

Sousa Mendes, Aristides de

(1885--1954), Portuguese diplomat in France who rescued thousands of Jews during World War II.

In May 1940 Germany invaded France. Tens of thousands of refugees escaped to the south of France; their hope was to cross into Portugal via Spain, and from there leave Europe by ship. However, to enter Portugal, the refugees needed Portuguese visas. On May 10 the Portuguese government ordered its diplomats in France to stop issuing visas to refugees trying to escape the Nazis, especially Jews.

At that point, Sousa Mendes was serving as Portugal's consul general in the southern French city of Bordeaux, where some 10,000 Jewish refugees were in need of Portuguese visas. Sousa Mendes decided to defy his government's orders and issue Portuguese transit visas---some 10,000---to all refugees who needed them. When his government discovered what he was doing, Sousa Mendes was immediately recalled to Portugal.

After his return home, Sousa Mendes was stripped of his job and benefits. With no pension and 13 children to feed, he died miserable and penniless. In 1966 he was designated as Righteous among the Nations by Yad Vashem, and in 1988 the Portuguese government posthumously restored his good name.