



Legislation Text

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Res. No. 1324

Resolution recognizing the late Dr. Aristedes de Sousa Mendes of Portugal for his humanitarian acts during World War II in conjunction with a photographic exhibition at the United Nations' Manhattan headquarters entitled "Visas for Life: The Righteous Diplomats."

By Council Members Nelson, Marshall, Fiala, Stabile; also Council Members Cruz, Harrison, Leffler and Michels

Whereas, Dr. Aristedes de Sousa Mendes was the Portuguese Consul-General to Bordeaux, France when World War II broke out in Europe, serving under the dictatorship of Prime Minister Antonio de Oliveira Salazar; and
Whereas, When the Nazis occupied Paris, at least 100,000 refugees were estimated to have converged on Bordeaux and Bayonne in southern France hoping to obtain visas to enter Portugal, a neutral country, fearing that the Nazis would soon conquer all of France; and
Whereas, Much to the surprise of refugees and government officials, Premier Salazar issued a harsh government order demanding that visas be granted only to those who could prove ownership of travel tickets outside of Lisbon and demanded that no visas be given to Jews under any circumstances; and
Whereas, Premier Salazar's refusal to grant visas to refugees would force these refugees to remain in France, where they would all almost certainly be transported to the death camps; and
Whereas, Dr. Sousa Mendes tried to convince Premier Salazar to reconsider his decision, informing him of the horrible consequences that would follow but to no avail, leaving Dr. Sousa Mendes in a difficult position; and
Whereas, Although Dr. Sousa Mendes was, of course, required to follow any orders handed down by Premier Salazar, he found himself anguished and sickened by the thought of denying visas to these refugees and virtually ensuring their encampment, persecution and in many cases, their deaths; and
Whereas, Dr. Sousa Mendes decided to side with his conscience and the pleas of a Polish refugee, Rabbi Chaim Kruger, allegedly saying "I would rather be with God against man than with man against God;" and
Whereas, He worked feverishly during a three-day period, issuing visas, often regardless of whether the refugees held a passport or offered any kind of identification at all; and
Whereas, Dr. Sousa Mendes used his expertise to locate an obscure and under-patrolled border crossing that aided tremendously in ushering people from France into Spain and on their way to Portugal; and
Whereas, Dr. Sousa Mendes saved the lives of approximately 30,000 people, 10,000 of them Jews, and demonstrated great personal courage by defying what amounted to a state-issued order of encampment and execution and choosing the right path regardless of the consequences that it would have on his life and his family's life; and
Whereas, After discovering that Dr. Sousa Mendes defied his orders, Premier Salazar immediately dismissed the consul from diplomatic service and sent him back to Portugal where his pension was denied; and
Whereas; Dr. Sousa Mendes, who had a law degree, was banned from pursuing his profession and no one would employ his eldest sons; with money scarce, the family ate meals alongside refugees in soup kitchens and his youngest children received some high school education through the generosity of the Jewish community; and
Whereas, Dr. Sousa, who died in 1954, officially disgraced in Portugal but revered by the many Jews and other refugees whose lives he saves, never expressed any regret for his actions; and
Whereas, Among a number of distinctions and posthumous honors, Dr. Sousa Mendes was honored with the title of "Righteous Among Nations" at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Museum in Israel in 1967 and the city of Bordeaux honored him with a prominent bust; and
Whereas, Dr. Sousa Mendes was a great humanitarian who knowingly sacrificed his career and his social and fiscal stability for the lives of thousands of people whom he had never previously met and this month, his legacy is part of an exhibit at the United Nations called "Visas for Life: The Righteous Diplomats," which recognizes him for his heroism; now, therefore, be it
Resolved, That the Council of the City of New York recognizes the late Dr. Aristedes de Sousa Mendes of Portugal for his humanitarian acts during World War II in conjunction with a photographic exhibition at the United Nations' Manhattan headquarters entitled "Visas for Life: The Righteous Diplomats."

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