

Saving one life: saving the world¹

by

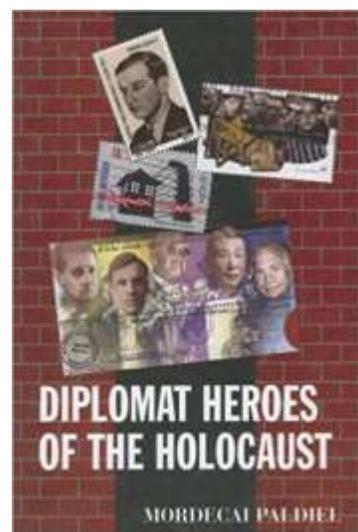
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Before reading this short article on the very complex subject of refugees in Portugal prior to and during WWII, perhaps you would like to stop and consider why such different characters as the monarchist Aristides de Sousa Mendes, the anti-Marxist Alfredo Casanova, the republican Alberto Veiga Simões, the liberal Giuseppe Agenore Magno, and other less-well-known people serving in Salazar's consular service, shared compassion for refugees in general, and for Jews in particular. And, again, why this compassion was also witnessed by so many refugees once they were in Portugal. And why, in identical times, places, and circumstances, various forms of indifference at best and hatred at worst were present in other nations and peoples. It is even today still simpler to ask such a question than to offer an answer. This question is key to the publications and research works of the Yad Vashem Holocaust Remembrance Centre.²

Introduction

At the start of WWII, the Portuguese Government announced, on 1 September 1939, that the 550-year-old Anglo-Portuguese Alliance remained intact.³ However, Portugal proclaimed its neutrality and in so doing became one of the Continent's last escape routes for refugees. Its neutrality remained effective until 1944, when an agreement was signed giving the United States permission to establish a military base in Santa Maria in the Azores, effectively changing Portugal's status from one of neutrality to being *a non-belligerent in favour of the Allies*.⁴

From 1933, Salazar began expanding the Polícia de Vigilância e Defesa do Estado (PVDE), thus enlarging its influence in the Portuguese state apparatus. This was particularly the case for its International Section, which controlled the borders and the entry of foreigners.⁵ With the growing number of Jews seeking to leave Austria and Germany by the end of 1938, a PVDE circular stipulated that only Transit or Tourist visas should be issued. This was part of the effort of the PVDE to impose its discipline on consuls and travel companies and, later, on ambassadors, to stop "any haphazard arrival of Jews" into Portugal. These restrictions were further strengthened at the end of 1940. This attitude of the authorities was in stark contrast to the almost complete lack of antisemitism within the broader population. As we discuss below, most consuls collaborated with aid organisations such as COMASSIS (Comissão Portuguesa de Assistência a Judeus Refugiados), the Quakers and the Unitarian Service Committee and empathized with the cause of the refugees and their plight,⁶ Lisbon being second only to Geneva in the amount of Jewish relief activity taking place at that time.



¹ "It is said that who saves one life saves the world." Rabbi Arthur Schneier, quoted in Mordecai Paldiel, *Diplomat Heroes of the Holocaust*, Ktav Pub & Distributors Inc. 2007.

² Avraham Milgram. *Portugal, the Consuls, and the Jewish Refugees, 1938-1941* p. 29

³ Leite, Joaquim da Costa (1998). *Neutrality by Agreement. Portugal and the British Alliance in WW II*, American University International Law Review 14- pp 185-199.

⁴ Michael Pease. Portugal: A WWII Enigma? BHSP Annual Report, 2011. <https://www.bhsportugal.org/library/articles/portugal-a-wwii-enigma>.

⁵ Gallagher, Tom. *Controlled Repression in Salazar's Portugal*. Journal of Contemporary History, vol. 14 (1979), pp. 385-402

⁶ Milgram, *op cit*

A PVDE report,⁷ puts the total number of refugees from the whole of Europe arriving in Portugal in 1940 as follows:

- Entry by land 30,854 / Exit by land 13,991
- Entry by sea 6,843 / Exit by sea 17,452
- Entry by air 5,843 / Exit by air 5,136

Thus, in that year 43,540 arrivals were officially registered, with departures amounting to 36,579. These official statistics by the PVDE for 1940, a time when many were escaping the German advance in The Low Countries and France, may have represented a significant undercounting. Estimates of the actual number of Jewish refugees vary widely. While Yehuda Bauer estimates the number of Jews arriving in Lisbon in 1940-41 as 40,000 and Haim Avni writes of 10,500 Jews transiting through Lisbon,⁸ the American Jewish Year Book⁹ puts forward the figure of 100,000. Other estimates put the total number of refugees that escaped through Portugal during the war at between 100,000 and an incredible one million.¹⁰

A haven for refugees

On 26 June 1940, four days after France's capitulation to Germany, Portuguese prime minister António Salazar authorised the main Office of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS-HICEM) in Paris to be transferred to Lisbon. According to the Lisbon Jewish community, Salazar held Moises Bensabat Amzalak, the leader of that community, in high esteem, which allowed Amzalak to play an important role in getting Salazar's permission for the transfer. A devoted Jew and a supporter of Salazar, Amzalak headed the Lisbon Jewish community for 52 years, from 1926 until 1978.¹¹

In France, the Portuguese Consul-General in Bordeaux, Aristides de Sousa Mendes, helped an undetermined number of refugees, and his actions were not unique by any means. Issuing visas in contravention of instructions was widespread at Portuguese consulates all over Europe,¹² with some cases being directly supported by Salazar. The Portuguese Ambassador in Budapest, Carlos Sampaio Garrido, helped an estimated one thousand Hungarian Jews in 1944. Along with Carlos de Liz-Texeira Branquinho, they rented houses and apartments under Salazar's direct guidance to shelter and protect refugees from deportation and murder, and issued safe-conduct passes to those who had Portuguese connections. Both Sousa Mendes and Garrido were recognised as “Righteous Among the Nations” by Yad Vashem. Another of the many Portuguese to deserve credit for assisting Jews and other refugees during the war was Francisco Paula Leite Pinto. Between 1943 and 1948 he was Managing Director of the *Companhia de Caminhos de Ferro da Beira Alta*, the railway used by many refugees to arrive in Portugal, and, together with Amzalak, organised several trains of refugees from Europe and took charge of ensuring their successful reception.¹³

Emile Gissot, the Honorary Portuguese Vice-Consul in Toulouse was dismissed in 1940 by Salazar for issuing visas. Gabriel Guizol, Deputy Consul and his brother Rolland, in Cannes, were dismissed for granting transit visas to Jewish refugees already living in Marvão, Valença-do-Minho and Elvas, in Portugal, in 1942.¹⁴ No less worthy of mention is the work of Ambassador Alfredo Casanova in Rome and

⁷ See the Government report on the movement of foreigners at Portugal's borders in 1940 ref: PT/TT/AOS/CO/IN-8C/5/PVDE. Also see <https://digitarq.arquivos.pt/details?id=3889734>

⁸ Haim Avni, *Spain, the Jews, and Franco*. University of Nebraska Press, 1982

⁹ American Jewish Year Book vol 46 – 1944 <http://www.ajcarchives.org/main.php?GroupingId=10079>

¹⁰ Neil Lochery is the author of the one million estimate. See Lochery, Neill. *Lisbon: War in the Shadows of the City of Light, 1939–45*, Public Affairs; 1st edition (1 November 2011) ISBN 978-1610391887.

¹¹ Levy, Samuel. Moses Bensabat Amzalak. Israeli Community in Lisbon.

http://old.cilisboa.org/sections/tikva_04/bu_4_35_hist.htm

¹² Milgram, *op cit*

¹³ Moisés Bensabat Amzalak. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mois%C3%A9s_Bensabat_Amzalak

¹⁴ C.B. Stuczynski and B. Feitler (eds). *Portuguese Jews, New Christians and New Jews: A tribute to Roberto Bachmann*. Brill / Leiden-Boston 2018

Genoa where he granted many visas, including one to a Mr Abram J. Lachman who managed to get to the USA via Lisbon, was sent back to Portugal and from Lisbon was sent back to Genoa. Both Casanova and the Honorary Consul, Count Giuseppe Agenor Magno, were confronted by Salazar for granting irregular visas to Jewish refugees and dismissed. Casanova wrote to Salazar in defence of Magno's actions, stating that "the irregular granting of visas to Jews should be seen as an expression of humanity and not as an act to be condemned. (...) All means are justified in saving human lives." If Salazar answered, his reply is not archived. However, the case of Magno is quite extraordinary because, despite having been dismissed, he remained in his post till his death in 1947, still granting visas until the very end.¹⁵



Alberto da Veiga Simões



Aristides de Sousa Mendes

Another interesting figure is Alberto da Veiga Simões, often called "A Paragon of Ambivalence". He was Ambassador to Berlin from August 1933 and sent long letters to Salazar to alert him to what was happening in the country. Veiga considered Germany's anti-humanism unacceptable but, having said that, his attitude toward the persecuted Jews was one of distancing and ambivalence: he didn't want to know what was happening to the majority of Jewish victims of Nazism and yet felt compassion for some specific Jews who had, in common, great wealth, great renown and good connections. Thus, after *Kristallnacht*, he warned Salazar about the possibility of mass emigration from Germany to Portugal, which he feared, while at the same time he issued visas and encouraged consuls to issue visas without waiting for authorisation from Lisbon. The critical approach taken by Veiga Simões to the German Government led to his recall in July 1940.¹⁶

However, despite the intention of Portugal to appear neutral, even those who lacked papers were not, in most cases, deported by Portugal. Many Jewish refugees have recorded the warm welcome they received from the Portuguese population in general. The Portuguese Jewish community was very small but it counted very influential members, in addition to Moses Bensabat Amzalak. Openness towards the Jews was already apparent before the war. In July 1938, the Portuguese Government had instructed Veiga Simões to remind the German Government that Portuguese law made no distinction between Jews and others, and that it was obliged to offer full protection to all nationals wanting to return to Portugal.¹⁷

"In 1940 Lisbon, happiness was staged so that God could believe it still existed," wrote the French writer, pioneer aviator and wartime pilot Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.¹⁸ The Portuguese capital became a symbol of hope for many refugees. Even Ilsa and Rick, the star-crossed lovers in the film *Casablanca*, bought tickets to that great embarkation point. The thousands of Jews who had arrived were trying to obtain the documents

¹⁵ See Archives at Yad Vashem - 1941 - G.A.Magno - File YVA M31/3459

¹⁶ <https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/academic/portugal-the-consuls.html>

¹⁷ Leite, *op cit*

¹⁸ Saint-Exupéry, Antoine escaped from France to Portugal and ended up in Lisbon, waiting for a visa to go to America.

necessary to escape to the United States, South America or Palestine. The majority were assigned to forced residence in Lisbon, Ericeira, Caldas da Rainha, and various other towns, with most being maintained by relief agencies. While they had to get police permission to leave the town to which they were assigned, there was freedom of movement and choice of residence within the town itself. Children were permitted to attend school as long as fees were paid.



Two routes for refugees to the USA. On the left the Steamship Serpa Pinto, which made ten voyages to the United States during the war and, for those who could afford it, the Pan Am Clipper, seen here at Lisbon.

Other refugees were members of French, Polish and other forces seeking to rejoin their comrades. In his Memoirs, the historian Carlton Hayes writes of a *prodigious number of refugees*¹⁹ who began pouring into Spain in November and December 1942. Most were Frenchmen, half starved, without money or clothes, and Hayes writes of the decisive intervention of the Portuguese Ambassador Pedro Teotónio Pereira in favour of 16,000 French and other military refugees who were trying in 1943 to get from Spain to North Africa in order to join the Allied forces. In that group were also Polish, Dutch and Belgians, most of whom were soldiers or would-be soldiers. The Poles, in particular, were destined to perform brilliant feats in the later Italian campaign, alongside the Allies.²⁰

It was not only Lisbon that received refugees. In July 1940, the civilian population of Gibraltar was evacuated due to expected attacks from Germany and Italy, as the Allies thought the Axis would seek to control access to the Mediterranean. At that time, Madeira agreed to host about 2,500 Gibraltarian evacuees, mostly women and children, who arrived at Funchal between 21 July and 13 August 1940 and who remained there until near the end of the war. In 2010, a monument was commissioned in Gibraltar and shipped to Madeira, the gift being a symbol of ever-lasting appreciation from the people of Gibraltar to the people of Madeira.^{21 22}

In conclusion, the authoritarian regime of Oliveira Salazar, the lack of funds in the Portuguese treasury, the proximity of Spain in the midst of a civil war, and a tiny Jewish community that did not exceed one thousand were all negative factors for any immigrant - especially a Jewish one - but, at least until October 1938, there were no official guidelines preventing Jews from entering Portugal. The Government's response to the refugee situation was complex and, at times, inconsistent, but this needs to be seen in the context of the need to maintain neutrality and to distance Portugal from what was going on in the rest of Europe; the Spanish Civil War and the involvement of the Axis countries; and the hypersensitivity of Salazar and his regime to the entry of foreigners.

¹⁹ Hayes, Carlton J.H. (1945). *Wartime mission in Spain, 1942–1945*. Macmillan Company. ISBN 978-1121497245

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ Mascarenhas, Alice (9 January 2013). *Madeira Gold Medal of Merit for Louis*. Gibraltar Chronicle.

²² *Gibraltar e os Madeirenses*. <http://relvateresa.blogspot.com/2017/07/gibraltar-e-os-madeirenses.html>



The monument recording the hospitality of the people of Madeira to the Gibraltarian refugees

Portugal, A Present-Day Stepping-Stone for Refugees

Salazar stood by Portuguese neutrality to the end of the war. On the death of Hitler, he followed international protocol for the death of a head of state and ordered flags to be flown at half-mast.^{23,24} Salazar also allowed German Ambassador, Baron Hoyningen-Huene, to settle permanently in the Lisbon area, where he lived out part of his retirement.²⁵ Portugal continued to welcome refugees after the war. Umberto II, the King of Italy, lived in exile for 37 years in Cascais; as well as King Carol of Romania, Admiral Horthy from Hungary, the Comte de Paris and his family and the family of the Archduke Hapsburg of Austria. The heir-apparent to the defunct Spanish throne D. Juan de Bourbon and his wife D. Maria de las Mercedes (the Count and Countess of Barcelona) were exiled in Estoril. Later, they were joined by their children Pilar, Juan Carlos (the future King Juan Carlos of Spain), Margarita and Alfonso. As is well known to Lisbon residents, Calouste Gulbenkian, the Armenian oil magnate known as *Mr. Five Percent*, also chose Portugal as a place to settle. Finally, in an operation organised by Caritas Portugal from 1947 to 1952, 5,500 Austrian children, most of them orphans, were transported by train from Vienna to Lisbon and then placed in the foster care of Portuguese families.²⁶

Portugal survived the horrors of war not only physically intact but significantly wealthier. To commemorate the fact that it was spared the destruction of the war, in 1959 the Cristo Rei monument was built at Almada, overlooking Lisbon, paid for by the mothers whose sons didn't go to war, as well, as by an annual collection from children on the Feast of the Holy Innocents. Despite the authoritarian character of the regime, Portugal did not experience the same level of international isolation as did Franco's Spain. Unlike Spain, Portugal was accepted into the Marshall Plan (1947–1948) in return for the aid it gave to the Allies during the final stages of the war. Furthermore, also unlike Spain, it was one of the twelve founding members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1949, a reflection of the country's role as an ally against communism during the Cold War, in spite of its continuing lack of democracy.²⁷

Portugal continues to welcome refugees. Under a new programme it is now offering citizenship to the descendants of Sephardic Jews who were forced to leave the country hundreds of years ago at the time of

²³ Lochery *op cit*

²⁴ Paulo Lowndes Marques, 1992. *Half-mast. Hitler's Death, 1945*. British Historical Society Annual Report No. 19, p.101
<https://www.bhsportugal.org/library/articles/half-mast-hitlers-death-1945>

²⁵ Lochery, *op cit*

²⁶ Sobral, Claudia (2013). *Depois da guerra, o paraíso era Portugal*. Público.

<https://www.publico.pt/2013/01/24/sociedade/reportagem/depois-da-guerra-o-paraiso-era-portugal-1581863>

²⁷ Nicolau Andresen, "The Salazar Regime and European Integration, 1947–1972," *European Review of History* (2007) 14#2 pp. 195–214

the Inquisition. Some of those taking up the offer are Israelis; others are British seeking European citizenship after Brexit.²⁸ Portugal also accepted to receive its quota of immigrants allocated by the UNHCR and the European Resettlement Network. Few chose to stay and most moved on to other countries in Europe, Britain, or the USA. Furthermore, today in Portugal, there is again hope of a better future for parentless refugee children, as the country has just announced that a group of children from war-torn zones, presently living in camps in Greece, are to be welcomed into Portuguese families after the COVID-19 lockdown has been lifted.

Further reading

In addition to the sources cited in the text, the following are recommended:

Carlos Guerreiro. *Aterrem em Portugal: Aviadores e aviões beligerantes em Portugal na II Guerra Mundial*. Pedra da Lua, 2008.

Arthur Koestler. *Scum of the Earth* is a memoir in which the author describes the chaos that prevailed in France just prior to the outbreak of WWII, France's collapse, his tribulations, internment in a concentration camp, and eventual escape to England, via Portugal and North Africa. It was first published by Jonathan Cape in 1941.

Life Magazine. April 28, 1941, *Lisbon: Europe's Bottleneck*, p. 77.
https://books.google.pt/books?id=tkwEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA77&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false

Neill Lochery. *Out of the Shadows: Portugal from Revolution to the Present Day*. Bloomsbury, 2017

Rui Lopes. *An Oasis in Europe: Hollywood Depictions of Portugal during World War II*.

Richard Zimmer. *The Last Kabbalist of Lisbon* - Richard was a Guest-Speaker at a BHS event in March 2019. His talk was called: **Speaking for the Silent**.

²⁸ See BBC. *Turning Portuguese*. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/Turning_Portuguese