.

In late January 1654, Dutch forces near Recife, capital of the coastal “Captaincy” (province) of Pernambuco, surrendered to Portuguese forces under the command of General Francisco Barreto De Meneses (1616–1688). Born in Portugal to a Spanish mother and Portuguese father, Barreto was appointed governor of Pernambuco in 1654. From 1656



Dr. Arnold Wiznitzer



Hondius, Hendrik, Creator. A Most Accurate Picture of Brazil. [Amsterdam, Netherlands: publisher not identified, 1630] Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021668372/>.



until 1663, he would serve as Governor-General of Portuguese Brazil. The Capitulation Agreement assured all non-Portuguese (mainly Dutch) subjects who wished to remain in Brazil that they would be governed and treated like all Portuguese residents. “As regards religion, they would be treated like all foreigners residing in Brazil.” All non-Portuguese residents, including Jews, who wished to leave Portuguese Brazil were given a deadline of three months beginning January 26, 1654, in which to take ship for Europe or destinations in the Caribbean.

The Dutch (though not the Portuguese) text of the Capitulation Agreement pardoned “all nations of whatever quality or religion” that “may have been rebellious against the crown of Portugal—the same also granted to all Jews, who are at Recife and Mauricia.” This appears to have referred to the openly Jewish residents, but not the *conversos* (or *marranos*, literally “swine”) who, under Portuguese rule, publicly converted to Catholicism to avoid torture and death while secretly practicing Jewish rituals and customs. Those secret Jewish “heretics” who remained after the three-month grace period would face the long arm of the vicious Portuguese inquisition.

In Wiznitzer’s analysis, “Barreto treated the defeated Dutch subjects with great magnanimity and issued regulations to assure their protection.” Nevertheless, professing Jews who had never adopted Catholicism, though not targets of the Inquisition, would have found it difficult to live under the very eyes of the agents of the Inquisition.

April 26, 1654, the deadline for departure for those residents who chose to return to Holland or seek other safe destinations, was fast approaching. Despite a lack of available (non-Portuguese) ships, Barreto was powerless to extend the deadline. On April 7th, Barreto clarified the limits of his authority as translated into English by Wiznitzer:

*That in case the general vicar [an officer of the Inquisition] should have the intention to persecute those Jews who had been Christian before—some of whom were already involved with the inquisition—he [Barreto] could not hinder it; in order to avoid any miseries they should therefore embark before the expiration of three months. All the people, Christians as well as Jews who, because of the delay of the vessels on which they are to leave, have not departed within the three months after the accord, shall be treated as up to the present, except the Jews who had been Christians, these being subject to the Holy Inquisition, wherein I cannot interfere.*

Barreto’s proclamation was a remarkable document. It is possible that Barreto, by taking such a bold public stance, put himself in some future danger from paranoid “inquisitors.” People live in their own place and time.

Barreto, by issuing this warning to the “Jews who had been Christians,” to his eternal honor, transcended his place and time. Wiznitzer quoted a text (ca. 1654–1660) by Saul Levi Mortera in *Providencia De Dios Con Yisrael*: “but almighty God in his infinite power protected his people and saved them from all imminent dangers by influencing the heart of governor Barreto.”

Although “Jews who had been Christians” were in the gravest danger, most if not all Brazilian Jews who openly professed Judaism (some 150 families), though not targets of the inquisition, chose to leave by the deadline.

Wiznitzer found no documentary evidence that any “openly professing Jews” (who would not have been subject to the inquisition), “resided in Brazil from 1654 up to the 19th century.”

With few ships of Dutch and other non-Portuguese flags in the harbor, Barreto made Portuguese ships available. Most of the refugees sailed for the Netherlands; some of these would later settle in the Caribbean region. A small group of 23 men, women, and children found refuge in New Amsterdam.

## 1954: HASID UMOT HA-OLAM

In his 1954 article, Wiznitzer departed from his own crisp academic style to speak from his heart. Such a paragraph demands our attention. This is what he wrote:

*Obviously, General Francisco Barreto De Menezes had not only respected the terms of his agreements with the Dutch, but had also interpreted them favorably for the Jews who had been his guests in Recife during the three months interlude from January 26 until April 26, 1654. Barreto remains in Jewish history as one of the hasidei umot ha-olam (Righteous Gentiles of the World)—a noble figure.*

Wiznitzer’s use of the transliterated Hebrew phrase, *hasidei umot ha-olam*, would be echoed in *Yad Va Shem*’s designation of “The Righteous Among The Nations.” (*Yad Va Shem*, created by Israeli law in 1953, formed its commission for the designation of The Righteous Among The Nations in 1962.)

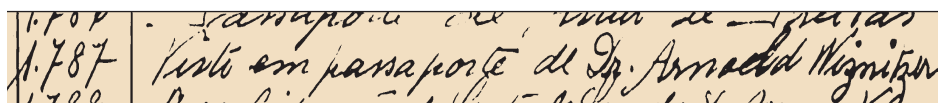
His tribute to Barreto was personal—it came from the heart. In 1939, Wiznitzer and his wife and child would owe their own safety—and probably their lives—to a Portuguese diplomat who granted them unauthorized visas for temporary sanctuary in neutral Portugal. It was surely his family’s rescue from the Holocaust that prompted Wiznitzer’s emotional reference to Barreto as a *hasid umot ha-olam*.

## 1939: SAVING DR. WIZNITZER

Aristedes De Sousa Mendes (1885–1954), the Portuguese consul general in Bordeaux, France, would be among the



first to be declared Righteous Among The Nations by *Yad Va Shem* (1966). Of aristocratic heritage, Sousa Mendes was the middle-aged father of 15 children (14 with his wife and one with his mistress) and a devout Catholic. In November 1939, unauthorized by the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sousa Mendes issued visas to Wiznitzer and his wife and son (probably Austrian nationals), who faced internment in a French detention camp. An image page of the consular log, reproduced on the website of the Sousa Mendes Foundation confirms that on November 28, 1939, Sousa Mendes entered in his own hand visa #1787: “visto em passaporte de Dr. Arnold Wiznitzer.”

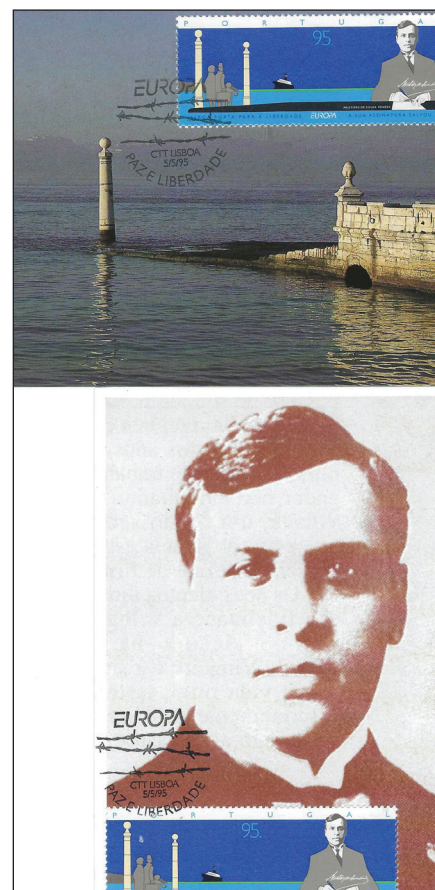


The Wiznitzer family reached Portugal and later took a ship for Brazil, where Witnitzer continued his scholarly work. Surely it was the memory of his own rescue by a Catholic consular official in 1939 that led Wiznitzer to write with such passion about Barreto's warning to the “Jews who had been Christians” in colonial Brazil in 1654. Echoing the Talmud, “whoever saves one life, saves the world entire,” Sousa Mendes began by saving three lives – the family of Jewish historian Arnold Wiznitzer.

### 1939: PORTUGUESE DICTATOR SALAZAR AND “CIRCULAR 14”

On November 11, 1939, two weeks before Mendes Sousa granted visas to the Wiznitzer family, António De Oliveira Salazar, dictator of neutral Portugal, issued the infamous Circular 14, ordering Portuguese diplomats to cease writing transit visas to Jews (among others fleeing the Nazis) without prior approval from the Portuguese foreign ministry. In granting transit visas to the Wiznitzer family, Sousa Mendes knowingly ignored Circular 14. He considered it “a duty of elementary humanity” to issue visas to the desperate family.

Sousa Mendes' action earned him a reprimand from the Portuguese foreign Ministry. Evidently, it was not the first time in his diplomatic career that he drew unwanted attention: “any new transgression or violation on this issue will be considered disobedience and will entail a disciplinary procedure where it will not be possible to overlook that you have repeatedly committed acts which have entailed warnings and reprimands.”



Sousa Mendes FDC maximum Cards 5/5/199



### 1940: SOUSA MENDES AND THE RABBI: THE BEGINNING OF A BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIP

From the fall of Holland (May 15, 1940) and Belgium (May 28, 1940) to the Nazis and until the capitulation of France (June 22, 1940), untold thousands of desperate refugees – Jews and others at risk – fled southward through France to the Portuguese consulate in Bordeaux, where they hoped to obtain visas that would allow them to cross the Pyrenees into neutral Portugal.

Sousa Mendes Israel FDC 4/27/1998 signed by the artist



Among the refugees crowding the streets, sidewalks, and squares around the Consulate was the young family of Ukraine-born Belgian Rabbi Chaim Tzvi Kruger. Kruger would later (1966) provide testimony to *Yad Va Shem*. (*Yad Va Shem* spells his name “Krieger.”) Sousa Mendes befriended the Rabbi and offered visas to the Kruger family, despite denial of permission from Lisbon. Kruger declined because he would not leave while his fellow Jews were left to suffer.

One month after the fall of Holland and Belgium and shortly before the total capitulation of France, Sousa Mendes—after days and nights of seclusion and mental anguish—followed his conscience and his understanding of his sacred duty as a devout Roman Catholic, in defiance of official Portuguese foreign office directives, Sousa Mendes resolved to aid the thousands of desperate European refugees, many of them Jews, seeking Portuguese transit visas at the Consular Office in Bordeaux. His decision would ultimately end his diplomatic career and plunge him into poverty.

## 1940: THE ROGUE CONSUL

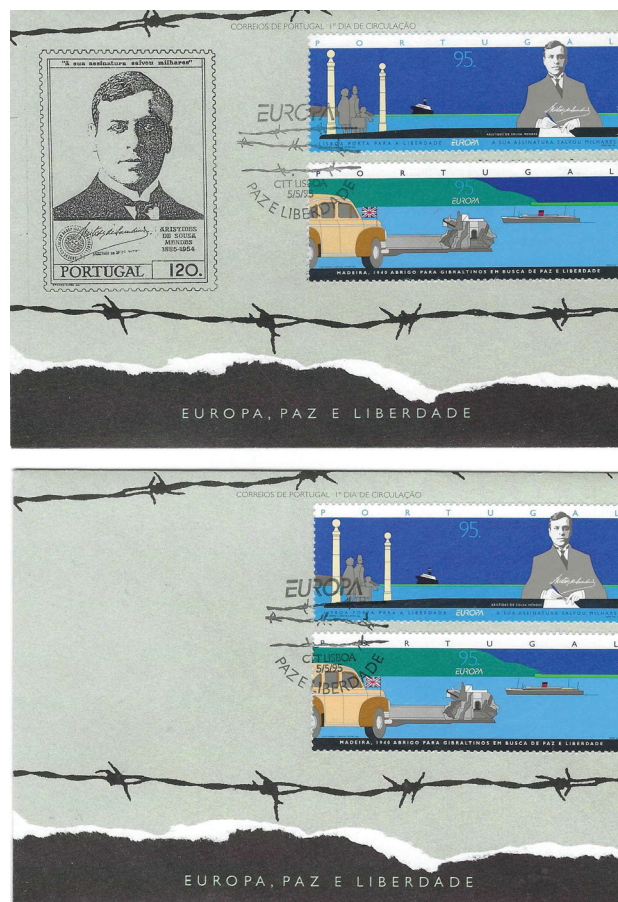
Acting on his own authority, and assisted by his son, a nephew, and the consular secretary, Sousa Mendes began stamping and signing passports and logging the names and visa numbers into the consular ledger. Rabbi Kruger helped streamline the process by collecting passports from the refugees crowded near the consular offices and on the staircases and offices within. Once the consul's documentation was complete, Kruger delivered the passports back to their owners.

Kruger recalled, “all the refugees [in Bordeaux] got visas and [Sousa Mendes] sat all day long and signed them. He didn't eat or drink the entire day until late in the night, and within a short time [across several days] gave thousands of visas until the perpetrators [advancing German armies] came closer and we had to escape through Spain.” The escape route to Portugal passed through Spain. It was the official policy of the Salazar regime to restrict foreign nationals to transit—and not resident—visas, with the requirement that they depart by air or sea for other countries of refuge within a specified period of time.

Sousa Mendes would later inform the Portuguese foreign ministry that among the refugees were “Statesmen, ambassadors and ministers, generals and other high officers, professors, men of letters, academics, famous artists, journalists. University students, people from various Red Cross organizations, members of ruling families, princes, soldiers of all ranks and posts, industrialists and businessmen, priests and nuns, women and children in need of protection. Many were Jews who were already persecuted and sought to escape the horror of further persecution.”

## JUNE 1940: CRISIS AT THE BORDER

Sousa Mendes was recalled to Portugal for insubordination on June 24, 1940 and was ordered to immediately cease granting transit visas. Any visas issued by Sousa Mendes from that date would be annulled. As he made his way to the border crossing at Vilar Formoso en route to Lisbon, Sousa Mendes,



*Sousa Mendes 1955 Europa stamps, Peace and Freedom issue*

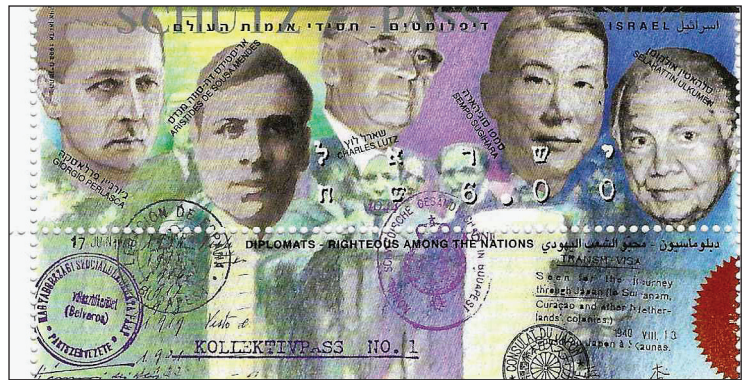


bent on his mission and having little to lose, disregarded his orders. At the Portuguese sub-consulate in Bayonne and in the city of Hendaye, he scribbled unauthorized and unregistered transit visas for exhausted refugees desperate to escape.

As Sousa Mendes arrived at the French-Spanish border crossing at Vilar Formoso en route to the Spanish-Portuguese border, he learned that the border gates had been closed for several hours—likely in response to direct orders from Lisbon advising guards to reject any unauthorized visas signed by Sousa Mendes following his recall. He was surprised to see Rabbi Kruger's family among those waiting with mounting anxiety for border guards to reopen the gates. A photograph, likely taken near the border crossing, of the rabbi and a somewhat ruffled Sousa Mendes, attests to the bond between the two men during a time of crisis for both.

Following intervention by the president of COMASSIS (Portuguese Committee of Assistance to Jewish Refugees) and Moisés Amzalak, a respected scholar and leader of Lisbon's small Jewish community, the gates were finally reopened for those bearing visas issued by other consular officials and by Sousa Mendes before his recall. The Kruger family safely crossed and made their way to Portugal. Many of the rejected refugees bearing the unauthorized visas signed by Sousa Mendes following his recall likely perished in the holocaust. (Those bearers of unauthorized visas who had already crossed the French-Spanish border before the gates were closed were allowed to cross into Portugal.)

Among those Jews who found temporary safety in Portugal were Hans and Margret Rey, who fled Paris on bicycles, carrying with them their manuscript about a curious little monkey named George. At the Portuguese consulate in Bayonne, Vice-consul Manuel Vieira Braga, on instructions from Sousa Mendes arriving from Bordeaux after his recall to Lisbon, signed transit visas for the couple, who passed safely into Portugal and eventually made their way via Brazil to New York. The first of their beloved Curious George books was published in New York in 1941. The books remain in print today.



Israel stamps  
Diplomats – Righteous Among Nations  
27/04/1998  
(left to right) Giorgio Perlasca, Dr. Aristides de Sousa Mendes, Carl Lutz, Chiune Sugihara and Selahattin Ülkümen



FDC Portugal Holocaust Memorial stamps



## 1966: TESTIMONY AT YAD VA SHEM

In his 1966 testimony before *Yad Va Shem*, Rabbi Kruger/Krieger recalled the moment his family crossed the border to ultimate safety in Portugal: “It was he [Sousa Mendes] who opened the gate for us.” The rabbi never forgot this small act of kindness of a quarter century earlier. “This man was a righteous among the nations,” continued Kruger. “He also told me that he was a descendant of the Jews who had been forced to convert in the middle ages.” Whether or not the family history of conversion from Judaism to Catholicism passed reliably down the generations over several centuries, Sousa Mendes believed it to be true. And in his impoverished final years, he seemed to find strength and comfort in such a vital connection to the refugees he saved.

During or after the war, the Kruger family reached Palestine (or Israel if after 1948). Kruger and his family visited Sousa Mendes in Lisbon some years later. Despite the loss of his consular career and impoverished last years, Sousa Mendes told the rabbi that he was content: “if thousands of Jews were suffering because of one Catholic [probably a reference to Salazar], ‘one Catholic [Sousa Mendes] could suffer for all the Jews.’” The rabbi died in Jerusalem in 1982.

Sousa Mendes was honored at *Yad Va Shem* in 1966, the 264th person to be named Righteous Among The Nations. Two other Portuguese men were later Named: Carlos Sampaio Garrida, ambassador to Hungary, sheltered Hungarian Jews and granted visas; Joaquim Carreira, a Catholic priest, protected Jews in his Church in Rome. Portuguese-born José Brito Mendes, residing in France with his French wife, hid a Jewish child of neighbors who later perished. The couple was honored by *Yad Va Shem* among the French Righteous. Portuguese diplomat Albert Carlos de Liz-teixeira Branquinho assisted and succeeded Carlos Sampaio Garrido; he is recognized by Portugal and the Raoul Wallenberg Memorial in Budapest, but not *Yad Va Shem*, possibly because he was backed by Portuguese Dictator Salazar. Portugal issued a first day cover in 2021 honoring all five of these Portuguese citizens of conscience.

The number of refugees saved by Sousa Mendes’ final unrecorded acts of disobedience is unknown. His recorded visas from the Bordeaux consulate numbered 2,862. Over half of these were issued between June 11 and June 22, 1940 (averaging 360 per day) until he was recalled and forced to leave for Portugal. Historian Arnold Milgram, writing in 1999, concluded from documents of refugee agencies, that some 16,000 Jews successfully transited and departed Portugal for safe havens between 1940 and 1941. “We must conclude,” Milgram wrote, “that the majority of Jews who, in the summer of 1940, succeeded in crossing the Pyrenees and Spain to the Portuguese border, did so thanks to Sousa Mendes.”

In a departure from the usual academic prose, Milgram subtitled his discussion of Sousa Mendes “The Incredible Lightness Of Disobedience.” Perhaps this oblique homage to Nietzsche’s “unbearable lightness of being” was a reference to living for the





moment—in this case, doing the right thing because it was the right thing to do in the context of the Holocaust. Milgram continued, “Portugal omitted for years the memory of Sousa Mendes, who was prosecuted, reviled and discharged from his consular functions” and, with loss of his pension, destitute until his death in 1954 at age 69.

## 1988: RECOGNITION BY PORTUGAL

In 1988, over three decades after his death, the Portuguese parliament posthumously readmitted Sousa Mendes to the consular service. In 2021, he was ceremoniously admitted to the national pantheon in Lisbon. The speaker of the Portuguese parliament, Eduardo Ferro Rodrigues, observed: “people who at the decisive moment put their and their family’s safety at risk for the greater good are rare. Sousa Mendes was one of those people.”

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*Aristedes De Sousa Mendes*