

Reinstating the Name and Honor of a Portuguese Diplomat Who Rescued Jews During World War II

Community Social Work Strategies

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This article describes how a community organization social worker, applying principles of community organization, advocacy, and Jewish communal service within an international social work setting, was able to develop a successful international advocacy effort that restored the good name of a Catholic Portuguese diplomat, Dr. Aristides de Sousa Mendes, who chose to issue transit visas to Jews and other undesirables during World War II. Strategies were implemented within the community social work advocacy model to bring to light his good works after he was dismissed from his post and was removed to Lisbon where he died anonymously in dishonor and poverty. The author created an international organizing effort to give honor to this man's name and establish his place in Portuguese history. This effort also provided closure to his family's pain and allowed for the celebration of this righteous man's deeds in today's Portugal.

During World War II, in the spring and summer of 1940, the Portuguese Consul General, Dr. Aristides de Sousa Mendes, when stationed in Bordeaux, France, issued upward of 30,000 visas to refugees, including 10,000 Jews fleeing occupied France. This action was done in contravention of orders issued by the dictator/president Antonio Salazar, which stated that under no circumstances should transit visas be issued to political undesirables, especially Jews.

In making the decision to rescue Jews, Mendes made the statement that as a practicing Christian and especially a Catholic and as an attorney knowing that the Portuguese constitution does not discriminate against people because of their religion, political leanings, or national origin, he was obligated to help the Jews, regardless of the consequences. He is further reported as saying, "I would rather be with God against man, than with man against God." His wife

and children concurred with his decision, and his older sons assisted with the visa-issuing process.

As a result, Mendes was physically removed from his consular post, escorted back to Lisbon where he was stripped of his diplomatic credentials, expelled from government service, thereby losing his pension, and forbidden to practice law. In 1954 he died in disgrace and a pauper, leaving behind 13 destitute children.

For 40 years following Mendes' death, his children worked to bring his story to the attention of the world community. They hoped that with knowledge of the injustice that had befallen their father, world opinion would bear down upon the Portuguese government to restore the Mendes name to a place of honor in contemporary Portuguese history and heal a deep and profound depression that had affected many family members. Years went by with no results.

Two Sousa Mendes sons were the most active in this effort. One son, John Paul, told his father's story to local San Francisco and East Bay newspaper columnists, set up a petition table in front of the church he and his wife attended every Sunday in Dublin, California, and even asked local Catholic clerics, including the Bishop, for assistance. His older brother, Sebastian, self-published a book and also attempted to interest local newspaper reporters in the story.

For years, both men would address local Portuguese community groups with no results. 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." And from the priest at the church he attended, John Paul was told to pray to "Our Lady of Fatima" for forgiveness. Such was the initial state of both American Portuguese understanding of the Holocaust and the local Catholic Church's interest in helping a Catholic family correct a tragic injustice.

Nothing happened until I read the story and understood the significance of the deceased diplomat's actions. I understood that there was a "story behind the story," that these Portuguese non-Jews were themselves victims of the Holocaust. Furthermore, they had no constituency to help them in their effort to bring honor to the Sousa Mendes name in Portugal. The name of Aristides de Sousa Mendes had been literally written out of the official history of Portugal. He became the classic "man who never was."

From 1979–1989, I was the executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) of the Jewish Federation of the Greater East Bay (Oakland, CA). In my professional capacity, I was responsible for organizing and managing the annual Yom Hashoah (Holocaust) memorial. Although I knew of the "Righteous Gentiles," I was unfamiliar with the Aristides de Sousa Mendes story. It was not until March 17, 1986, when I read an article in the *Oakland (CA) Tribune* about the efforts of John Paul

Abranches, the youngest Sousa Mendes son, to restore the Sousa Mendes name did I know of Dr. Sousa Mendes' activity and the consequences of his actions.

INQUIRY AND ASSESSMENT

Soon after reading the newspaper article, I called the reporter to confirm the authenticity of John Paul's claims. I had been a student of Holocaust history, been active professionally in Holocaust-related issues, and attended classes on the subject at the Wurzweiler School of Social Work summer block program, yet I had never heard of Aristides de Sousa Mendes.

The reporter, himself the son of Dutch Jews who survived the Holocaust, validated everything that he had written in the article. He told me that John Paul had shown him a certificate given to his family by the Government of Israel attesting to Dr. Sousa Mendes' bravery and designating him a "Righteous Amongst the Nations." A tree had been planted in his honor on the Avenue of the Righteous at Yad Vashem.

I quickly informed the JCRC board of directors that the local Jewish community had within its midst family members of an unknown diplomat who had forfeited his and his progeny's future by rescuing Jews. I further shared with them that, as a consequence of his efforts, his surviving children and extended family members living in many countries were suffering as unidentified victims of the Holocaust. I also reported that there was no willing constituency to assist them in their efforts and that it was our responsibility and, more importantly, our obligation to help this family. The board was initially supportive, but skeptical of what I would be able to do and cautioned me with this adage, "Don't give up your day job."

In my initial research, I made a quick inquiry to Yad Vashem, corresponding and then speaking with its founding executive director, Mordechi Paldiel. I received confirmation that the Sousa Mendes story was all true. Dr. Paldiel in fact said that in his

estimation Dr. Sousa Mendes' deeds were equal if not greater than those of Raoul Wallenberg. He related to me that while Wallenberg had planned to rescue large numbers of Jews, Sousa Mendes' decision to save 30,000 persons was a spontaneous and courageous act in and of itself and that he surely knew that he would bear terrible consequences for his actions. And yet no one had heard of him.

After receiving this information, I secured permission from the JCRC board to pursue a course of action as I saw fit in support of the family's efforts to have the Sousa Mendes story shared with the world (and by doing so to restore the Sousa Mendes name to a place of honor in Portugal and in the chronicles of Portuguese history). Most of this effort was done via fax or snail mail, since e-mail had not yet been created.

I was challenged to fully use many of the community social work skills I was taught by my teachers at Wurzweiler in my effort to effect change from within a Jewish communal service setting using community social work advocacy within an international context.

PRINCIPLES AND VALUES OF COMMUNITY SOCIAL WORK

As a student at Wurzweiler, I studied numerous models representing various advocacy strategies, such as building coalitions, developing alliances, identifying allies, creating "rallying points" for bringing disparate groups together for similar or like goals, and identifying previously unknown constituencies. I created and implemented "talking points" as part of multi-level informational campaigns to educate disinterested and/or uninformed potential constituencies, in addition to the public at large.

In launching all of the above I was ever mindful of the principles and values I was taught as a social work professional operating in a Jewish communal service context. As a Jewish communal professional, I had a duty if not an obligation to do the following:

1. Identify, understand, and research the facts surrounding the Sousa Mendes story.
2. After confirming the validity of the story, report my findings to my employer and recommend an advocacy strategy on behalf of the Sousa Mendes family.
3. With JCRC's consent, bring the Sousa Mendes story to the East Bay Jewish Federation governing board for their "buy in" to the advocacy campaign and permission to go forward.
4. Create an initial venue to recognize the deeds of Dr Sousa Mendes (such as the annual Yom HaShoah ceremony).
5. Concurrently educate the local Jewish community as to our obligation as Jews to come to their aid.
6. Work with the Sousa Mendes family to develop an informational campaign for the international community.
7. Find a way to influence the Portuguese government to restore the Sousa Mendes name to a place of honor in Portugal and recognize him as a humanitarian.
8. Work toward the healing and eventual closure of the suffering that the Sousa Mendes family has experienced.

THE PLAN AND STRATEGY TO RECOGNIZE DR. SOUSA MENDES

Because the JCRC was chronically underfunded on an annual basis, I never had enough money to hire a full-time secretary. But, since John Paul's original cohort in this effort, his wife Joan, who was a professional secretary by training, was cranking out reams of letters and petitions by typewriter, along with creating extensive files of this effort in their garage, I very clearly saw an opportunity in the making. I hired Joan as my half-time secretary to do all my JCRC work, and the other half of the time she was the corresponding secretary for the international committee, still turning out an ever-expanding amount of information on behalf of the Sousa Mendes effort. This allowed Joan to bring to the office all the files that were accumulating in her garage. It was also

during this time that the JCRC was finally able to acquire computers.

There was a time when Joan and I would be working two days in one. We were never able to fully separate the Sousa Mendes efforts from the JCRC work, and eventually they merged into one seamless operation. As the saying goes, we just kept on truckin'.

Constituencies were identified and coalitions were established. Funding was secured. Individual diplomats; federal, state, and local legislators; and religious leaders from various countries were recruited and engaged in the effort.

We had direct access to the Israeli Ambassador to Portugal through a succession of Israeli Consul Generals in San Francisco. She, in turn, influenced the decision-making process of the Portuguese government as part of her diplomatic role. This ambassador, Colette Avital, was the first female Israeli ambassador and is now a member of the Israel Knesset.

While Ambassador Avital influenced the internal workings of the Portuguese government as the ambassador of the Jewish State, itself founded in part by Holocaust survivors, I was working from outside the government by coordinating efforts directly with the organized Portuguese Jewish community leadership residing in Lisbon.

Our funding included an anonymous \$10,000 contribution from a non-Jewish supporter. This allowed us to buy supplies, pay bills, and, more importantly, to travel throughout the world to advance our efforts. We used the Federation's 501(c)3 tax-exempt status to accept contributions, since the international committee was indeed a committee of the JCRC.

We secured cooperation from national Jewish communal organizations, synagogues, Jewish federations, Jewish community relations councils, churches, and eventually various Portuguese-American communal organizations. The national and the international press, electronic media, and the Jewish, Catholic, Portuguese, and Portuguese-American press were engaged. Articles appeared in *Moment*, *Hadassah*

Magazine, *Bnai Brith Monthly*, the Catholic monthly magazine, *Guideposts*, and even in many international editions of the *Reader's Digest*.

Early on, I realized that the only way that a small local Jewish-sponsored organization, with barely any money, could succeed in this effort was to find allies outside the Jewish community; I hoped to attract support from Congress and an individual of significance from the national Portuguese American community. And so I began to seek out the appropriate partners for the task at hand. There were simply no Portuguese business people of any visibility or corporate leadership that I could identify anywhere in the United States! It was becoming very frustrating.

One day, I received an invitation from the AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) regional director to attend an upcoming dinner with the aides of a local congressman. Much to my delight, I was seated next to the local field director of Congressman Tony Coelho, who happened to be the only Congressman of Portuguese descent. In the course of my small talk with this aide, I found out that Congressman Coelho proudly identified as a Portuguese American and was also the House Majority Whip! In this capacity, he met with foreign ministers when they visited Washington, and he was familiar with the Portuguese foreign minister. Portugal received significant foreign aid from the U.S. Congress, and Congressman Coelho would receive its foreign minister and discuss Portugal's request.

As a result of meeting his aide, I was able to get the attention of Congressman Coelho, who, in turn, started a process of putting pressure on the Portuguese foreign minister to relay to Lisbon his displeasure with the government's unfortunate attitude toward the Sousa Mendes case.

We were also able to enlist the support of such Congressmen as Pete Stark, George Miller, Henry Waxman, and Tom Lantos, as well as Senators Frank Lautenberg and Ted Kennedy, in addition to state legislators throughout the United States.

As a political strategy, we created very impressive-looking stationery for what we wanted to be perceived as a well-organized and functioning international committee. It had the Sousa Mendes family coat of arms printed as the background. It listed friends and family as board members with their addresses in foreign capitals, thereby giving the impression that there was truly an international committee with offices throughout the world.

We were known officially as the International Committee to Commemorate Dr. Aristides de Sousa Mendes. My position, depending on the activity in which we were engaged, was that of either executive director or president. John Paul was first chairman of the board and then the international president.

One of our board members, Dr. David Shpiro, a professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and the "chair of our Jerusalem office," had a friend who taught printing classes at a boy's vocational school. It was he who designed and printed our stationery.

We gave the impression that we had several operating international offices. One was in California—my JCRC office—and by extension, the international headquarters, and we had an East Coast office in New York. Other international offices were in Jerusalem, Quebec, and Lisbon, with a committee member becoming the international committee "representative" in Washington, DC.

SUCCESSFUL ADVOCACY

By advancing the above activities and implementing additional strategies, in 1988, the international committee successfully brought about the Portuguese government's recognition of Aristides de Sousa Mendes as a contemporary Portuguese hero. 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 Or-

der of Christ. President Mario Soares also made a personal apology to the Mendes family for the pain they had suffered. (Additionally he apologized to the Jews of Portugal for the pain suffered at the hands of the Inquisition.) 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 Portugal. A foundation has been formed in Portugal to refurbish the ancestral Sousa Mendes home and for it to be eventually a center for future Portuguese-Jewish dialogue.

The Sousa Mendes family now holds its head up high in knowing that Aristides Sousa Mendes is rightfully recognized as a man who chose to rescue Jews and others when they had no other chance to survive. He is now recognized in Portugal as one of its few contemporary heroes.

As a Jew, I had no other option but to assist this family to correct the injustice that had befallen Dr. Sousa Mendes. Throughout my efforts, a haunting refrain replayed in my consciousness: "By a stroke of fate, I could have been one of those Jews lining up in front of Dr. Mendes' office begging for a transit visa to freedom, and if he chose not to assist me, then I would have surely perished."

As a social worker, I also had an obligation to do what I could in my professional capacity to help heal this family and bring it back to a state of wholeness. I have been very fortunate by having been graced with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do good and to establish justice in the world, both as a Jew and as a social worker.

I could not have done otherwise.

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