HISTORY | NOVEMBER 2021

The Untold Story of the Portuguese Diplomat Who Saved Thousands From the Nazis

As the German army marched across France, Aristides de Sousa Mendes faced a choice: obey his government or follow his conscience—and risk everything

Portuguese diplomat Aristides de Sousa Mendes was serving as a consul general in France when the Nazis invaded the country.

Sandra Dionisi

By Chanan Tigay

It was the second week of June 1940, and Aristides de Sousa Mendes would not come out of his room. Portugal's portly consul general in Bordeaux, France, Sousa Mendes lived in a large flat overlooking the Garonne River with his wife and several of their 14 children—all of whom were becoming increasingly concerned.

especially Rina Ketty's "J'attendrai," a tender love song that in the shifting context of war was becoming an anthem for peace. And Sousa Mendes loved his mistress, who was five months pregnant with his 15th child. He found something to laugh about, relatives recall, even in the worst of times. But now, faced with the most consequential decision of his life, he had shut down. He refused to leave his room even to eat. "Here the situation is horrible," the 54-year-old diplomat wrote to his brother-in-law, "and I am in bed with a severe nervous breakdown."

The seeds of Sousa Mendes' collapse were planted a month earlier when, on May 10, 1940, Hitler launched his invasion of France and the Low Countries. Within weeks, millions of civilians were driven from their homes, desperate to outpace the advancing German Army. A representative of the Red Cross in Paris called it the "greatest civilian refugee problem in French history." The *New York Times* correspondent Lansing Warren, who was later arrested by the Nazis, cabled home: "Nothing like it ever had been seen. In a country already packed with evacuees from the war zones, half the population of the Paris region, a large part of Belgium, and ten to twelve departments of France, somewhere between 6 million and 10 million persons in all, are straggling along roads in private cars, in auto trucks, on bicycles and afoot."

Exhausted drivers lost control of their vehicles. Women harnessed themselves to carts built for horses, dragging children and goats. In Paris, "Houses were cleared of their contents," recalled Marie-Madeleine Fourcade, a leader of the French Resistance. "Dog owners killed their pets so they would not have to feed them.…Weeping women pushed old

circumstances, but it is safe to say that all in the end will be stranded."

As the French government fled Paris, and German soldiers raised the swastika at the Arc de Triomphe, refugees pushed south, scouring the country for exit visas. Many hugged the coast in the hope they might secure passage on a ship off the continent. Others flocked to cities along the Spanish border, desperate to cross. In Bordeaux, the population more than doubled, swelling with refugees for whom only one option remained: a visa from neutral Portugal, allowing them passage from France, through Spain, and on to Lisbon. There they might secure tickets on a ship or plane out of Europe.

Thousands massed outside 14 Quai Louis XVIII—the five-story waterfront building that housed the Portuguese consulate and, upstairs, the Sousa Mendes family. Two blocks away, in the Place des Quinconces, one of the largest city squares in all of Europe, refugees set up camp in automobiles and boxes and tents. Among them, Sousa Mendes later informed the Portuguese Foreign Ministry, 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." And, he added, "Many were Jews who were already persecuted and sought to escape the horror of further persecution."

As the Nazis closed in, the vast encampment grew frantic. "The center of the town was bedlam," wrote an American journalist named Eugene

then we heard them—the bombs. We counted eight, in quick succession....Then the sirens began to shrill, far away too, then nearer and nearer."

Sousa Mendes, a devout Catholic who suspected he descended from *conversos*, Jews who had been forced to convert during the Spanish Inquisition, was appalled by the suffering. "Some had lost their spouses," he later recalled. "Others had no news of missing children, others had seen their loved ones succumb to the German bombings which occurred every day and did not spare the terrified refugees."

What many refugees did not know was that seven months earlier, Portugal's austere dictator, António de Oliveira Salazar, had quietly issued a missive known as Circular 14, effectively forbidding his diplomats from offering visas to most refugees—especially Jews, ethnic Russians and anybody else whom the conflict rendered a "stateless person." Although Salazar had, technically, remained neutral, in reality Portugal's "neutrality" was fluid, depending on events. Now, with Nazi forces tearing through Europe, Salazar was reluctant to provoke Hitler or

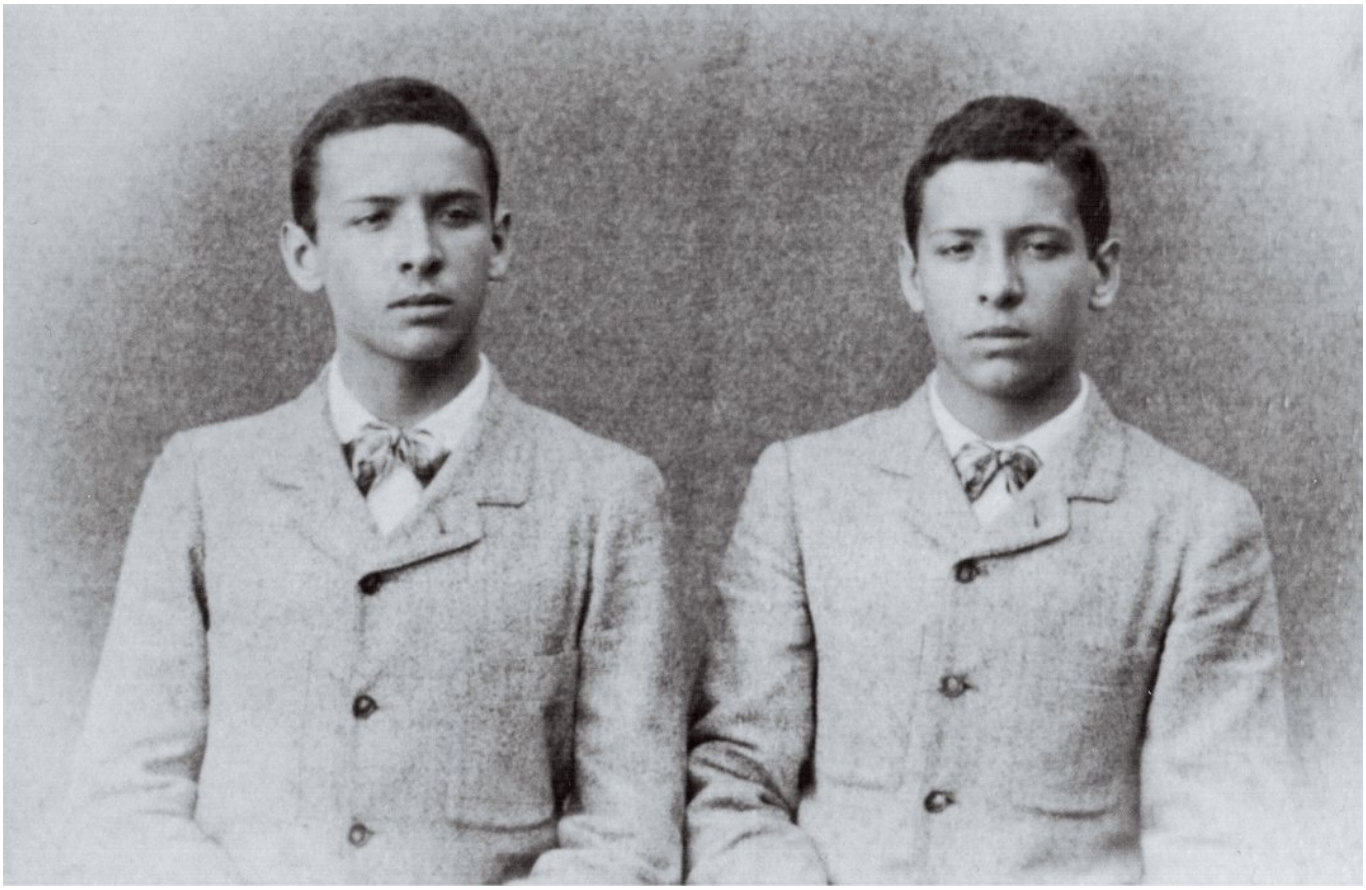
Sousa Mendes and his first wife, Angelina, in 1911. The diplomat served in Europe, Africa and North and South America before his posting in Bordeaux. Courtesy of sousamendes.org

Aristides and Angelina with nine of their children in 1929. The family would end up dispersed around the globe. Two sons enlisted in the U.S. Army and one took part in the landing at Normandy. Other children settled elsewhere in Europe and in Canada and Africa. Courtesy of sousamendes.org

As the situation beneath his window deteriorated, Sousa Mendes invited elderly, ill and pregnant refugees to shelter in his flat, where they slept on chairs, blankets and the rugs covering the floors. “Even the consul’s offices were crowded with dozens of refugees who were dead tired because they had waited for days and nights on the street, on the stairways, and finally in the offices,” Sousa Mendes’ nephew, Cesar, recounted in testimony to Yad Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust memorial. “Most of them had nothing but the clothes they were wearing.”

One evening, Sousa Mendes ducked into a chauffeured car to survey the scene outside, where French soldiers with steel helmets and bayonets maintained order. Approaching Bordeaux’s Great Synagogue, Sousa Mendes spotted a man in a dark, double-breasted caftan—a Polish rabbi

Kruger later told the American Yiddish newspaper *Der Tog*. “But he immediately declared that no Jews may receive a visa.”



Aristides and his twin brother, Cesar, c. 1899. Both would earn law degrees before entering the foreign service. They remained close, but it was Aristides whose life was upended by World War II. Courtesy of sousamendes.org

Quietly, however, Sousa Mendes did request permission from Lisbon to issue the visas, and on June 13 the Foreign Ministry responded: “*Recusados vistos*.” Visas denied. Flouting his superior, Sousa Mendes offered Kruger the papers anyway. Kruger declined them. “It is not just me who needs help,” he told Sousa Mendes, “but all my fellow Jews who are in danger of their lives.”

government and obeying his conscience. The dilemma was so destabilizing that Sousa Mendes stumbled into his bedroom “as though he had been struck down by a violent disease,” his son recalled.

He finally emerged three days later. “I am going to issue a visa to anyone who asks for it,” he announced. “Even if I am discharged, I can only act as a Christian, as my conscience tells me.”

A few years ago, I spent several days in the basement of a comfortable home on Long Island, New York, trying to piece together the details of what happened after Sousa Mendes opened the consulate doors to welcome the desperate refugees—“perhaps the largest rescue action by a single individual during the Holocaust,” according to the Israeli historian Yehuda Bauer.

The home belonged to a woman named Olivia Mattis. It was fall, and the trees shading the quiet block were shedding their leaves in yellows and oranges and reds. Mattis, a Stanford-educated musicologist, has built a large and meticulously maintained archive dedicated to Sousa Mendes. He left behind no diary, no extensive collection of correspondence and no memoir, but I hoped the old photographs, letters, passports, books and newspaper articles that Mattis had collected would help fill in the story of his campaign, which is surprisingly little known outside Portugal.

When Hitler invaded Belgium, Mattis’ family was one of those forced to run. A dozen of her relatives, including her father, Daniel, then 7, found their way to southern France, to Sousa Mendes—and on to Spain,

Portuguese dictator António de Oliveira Salazar. Striving to remain neutral in the conflict, he personally ordered Sousa Mendes to refuse aid to Jews and other refugees. Niday Picture Library / Alamy

however, Mattis, who was born in 1962, didn't even know Sousa Mendes' name, never mind the fate that befell him. "It was something my father never spoke about," she told me. "And it became clear that the reason he did not speak about it was because it was very present in his life—he couldn't talk about it without crying."

In her late 20s, Mattis decided to translate her grandmother's memoir from French into English. "It was in that act of translating it that I revisited all of her stories," she said. In 2010, Mattis' father stumbled on a French film about Sousa Mendes and realized this was the man who had saved his life. He contacted the filmmakers and was put in touch with members of the Sousa Mendes family. "This just knocked him over, and it had the same effect on me," she said. "I felt like I was compelled to do something. It was too late to help Sousa Mendes except to give him some posthumous justice."

Along with several others, including two of Sousa Mendes' grandchildren, Mattis formed the Sousa Mendes Foundation, to commemorate him in the United States and try to restore his ruined estate in Portugal as a

to establish the number of people who escaped France on papers signed by Sousa Mendes.

During my visit, Mattis stayed with me in the basement, quietly reading in a lounge chair. Ostensibly she was there to answer my questions, but I came to believe that she remained nearby to watch as the story of the man who saved her family—a story she has worked tirelessly to document—passed from her world to mine. When I asked her to tell me why Sousa Mendes moved her, she began to cry. “How much that family suffered so that my family and families like mine could live,” she said.

Aristides de Sousa Mendes was not born to suffer. A member of the landed gentry, he owned a lavish estate in Cabanas de Viriato, the central Portuguese village of his birth. The house featured two dining rooms, a billiards salon and a mezzanine hung with the flags of nations where Sousa Mendes had served. Each Thursday, in the shadow of a Christ the Redeemer statue he had commissioned, he and his wife, Angelina, welcomed village poor into their home for a meal prepared by their household staff.

Though an aristocrat, he was bad with money, and often had to borrow from his twin brother, Cesar. Whereas Aristides was outgoing and spontaneous, Cesar was serious and studious. Both entered the law school at Coimbra, Portugal’s most prestigious university, graduating in 1907 and practicing briefly before enlisting in the foreign service. By the early 1930s, Cesar had reached the top of the profession as Portugal’s foreign minister. Aristides, meanwhile, bounced around the globe in a

Geraldo.

In September 1938, Angelina and Aristides and several of their 12 remaining children—a son, 22 years old, and an infant daughter, had died, Manuel of a ruptured spleen and Raquel of meningitis—arrived in Bordeaux. Soon art and music instructors were cycling in and out of the flat on Quai Louis XVIII. Sousa Mendes, an avid singer, struck up a relationship with a musician named Andrée Cibial, who was 23 years his junior. Known around town for her ostentatious hats, Cibial amused Sousa Mendes with her freethinking temperament and bizarre outfits, including a dress fashioned from draperies she'd yanked off a window, and they became lovers.

By this time, the French government, anxious about an influx of Jewish refugees from Germany and anti-Fascist Republicans escaping the Spanish Civil War, had set up a number of detention and internment camps to house them. In November 1939, ten days after Salazar posted Circular 14, Sousa Mendes issued an unauthorized visa to one such person, the Jewish historian Arnold Wiznitzer. The following March, he signed another, this one for Spanish Republican Eduardo Neira Laporte, formerly a professor in Barcelona. Both men faced imminent imprisonment in French camps. Nevertheless, Sousa Mendes earned a strong rebuke from the Foreign Ministry. "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," his superior wrote. Recounting the censure to his brother, Cesar, then Portugal's ambassador in Warsaw, Sousa Mendes groused

Nazi soldiers in Bordeaux. France surrendered to Germany on June 22, 1940. Sousa Mendes was recalled from his post days later. Alamy Stock Photo

With bombs in the near distance proclaiming the imminent arrival of the Germans, and with his government holding firm in its refusal to grant the unlucky refugees safe passage, Sousa Mendes must have understood the likely consequences when, in June 1940, he threw open his doors and began to sign visas en masse. And once he started he didn't stop. He signed visas for refugees who had passports and those who did not. They lined up by the thousands at his desk, out the door, down the stairs, and into the street. "Add to this spectacle hundreds of children who were with

means not to be able to protect family.”

As the Nazis rumbled toward Bordeaux, Sousa Mendes scarcely slept. He was, by one account, “evidently exhausted.” In the rush to attend to everyone, his signature grew shorter: from Aristides de Sousa Mendes to Sousa Mendes to, finally, simply, Mendes. Frightened to lose their places in line, refugees would not move even to eat or drink. Fistfights erupted. And each day new people arrived, desperate for documents. The banking magnates Edward, Eugene, Henri and Maurice de Rothschild came seeking papers. So did Gala Dalí, Salvador’s wife, who requested visas for herself and her husband; he was busy building a bomb shelter in the garden of their rented house near Bordeaux. The Dalís sought refuge in the United States along with a number of Surrealists and other artists.

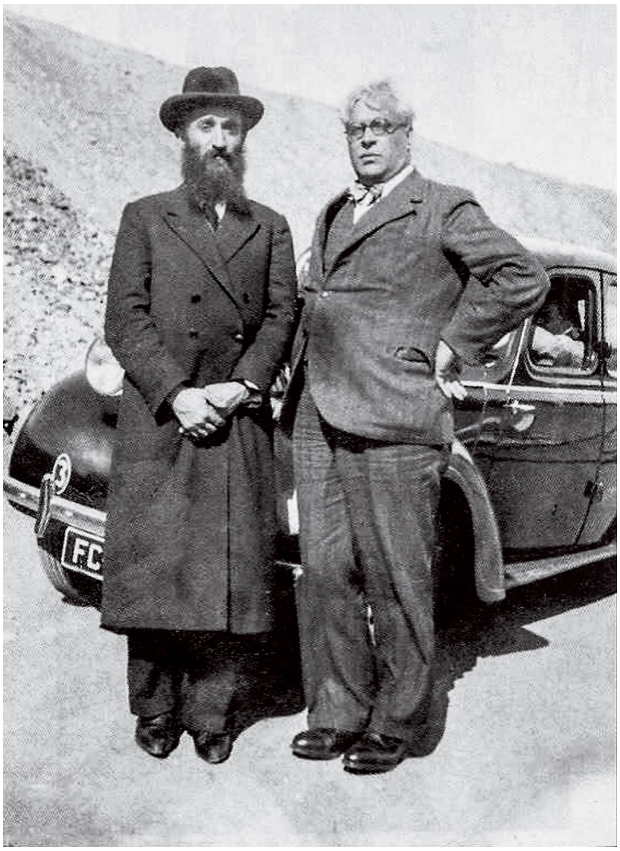
To speed up his operation, Sousa Mendes enlisted help from his son Pedro Nuno, his nephew Cesar, and José de Seabra, his consular secretary. One man would stamp the passport, Sousa Mendes would sign it, and Seabra would issue a visa number before everything was recorded in a ledger. Kruger circulated among the crowd, gathering passports in bunches, shuttling them upstairs for Sousa Mendes’ signature, and delivering them when they were complete. Among those seeking papers were Israel and Madeleine Blauschild—better known by their screen names, Marcel Dalio and Madeleine LeBeau—on the run after the Nazis plastered Dalio’s image around France to help Frenchmen identify the “typical Jew.” (Two years later, the couple would appear in *Casablanca*, a film about refugees seeking letters of transit to Portugal; he played the croupier Emil and she the young Yvonne, who famously sang “La Marseillaise” while tears ran down her face.)

waited in a chateau 80 miles away, Otto dined at Le Chapon Fin, Bordeaux's finest restaurant, hoping to glean intelligence from overheard chatter. His secretary handed over 19 passports. Sousa Mendes stamped and signed each one. The former royals, traveling in five cars trailed by two trucks stuffed with their belongings, lumbered to the border. On the morning of June 18 they crossed into Spain.

The next day, word reached Salazar of "irregularities" emanating from his consulate in Bordeaux. That night Germany bombed the city. With Hitler's inexorable advance, and a collaborationist regime taking form in France, Sousa Mendes' position was becoming untenable. At some point, Spain would cease honoring any visa bearing his signature, and Salazar would have him recalled, arrested—or worse.

At this point, about nine days into his visa operation, Sousa Mendes had already saved thousands of lives. But, though the Quai Louis XVIII was now largely empty, thanks to him, the diplomat received word that desperate scenes were unfolding farther south.

Sousa Mendes spoke by phone with Portugal's vice consul in Toulouse and instructed him to begin issuing visas there. Then he raced more than 100 miles south to Bayonne, not far from the Spanish border. "On my arrival there were so many thousands of people, about 5,000 in the street, day and night, without moving, waiting their turn," Sousa Mendes later recalled. There were "about 20,000 all told, waiting to get to the consulate."



Sousa Mendes, right, with Rabbi Chaim Kruger, likely at the French border with Spain in 1940, hours before Kruger's escape. Together they saved thousands of people. Historic Collection / Alamy Stock Photo

Inside, he found that the consulate's old wooden staircase was straining under the weight of visa seekers, so he found a table and set it up outside. Then, as he had done in Bordeaux, he devised a rogue assembly line and signed every passport he could. Among those waiting were H.A. and Margret Rey, who had escaped Paris on a homemade bicycle with an illustrated manuscript of *Curious George,* their masterpiece of children's literature. Manuel Vieira Braga, vice consul in Bayonne, would later say that Sousa Mendes "struck me as both elated and aware of the situation."

On June 22, Salazar cabled Sousa Mendes directly. "You are strictly forbidden to grant anyone a visa for entry to Portugal," he wrote. Then he dispatched Pedro Teotónio Pereira, the ambassador to Spain, to investigate. "I met Consul Aristides de Sousa Mendes and asked him to explain his extraordinary behavior," he said in later testimony. "All I heard, coupled with his disheveled aspect, gave me the impression that this man was disturbed and not in his right mind."

Pereira ordered Sousa Mendes back to Bordeaux. Instead he headed

issued by Sousa Mendes as “null and void.”

The *New York Times* estimated that shuttering the Spanish border stranded 10,000 refugees in Nazi-occupied France. Among them was a group who had been interned at a camp in Bordeaux. After receiving visas from Sousa Mendes, they fled to the border, but once Pereira’s order was issued they were turned away. (Ultimately, a few landed in Toulouse, others in Switzerland, but most were killed by the Nazis.)

Now, as Sousa Mendes parked his car near the crossing, another cohort of refugees was trying unsuccessfully to pass. Unbelievably, Sousa Mendes spotted Rabbi Kruger and his family speaking with border guards. Sousa Mendes intervened, negotiating with the guards for over an hour. When at last Sousa Mendes turned away, he opened the gate himself and waved Kruger and his fellow exiles—every single one—across the border and into Spain.

In February 2020, shortly before the pandemic made international air travel impossible, I visited the ultra-Orthodox enclave of Kiryat Mattersdorf, in northwest Jerusalem, to meet Rabbi Jacob Kruger—Chaim Kruger’s son. The people saved by Sousa Mendes ultimately landed all over the globe: in the United States, Britain, Argentina, South Africa, Uruguay, Cuba, Mexico, the Dominican Republic. And many, like Jacob Kruger, ended up in Israel.

The younger Kruger, now 90, had been reluctant to see me. Over the phone, before agreeing to meet, he insisted that he remembered nothing

yeshiva? Do I wear a *kippah*? What about my siblings—do they follow Jewish religious law?

Ultimately he relented, and on a warm Thursday evening I caught a taxi from my hotel to his spacious apartment, about two miles from an intersection where, in June 2020, the municipality of Jerusalem named a public square after Sousa Mendes. On the sidewalk I heard mostly Yiddish. On the bus that passed by Kruger's flat, the men wore black hats and twirled their earlocks. A boy, maybe 15, rushed past me holding his prayer shawl in a felt bag.

Kruger and his wife, Sara, welcomed me warmly. They poured me a Coke on ice and invited me to sit at their long dining table, which was surrounded, like much of the apartment, by shelves of books. Kruger, the respected rabbi of a nearby synagogue, had just returned from a funeral, and he was tired.

As a couple of grandkids hurried around, I asked Kruger what he remembered about his father's role in the Sousa Mendes affair, but he remained hesitant. "I am proud of my father without that," he said, leaning back in his chair. But when I pushed, he brought out a number of keepsakes—ship tickets, letters—that told the story of the family's ordeal.

After escaping France and making their way through Spain, the Krugers spent a year in Portugal. On June 3, 1941, the family boarded the *Nyassa*, a ship full of refugees bound for New York. Eventually, Chaim Kruger moved to Israel, and two of his children, including Jacob, joined

Olivia Mattis, a musicologist, is president of the Sousa Mendes Foundation. Twelve members of her family were rescued by the Portuguese diplomat. Dina Litovsky

Kruger called over his son-in-law, Avrohom, a genial young man. When I asked about Sousa Mendes, Avrohom came alive. Along with his wife, Feiga, he publishes a comic book that tells stories from Jewish lore. He brought over an issue and pointed me to a ten-page strip titled “The Courage to Refuse.”

In it, Sousa Mendes, with his long, drawn face and double-breasted khaki suit, tells Chaim Kruger, “I can give you and your family visas. For all the rest, I’ll have to request special permission from the foreign office.”

“Just for me?” Kruger responds. “How can I take care of just myself? How I can I leave my fellow Jews behind?”

“You know what, Rabbi Kruger?” says Sousa Mendes, presented now in extreme close-up. “You win!”

In this unexpected way, Chaim Kruger’s grandchildren had commemorated both their grandfather and Sousa Mendes. And so, in another way, had Jacob Kruger himself, in an interview conducted for a Portuguese documentary from the early 1990s and posted to YouTube in

anything, and if I said I did, it probably wouldn't be right," he told me. "I was a little boy. Now I'm an old man."

On June 24, 1940, Salazar recalled Sousa Mendes to Portugal. On July 4, he initiated a disciplinary proceeding, a trial conducted through written testimony submitted by many of those involved and adjudicated by a committee. Sousa Mendes acknowledged that some of the 15 charges levied against him were true. "I may have erred," he wrote, "but if so, I did it unintentionally, having followed the voice of my conscience, which—despite the nervous breakdown I am still experiencing due to the workload, during which I spent weeks with practically no sleep—never failed to guide me in the fulfillment of my duties, in full awareness of my responsibilities."

The impact of Sousa Mendes' actions can't be overstated. Among the prominent people (pictured in this image and the next three photographs) he helped flee the German occupation were Salvador Dalí and his wife, Gala. Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images


52804

H.A. and Margret Rey, who escaped with the manuscript for their unpublished book, *Curious George*.

The verdict was preordained. Before it was handed down, Salazar was already informing his ambassadors that Sousa Mendes had been dismissed. When the decision was delivered in October, Salazar deemed

he said, “than with man against God.” He was promised a pension but never received it. Salazar did not disbar him, but he didn’t need to—who would hire the consul Salazar had effectively blacklisted? For good measure, Salazar took the written record of the disciplinary proceedings and sealed it shut.

That same month, in Lisbon, Cibial gave birth to Sousa Mendes’ 15th child, a daughter, who was sent to live with relatives back in France. After Salazar’s punishment came down, Sousa Mendes’ other children, fearful of retribution, dispersed. His daughter Clotilde moved to Mozambique. Two sons, Carlos and Sebastiaõ, both born in California when Sousa Mendes was posted to San Francisco in the 1920s, enlisted in the U.S. Army. (Sebastiaõ later took part in the landing at Normandy.) Luis-Filipe and Jean-Paul, in a letter to the American Friends Service Committee seeking help moving to America, reported on the family’s ruinous situation. “In consequence of the severe punition imposed,” they wrote, their father’s “financial position has been strongly affected and now he has no means to support the charges of his big family.” Luis-Filipe eventually immigrated to Canada; Jean-Paul landed in California.

By 1942, Sousa Mendes was taking meals at a Jewish community soup kitchen in Lisbon. The Cozinha Económica Israelita had two dining rooms—one for Portuguese families, the other for refugees. A young man named Isaac “Ike” Bitton worked setting tables for the refugees. One day, Bitton recalled later in a letter to a Portuguese filmmaker, he noticed the Sousa Mendes family speaking Portuguese as they entered the refugee dining hall. “I approached the head of the family and told him in Portuguese that this dining room was only for refugees,” Bitton

Over the next several years, as his financial situation cratered, Sousa Mendes campaigned for reinstatement to his former position and access to his pension. He petitioned Salazar and the head of Portugal's National Assembly. He wrote to Pope Pius XII. Cesar, too, sought his brother's rehabilitation, writing to Salazar on his behalf. But in a brief written recollection of the period, Sousa Mendes' son, Luis-Filipe, lamented that "the rock was unshakable, and our hope fades away."

A telegram sent by Sousa Mendes to the Foreign Ministry in Lisbon seeking permission to issue visas to refugees. His request was denied, but that did not stop him. Courtesy of sousamendes.org

Emile Gissot, a French official in Toulouse, was told by Sousa Mendes to issue visas—and was fired. History and Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo

went on, and aware that the Allies valued humanitarian action, began to take credit for what Sousa Mendes had done. Pereira, the ambassador who had chased Sousa Mendes down at the border, claimed that he had visited France to assist “in every way that I had at my disposal.” Salazar himself put it more succinctly in a speech to the National Assembly lamenting the sad plight of the war’s dispossessed. “What a pity,” he said, “that we could not do more.”

In the summer of 1945 Sousa Mendes suffered a stroke, leaving him partially paralyzed. He could no longer write letters seeking help on his own, and enlisted his son to pen them for him. Angelina’s health, too, declined. Former colleagues and friends ignored Sousa Mendes in the street. “On the contrary,” said Luis-Filipe, “blame and sarcasm were not uncommon, sometimes from close relatives.”

Angelina died in August 1948. The following year Sousa Mendes married Cibial. The couple lived together in abject poverty. She fought for years for his pension. As his health declined, he rarely left home. He tumbled out of his bed and had to be helped to his feet. His estate fell into

April 3 of that year he died at the age of 68. Confiding in his nephew from his deathbed, Sousa Mendes took solace in the knowledge that although he had nothing but his name to leave his family, the name was “clean.”

He was buried in Cabanas de Viriato in the robes of the Third Order of St. Francis, a religious fraternity whose adherents, Sousa Mendes among them, live by the example of its patron, who preached that God lives in every man.

After Sousa Mendes died, the regime disappeared his memory. “Nobody in Portugal knew about the refugees who had come through the country—not even historians,” says Irene Pimentel, a researcher at the New University of Lisbon. “Salazar succeeded in making Aristides de Sousa Mendes forgotten.”

Yet Sousa Mendes’ children urged Jewish leaders in Portugal, Israel and the United States to recognize their late father. In 1961, Israel’s prime minster, David Ben-Gurion, ordered 20 trees planted in Sousa Mendes’ name. In 1966, Yad Vashem honored him as one of the Righteous Among the Nations. In the mid-1970s, after Salazar died and the authoritarian regime that followed him was overthrown, the new government commissioned a report about Sousa Mendes. The document was scathing, calling Portugal’s treatment of Sousa Mendes “a new Inquisition.” But the new administration, still populated by remnants of the old regime, buried the report for a decade. “He was their skeleton in the closet, and nobody wanted his name to be known,” said Robert

Andrée Cibial, Sousa Mendes' second wife. Today the portrait is displayed in the home of her daughter, Marie-Rose Faure, Sousa Mendes' last surviving child.
Courtesy of sousamendes.org

U.S. members of Congress signed a letter to Portugal's president, Mário Soares, urging him to recognize Sousa Mendes. The following year, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution paying tribute for "remaining faithful to the dictates of his conscience." At a ceremony that year at the Embassy of Portugal in Washington, D.C., Soares apologized to the Sousa Mendes family on behalf of his government. "That was to me very meaningful," António Moncada Sousa Mendes, Sousa Mendes' grandson, told me. "The head of state recognized that they made mistakes. That was really something."

On March 18, 1988, Portugal's Parliament voted unanimously to admit Sousa Mendes back into the consular service and promote him to the rank of ambassador. "The time has come to grant...Sousa Mendes the visa that he himself could not refuse," one member of Parliament proclaimed to the assembly, "and in so doing to repair a profound injustice."

This past April, the U.S. Senate unanimously approved a resolution introduced by Senator Mitt Romney honoring Sousa Mendes. In October, Portugal was set to bestow on Sousa Mendes one of its highest

the initiative. “His active dissent saved thousands of people from the Nazi regime’s legalized murder, persecution and culture of violence. He paid a very high price for his actions, dying in misery.” Even so, Moreira went on, she hoped his example would serve as a beacon.

The actual number of people Sousa Mendes rescued isn’t known with certainty. Immediately after the war, a Portuguese journalist, writing under a pseudonym to avoid retribution from Salazar, reported that Sousa Mendes had saved “tens of thousands” of refugees. In 1964, the magazine *Jewish Life* estimated it was 30,000, including 10,000 Jews, which are the numbers cited by Yad Vashem and the U.S. House of Representatives. The number is difficult to ascertain because so much time has passed, so many refugees refused to discuss the war, and because only one of Sousa Mendes’ two visa registers from the period has survived. Also, because Portugal’s dictatorship so successfully suppressed the facts. For decades after the war, not even Sousa Mendes’ daughter with Cibial, Marie-Rose Faure, knew what her father had done.

Passports collected in the archive of the Sousa Mendes Foundation, which is trying to document each refugee
he saved. Dina Litovsky

Faure, now 81, is Sousa Mendes' last surviving offspring. She lives in the French castle town of Pau, on the edge of the Pyrenees. Recently, as Gilka, her regal spaniel, napped on a settee in the sitting room of her simple two-level home, Faure—diminutive, bespectacled and warm—recalled the first time she met her father. She was 11 years old, and celebrating her communion in France, where she lived with a great-uncle and great-aunt. "I had been waiting for this moment to meet him for a really, really long time," Faure told me. The delay, she said, was Salazar's doing: He would not let Sousa Mendes leave Portugal. When at

Afterwards, he returned occasionally for two-month holidays. He brought her a gramophone and accompanied her to and from school each day. “He came regularly and my friends saw him—that was important to me,” Faure said.

Every afternoon at three o’clock, Sousa Mendes would disappear into her uncle’s living room to pray, rosary in hand. Today she keeps just a few mementos of her father, and she went to her fireplace now and removed two keepsakes from the mantel: a sword that had been part of Sousa Mendes’ consular costume, and a steel cylinder that served as a diplomatic pouch for carrying documents. She received a third memento when she was 23—the first time she learned what her father had done in Bordeaux. A colleague at Mutual Insurance, where she worked as a secretary, had spotted a short article about Sousa Mendes and said, “‘Hey, that’s not someone from your family, is it?’”

When I asked her how she felt reading the story, she paused. Not a single photo remains of her mother, but she keeps a small painting of her on the mantel beside the sword. She lifted it now, tugging with her other hand at the collar of her gray sweater. “It was a shock,” she said. “They spoke about the number of people who had been saved. They said it was 10,000, 20,000 Jews.”

Eighty years on and the number remains elusive. To date, Olivia Mattis and the Sousa Mendes Foundation have definitively documented 3,913 visa recipients, though she believes the true figure is significantly higher. It’s likely that we’ll never know the precise number, but in the end that is of far less significance than what we do know. In Jewish tradition, it is

Flight to America

The story of one of the thousands of people aided by the courage of Aristides de Sousa Mendes

By Chanan Tigay

In July 2016, an elderly American named Stephen Rozenfeld ascended the *bimah*, or prayer platform, of an ornate synagogue in Lisbon. Before him in the pews sat some 40 women and men from all over the world who had one thing in common: They or their forebears had been saved by Aristides de Sousa Mendes. Now they had returned, along with Olivia Mattis, president of the Sousa Mendes Foundation, and two of Sousa Mendes' grandsons, to retrace the passage from Bordeaux to Lisbon and to pay homage to the man who had rescued them.

When Germany invaded Poland, in September 1939, Rozenfeld's father was away on business, in Belgium. Four months later, Rozenfeld and his mother fled their home in Lodz to try to meet him. They traveled to Germany and then to Belgium, where the family reunited. Next, they arrived in France, where Sousa Mendes issued them the visas that would save their lives, and went to Spain before reaching Portugal in July. Along the way, Stefan, 5 years old, contracted appendicitis, rode in a hay cart and pretended to be mute. When at last the family arrived in Lisbon, he now told the audience, their money had run out. And that's when a "miracle" occurred.

The woman said she would cover the family's passage to America. "My mother had smuggled out a few pieces of jewelry from Lodz, and she offered them to her until my father paid her," Rozenfeld said, reading from notes jotted on white cards. "She would not take them. She said, 'You will pay me when you have the funds.'"

The Rozenfelds crossed the Atlantic on a Greek passenger ship, docking in Hoboken, New Jersey, on July 12, 1940. They settled in Queens, New York, and moved into a house with a family of Jewish refugees from Austria. Six weeks later, Rozenfeld said, his mother walked him to school, where he was introduced as "the new refugee boy, Stefan Rozenfeld." His classmates stood and sang "My Country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing."

"I didn't know the song," Rozenfeld said, "and the tears were running down my face—and I said, I'm going to be a real American." He stopped speaking Polish, and he changed his name, from Stefan to Stephen.

Stephen Rozenfeld was 5 when he and his family fled Poland. He was naturalized as an American citizen in 1945. Courtesy Sousa Mendes Foundation

Stephen went on to a good life. He married, had four children and 11 grandchildren. He lived in the waterfront New York suburb of New Rochelle. He owned a business that dubbed and subtitled films. But, during his trip to Lisbon, he announced that he wished to be known once again as Stefan.

Last year, in July, as this story was being reported, Rozenfeld died of Covid-19. He was 86.

In that moment in Lisbon, though, standing on the bimah before the holy ark, “he made some peace with himself,” his daughter, Leah Sills, told me. “He realized that he was proud of his background. That it was okay to be Stefan. Nobody was going to come and get him, or make fun of him, or call him the refugee boy,” she said. “My father went back to being the Polish boy who escaped—who lived.”

Chanan Tigay | **READ MORE**
Chanan Tigay is an award-winning journalist and nonfiction writer whose work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *McSweeney's* and the *Atlantic*, among others.

DIPLOMACY EUROPEAN HISTORY FAMILY FRANCE GOVERNMENT LEADERS HOLOCAUST JUDAISM NAZIS REFUGEES RELIGIOUS HISTORY WORLD WAR II

RECOMMENDED VIDEOS

POST A COMMENT

SECTIONS

SUBSCRIBE

EXPLORE

Smart News
History
Science
Innovation
Arts & Culture
Travel
At The Smithsonian
Photos
Video
Games

SUBSCRIBE

Subscribe
Give a gift
Renew

NEWSLETTERS

Sign Up

OUR PARTNERS

Smithsonian Institution
Smithsonian.com
Air & Space Magazine
Smithsonian Store
Smithsonian Journeys
Smithsonian Channel
Smithsonian Books

TERMS OF USE

About Smithsonian
Contact Us
Advertising
RSS
Member Services
Sustainability
Terms of Use
Privacy Statement
Cookie Policy
Advertising Notice