'I'D RATHER STAND WITH GOD AGAINST MAN THAN MAN AGAINST GOD'

Jerusalem square named for Portuguese diplomat who saved 10,000 Jews in WWII

Aristides de Sousa Mendes defied his country's dictator and provided visas to people in France fleeing Nazi persecution; mayor says plaza 'now carries the name of a hero'

By **ASH OBEL**   9 November 2022

square named in his honor, Kiryat Hayovel, Jerusalem, November 8, 2022 (Ash Obel/Times of Israel)

A picture of Aristides de Sousa Mendes, who is credited with saving thousands in the Holocaust, next to the square named in his honor, Kiryat Hayovel, Jerusalem, November 8, 2022 (Ash Obel/Times of Israel)

The Jerusalem Municipality on Tuesday named a square in honor of Portuguese diplomat Aristides de Sousa Mendes, who is credited with saving the lives of thousands of Jews during the Holocaust.

In a ceremony in Jerusalem's Kiryat Hayovel neighborhood, with several descendants of those who he saved and his own family members present, Sousa Mendes was hailed for his courage.

"This small corner of Jerusalem, the eternal city, now carries the name of a hero," announced Jerusalem Mayor Moshe Lion.

"Think of the many thousands who will pass by here every day. Many of them, perhaps, Jews who were saved because of the bravery of ambassador Sousa Mendes," he said.

"History was not quick to recognize his sacrifice and his courage, but today we need to remember such brave acts more than ever. The shadow of antisemitism skulks around us in every walk of life. At this time we need to remember the bravery of this hero," Lion said.

Although a number has never been confirmed, estimates suggest Sousa Mendes saved 30,000 people during World War II — 10,000 of them Jews.

Jerusalem Mayor Moshe Lion (left) and Gerald Mendes, the grandson of Aristides de Sousa Mendes, a Righteous Among the Nations, unveil a street sign with Sousa Mendes' name in Kiryat Hayovel, Jerusalem on November 8, 2022. (Ash Obel/Times of Israel)

In his capacity as Portugal's consul-general in the French city of Bordeaux in 1940, Sousa Mendez defied the orders of Portuguese dictator Antonio Salazar and his infamous "circular 14" decree, which banned the country's diplomats from providing Jewish refugees, among others, with visas.

Despite the danger to himself and his family, Mendes distributed visas to all who sought to flee Nazi Germany's expanding terror.

But his actions were not widely acknowledged.

"Twelve years ago I and a group of others started this foundation to give credit to this hero who is not widely known, and should be," Dr. Olivia Mattis, president of the Sousa Mendes Foundation and a descendant of one of those he saved, told The Times of Israel.

Mattis said that the Sousa Mendes story had been initially suppressed by the Salazar dictatorship due to its glorification of insubordination, but even after Portugal became a democracy in 1974 "there were forces in the Portuguese government loyal to the old regime who were keeping the story repressed."

After pressure from Israeli and US diplomats, as well as the Sousa Mendes Foundation, Portugal has begun to grant Sousa Mendes the recognition he deserves, adding a tomb with his name to the country's National Pantheon in 2021.

Jerusalem Mayor Moshe Lion stands in the middle of the newly named Aristides de Sousa Mendes square in Kiryat Hayovel, Jerusalem, November 8th, 2022 (Ash Obel/Times of Israel)

"[Circular 14] was the decree that Sousa Mendes violated because it violated his conscience," Mattis said, adding that he had apparently told his family that despite pressure on him from the Portuguese government he would "rather stand with God against man than with man against God."

"He lost everything," she said.

Having been recalled to Lisbon, Sousa Mendes became blacklisted, leaving him and his family of 15 socially isolated and in abject poverty. Lisbon's wartime Jewish community, aware of the diplomat's heroics, took it upon itself to feed Sousa Mendes and his family in the community soup kitchen.

"There are very few people who actually saved Jews during the Holocaust. This man has been underrecognized," declared Jerusalem Deputy Mayor Fleur Hassan-Nahoum as she sat alongside Sousa Mendes' grandson, Gerald Mendes, who had flown in for the occasion.

Hassan-Nahoum told The Times of Israel that she hopes to add to the newly inaugurated square with public art or a statue.

After welcoming the crowd in Portuguese-accented Hebrew, Lisbon's ambassador to Israel Jorge Cabral praised the "courageous and extraordinary man, a human being, and a diplomat who saved Jews from an atrocious and despicable fate."

"Paying tribute to this man today is an opportunity to look inside ourselves in search of values of peace, love, humanity and compassion for each other," he said.

"We cannot understand the present nor the future without knowing what happened in the past. We must remember," Cabral said.

Deputy Mayor (right) Fleur Hassan-Nahoum and Gerald Mendes stand alongside a picture of his grandfather, Aristides de Sousa Mendes, prior to a ceremony inaugurating a city square in Sousa Mendes' honor, Kiryat Hayovel, Jerusalem, November 8th, 2022 (Ash Obel/Times of Israel)

As the inauguration ceremony concluded, a 50-year resident of the building closest to the square told The Times of Israel, "It's a very good thing... from my window I can see and protect it."

The ceremony drew dozens of onlookers in the normally quiet neighborhood. Curious children circled Sousa Mendes' grandson, Gerald, who stood out in his tailored blue suit.

A bystander explained to the children who Gerald's grandfather was and how many Jewish lives he saved from Nazi atrocities, bringing many of them to go and shake the hand of the grandson of the man who helped so many.