

# Spared Lives

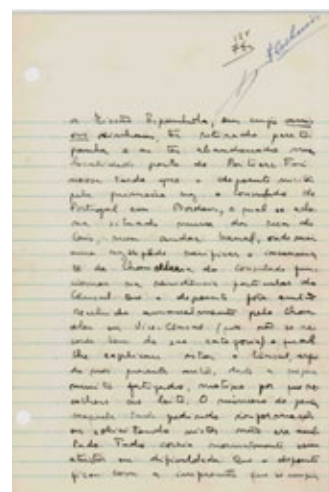
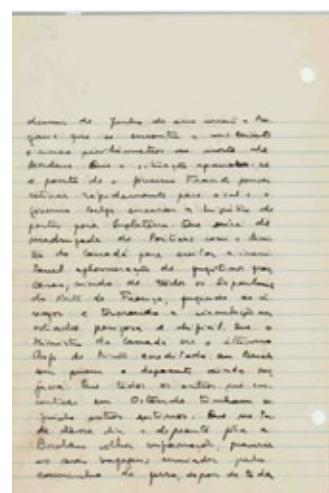
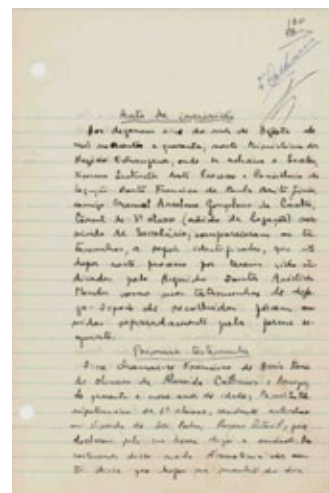
## The actions of three Portuguese diplomats in World War II

19 Aug. 1940

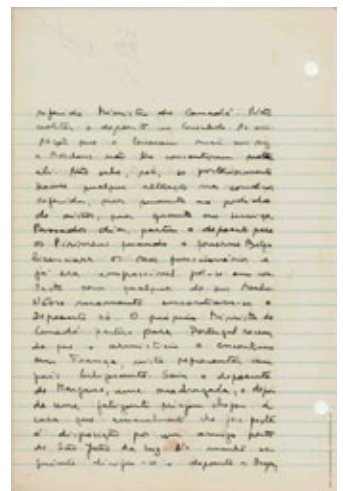
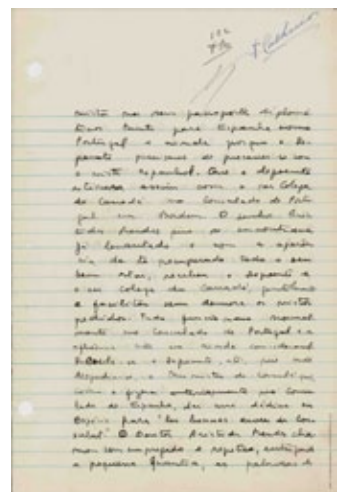
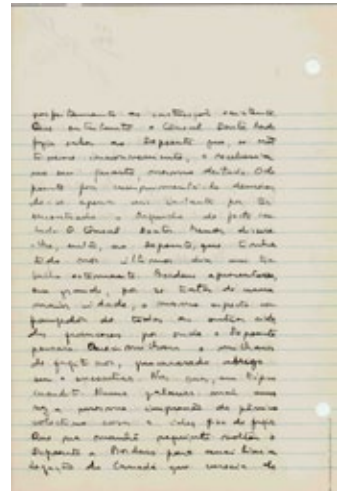
Deposition of Francisco Calheiros e Meneses, Portuguese Minister in Belgium, witness for the defense in the disciplinary proceedings against Aristides de Sousa Mendes, describing the exodus of thousands of people fleeing from the German invasion and commenting on the moral fortitude required by a civil servant to obey orders instead of listening to the appeals of the victims.

(AHD - Disciplinary Proceedings against Aristides de Sousa Mendes)

... On this matter he said that he arrived on the morning of the sixteenth June of this year in Margaux which is about twenty-five kilometers north of Bordeaux. The situation had deteriorated to the point where the French Government was considering retreating rapidly to the south and the Belgian Government was thinking of leaving for England. He had left at dawn from Poitiers with the Canadian Minister to avoid the inevitable agglomeration of French refugees from all the departments of the north of France who were fleeing from the invader and making the traffic on the roads dangerous and difficult. The Canadian Minister was the last head of mission accredited in Brussels with whom the witness was still traveling. All the others he had encountered in Ostend had left for other destinations. On the afternoon of that day the witness had gone to Bordeaux to gather information, find his luggage which had been sent by rail when the Spanish mission, in whose truck it was traveling, had retreated to Spain and abandoned it somewhere near Poitiers. It was on that afternoon that the witness first visited the Portuguese consulate in Bordeaux, located in one of the streets near the docks, in an ordinary apartment, where once again he was able to see how inconvenient it was for the chancery of the consulate to function in the consul's residence. The witness had been kindly received by the chancellor or vice-consul (he is not sure of his grade) who had explained that since the previous evening the consul, defendant in these proceedings, had been extremely fatigued and had repaired to his bed. The number of people requesting information or visas not very large. All was running normally without conflict or difficulties. The witness got the impression that all existing orders were being perfectly obeyed. Meanwhile Consul Dr. Mendes had asked that if he did not mind he would receive the witness in his bedroom, although he was lying down. The witness went to greet him but stayed only a few moments as the defendant was in fact very tired. Consul Dr. Mendes had then told the witness that in the last days he had had exhausting work. Bordeaux presented on a large scale, as it was a larger city, the same heartbreaking aspect of all the other French towns through which the witness had traveled. There were thousands and thousands of refugees, seeking shelter to no avail. In the streets, traffic as never seen before. In a word: once again the same impression of collective panic with the fixed idea of fleeing. On the following morning



the witness returned to Bordeaux to help the Canadian Legation which required visas in their diplomatic passports for Spain and Portugal and also because the witness needed to be forearmed with a Spanish visa. The witness had met his Canadian colleague at the Portuguese consulate in Bordeaux. Mr. Aristides Mendes, who was already up and appeared to have recovered, received the witness and his Canadian colleague very kindly and complied with their request for visas without delay. The witness even remembers that when they left the Canadian Minister wished, as he had done in the Spanish Consulate, to leave a donation in money for "les bonnes oeuvres du consulat" ["for the good works of the consulate"]. Mendes summoned an employee and giving him the small amount repeated the words of the Canadian Minister. The witness did not return to the consulate. The tasks that had taken him to Bordeaux did not permit this. He does not know, therefore, if there were any later alterations to the conditions mentioned, both as regards applications for visas and the service. Some days later the witness left for the Pyrenees when the Belgian Government released its functionaries and it was no longer possible to contact any of its members. The witness was alone at this time. As he represented a belligerent country and fearing that the armistice might find him in France the Canadian Minister had left for Portugal. The witness left Margaux one morning at dawn and after a tiring journey reached the house near St. Jean de Luz which had been kindly lent by a friend. On the following morning he went to Bayonne to look for his luggage which he knew was at the consulate. In this town, the same desolate spectacle, worsened if possible in contrast with Biarritz where it seemed that people did not really understand the significance of events. The Portuguese consulate was located on a horrible third floor to which access was made by crossing a narrow street in the center of town and which was reached by a difficult, rickety and detestable wooden staircase. The consul told him, however, that it was the best he could find with the money available. The spectacle that greeted him when he tried to reach the front door was such that he wondered whether it would not be preferable to carry on, leave his luggage in the care of the consul and desist from this visit. Penetrating on his own into the building appeared impossible and possibly even dangerous given the number of people and their attitude. He then decided to call the consul and ask him to come with some of his staff to collect him which was done, the witness having practically been hoisted up to that hideous third floor. The noise and confusion were indescribable and he confesses that having discovered where his luggage was kept and sent a telegram to the ministry announcing his arrival in Bayonne, which telegram he later saw the consul had never sent, he decided to face the crowd again and descend by the stairs. It was at that precise moment that the Portuguese consul to Bordeaux arrived. Dr. Aristides Mendes appeared to the witness to be quite excited but as everyone else was also and the noise was extraordinary he was unable to determine if it had merely been an impression. He had, he said, come expressly from Bordeaux to



convey the instructions received which were that all passports to Portugal should receive a visa. The witness cannot be sure that the defendant actually said that he had received these orders directly from the Ministry but he remembers perfectly that he quoted the name of the Portuguese Minister in Paris, adding that the consulate in Bayonne would receive them shortly. Mr. Faria Machado strongly resisted these instructions which seemed to him to be contrary to all those he had received thus far but on Mr. Aristides Mendes' formal orders, he gave in and telegraphed the Ministry to recount what had happened. The consul in Bordeaux even wished the witness to intervene, not remembering so upset was he, that the witness was not competent in this matter. The witness nevertheless confesses that it did not even cross his mind that a functionary who had been in the foreign service for so many years would say that he had received instructions when he had not, or that they had not been given him by our Minister in Paris. The witness firmly believed they were true and for reasons unknown to him, refugees would be allowed into Portugal until further orders. The fact that the defendant had traveled to Bayonne from Bordeaux, more than two hundreds kilometers away (whence he would have to return, a difficult and even perilous journey), to convey these instructions, further convinced the witness. The witness never returned to the consulate in Bayonne but went often to Mr. Faria Machado's house in Anglet. He never saw Dr. Aristides Mendes again, then or later. These are exactly the facts as the witness saw them. Having been informed of the defense presented by the defendant on pp. 101 et. sq. of the proceedings, where it says that the defendant had made a suggestion to Mr. Faria Machado in Bayonne which had been accepted by the latter and ratified by the witness, and that the witness "himself began issuing visas", the witness declares that there was no suggestion but as mentioned above a formal order from Dr. Aristides Mendes to Consul Faria Machado to issue visas on all passports to Portugal. Indeed, even if such a suggestion had been made, which it was not, the witness would not be competent to ratify it, as he was accredited with the Belgian Government and not with the French authorities. There is no truth in the fact that the witness issued visas in passports at that consulate, and it is easy to prove. The witness would like to add some remarks to his deposition owing to the fact that the defendant Dr. Sousa Mendes indicated him as a witness for the defense. As the witness has said above he did not see the Consul to Bordeaux again, but he supposes that the defendant believes that more than anyone else at the Ministry the witness may judge of his torment, hounded as he must have been by the many people who implored his pity and protection. The witness is not attempting to excuse any fault or prevarication, if any; he would merely like to explain to himself what gave rise to the defendant's conduct. The witness is well aware that a functionary has no need to be human when it is a question of obeying orders, whatever they may be. Not all people, however, have the same moral resistance that enables them to confront situations such as the one experienced by the witness

