How to Rehabilitate a Hero: from Oakland Federation to Portugal

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Forbidden to practice in his trained profession as a lawyer and stripped of his position in Portugal's diplomatic corps, and his pension, Aristides de Sousa Mendes died in a poor house in Portugal in 1954.

“I would rather be with God against man, than with man against God.” -Aristides de Sousa Mendes

Against the orders of the Portuguese government, Sousa Mendes, then the Portugese Consul general to France, decided to issue a Portuguese visa to anyone who requested one, regardless of race, religion, or economic status. He and children worked round the clock to produce visas for refugees. The visa allowed the bearer to flee from France into Spain, and to escape the Nazis. In this way, Sousa Mendes saved 30,000 lives, including 10,000 Jews.

The Portuguese government punished him for his disobedience. Thirty-four years later it changed its mind.

In 1988, "he was posthumously reinstated to the Portuguese diplomatic corps, given the rank of Diplomat First Class, and was subsequently awarded the highest honor and medal that can be bestowed on a Portuguese civilian: the Grand Cross of the Order of Christ... A postage stamp with Sousa Mendes’ likeness was issued and a new subway station named in his honor. A curriculum exemplifying Dr. Sousa Mendes’ deeds was developed and is now taught to every school child."

In **Reinstating the Name and Honor of a Portuguese Diplomat Who Rescued Jews During World War II: Community Social Work Strategies**, Robert Jacobvitz tells the story of how, in his position as director of the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) of the Jewish Federation of the Greater East Bay (of Oakland, California, where some of Sousa Mendes' descendants lived) he, Sousa Mendes' son and daughter-in-law, John Paul and Joan, worked on a shoestring budget to organize an international effort to persuade Portugal to recognize and honor Sousa Mendes - the only Portugese citizen ever recognized by Yad Vashem. They were able to recruit Israel's first female Ambassador (and now member of the Knesset), Consul General to San Francisco **Colette Avital**, and then United States Representative **Tony Coelho**, the only Portugese American in Congress, as allies in their effort.

Jacobvitz frames this article as the story of how he applied his education from **Yeshiva University's Wurzweiler school of Jewish Social Work** to organize a small team of committed to people to act as effectively, and appear to the world as, a large international campaign. I'm glad we have it in BJPA to serve as both a template and inspiration for future efforts by Jewish communal professionals.

Here are some more sources about Sousa Mendes:

- **Jweekly.com**

- **The Independent**
- **Arty Semite in the Forward**
- **Jewish Virtual Library**
- **Wikipedia**
- **Sousa Mendes Foundation**
- **Sousa Mendes Website** (French)

The **Jewish Foundation for the Righteous** is an organization dedicated to finding and supporting gentile rescuers (who are often too proud or humble to seek help) to make sure that the future is unlike the past:

> John Paul once shared with me this response he received from a Portuguese group representative: “If your father rescued Jews, then let the Jews help you.”