

Reasons of humanity: Aristides Sousa Mendes

Aristides Sousa Mendes: razões de humanidade

Manuela Franco*

Abstract: Sixty seven years to this month of November 2007, Aristides Sousa Mendes stood condemned to one year's suspension on half pay followed by compulsory retirement from the diplomatic service. I will bring before you the case of this Portuguese diplomat, a Righteous Gentile, whom in the War's darkest hour, faced with a political and social order contradictory to human dignity, submitted to moral obligation. Rather than seeking refuge in the magic of faith, he chose effective action, and used his power to help thousands of people escape the German westward advance, a decision for which he was himself to become an outcast – till his death and beyond, for it took almost 50 years for him to be reinstated.

Keywords: Aristides Sousa Mendes. Nazism. War.

Resumo: Aristides Sousa Mendes foi um diplomata português que, na hora da escuridão da guerra, diante de uma ordem política e social contraditória à dignidade humana, em vez de procurar refúgio na fé, escolheu uma ação eficaz e usou o seu poder para ajudar milhares de pessoas a escapar do avanço alemão, uma decisão para a qual ele mesmo se tornar um pária.

Palavras-chave: Aristides Sousa Mendes. Nazismo. Guerra.

Sixty seven years to this month of November 2007, Aristides Sousa Mendes stood condemned to one year's suspension on half pay followed by compulsory retirement from the diplomatic service. I will bring before you the case of this Portuguese diplomat, a Righteous Gentile, whom in the War's darkest hour, faced with a political and social order contradictory to human dignity, submitted to moral obligation. Rather than seeking refuge in the magic of faith, he chose effective action, and used his power to help thousands of people escape the German westward advance, a decision for which he was himself to become an outcast – till his death and beyond, for it took almost 50 years for him to be reinstated.

To all appearances, Aristides de Sousa Mendes was the anti-hero. A country esquire, a conservative, a devout catholic with a large family, nothing seemed to set him apart from his peers. A diplomat with a career which even if marked by political riptides, remained an average one until his compulsory retirement in 1940, at age 55. A mature man, used to the ways of the world, politically conscious, forewarned by the Lisbon bureaucracy, he was keenly aware of the dire personal retribution his actions were likely to get. In fact he voiced his concerns as the thousands of refugees massed in front of the Portuguese Consulate in Bordeaux:

As I informed all of you, my government has determinedly refused all the requests to grant visas to any refugees whatsoever (...) All the refugees are human beings and their position in life, religion or color, are completely irrelevant to me (...) I know that my wife shares my views, and I am sure that my children will understand and will not condemn me if, in granting all these visas to all and each of the refugees, I am tomorrow to be dismissed from my post for having acted against orders that to me are vile and unjust, and therefore I declare that I will give, free of charge, a visa to whoever requests it.

A couple of weeks later, he forthrightly declared to the disciplinary committee convened to ensure lawful trappings to his dismissal:

It was indeed my aim to "save all these people", whose suffering was indescribable: some had lost their spouses, others had no news of missing children, others had seen their loved ones succumb to the German bombings which occurred everyday and did not spare the terrified refugees. (...) In addition to this extremely emotional aspect, however, which filled me with commiseration for so much misfortune, there was another aspect which should not be overlooked, the fate of so many people if they fell in the hands of the enemy. Indeed, in the midst of these refugees were officers from the armies of countries that had already been occupied, Austrians, Czechs and Poles, who would be shot as rebels; there were also many Belgians, Dutch, French, Luxemburgers and even English who would be subject to the harsh regime of the German concentration camps; there were eminent intellectuals, famous artists, statesmen, diplomats, of the highest category, major industrialists and businessmen, etc, who would suffer the same fate. Many were Jews who were already persecuted and sought to escape the horror of further persecution. Finally, an endless number of women from all the invaded countries attempting to avoid being at the mercy of brutal Teutonic sensuality. Add to this hundreds of children who were with their parents and shared their suffering and anguish, needing cares they often were unable to provide. Moreover, because of the lack of accommodation this multitude slept in the streets and public squares in all weathers. How many suicides and how many acts of despair must have taken place, I myself witnessed several acts of madness! All this could not fail to impress me vividly, I who am the head of a numerous family and better than none understand the meaning of not being able to protect one's family. Hence my attitude inspired solely and exclusively by the feelings of altruism and generosity, (...). I may have erred but if so I did it unintentionally, having followed the voice of my conscience which (...) never failed to guide me in the fulfillment of my duties and in full awareness of my responsibilities.¹

Paying tribute is not *glatt kosher*. On the safe side, It is a way to honor a man whose feat honors humanity. It is also a way to soberly enlighten present and future generations about the endless possibilities of doing Good in the worst circumstances. It certainly is an opportunity to bring over from the past a moral tale, one that shows how doing Good can be subversive, a pragmatic lesson on the unfairness of life. But paying tribute also entails a will to recognize and to understand the complexities along the path, and a determination to seek whatever truth is there to pass on. And for this we must set aside the commemorative soundtrack, revisit the set, transform the requirements of what was to what is a hero so that we bridge the standards of the day and our age. As words go, it is an interactive mode. One should bear in mind that "insofar as the past has been transmitted as tradition, it possesses authority; insofar as authority presents itself historically, it becomes tradition". Walter Benjamin, one of those who, faced with a refusal to cross the French-Spanish border in 1940, committed suicide, "knew that the break in tradition and the loss of authority which occurred in his lifetime were irreparable, and he concluded that he had to discover new ways of dealing with the past. (...) He discovered that the transmissibility of the past had been replaced by its citability and that in place of its authority there had arisen a strange power to settle down, piecemeal, in the present and to deprive it of 'peace of mind', the mindless peace of complacency".

World War II and the totalitarian experience stand as a signpost cautioning western civilization against treading the path of moral relativism. We shall remember that evil is not a mystical principle that can be deleted by some ritual, evil is an offence done by man unto man. And nobody, not even God, can take the place of the victim.

Politically, the reunification of Germany and the end of the Soviet Union prompted the Allies to seek closure to a number of issues that the Cold War had left in the open. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the thinking behind the reinvention of Europe has been framed by the moral effort required to understand the disasters of World War II and Soviet totalitarianism. Albeit unevenly, the question of morality and politics has been under the spotlight both in terms of relations among States and between these and individual rights. Seemingly, the Rights of Man are gaining ground on the National State.

One such issue was the industrial extermination of the Jews. Hard to grasp, as absolute evil cannot be rationalized, the Holocaust remains beyond the realm of reckoning, all the more so as the western world has become so thoroughly removed from imagining, let alone experiencing, the terror of political power unleashed upon society. Nevertheless, the pariah status imparted to Jews for over one and half millennia of Christianity has recently been acknowledged. And decades of research have unequivocally documented the legal and logistic apparatus that prepared and supported the nazi policies, from plain persecution to theft, from destitution of the attributes of a social being, such as deprivation of a personal name, to being treated as cattle for slaughter. The international process of according compensation for damages is above all a formal acknowledgement that terrible things happened, that crimes were committed against individuals. The representatives of the guilty pay up and the representatives of the victims give acquittance.

German totalitarianism imposed war on many countries. All along, the Nazis extended "special consideration" to occupied, allied or neutral countries for being, in the words of the Reich bureaucracy, "friends or allies of Germany". As the German war effort was intimately connected with the "final solution" of the Jewish Question in Europe, these countries are now being called upon to reassess their behavior during World War II. A call that cannot go unheard, particularly when democracy has been sanctioned as a paradigm of the organization most favorable to Man, now, professedly, the measure of all things.

Portugal participated in World War II as a neutral country. A lucid assessment of internal and external constraints, i.e. the experience of the barely finished Spanish Civil War and the Iberian Peninsula's geostrategic position made that stand advisable. In 1939 neutrality was a political and juridical concept of simple, if deceptive, implementation. But, in addition to its vile plan of conquering territories and spheres of influence, Germany was engaged in total ideological warfare. As the commands of the totalitarian movement were enforced, the Nazi world vision was thrust upon conquered lands, and the values on which the western world had functioned until then were destroyed. The semantics of neutrality changed. It became a difficult position to administer, particularly as Portugal was under an authoritarian regime, governed by a dictator, Salazar, who operated on certainties, in this particular case a set of principles tailored to a world that the war itself was destroying.

Certainties are the enemy of truth. In the Portuguese case, hidden behind the self-satisfaction of having escaped the conflict, whilst possibly even having benefited in the process, the truth was not grasped even as the war ended: on the news of Hitler's death, official mourning was declared. And to this day, a legalist, apolitical and amoral assessment of Portuguese neutrality still prevails. Having

failed to understand that winners and losers would never be equal and that the Nazi state could not be regenerated, having abstained from taking sides in the political and moral conflict brought about by World War II, Salazar relegated Portugal to the periphery of modernity and out of the history of Europe. Democracy would take another thirty years to reach Portugal. Only then would the country find the political route back to Europe.

Steps along this route were haltingly taken, as the rehabilitation process of Aristides Sousa Mendes clearly mirrors. As a result of nearly fifty years of a severely backward authoritarian regime, the Portuguese had settled into a gloomy parochialism, twice removed from European cultural and political life. The 1974 revolution that put an end to the colonial wars and to the colonial empire had other eggs to hatch. In fact, it was the entry into the European Union, in 1986 that brought discipline to change. Aristides Sousa Mendes' punitive proceedings were first reviewed in 1976, but the official rehabilitation really happened from 1987 onwards. He was reinstated as Ambassador in 1988, and in 1995 was awarded the most important Portuguese civil decoration. This current year the Portuguese Government, through the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Jaime Gama, donated 220 thousand dollars to the Aristides Sousa Mendes' Foundation, recently established by the Sousa Mendes family as a means to honor the memory of the late diplomat.

In what we venture to take as further evidence to the ability of facing up the untidiness of the not so distant past, such as unveiling the workings of Portuguese neutrality, the same Minister for Foreign Affairs sponsored a documentary exhibition on Sousa Mendes and two other Portuguese diplomats who participated in the rescuing of Budapest Jews in 1944. This exhibition, which opened in September in Newark, NJ, is now touring the network of Portuguese consulates in the United States.

1 WW II Refugees

It is known that thousands of refugees, mainly Jewish, passed through Portugal during the years of the Second World War. Many of these lives were spared by the determined action of several diplomats, first among which Aristides de Sousa Mendes, Portuguese Consul in Bordeaux. Through the strength of his character, Sousa Mendes rose above the prevailing panic in June 1940 and on his own decision and risk opened Portugal's doors at the right moment to those fleeing France. He was crushed by the certainties of Salazar who was nevertheless overcome by the creation of a political fact, which if reversed would raise issues that would be difficult to fit into the chosen parameters of Portuguese neutrality.

The initially restrictive attitude towards refugees from Nazism was in harmony with the policies by which the other countries in Western Europe attempted to resist the destabilization caused by the expulsion of the Jews from Germany. Between 1935 and 1938 mass movements in Europe appeared to be a question of yet more refugees, with national states refusing to take part in the solution to a problem provoked by the irresponsible policy of one of their peers. Third parties were involved in the upheaval and expense for which the guilty party – the Reich – refused to pay, with the added insult that it had previously expropriated the property of those it expelled. Secondly, the people expelled were not a temporary problem: with no possibility of returning, stripped of their nationality, whoever took them in should be prepared to integrate them in their national community. And therein lay an additional problem: they were Jews.

Faced with the internationalization of the Jewish issue, Portugal did not renounce its sovereign attribute of protecting its own nationals, nor the prerogative of granting asylum as it saw fit, i.e. provided that the way of life and the unity of the State were not disturbed. Early on the Portuguese

regime marked the difference between "Portuguese nationals of Jewish extraction", protecting their interests in Germany, and refugees, a political problem it did not wish to have. "Portugal has no political or racial reasons to concern itself with a problem that does not exist within its frontiers where for that very reason it has no desire to see it emerge", as one document at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs put it in 1939. The Police of Vigilance and Defense of the State (PVDE) declared foreign Jews morally and politically undesirable and sought to limit to a minimum their arrival in Portugal.

2 A border policy

As with its foreign counterparts, the Portuguese security police was instrumental in defining the policy of entry. This is documented in a series of Directives with instructions on issuing visas, which were sent by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to its diplomatic missions and consular services abroad. Since 1936, with the civil war in Spain and the specter of a Soviet revolution there threatening national independence and the survival of the regime, the visa policy had assumed importance as an active instrument of Portuguese national defense. That year, Russians, stateless persons and individuals documented by institutions and countries to which they did not belong – such as with the Nansen passports – could no longer be given residence permits. The consular services could only provide 30-day tourist visas, extendable to 60 days.

Meanwhile, as a result of a number of agreements signed in the late 20s the citizens of many European countries, including Germany, could enter Portugal without a visa and this had enabled many German Jews to settle there. The PVDE, however, complained to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the number of Germans arriving on short-term passports which the German consulate refused to revalidate. The PVDE was annoyed that "this refusal is given only to Jews, but the measures adopted by the police are general given the difficulty in distinguishing a German Jew from the rest [of the Germans]". The agreements on visas were to be cancelled only in September/October 1939, but a stop was put to the problem in 1938: after the annexation of Austria and the failure of the Evian Conference, on October 8th, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent out a Directive saying that "[Jewish] emigrants may not be granted residence permits for Portugal, they will be allowed in as tourists, and then only for 30 days".

Following the fall of Poland, Portugal's unique conditions as a neutral country, beyond the sphere of German influence and with an operational Atlantic port, were objectively framed by Salazar when determining that Portugal should be a transit country. Directive 14, dated 11 November 1939, sent to posts abroad "to avoid abuses and loose practices which the PVDE deems inconvenient or dangerous" set down a list of cases for which consuls could not grant consular visas without previous authorization of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: foreigners of undefined, contested or disputed nationality, those whose passports bore a declaration or any sign that they could not freely return to the country from whence they came, or Jews expelled from the countries of their nationality or residence. Nevertheless the same Directive made it quite clear that "consuls will be very careful not to obstruct the arrival in Lisbon of passengers on their way to other countries, particularly the transatlantic air routes or to the East".

From early 1940 onwards, correspondence between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the PVDE and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the diplomatic missions and consulates is clearly restrictive to Jews entering Portugal, regardless of their nationality. As the Germans advanced to the west, Lisbon accelerated the pace at which it issued new instructions, seeking to limit entries and centralize decisions. On April 23, Portuguese consuls in the Netherlands were advised to scrutinize carefully if requested visas were for Jews as "no visa could be issued in Jewish passports without the

authorization of the Foreign Ministry". This met the PVDE's wish "to avoid the entry in Portugal of individuals of that quality". On May 17, Telegraphic Circular 17 told Consulates that "in no case whatsoever" could they grant visas in passports without prior authorization from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One week later, on the 24th, a new Directive explained to consuls that it was not a question of restricting the transit of foreigners returning to their country of origin, but of avoiding transit visas becoming residence permits.

The stamp seemed to be an efficient weapon in the defense of stability, necessary to pursue Salazar's work of "national restoration". However, the fall of France brought a huge wave of refugees who had taken shelter in that country and could but flee over the Pyrenees. Spain was destroyed and would let anyone through who showed a transit visa or a residence permit for Portugal. At this critical point in the war, in the paroxysm of anxiety over the possibility of safeguarding neutrality, the Portuguese government decided to impose new restrictions. On June 14 – the day the Germans entered Paris and two days after Spain went from neutral to non-belligerent – Telegraphic Circular 23 stipulated that requests for visas should be sent directly from the consulates to the PVDE, reserving only the special cases for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Consuls were only allowed to issue transit visas without prior authorization to whoever had a visa for a third country and a ticket for the trip.

3 Aristides de Sousa Mendes, Portuguese Consul in Bordeaux

All these instructions embodied the Portuguese authorities' wish to avoid problems. When Aristides de Sousa Mendes took it upon himself to save as many as he could of the thousands fleeing the German advance in France, by giving them visas to cross the Pyrenees, over and above disobeying instructions he was challenging a political concept and confronting Lisbon with the creation of that most difficult of precedents, the humanitarian one. The image of "Portugal, a safe haven" was born then in Bordeaux, and it lasts to this day.

We will never know how many visas Aristides de Sousa Mendes issued. The Bordeaux Register of Visas eloquently documents this situation. Between November 1939 and April 1940, about 20 visas were issued every month. In May 1940, this figure rose to 8 visas a day. Between 17 and 30 May the daily average rose to 160. Up to 10 June, the consulate issued 59 visas. On the 11th it issued 67; on the 12th, 47; on the 13th, 6, on the 14th, 173; on the 15th, 112 and on the 16th, 40; on the 17th, 247, on the 18th, 216; between the 19th and the 22nd, an average of 350 were written into the Register of Visas. From then on the concern for maintaining order could no longer be discharged, names were no longer mentioned and in the end no record was kept. The fall in numbers on the 13th probably shows the number of authorizations granted from Lisbon; and on the 16th it marks the moment when the consul, exhausted by circumstances, called in sick and must have taken the decision not to wait for the authorizations from Lisbon to give refugees a free passage. There is no record of the visas issued under the authority of Aristides de Sousa Mendes at the Portuguese Consulate in Bayonne, or on the street or at the border in Hendaye.

The entire episode unfolded between 17 and 24 June. On June 20, Lisbon woke up to this problem with an Aide-Mémoire from the British Embassy, alleging that the Portuguese Consul in Bordeaux was improperly charging money "for Portuguese charity" for visas issued outside office hours. On that day, a telegram from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs requested the Portuguese Minister in France to look into and take energetic measures against events in Bordeaux. That same day the Portuguese Ambassador in Madrid sent a letter to Salazar saying that he would be travelling to Bayonne on the following day to speak with the Consul. On June 21 a telegram arrived at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from Bayonne, informing of the orders given by Sousa Mendes to issue visas indiscriminately,

without charge. Lopo Simeão, a consular functionary, was immediately sent to Bayonne on a special salvage mission. On June 23 he sent a telegram to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs suggesting that the Portuguese government should punish the Consul in Bordeaux immediately in order "to offload its responsibility entirely". On the field, the Portuguese Ambassador to Madrid, Pedro Teotónio Pereira, a man of Salazar's full confidence, held endless meetings with the Spanish border authorities and the Madrid authorities, clearly demarcating the Portuguese government from the actions of its Consul and annulling all visas as from June 24. That day, orders were sent to the Portuguese Minister in France to send Aristides de Sousa Mendes back to Lisbon immediately. On July 2 Salazar informed his Ambassador in London that he had removed the Consul from his post, and on July 4 he ordered disciplinary proceedings to begin.

"Reasons of humanity do not distinguish race or nationality", said Aristides de Sousa Mendes in his defense. The Portuguese government, however, was not of the same opinion, much less in the week when Spain became non-belligerent, German divisions were massing on the Pyrenees and some could almost see the Reich in Gibraltar. Tried in administrative proceedings and denied an appeal, Aristides de Sousa Mendes was banned from public service, which in authoritarian and corporatist Portugal basically meant he had been banned from active life. By acting on the scale of reality, insofar as possible assisting the dramatic situation of thousands of endangered people, knowing that he would have to confront a hierarchy that viewed diplomats as officers in plain clothing, Aristides de Sousa Mendes was crying out to Lisbon that freedom of conscience is not a matter of convenience. His crime was to have made it clear to the regime that the political structures on which its international profile and its bureaucratic lines of defense were built were but a mere construct.

The diplomat was punished but the "crime" was hushed up. Knowing that Spain would not take them back, the PVDE allowed through most of the people who arrived on the Portuguese borders. To pretend nothing had happened was the best way to minimize the precedent and to handle the discrediting fact that neither the Ministry of the Interior nor the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had been able to avoid the turn of events. The regime's ability to transform vice into virtue can be seen in a cutting from the Lisbon daily *Diário de Notícias* of 14 August, which Aristides de Sousa Mendes sent to be attached to his defense. A paean to Portuguese humanism, duly approved by the government censorship, it read "Portugal has always been Christian" and waxed about "the hospitality shown by Portugal to foreigners" and "the absolute impartiality that characterizes the understanding attitude that has, individually and nationally, inspired our welcome, without preferences for nationalities or reservations of opinions, to all those who harassed by panic or hardship have beaten on our door". And it went on "The services of the Ministry of the Interior – give praise where praise is due – have functioned perfectly. Praise for our actions, not only internally, but also on the borders, where it is particularly difficult, is general. All such references are addressed to the organization of our international police. As a result, the Portuguese heart was shown once again to the world, to the extent permissible under the circumstances, in the fullness of its ideal grandeur – which was always the greatest of its greatness".

At about the same time, the French Minister in Portugal informed Vichy that according to reliable sources the "affluence of refugees of all nationalities to Portuguese territories is causing the Portuguese government grave concern and it has taken very severe measures regarding the Czechs and the Poles. The threat of loss of nationality, caused by the law of July 23² hanging over the French, makes this situation worse – the authorities do not wish to take responsibility for potential stateless persons whom they cannot repatriate to their countries of origin". On the subject of the nearly 600 French refugees, he said: "most of them had entry visas issued by the Portuguese consul in Bordeaux but as this functionary has been dismissed, the Portuguese authorities do not recognize the validity of

any visas he issued. Consequently, the refugees who are considered as having entered Portugal without papers have been placed under assigned residence. Their passports are retained by the police and only returned to their bearers when they leave the country, having settled their situation". Months later, in November, in reply to a request for information from the Vichy Interior Ministry, the French Minister said that "the Portuguese government has taken no new measures to forbid the entry of Israelites but that more and more entry visas in Portugal would not be granted to Israelites who did not have the documents needed to take them on to another country". The information was reliable: in December 1940 Telegraphic Circular 29 established that visas could only be granted by the PVDE, thus canceling the possibility that had existed until then of consuls being able without prior authorization to provide transit visas for people travelling on to other countries.

Meanwhile, since the fall of Paris, the refugee organizations based there, in particular the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), HIAS and HICEM had moved to Portugal where they worked from July 1940, under the institutional aegis of the Refugee Section of the Jewish Community in Lisbon. The efficiency of such organizations in financing the cost of the transit of refugees and in guaranteeing that they would be moved on to third countries proved to be vitally important in soothing the concerns of the Portuguese government and contributed decisively to the gradual mellowing of the refugee policy. By then, though, Aristides Sousa Mendes and his family were being fed by the *Lisbon Jewish Economic Kitchen*.

In closing, we cannot but remember Hannah Arendt's words on *Men in Dark Times*,³ written at about the same time that the Yad Vashem recognized Aristides de Sousa Mendes as a Righteous Gentile:

If it is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better and for worse, who they are and what they can do, then darkness has come when this light is extinguished by "credibility gaps" and "invisible government", by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality. Even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given to them on earth. Eyes so used to darkness as ours will hardly be able to tell whether their light was the light of a candle or that of a blazing sun. But such objective evaluation seems to me a matter of secondary importance which can be safely left to posterity.

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Notas

¹ Hannah Arendt in Preface to Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations*, 1969.

Arquivo Maaravi: Revista Digital de Estudos Judaicos da UFMG. Belo Horizonte, v. 1, n. 1, out. 2007. ISSN: 1982-3053.

²Pétain's law that reviewed conditions for French naturalization since 1927 and enabled it to be taken away from all undesirables.

³Hannah Arendt in *Men in Dark Times*, 1968.

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