Heroes of the Holocaust

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These articles are meant to recognize and honor a few of the brave and saintly men and women who were willing to suffer greatly for their Catholic Faith during World War II. There is no doubt that the Jewish people were the main target of Nazi hatred and racism. By the end of the war, approximately six million of our Jewish brothers and sisters had been deliberately murdered, over one million of them children. While remembering this, we must not forget that the Holocaust also claimed at least five million Gentile victims. Any system, such as National Socialism, that preaches a philosophy of hatred and racial superiority will have its avid supporters and its enemies. The Nazis arrested any person or group considered either racially inferior or a threat to the tenets of National Socialism.

The men and women in these articles—priests, religious and laity—were faithful in their daily lives to the demands of the Gospel. Because they were faithful, they were considered a threat by the Nazi regime.

There is an intimate connection between the way we live our life and the way we die. Every person mentioned in this book led a holy life even before confronted with imprisonment and death; they radiated Christ when things were going well and when things were going poorly. They did what they believed God wanted them to do, regardless of the consequences. Many did not survive the war. Others survived, only to die shortly after liberation because of the poor treatment they had endured.

Each of these biographies is unique because each person reflects Christ in a unique way. What the stories have in common is the witness each person was willing to give. The sacrifices they made were the culmination of lives lived for others in imitation of Christ. They died the way they lived; with love for their enemies and hope in the Resurrection. May their witness inspire us to follow the path of truth regardless of the consequences.

Heroes of the Holocaust: France

Aristides de Sousa Mendes
"Angel of Bordeaux"

Aristides was born on July 9, 1885, in northern Portugal. Aristides and his identical twin, Cesar, followed in their father's footsteps and received law degrees. They graduated in 1907 from Coimbra University and both entered the diplomatic corps. Raised in a deeply devout Catholic family, Aristides was to put these values into practice throughout his diplomatic career. Aristides married his cousin Angelina and together they raised their fourteen children in Spain, California, British Guyana and Belgium. Evenings in the Sousa Mendes household were family events filled with music and concluding with the Rosary before bedtime. Unfortunately, these happy times ended in 1934, when the second son, Manuel, dropped dead in front of the family due to a ruptured blood vessel. Several months later, their youngest child also died. In August of 1938, the family moved to Bordeaux, France, where Sousa Mendes was Consul-General. Soon, the family would be caught up in the events of the Second World War. In the spring of 1940, as German troops invaded and conquered Belgium, Holland and then France, thousands of refugees fled ahead of the advancing army. The refugees jamming the roads were Jews, defeated soldiers, opponents of Nazism, the elderly, the young. These refugees sought safety in neutral countries like Spain and Portugal. The city of Bordeaux, with its port, was a natural destination for thousands of the refugees. However, only the very wealthy were able to afford the artificially high prices for passage on a ship. The only other alternative was to get a transit visa to leave France and enter Spain and then go on to Portugal; people thought they would be able to get such a visa at the Portuguese consulate. To add to the fear of the refugees, the German Army had no mercy on the crowds on the roads. The refugees were often attacked by fighter pilots who killed hundreds if not thousands. So, the people who survived the attacks arrived in Bordeaux, hungry and frightened.

Transit visa

To better understand the moral predicament Sousa Mendes was about to be put in, it is important to understand the political situation in Spain and Portugal. In Spain, Francisco Franco had been helped by Hitler during the Spanish Civil War. By closing Spanish borders to refugees fleeing Hitler, Franco could avoid joining the war but still express his support for Hitler. Portugal's premier, Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, also followed a policy of strict neutrality but for different reasons. Portugal had a long standing treaty with England and a new one with Spain. If Salazar sided with the English, Spain might invade Portugal. If Salazar sided too heavily with Spain, England might pressure Portugal to join the war on England's side. Salazar showed his solidarity with the Spanish dictator by following Spain's policy of not allowing refugees into Portugal. On May 17, 1940, Salazar sent his diplomats in Europe a directive that no visa was to be granted unless they received special permission from Lisbon. In effect, this policy kept any Portuguese diplomat from granting visas to any refugee. Throughout May, as France crumbled before the German onslaught, thousands of refugees tried to escape to Spain. Spain would only allow in refugees who had a Portuguese transit visa, so the refugees' last hope was the Portuguese consulate. The consulate where Sousa Mendes worked and lived with his family was literally jammed with thousands of refugees. Without authority, Sousa Mendes was suddenly responsible for the lives of thousands of his fellow human beings. As the crowds kept pouring into the consulate, Sousa Mendes sent hundreds of telegrams to Lisbon requesting visas. Lisbon's response was silence. Tensions increased as the German Army drew closer to the city. The consulate was full of people, sleeping on chairs and rugs, and Sousa Mendes had orders not to help. Then, the consul fell ill. For three days, Sousa Mendes struggled, torn between service to his country and duty toward his God. According to his nephew, after the illness, Sousa Mendes got up by a "divine power" [1] and began granting visas to all who asked. The consul was disobeying specific orders and in the end it would cost him his career. But, as he would tell his government later, "I would stand with God against man, rather than with man against God." [2] The consul set up a work station and enlisted workers. Passports were stamped, reasons given for the visas, and Sousa Mendes signed them. If refugees had no documents, visas were stamped on pieces of paper. Their work continued day and

night and the crowds began to head for the Spanish border. Spain had to honor the Portuguese visas-the refugees were allowed to cross through Spain to get to Portugal but they could not stay. Once the refugees reached Portugal, they could not be denied entry because the Spanish would not let them back into Spain. The Premier of Portugal was furious; Sousa Mendes had forced Salazar to accept the refugees. On June 19, German planes bombed Bordeaux. The terror-stricken crowds fled closer to the Spanish border at Bayonne where there was a Portuguese consulate besieged by refugees. The staff at this consulate were obeying their orders and not issuing visas. Fortunately, Sousa Mendes had authority over Bayonne and immediately began issuing visas. For the next two days, Sousa Mendes signed his name and stamped visas which would save the lives of thousands. When the consul returned to Bordeaux on June 26, he found a cable from Salazar relieving him of his post and ordering him home. As German troops began occupying Bordeaux, Sousa Mendes began issuing Portuguese passports. Although the passports would not allow people to cross the border, they could prevent people from being arrested and deported to concentration camps. Once again, he was ordered to stop and return to Portugal. Ironically, Salazar received a great deal of praise for accepting war refugees, a policy he continued throughout the war. Unfortunately, he never forgave the man who began it all. After returning to Portugal, a disciplinary council found Sousa Mendes professionally incapacitated. He was officially shunned and he could neither work nor retire. With no way to earn an income, the family was reduced to poverty. The younger children could not continue their education and the older ones were unable to find work. Eventually, the family began taking meals with refugees at a soup kitchen run by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. Shortly before the war's end, Sousa Mendes had a stroke which left him partially paralyzed. His beloved wife and helper, Angelina, had a cerebral hemorrhage in 1948. She spent the last six months of her life in a coma in a basement apartment in Lisbon. Sousa Mendes survived his wife by six years, never giving up hope that his name would be cleared. On April 3, 1954, he died at a Franciscan hospital in Lisbon with only a niece at his side. It is believed that at least 30,000 people received visas, including 10,000 Jews. However, Premier Salazar never closed Portugal's borders to war refugees and it is estimated that one million refugees were able to escape through Portugal because of what Sousa Mendes had done.

Father Jacques Bunel
"Pere Jacques"

Lucien Bunel was born in 1900, in Normandy, France. Lucien was the third of seven children born to a pious and hard-working family. By the age of twelve, young Lucien decided he was going to be a priest. He was ordained as a diocesan priest and distinguished himself as a teacher, preacher and youth leader. Drawn to the Carmelite order, he received permission to enter and received his religious name, Jacques. In 1934, the Carmelite priest was given the task of opening a boys' school in Avon, France. Pere Jacques founded and became headmaster of the Petit College Saint-Therese de l'Enfant Jesus. Pere Jacques was one of many priests drafted into the French Army at the onset of World War II. After France's surrender, he spent the next five months as a prisoner of war where he was able to minister to his fellow prisoners. Upon his release from the camp, he returned to Avon and reopened the school. Pere Jacques also asked his superior's permission to shelter those being persecuted by the Nazis. Permission was granted and Pere Jacques was able to help Jews and those men who had been ordered to Germany for forced labor. These refugees were hidden in a nearby convent and surrounding areas. In January, 1943, three Jewish students were admitted to the school, with their true identities carefully concealed. A year later, the school was raided and the priest and his Jewish students were imprisoned. The students were eventually shipped to Auschwitz. Pere Jacques was sent to Neue Bremm death camp. While he was there, the Catholic priest and a Communist prisoner volunteered to clean the infirmary and care for the patients. Pere Jacques would share his own food rations with the sick and his example caused others to do the same. In July, 1944, he was transferred to the camp at Gusen I, only three months after the death of "Papa" Gruber. Pere Jacques was with a group of prisoners assigned to construct a water-reservoir. In spite of this difficult work, he was optimistic, encouraging his comrades to believe they would be freed and still sharing his food with others. He also provided spiritual support by performing baptisms and holding religious services, all of which were illegal and would have resulted in severe punishment if he were caught. Pere Jacques continued his work sustained by his

devotion to Saint John Vianney and St. Therese of Lisieux. His fellow prisoners assert that many of them would have given up all hope and faith if not for Pere Jacques' strong faith and encouragement. At last, the camp was liberated in April, 1945, by American troops. At liberation, Pere Jacques weighed seventy-five pounds and had tuberculosis. He still continued working to care for the many sick. By May 7, he was unable to keep working and went to a nearby hospital where he was cared for by the Franciscan Sisters. He died on June 2, 1945. In 1985, Pere Jacques was honored as one of the "Righteous Among the Nations" by Yad Vashem. His cause for canonization was opened in 1990.

Blessed Marcel Callo

Marcel was born on December 6, 1921, in Rennes, France, one of nine children. When he was thirteen, Marcel was apprenticed to a printer. He also joined the Christian Worker's Youth organization. After the Nazi invasion of France, Marcel and some friends would go to the railway station and help refugees who were hungry or confused. They were also able to help many people escape arrest by the Nazis by giving the refugees their Red Cross armbands. Marcel became engaged in August of 1942, and in March of 1943, he was ordered to enter the Service of Obligatory Work—a nice way of saying he would be used as slave labor in Nazi Germany. Marcel was sent to a factory in Zella-Mehlis, Germany. The inhumane working conditions caused many of the workers to despair. Marcel, although ill himself due to hard work and the poor diet, organized the Christian workers and encouraged his fellow prisoners. He was even able to arrange to have a Mass said. The Gestapo viewed this as being "too Catholic". [3] Marcel was arrested and in October 1944, was sent to Gusen II. At Gusen II, the prisoners worked at an underground aircraft factory with inadequate food, clothing and shelter. He continued to pray and encourage his fellow prisoners. On March 19, 1945, Marcel died from malnutrition. He was beatified in 1987. At the beatification ceremony, Pope John Paul II said: "Like the Lord, he [Marcel] loved his own until the end and his entire life became eucharist."[4]

Footnotes

1. Maria Julia Cirurgiao and Michael D. Hull, “Angel Against the Blitzkrieg”, Lay Witness, October, 1998.

2. Cirurgiao and Hull.

3. Matthew Bunson, Margaret Bunson and Stephen Bunson, John Paul II’s Book of Saints, (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1999), p. 228.