

# TO SAVE ALL THOSE PEOPLE

## The action of Aristides de Sousa Mendes

The historian Yehuda Bauer, in his book "A History of the Holocaust", writes: "the portuguese consul in Bordeaux, Aristides de Sousa Mendes, issued visas to thousands of refugees, disobeying the orders of his own government.

Perhaps the largest action by a single individual during the Holocaust".





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# The action of Aristides de Sousa Mendes

The aim of this exhibit is to publicize the actions of Aristides de Sousa Mendes, the Portuguese Consul in Bordeaux who defied the orders of António de Oliveira Salazar's regime. Confronted with the exodus of thousands of people fleeing the nightmare of WW II, he granted the visas they needed to save their lives. The title of this presentation is nothing but the words Aristides de Sousa Mendes used to defend his own actions: "It was really my goal to save all those people whose suffering defied description."

Since 2010 the Biblioteca Municipal / Centro de Artes has been commemorating January 27th in honor of the Holocaust victims. One of our difficulties has been gaining access to high-quality, print-ready, online information for use in schools, public libraries, community centres, and any location where there is an educational need for lessons relating to the study of WW II. Given these constraints, we have collected content from the Fundação Aristides de Sousa Mendes, The Sousa Mendes Foundation, the Museu Virtual Aristides de Sousa Mendes, and the projects Os Nove Dias de Sousa Mendes (journalist Inês Faro) and Vidas Pougadas/Spared Lives (Arquivo Histórico-Diplomático do Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros) to put on this exhibition. These materials will be available to the general public at no cost, in both Portuguese and English, on the website of the Centro de Artes de Sines'. Visiting the websites that supported us will allow visitors to deepen their knowledge of an important theme such as the courageous contribution of Aristides de Sousa Mendes at one of the darkest pages in human history.



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## Life

Aristides de Sousa Mendes do Amaral e Abranches was born on July 19th, 1885 in Cabanas de Viriato, a small town in the district of Viseu, in Portugal. He grew up in a conservative, Catholic, aristocratic family. He married Angelina de Sousa Mendes - his cousin - and they had 14 children together.

As the son of a judge, Aristides followed in his father's footsteps and earned a Law degree at Coimbra University in 1907. Upon graduation, he eagerly embraced a diplomatic career. He held positions at several Portuguese consulates around the world: Zanzibar, Brazil, and the USA. His last posting as Portuguese consul was in Bordeaux, France, during the period when WW II broke out.

Between the 17th and the 25th of June 1940, Aristides de Sousa Mendes issued thousands of visas and, with his action, saved the life of innumerable refugees wanted by the nazi regime. Among these thousands of anonymous are people like the artists Salvador Dalí and his wife Gala, the Rothschild family, the american actor Robert Montgomery, the royal family of Luxembourg, members of the Belgium government, among many other personalities that would influence the culture and political destinies of Europe and the rest of the world in the next decades.



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ALL THOSE  
PEOPLE**

His decision to issue visas without regard to belief or religion was interpreted as an affront to Salazar's government, namely to the instructions contained in "Directive 14," issued on the 11th of November, 1939. This Directive forbade the granting of visas without prior permission of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to "foreigners of undefined nationality, to holders of Nansen passports [stateless persons], to Russians, to foreigners without any means of support, and, under all circumstances, to Jews".

Sousa Mendes' humanitarian gesture ended up influencing the rest of his life: he was subjected to a disciplinary process that prevented him from continuing his diplomatic career, a situation that led him and his family into financial ruin. Although aware of the consequences his actions had for himself and his family, the Portuguese consul never regretted his choice. "My desire was to remain with God against man instead of siding with man against God," he professed to one of his sons.

Aristides de Sousa Mendes succumbed to financial troubles and to a series of strokes he suffered. He died in Lisbon in 1954.

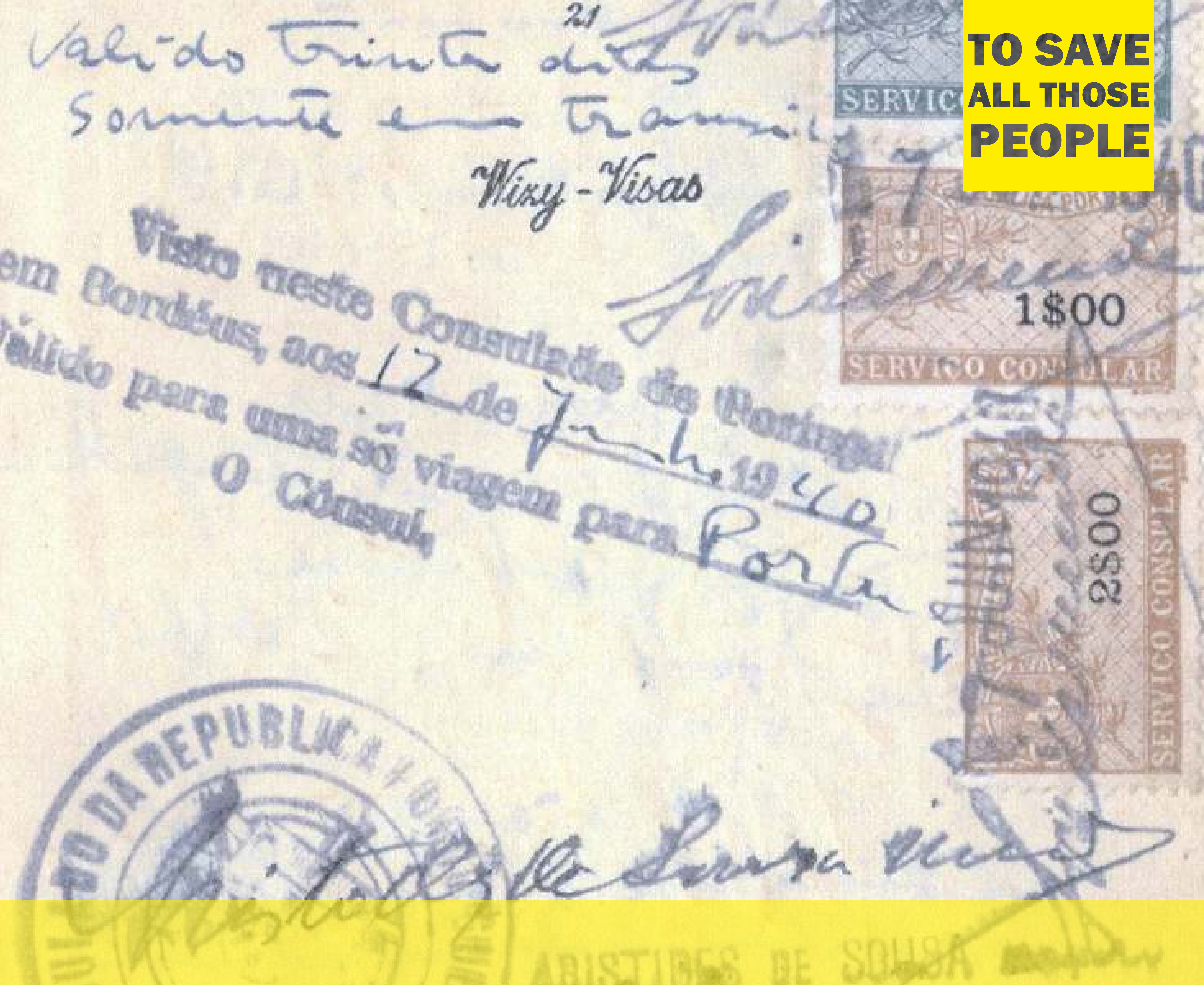
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PEOPLE**



## Historical context

Adolf Hitler's rise to power in Germany in 1933 marked the beginning of systematic persecution of Jews in that country. What started as a boycott of businesses and jobs devolved rapidly to total discrimination and the physical violence that culminated in the creation of the extermination camps.

As the situation became unbearable, a growing number of Jews fled Germany. Other opponents of the Nazi regime, mainly intellectuals, socialists and communists, joined the Jewish refugees. At first, they tried to rebuild their lives in neighbouring countries, settling for the most part in Belgium and France. In 1938, Germany occupied Czechoslovakia and annexed Austria. In September of the following year, the invasion of Poland by the Germans marked the beginning of World War II. One year later, German troops had occupied almost all of Europe. The exodus of civilians intensified. Thousands of people who were simply fleeing the war zone joined the refugees cast out by the Reich.



When the Germans reached Paris, the flight towards the south continued to grow. Refugees arrived in Bordeaux by the thousands, desperately seeking visas to freedom. Moved by the human drama unfolding before his eyes, Aristides de Sousa Mendes decided to ignore the orders he received from Portugal and started to issue visas to "all those people." As the situation became more serious because of interruptions in communications and the rapid approach of the Germans, Sousa Mendes ordered his dependent consuls in Toulouse and Bayonne, to follow suit.

Despite efforts of the Portuguese government to stop him, Sousa Mendes continued to issue visas, even on the street and near the border at Hendaye. Only the arrival of the Germans caused him to give up his efforts.

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The majority of refugees coming from Europe entered Portugal at the Vilar Formoso border crossing. Only those with a ticket and a visa to another country were authorised to continue on to Lisbon. All the others were redirected to beach and spa resorts or to provincial towns, where they were required to live. The destination for higher profile refugees and for the wealthy was Estoril, an international beach resort near Lisbon. Despite the initial shock caused by contact with their unexpectedly "modern" lifestyle, the refugees were welcomed by the local population, who did their best to ease their troubles.

Portugal became a paradise on earth for thousands of people. Even so, it was clear that the danger wasn't over: at any moment, Hitler could have advanced through the Iberian Peninsula. Because of that, and also because of the difficulty in obtaining authorisation to reside permanently in Portugal, the highest priority of the majority of the refugees was to obtain visas to another continent, to put an ocean's distance between themselves and the forces of the Reich.



# Nine Days

Notwithstanding the numerous visas issued during the previous months - and particularly from mid-May on -, it was between the 17th and the 25th of June of 1940 that Aristides de Sousa Mendes's most dramatic rescue took place, saving the lives of thousands of people.

On July 17th, Pétain assumed power. Bordeaux was, from that day, seen as France's provisional capital. The city filled with refugees in desperate need of visas to leave the country. Aristides, Portugal Consul in Bordeaux, ignored Circular 14 (the directive issued by the Salazar government, which forbade the granting of visas without previous consultation). Instead, he acted according to his conscience: he issued the visas without considering beliefs or religions, to all refugees fleeing war-torn Europe.

After the bombings in Bordeaux between the 19th to the 20th of June, thousands of refugees fled to Bayonne, and Aristides de Sousa Mendes travelled to that city to try to answer all requests. A table was set up in a small vestibule on the ground floor of the building, as people were afraid that the entire staircase would collapse from the weight of so many refugees.

After Bayonne, Aristides travelled to Hendaye, on the French-Spanish border, on the 22nd. There, Sousa Mendes was taken by surprise. Salazar already knew about his actions and sent Teotónio Pereira, Portuguese Ambassador in Madrid, to stop Aristides from continuing to issue the visas. Also, the visas issued by Sousa Mendes were declared null and void, and the refugees were barred from crossing the border. Confronted with the growing number of refugees at Hendaye, Aristides escorted them to another, less-known, land border: Biriattou. Without knowing of the Portuguese government's instructions, the guard allowed all the refugees to cross the border. Aristides de Sousa Mendes also returned to Portugal.



**TO SAVE  
ALL THOSE  
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# Rehabilitation

From the moment he was stripped of his position, Aristides tried to clear his name and correct the Salazar government's errors of judgment. After his death, it was the family, the people he saved or the people who witnessed his life-saving actions, or simply individuals who admired him for the courage of his acts, that untiringly continued to pursue that objective: rehabilitate and exalt the memory of Aristides de Sousa Mendes and his noble behaviour. These are some dates of that long road:

1945 - Aristides de Sousa Mendes presents a protest to the National Assembly against the condemnation imposed upon him for not obeying instructions he considered unconstitutional.

1967 - The General-Consul of Israel in New York delivers the "Righteous Among the Nations" Medal to Joana de Sousa Mendes (daughter), in memoriam of Aristides de Sousa Mendes (the only Portuguese to have received it until 2010).

1986 - The International Committee to Commemorate Dr. Aristides de Sousa Mendes is created.

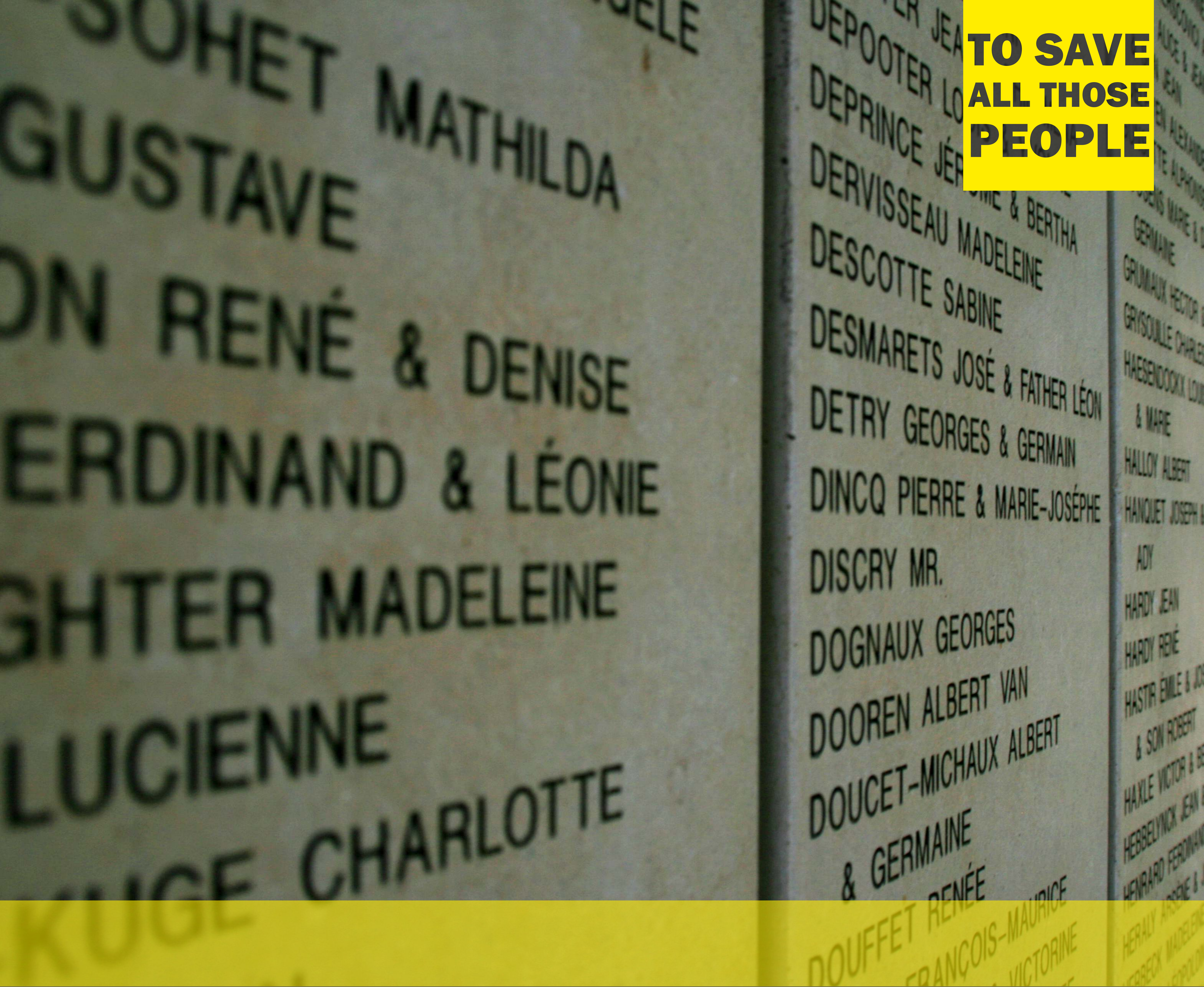
1987 - In the Portuguese Embassy in Washington, the President of Republic Mário Soares delivers the Order of Liberty (Official degree) to the family of Aristides de Sousa Mendes.

1988 - The Portuguese parliament approves the bill of law, authored by the deputy Jaime Gama, Socialist Party, officially rehabilitating Aristides de Sousa Mendes, and, in April, *Diário da República* publishes the posthumous readmission of Aristides de Sousa Mendes to the diplomatic career, promoted to Ambassador.

1990 - The city of Montreal (Canada) names a park after Aristides de Sousa Mendes.

1993 - The program "Sinais do Tempo" of TV channel RTP 2 broadcasts the documentary film "O Cônsul Injustiçado" ("The Wronged Consul"), about Aristides de Sousa Mendes, by Diana Andringa, Teresa Olga and Fátima Cavaco. In May a forest of 10.000 trees in the Negev Desert (Israel) is given the name "Aristides de Sousa Mendes Forest".

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1995 - Aristides de Sousa Mendes is honored posthumously with the Great Cross of the Order of Christ.

1998 - The European Parliament recognizes Aristides de Sousa Mendes, granting him an important medal / decoration.

1999 - The City Council of Rio de Janeiro grants the City's Decoration in memoriam of Aristides de Sousa Mendes; the President of the Republic, Jorge Sampaio, honors Aristides de Sousa Mendes; at Cabanas de Viriato, next to the tomb where the remains of Aristides de Sousa Mendes rest, D. António Monteiro, Bishop of Viseu, asks forgiveness, in the name of the church's hierarchy, for refusing help to Aristides de Sousa Mendes and his family when they requested it.

2000 - Fundação Aristides de Sousa Mendes is established in Portugal.

From the year 2000 onwards, the recognitions multiplied, namely via online supports: Museu Virtual Aristides de Sousa Mendes, Vidas Poupadas/Spared Lives (an online exhibition by Instituto Diplomático - Arquivo Histórico-Diplomático do Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros), Os nove dias de Sousa Mendes (website/documentary film by Inês Faro and Mélanie Pelletier), the webpages of Fundação Aristides Sousa Mendes, of Sousa Mendes Foundation and of Comité National Français en hommage à Aristides de Sousa Mendes.

2010 - The Sousa Mendes Foundation was established in the United States as a partnership between members of the Sousa Mendes family and individuals whose families received visas.

2013 - Opening of the exhibition "Work Towards Fairness", by the American architect Eric Moed, at Casa do Passal (Aristides de Sousa Mendes' residence). Portugal's Direcção Regional da Cultura do Centro announces the beginning of the restoration of the house.

2014 - The restoration of Casa do Passal, classified national monument, begins.