

The Insubordinate Consul

Aristides de Sousa Mendes, one of the greatest Portuguese citizens of all times, who gave his life and kind heart to humanity, was born in *Carregal do Sal* on 19th July 1885. He took a law degree in the *Universidade de Coimbra* and married Maria Angelina Coelho de Sousa Mendes with whom he had fourteen children. He was a consul around the world, but it was in Bordeaux, France, where his heroic story began.



During the Second World War, the Portuguese government sent to all Portuguese diplomats a document known as “*Circular 14*” ordering the suspension of visas to refugees - mainly Jews, Russians and stateless people, in order to keep the country out of this global catastrophe. Aristides fought so that the Prime-Minister would change this order; however, it was in vain and he was left to choose between his duty and his values. Without hesitation, with the help of his family, he began to issue visas without distinguishing individuals by their race or religion. We do not know for sure how many people he saved but the number is believed to be near thirty thousand people.

One day, he got caught and had to return to Portugal where he lost his job and other special permissions. With this, he lived a miserable life both in Portugal and abroad with his big family at the expense of his extended family and refugee aid associations, as he had become stateless. Only years after he died in a religious hospital did we discover that he was, in fact, an absolute hero and we failed once again to honour and reward him for every single soul that he saved.

What is it to be a hero? A hero is someone who is not afraid to go against the flow. He is someone who is as fearless and courageous as a lion willing to take the risk so that others do not have to. Even if the whole world tells him to do otherwise, he will go against all rules following his own values without ever thinking twice. He is a warrior and never stops fighting for what is right trying to make the world a better place. He is a kind, compassionate and humble person with a pure and honest heart, who will always inspire other people to be like him, to be better, to do better... Every single one of us has the needed potential to be a hero. We just need to be ourselves and follow our hearts.

What is it to be a hero? It is to be like Aristides de Sousa Mendes: brave, persistent, and kind, yet fearless and crazy enough to change the world.

By Laura Dias