



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jack M. Martins

Senator Martins Speaks at Program Dedication Ceremony For Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center

JACK M. MARTINS February 9, 2011

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State Senator Jack Martins offered comments and program insight at a dedication program at the Nassau County Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center this past Sunday, Feb. 6. The program, "These are My People," discussed the selfless acts of Aristedes de Sousa Mendes during World War II. Mendes spearheaded a visa operation which resulted in the saving of 30,000 refugees from Nazi oppression during the invasion of France during World War II.

The event featured Senator Martins, Portuguese Ambassador Jao Maria Cabral, Congressman Steve Israel, Rabbi Jeffrey Clopper, Yad Vashem Director of the Righteous Dr. Mordechai Paldiel and Luis Pires of Luso-Americano Newspaper.

Dr. Olivia Mattis, curator of the exhibition, moderated a conversation during the program between Sebastien Michael Mendes, grandson of the hero, recipients of lifesaving Sousa Mendes visas, now in their 70's and 80's and panelists: Dr. Sylvia Bromberger, Dr. Lissy Jarvik, Josette Nelson, Charles Teschner and David Morewitz. The panel discussed events that led up to the visa issues and, in the case of David Morewitz, looked at others who had a direct impact on the operation. Specifically, Morewitz's father, in 1940, rescued a boatful of refugees, many bearing Sousa Mendes visas, who had been barred by immigration authorities from entering US soil.

The exhibit is a chronicle of Aristedes de Sousa Mendes, the Portuguese Consul General in Bordeaux, France during World War II. Sousa Mendes is specifically credited with saving an estimated 30,000 lives in 1940 from Nazi atrocities and deportations to concentration camps. As Germany invaded France, thousands of refugees were trapped within French borders with no means of escape. It was Mendes who authorized and issued the tens of thousands of visas.

Although Portugal was officially neutral during the war, its dictator issued a directive barring Jews, Russians and other refugees from entering Portugal as a means of escape. Sousa Mendes disobeyed orders of the dictator government, and at great personal peril and risk decided to issue visas to anyone who asked, free of charge, regardless of race, religion or nationality.

In addition to the program dedication Senator Martins announced that he has also arranged for the exhibit to be shown at the Mineola Library. The exhibit is open to all residents of the

7th Senatorial District. It will be at the Mineola Library, located at 195 Marcellus Road in Mineola, from February 10 to April 3. The venue was arranged on behalf of the Sousa Mendes Foundation and Senator Martins. To date, the exhibit has attracted numerous residents from the Sephardic, Jewish, Russian, Portugese and Eastern European communities.

“Aristedes de Sousa Mendes is a wonderful example of how a single individual of character and courage can change the world in a positive way,’ said Senator Martins. “His selflessness and grace in the face of adversity is an inspiration to us today.”

In recognition of his selfless acts, the Israeli Holocaust authority, Yad Vashem, awarded Sousa Mendes the title of “Righteous Among the Nations” for his heroic sacrifice.

The exhibition, open to the public, is curated by Dr. Olivia, herself the daughter and granddaughter of Sousa Mendes visa recipients, and will be on view in the library auditorium. “This exhibit is powerful, moving and yet another reminder of the Holocaust, its horrors, and the efforts of people to try and save those who were being targeted for genocide,” said Senator Martins concluding, “this foundation is yet another tool for our young people to learn and understand the complexities of history and the impact that one person can have.”