

Spared Lives

The actions of three Portuguese diplomats in World War II

25 Jun. 1940

Telegram n° 101 from the Portuguese Ambassador in Madrid to the MNE recounting his mission to France (Bayonne), describing the chaotic situation of refugees at the border and informing that all visas granted by Portuguese Consul in Bordeaux had been declared invalid.

(AHD - Cipher, Collection of Telegrams received Madrid)

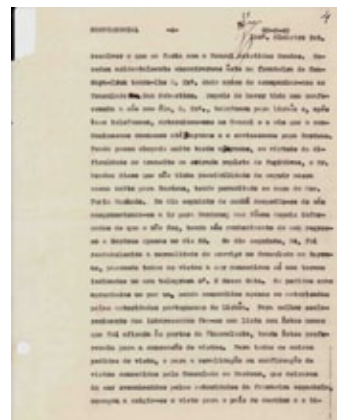
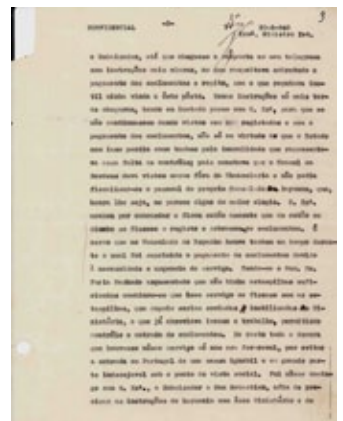
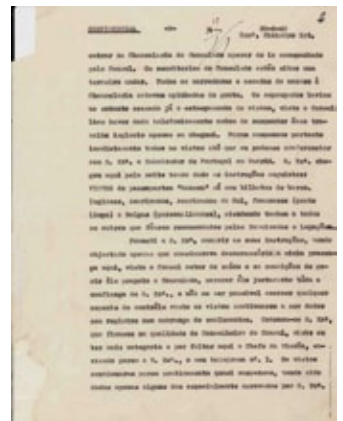
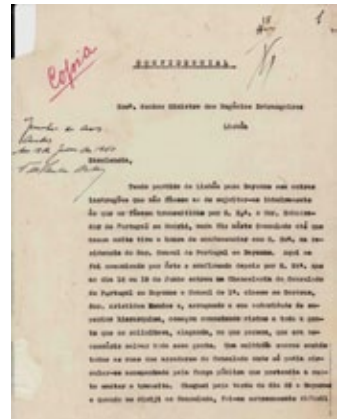
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To the Minister of Foreign Affairs
Lisbon

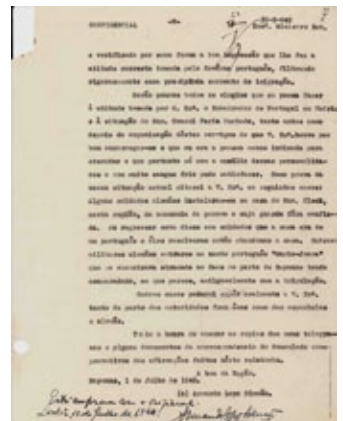
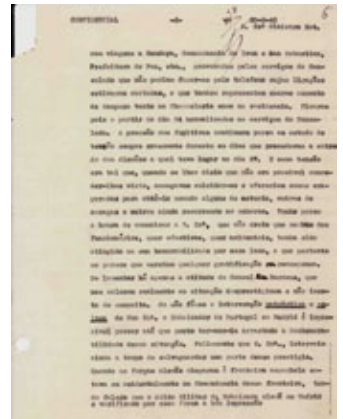
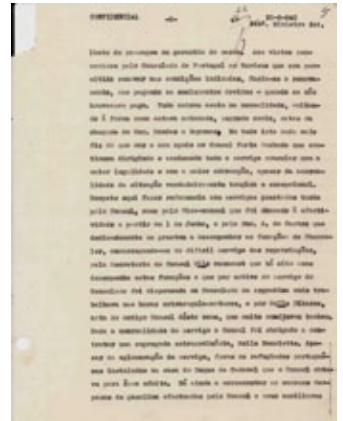
Excellency,

I left Lisbon for Bayonne with no instructions other than to comply with those given to me by the Portuguese Ambassador in Madrid. I did nothing here in this consulate until I had the honor that night of having a meeting with H.E. at the residence of the Portuguese Consul in Bayonne. The latter told me, later confirmed by H.E., that on 18th or 19th June at the chancery of the Portuguese Consulate in Bayonne, the consul (1st Class) in Bordeaux, Mr. Aristides Mendes, on his superior authority, began issuing visas to all those who applied, apparently alleging that all these people had to be saved. There was a large crowd in the streets around the consulate and it was only possible to get through with the help of the public force who attempted at great cost to control the traffic. I arrived in Bayonne on the afternoon of the 22nd and when I arrived at the consulate I found it extremely difficult to get into the chancery although accompanied by the consul. The consular offices are located on the third floor. All the corridors and stairs giving access to the chancery were crammed with people. By then, however, the employees had stopped stamping visas having received instructions over the telephone from the consul as soon as I arrived to suspend this inglorious task. All visas, therefore, were immediately suspended until I could confer with H.E. the Portuguese Ambassador in Madrid. H.E. arrived here in the evening and gave the following instructions: VISAS on Nansen passports only with boat tickets. English, American, South American, French (clean people) and Belgians (personalities), also all others recommended by Embassies and Legations.

I promised H.E. that I would obey his instructions and objected only that I thought my presence here unnecessary as the consul was in good health and able to manage the consulate himself, and that he was justly deserving of H.E.'s trust, and that I would not be able to exercise any sort of control over the visas as they continued to be issued without registration or emoluments. H.E. ordered me to remain as adviser to the consul as I was of a higher category and as the head of mission was absent, notwithstanding which I sent you my telegram n° 1. Visas,



however, were practically suspended, only a few specially approved by H.E. the Ambassador having been issued, until I received an answer to my telegram with clearer instructions, particularly regarding the payment of emoluments and I repeat, failing which I considered my visit to this post to have been quite useless. These instructions only arrived later although I insisted with H.E. that no more visas should be issued without registration and payment of emoluments, not only because the State was losing money but also because of the immorality represented by such lack of control; it was said that the consul in Bordeaux issued visas even outside the chancery and it was impossible to supervise the staff at the consulate in Bayonne who, truth be told, appeared to be worthy of the highest praise. H.E. finally agreed with me and it was decided that from that moment onwards visas should be registered and emoluments charged. It is true that for a while emoluments were suspended in the Spanish consulate due to service urgency and need. As Dr. Faria Machado argued that he did not have sufficient stamps it was agreed that said service would be provided without stamps, which would then be canceled and sent to the Ministry; this would considerably reduce the work and allow for control and collection of emoluments. Besides, delays in the service could favor us, avoiding the entry into Portugal of a base mass, mostly undesirable from a social point of view. I went that Sunday with H.E. the Ambassador to San Sebastian to define the instructions from the Ministry and to decide what to do about consul Aristides Mendes. We found him by chance at the Hendaye-Irun border and H.E. ordered him to accompany us to the consulate in San Sebastian. Having spoken with him in private H.E. telephoned Lisbon after which he told the consul and me that he would drive with us to Bayonne from where he would be sent on to Bordeaux. However, as we were very late arriving in Bayonne given the difficulties of driving on roads crowded with refugees, Mr. Mendes said that he would not be able to return to Bordeaux that evening and stayed overnight at the house of Mr. Faria Machado. The next day he said goodbye to us and promised to go to Bordeaux; we later found out that he had not gone and we know that he only returned there on the 26th. The following day, the 24th, business returned to normal at the Bayonne consulate, all visas being issued under the terms indicated in my telegram nº 2 of that same date. Applications were analyzed one by one and only granted to those authorized by the Portuguese authorities in Lisbon. To provide further information to the applicants a list was drawn up with these names and fixed to the chancery doors, such people to have preference in being granted visas. With regard to all other visa applications or to revalidate or confirm visas issued by the Spanish border authorities, we began demanding to see the visa for the country of destination and ticket or guarantee thereof. All visas issued by the Portuguese consulate in Bordeaux that could be renewed under the conditions indicated, were renewed against payment of the emoluments due – if not already paid. Everything thus returned to normal, back to how it was, as far as I know, before the arrival of Mr.



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Mendes in Bayonne. In all the above I did nothing more than lend my support to consul Faria Machado who continued directing and signing the consular services with all legality and correctness despite the unusualness of this truly tragic and exceptional situation. It behooves me here to speak of the services rendered by the consul, the vice-consul who came on duty on 1 June, Mr. A. de Castro, who with great dedication agreed to take over the duties of chancellor, in charge of the difficult question of repatriations, the consul's secretary, Mlle. Mocosant (who has performed these duties for eight years and who owing to the amount of work at the consulate was released from the Argentine consulate where she worked after hours), by Mlle. Diharce, granddaughter of the former consul of that name, who was also a great help. Given the unusual amount of work the consul was forced to hire an extra employee, Mlle. Henriette. Despite the amount of work, the Portuguese refugees were installed in the house of the Duke of Cadaval obtained by the consul expressly for that purpose. I must add that by the consul and his aides have spent enormous amounts of money on gas with trips to Hendaye, Irun Border Command and San Sebastian, Pau Prefecture, etc., due to consular services that could not be handled over the telephone as the lines had been cut, and that this represents an enormous increase in expenses at the chancery and at the residence. Consular services, therefore, returned to normal on the 24th. The pressure of refugees continued however under growing tension during the days preceding the Germany arrival which occurred on the 27th. The tension was such that when told they would not get visas, some threatened to commit suicide, some offered exorbitant sums of money to obtain one, some used cunning, some threats, others attempted bribery. I have the honor to inform you, however, that I do not believe that any of the functionaries, full or part-time, had their honorability tainted by such slime and I therefore believe they are deserving of some gratuity or recompense. We have only to regret the attitude of the consul in Bordeaux who has really placed us in a discreditable situation that is not above suspicion. Had it not been for the patriotic and zealous intervention of H.E. the Portuguese Ambassador in Madrid it is difficult to foresee how far the dishonorability of this situation would have dragged us. Happily, H.E. intervened in time to safeguard part of that prestige. When the German forces arrived on the Spanish border I happened to be in the Border Command and spoke with the Military Attaché of the German Embassy in Madrid, so was able to see the good impression caused by the Portuguese Government having taken the proper attitude, strictly screening the precipitous torrent of emigrants.

I have not sufficient praise for the attitude of H.E. the Portuguese Ambassador in Madrid and the situation of consul Faria Machado, both before and after the organization of these services that you decided I should handle although being the person less indicated, which I was only able to accomplish with the help of these persons and with great sang-froid. As proof of our current situation I will mention the following cases: some German soldiers moved into the house of Mr.

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Bleck, in this region, in the absence of the person to whom it had been entrusted. When the latter returned she told the soldiers it belonged to a Portuguese and they decided to leave the house. Other soldiers boarded the Portuguese vessel "Maria-Joana" moored at Bayonne port and seemingly, bunked down amicably with the crew.

I will be able to inform you orally of other cases, both on the part of the French, the Spanish and the German authorities.

I am honored to attach copies of my telegrams and documents pertaining to correspondence at the consulate that proves the statements made in this report.

At the Service of the Nation

Bayonne, 1 July 1940

s/ Armando Lopo Simeão