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The Ultimate Sacrifice

Aristides de Sousa Mendes (1895-1954) was a man who had it all. He was born into an aristocratic Portuguese family. He lived in a lavish estate. He fathered thirteen beautiful children. He held a prominent government position. Most importantly, he possessed a strong will and a compassionate heart, for he would risk all of this for the lives of those Jews threatened with the ghastly reality of the Holocaust.

Mendes served as the Portuguese consul-general in Bordeaux, France during the outbreak of the Second World War. As the relentless German army inched closer and closer to Bordeaux in June 1940, Mendes experienced firsthand the tragic and pathetic state of the Jewish refugees. Although Portugal's dictator, Antonio Salazar, decreed that no visas were to be issued to any refugees, Mendes' honor still demanded that he should at least offer one to Rabbi Haim Kruger and each of his member of his family.

Soon, a tremendous revelation transformed and enlightened Mendes' thinking. After a deep reflection, he realized that he could never live without regret if he only saved Rabbi Kruger and his family. His conscience would never allow the deep guilt inside of him to subside. From this point on, his upbringing as a Christian would guide him, not the petty words of his dictator, whom obviously was trying to please Hitler. Mendes himself stated, My desire is to be with God against man, rather than man against God. Even the Portuguese constitution forbade him from denying refuge in Portugal on the basis of religion or Politics.

With the help of Rabbi Kruger, Consul-General Mendes quickly issued Portuguese visas to thousands of Jews. His bravery never seemed to waver or slacken, for the Rabbi later recalls how Mendes did not even stop to eat or to sleep in the hopes of saving as many Jewish refugees as he could before the Portuguese government reacted to his insubordinate actions.

The response that Mendes expected from Lisbon came quickly. The government soon dispatched two emissaries to escort the man to his country in shame. This did not deter Mendes from issuing visas to more desperate Jews as the entourage traveled closer to the Spanish border. Mendes cleverly knew that his position as the official representative of Portugal was not relinquished until he actually left France.

Once in his homeland, a disciplinary board kicked Mendes out of the diplomatic corps and stripped him of all retirement and severance benefits. With thirteen children to feed and no income, Mendes promptly used up all of his savings and property in an attempt to survive. Aristides de Sousa Mendes died in poverty, but he never regretted his sacrifice of worldly comfort for the lives of thousands of Jews. He himself reportedly said, "If thousands of Jews can suffer because of one Catholic [Hitler], then surely it is permitted for one Catholic to suffer for so many Jews I could not have acted otherwise, and I therefore accept all that has befallen me with love."

The example of Aristides de Sousa Mendes proves that the path of a virtuous and moral life is riddled with frequent trials and hard sacrifices. Whereas countless people over the globe risked their livelihoods for the sake of the Jews, he actually lost everything dear to his heart, but he retained his honor, conscience, and fortitude. If one lesson needs to be learned from Mendes' life, it must be that these intangible attributes yield more happiness and satisfaction than all of the diamonds in the world do.

The pivotal transition in Mendes' life from respected diplomat to Jewish hero also sparks an extraordinary revelation; one small step truly does lead to a giant leap in progress. Mendes originally planned to contribute by issuing several visas only to Rabbi Kruger. This noble act soon swept the man into the whirlwind of saving the believers of Judaism from a ghastly death. From this fact we can rest assured that courage does not come in large packages from larger-than-life superheroes. Instead, it grows from humble beginnings and a constant willingness to nourish and support it. We too can rise up against injustice, if only to correct a tiny grievance. Trust in the fact that one small act can lead to bigger results. As Jesus Christ himself said, we only need faith and courage the size of a mustard seed for it to mature into a formidable tree of honor, glory, and love, ripe for the use of a society vulnerable to many injustices. The life of Aristides de Sousa Mendes himself completely supports this observation. He is valor's child. He is honor's pride. He is a man worth imitating.

Bibliography

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