

*REMARKS BY THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF PORTUGAL AND MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, AMBASSADOR ANTÓNIO MONTEIRO, AT THE SPECIAL SESSION “REMEMBERING THE PAST, SHAPING THE FUTURE”, ON THE OCCASION OF THE INAUGURATION OF THE NEW YAD VASHEM MUSEUM*

(Jerusalem, 16 March 2005)

- Dear friends: Today, on this historical occasion and at this unique venue (*Yad Vashem*, “*a memorial and a name*”), let me briefly tell you a story that many of you have never heard. This will be our way of paying tribute to the lasting memory of someone who should be so dear to Israeli and Portuguese hearts.
- Sixty-five years ago, in the city of Bordeaux, in the south of France, a massive, and yet almost anonymous, rescue operation of Jews and other people from all over Europe, fleeing in desperation from the rapid advance of German troops, took place. Even today this story is not sufficiently acknowledged. According to some estimates, perhaps thirty thousand people were saved thanks to this action.
- And yet, this was not an organized operation. Instead, it was a personal endeavour by a lonely man, with very limited resources and no outside support: the then Portuguese Consul-General in Bordeaux Aristides de Sousa Mendes, with whom I have the great honour of sharing both the nationality and the profession.
- With deep emotion, I have proudly noted that his memory, as one of the most distinguished *Righteous amongst the Nations*, is being kept and duly honoured here amongst all places, at this new *Yad Vashem*.
- I do feel that his name and his remembrance are cherished and are safe here: they are in good hands; the hands of those who owe their lives to the thousands of visas and travel documents that Aristides de Sousa Mendes, in a matter of only a few weeks, decided to issue for the sake of countless refugees who hoped to transit to neutral Portugal and to the Americas via Spain.
- My friends, there is so much that can be done, even at times of despair. And one single person, one person of integrity can make a difference. A difference of life and death.

- This was not a man who necessarily thought he had a mission to accomplish. He was not Jewish, but a devoted Catholic. He was not an agent for some organization or country, but was acting alone. He had never heard the words Auschwitz-Birkenau or Treblinka. Nobody at that time was talking about a Holocaust or a Shoah. He had never seen aerial photographs of the extermination camps or any evidence of the train tracks leading to Auschwitz. He probably didn't actually suspect anything about the imminent annihilation of European Jewry in this month of June 1940.
- He was definitely not following instructions from his government. On the contrary, the Portuguese authorities had, all of a sudden, explicitly denied all visa applications to any refugees. For his disobedience, Aristides de Sousa Mendes would pay dearly: he was summarily suspended and saw his professional career unravel. He, who was destined to enjoy a comfortable and rewarding diplomatic life, eventually died in absolute poverty, his retirement and severance benefits having been unjustly taken away.
- My friends, even at a late stage of the Second World War, some people at the highest level of responsibilities in the allied camp had irrefutable evidence of what was happening to Jews - and did nothing. For his part, at the very beginning of the war, Aristides de Sousa Mendes, a quiet family man with no particular dreams of grandstanding or moral righteousness, certainly had scant knowledge of the extent of the catastrophe that had started to unfold. But one thing he knew: there were people, right in front of his eyes, suffering immensely and obviously facing a grave danger. He, a father of 13 children, was witnessing the grim reality of entire families stranded on the streets of Bordeaux, with no roof, no food, and almost no hope. Were they guilty of any crime? Clearly not. Was he going to stand idle, like so many others in those times of widespread cowardice and indifference?
- Here is what he said to his staff at the Consulate, according to Rabbi Haim Krugger, one of the refugees he saved: *“Even if I am dismissed, I can only act as a Christian, as my conscience tells me. (...) I cannot allow these people to die. Many are Jews and our Constitution states that the religion, or politics, of a foreigner shall not be used to deny him refuge in Portugal. I have decided to follow this principle. I am going to issue a visa to anyone, regardless of whether or not he can pay.”*

- To his aides, he also stated: *“My desire is to be with God against man, rather than with man against God.”*
- And this is what he had to say at the disciplinary proceedings brought against him as early as August 1940: *“It was indeed my aim to save all those people, whose suffering was unspeakable: some had lost their spouses, others had no news of missing children, others had seen their loved ones succumb to the German bombings which occurred every day and did not spare the terrified refugees. (...) What would be the fate of so many people if they fell into the hands of their enemy? (...) Many were Jews who were already persecuted and sought to escape the horror of further persecution.”*
- After his dismissal, Aristides de Sousa Mendes reportedly told Rabbi Kruger, whom he met again in Lisbon: *“If thousands of Jews can suffer because of one Catholic (i.e. Hitler), then surely it is permitted for one Portuguese Catholic to suffer for so many Jews.”* And he added: *“I could not have acted otherwise, and I therefore accept all that has befallen me with love”*.
- Dear survivors of the Holocaust, you who are the witnesses for all of mankind, you who invite us all to remember those whom André Malraux called *“our brothers in the order of the Night”*, let me, on behalf of the Portuguese President of the Republic, Jorge Sampaio, and therefore on behalf of the entire Portuguese people, pay tribute to your suffering, to your sacrifice, to your sense of loss. And also to your commitment to never forgetting, always remembering, always honouring the names of those - men and women, girls and boys - whose lives were cut short in the most inhumane and senseless way by other human beings, at the very heart of civilised Europe. We cannot be real men if we ever forget you. Elie Wiesel, who is one of yours, was right: your survival *“has meaning for mankind”*.
- Lastly, let me pay tribute to the State of Israel, to the courage of its people and to the wisdom and steadfastness of its leaders, who are making the choice of Peace. By doing this, Israel is paving the way for a better life for all future generations, in this region and beyond. I do trust, and we all hope, that very soon you will indeed be fulfilling the vision of your founding fathers, who aimed for this State and for its people to be *“a light unto the nations”*.