

A Hero for Our/All Time

During the year I lived in Lisbon with my family, our first full day in the city took us to a local bank to open an account. When I explained to the inquiring bank officer that I was in Portugal to research Cape Verdeans who bear some Jewish ancestry, our young banker immediately launched into an unbelievable story of his grandfather, one Aristides de Sousa Mendes. The account officer claimed that his grandfather had single-handedly saved some 10,000 Jews and 20,000 other refugees from the Nazis. As General Consul of the Portuguese consulate in Bordeaux, Sousa Mendes had found the shared humanity in 30,000 desperate refugees and had hand-signed visas for them all, mostly during a single six-day period in 1940. In so doing, Sousa Mendes defied Circular 14, issued by his government in 1939, to deny visas to Jews and others categorized as "inconvenient or dangerous." After the Portuguese dictator, Salazar, discovered his renegade consul's insurrection, Salazar recalled Sousa Mendes to Lisbon and stripped him of his position, his law degree, his pension, and, ultimately, his dignity. Fourteen years later, Mendes died--financially ruined, politically disgraced, and historically forgotten.

Or so our banker claimed. While feigning admiration, I secretly doubted every claim I heard. I knew the Portuguese to be great storytellers and wrote off our banker's bravado as products of an over-active imagination trying to impress some visiting Yankees.

Back in our apartment, I Googled the name I'd jotted down at our banker's insistence. Imagine my amazement when I saw corroborated every detail of the narrative we had just heard.

But how was it that I had never so much as encountered the name of this remarkable figure, now considered the single-most heroic individual of World War II?

As my family learned during our year in Lisbon, the outside impact that the tiny country of Portugal has had on the world—for good and for ill—has largely remained a national secret.

In fact, Portugal boasts a checkered history when it comes to religious and racial minorities. It was the Portuguese who discovered new peoples in navigating the world's seas, the Portuguese who developed the first globalized commercial system, the Portuguese who created the first modern European empire, the Portuguese who housed (if ambivalently) large numbers of practicing Jews and Muslims in their midst until the 15th century. It was also the Portuguese who developed the Atlantic slave trade, the Portuguese who conducted, arguably, the longest-lasting and most brutal Inquisition against Jews, and the Portuguese who fought the most ruthless and protracted wars in Africa to hold onto its colonies, with devastating and lasting effects in Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, Angola, and Mozambique.

But these and nearly all other Portuguese honors--and dishonors--remain under wraps in the quiet Portuguese psyche. Among the until-now-unknown heroes of whom the Portuguese can be most proud is Aristides de Sousa Mendes.

In this era of institutionalized racism, increasing economic inequality, expanding refugee crises, and the twin plagues of continuing anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, the story of one man's insistence to do the right thing even while knowing that he would likely pay an extreme price for his decision is both rare and inspirational. Yet, toward the end of his life, an impoverished Sousa Mendes once said, "I could not have acted otherwise, and I therefore accept all that has befallen me with love."

Are we humans still capable of producing a hero the likes of Aristides de Sousa Mendes?

*

For more about the life and legacy of this extraordinary person, see:

- <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/sousa-mendes-saved-more-lives-than-schindler-so-why-isnt-he-a-household-name-too-2105882.html>
- http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%203230.pdf
- <http://sousamendesfoundation.org>
- <http://www.ajpn.org> [in French]

-- Dr. Alma Gottlieb

Professor of Anthropology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign