

The bravery of a Portuguese war hero resonates today



The decaying Sousa Mendes mansion. Photograph: Mark Fonseca Rendeiro

"So you've seen our shame, our disgrace?" Those were the first words from an older gentleman wearing a sash along the parade route. It is carnival in [Cabanas de Viriato](#), the ancestral home of Portuguese second world war hero [Aristides de Sousa Mendes](#), and I'm walking alongside Francisco Antonio Campos, director of the local philharmonic.

He sounds frustrated as he stares in any direction to avoid looking at the [ghastly abandoned mansion](#) looming over us in the town square. More than 70 years since Sousa Mendes, a diplomat assigned to the consulate in Bordeaux, saved over 30,000 people from the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, his story remains largely unknown and his majestic home, Casa do Passal, is falling to pieces.

Further along the parade route, I meet Agostinho Nascimento, mayor of Beijoz – the town next door. He too has been enjoying the children's parade, a carnival tradition that marches right past the rusting gate and windowless facade of the Sousa Mendes house. He says: "This is not just a reflection of how we in Portugal don't value bravery and sacrifice in the face of great risk, this says something about how people in Europe and all over the world honour one of the most selfless acts one can commit."

Sacrifice is what Sousa Mendes embodied: he provided an unbelievable amount of visas and physically ushered refugees across the French-Spanish border, assuring



Aristides de Sousa Mendes
Photograph: Public domain

their safe passage to officially neutral Portugal, only to eventually return home to be condemned and disgraced by a fascist government sympathetic to Hitler. His family would be blacklisted, his title stripped and his assets, including the mansion, confiscated.

"My grandfather never thought he would be punished to the extent that he was," Sousa Mendes's grandson, Aristides Manuel, explains. "He knew there would be some retribution, but to lose everything and have the family disgraced, he never thought it would go that far." Even after having lost everything for knowingly defying orders to not issue

visas to "foreigners of indefinite or contested nationality; the stateless; or Jews expelled from their countries of origin", Antonio Salazar, dictator of Portugal, ordered that no one in the country show him charity. Having no other choice, his children left Portugal one by one. After suffering a stroke that left him partially paralysed in 1945 and the death of his wife in 1948, Sousa Mendes only received food and shelter with the help of a local Jewish refugee organisation until his death in 1954. According to his children, his last request was that his name be restored.

More than 55 years since his final wish, governments around the world – including the US, Israel and Portugal – have recognised him as a hero. His title of ambassador was posthumously restored in 1988, all charges against him were officially dropped, and by 2001 the Sousa Mendes home was handed over to the newly founded [Aristides de Sousa Mendes Foundation](#). Their mission was to restore the mansion, abandoned since the 1950s, where – upon their arrival in Portugal – many of Sousa Mendes's visa recipients once took shelter.

The Portuguese government declared the site a national monument in 2008, but just when it seemed as if the historic building would finally be restored along with the family name, more obstacles appeared. Competing plans and a lack of consensus about how to make use of the building resulted in a stalemate on the part of the foundation, which continues even now. With Portugal itself engulfed by an economic crisis and widespread financial uncertainty, the foundation is in a state of paralysis.

While millions of people in the Middle East and north Africa march in the streets demanding human rights and democracy, the story of Sousa Mendes is more relevant

than ever. It was not just in the 1940s that the world needed brave and defiant people to save lives, at this very moment in places such as Syria, Jordan, Yemen, Bahrain and Libya, there are once again people of authority who have the power to choose, even at great risk to their own careers or lives, not to open fire into that crowd, not to beat a teenager to submission, and not to follow the orders of a morally bankrupt leader.

It is up to all of us, as witnesses and human beings, to make sure Aristides de Sousa Mendes's past and present are not abandoned and neglected. Now more than ever, those who question orders and break the rules when the rules no longer value human life must be valued and celebrated.