

For Immediate Release

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## ***THERE IS A MIRROR IN MY HEART***

**MULTI-MEDIA EXHIBITION AND PERFORMANCE BY SEBASTIAN MENDES  
BASED ON THE HEROISM OF HIS GRANDFATHER ARISTIDES DE SOUSA MENDES**

*Recognized as One of Greatest Single Rescue Acts of the Holocaust*

January 30-July 24, 2011 at the Yeshiva University Museum

January 25, 2011 (New York, NY) – The heroism of Portuguese diplomat Aristides de Sousa Mendes, who saved tens of thousands of Jewish and non-Jewish refugees from the Nazis in the first year of WWII, informs and inspires a multi-media exhibition and performance-action work presented by the Yeshiva University Museum, opening January 30<sup>th</sup>.

Created by Sebastian Mendes in tribute to his grandfather, ***There is a Mirror in My Heart: Reflections on a Righteous Grandfather*** brings to life a remarkable story that is little known by the general population. Posthumously named one of the “Righteous Among the Nations” by Yad Vashem and celebrated as his native country’s “greatest hero of the twentieth century,” de Sousa Mendes’s legacy will be introduced to New York audiences through the ingenuity of Mendes’ art and performance. The American Society for Yad Vashem is partnering with the YU Museum on special exhibition-related events and public programs.



***There is a Mirror in My Heart*** is a personal artistic response to the events of June 1940, when de Sousa Mendes, a devout Roman Catholic who was then serving as the Consul General in Bordeaux, France, acted against the explicit orders of his government and issued handwritten transit visas to thousands of refugees trapped in the area of Bordeaux between the Spanish border and the advancing Nazi army. These visas made it possible for bearers to pass through Spain and into Portugal in the hope of traveling on to safer shores. Over several days, in an assembly-line operation, thousands of documents were processed; the Consul signed each one, often to save time

simply as "Mendes." Historians have recognized the operation he initiated and led as one of the most successful single rescue acts of the Holocaust.

“The oral history and legacy of my grandfather’s actions had been a regular presence in the daily lives of my family,” recounted Sebastian Mendes. “I think I was already aware of his story by the time I was or six or seven years old, I knew that my father had authored a novella paying homage to his father’s actions. He had used a *nom de plume* and as I was growing up I eventually realized that this story was my dad’s own deeply felt expression of what was then a nearly unknown story.”

The story had always been shared with him “in fragments,” he added. “From time to time, here and there, my father, his many brothers and sisters and Sousa Mendes visa recipients left me with the pieces to construct my own understanding, which only after my visiting Portugal and meeting aunts and uncles there did I begin to more fully appreciate the depth and power of my grandfather’s legacy.”

In an effort to convey the essence of his grandfather’s heroism, which he views as the action of one principled individual to quietly undertake, at great cost to himself, to save the lives of thousands, Sebastian Mendes has conceived a powerful, multi-layered exhibition made up of three components—one of which incorporates continuous in-gallery performance by the artist. These components include:

**Palimpsest Drawings** An ensemble of thirty 24” x 30” ink drawings of heavily superimposed writing, recalling signatures, written over each other to create a palimpsest, representing the thousands of desperate refugees who were saved by de Sousa Mendes’ actions. Each drawing is the product of a simple reverent gesture of remembrance, writing a number, a refugee’s surname and the signature of Aristides de Sousa Mendes, as it would have customarily been written upon transit visas.

**An In-Gallery Performance-Action Work** In the gallery the artist will undertake the continuous performance action of inscribing hypothetical and actual surnames that can represent the refugees who received transit visas from de Sousa Mendes. These performance-actions will take place over the course of the exhibition and the artist’s residency at the Museum. The drawing will be created on a 7 by 7 foot surface Japanese *Daitoku* paper. The drawing will be produced on a large *sculptural* table designed to evoke the conjoined appearance and function of a massive consular desk with a functional drawing table. Each of the surnames included in the large panel will also be inscribed into a numbered ledger book, like the original consular ledger. This performance-action work has an important social component.

Visitors to the exhibition will be able to discuss the work with the artist and join him in pondering the meaning of Aristides de Sousa Mendes’ historic action as well as its implication as a work of contemporary art. The artist plans to invite any visitor who knows the name of a Holocaust victim or survivor to add them to his ledger book whereupon the name will be added to the drawing.

**Bread Reliquary Suitcases** As Aristide de Sousa Mendes was a religious Catholic (the origins of his own family roots go back to the inquisition when his ancestors were forced to convert from Judaism to Christianity), he prayed through a whole night with his wife as he reached his dangerous decision to grant the transit visas. Bread is a multivalent symbol for both Jews and Catholics, and in the present project the inclusion of loaves of bread bearing Anglicized Jewish names made of bread dough will symbolize both the refugees themselves and their adaptation to new cultures in the lands where they found safety. Such loaves and slices of bread will be set in a variety of suitcases whose ordinary world worn external appearance recalls the refugees’ journeys, as well as safeguard and display the named bread loaves, just as a reliquary does sacred relics.



***There is a Mirror in My Heart*** finds a natural home at the Yeshiva University Museum states Dr. Jacob Wisse, director of the Yeshiva University Museum.

“The YU Museum is committed to exploring contemporary, as well as historic manifestations of Jewish art and life; because we recognize that our present is linked to the past, and that modern and contemporary achievements and traditions update or re-imagine longstanding ones. ***There is a Mirror in My Heart*** employs the evocative power of abstract images and the human contact that performance/action art is capable of creating to communicate a life and death drama, and a heroic sacrifice that enabled many to escape and live,” he said.

The battle Aristides de Sousa Mendes waged to save a large group of refugees, many of whom were targeted for destruction (over 10,000 are estimated to have been Jews), is not only a gripping narrative but a story deserving of wider recognition, says Wisse. ***There is a Mirror in My Heart*** gives form to his act of heroism through the universal language of visual art. It invites us to consider and celebrate the depth of moral courage necessary to combat horrific evil.

Furthermore, this artistic project also expresses the human need to understand and honor family history. For his humane deed, de Sousa Mendes was dismissed from the Portuguese diplomatic corps, disbarred from practicing law and deprived of all salary and benefits. Formerly a wealthy nobleman, he died in abject poverty and disgrace in 1954. Sebastian Mendes's lifelong fascination with the remarkable actions and sacrifices made by his grandfather and their impact on countless lives will resonate among visitors of all religions.

#### **ABOUT SEBASTIAN MENDES**

Sebastian Mendes holds an MFA in Studio Art from Stanford University, and has exhibited nationally and abroad for over 30 years. Currently, he also teaches studio art and contemporary art seminars at Western Washington University. Through the beauty and transparency of his work, Sebastian Mendes offers an accessible and contextualized form of contemporary art, different from much of the work created in response to the Holocaust. The uncommon combination of traditional fine art and contemporary performance art, of personal family reflection and contextualized historical exploration gives the project distinct character and power.

As a story with strong intergenerational and interfaith appeal, ***There is a Mirror in My Heart*** will resonate profoundly with the diverse audiences drawn by the Yeshiva University Museum.

For further information about ***There is a Mirror in My Heart***, to arrange a tour of the exhibition or an interview with Sebastian Mendes, please contact Shira Dicker at [shira.dicker@sd-media.com](mailto:shira.dicker@sd-media.com) or 917-403-3989.

#### **ABOUT YESHIVA UNIVERSITY MUSEUM**

For more than 35 years, the Yeshiva University Museum has provided culturally diverse exhibitions and programming for the greater metropolitan area and beyond, as well as Yeshiva University students, faculty, and alumni. Its permanent collection includes more than 9,000 objects spanning over 3,000 years of Jewish history. The Museum also emphasizes teaching schoolchildren and adults of diverse backgrounds about Jewish culture through many varieties of interdisciplinary programs. Located at the Center for Jewish History, the Museum occupies four spacious galleries, a children's workshop center, and an outdoor sculpture garden.

#### **Museum Hours:**

Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday: 11 am – 5 pm

Monday: 3:30-8:00 pm (FREE)

Wednesday: 11 am – 8 pm (FREE 5 pm – 8 pm)

Friday: 11 am – 2:30 pm (FREE)

#### **Museum Admission:**

Adults: \$8 Seniors and Students: \$6

YU Museum Members and Children under 5: Free

Yeshiva University Faculty, Administration and Students: Free (with valid ID)

#### **Location:**

Yeshiva University Museum

at the Center for Jewish History

15 West 16th Street, NYC 10011

212-294-8330

[www.yumuseum.org](http://www.yumuseum.org)