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El Salvador Seeks To Make Wartime Diplomat Righteous Among The Nations

by LADB Staff

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El Salvador is seeking to elevate one of its World War II diplomats to the status of "Righteous among the Nations." This is an honor roll maintained in Israel of non-Jews who, at personal risk and for no personal gain, participated in the rescue of Jews from the Holocaust.

Col. Jose Arturo Castellanos would join more than 21,000 people, most of them Europeans, to have been so designated. Castillo was El Salvador's consul-general in Switzerland during World War II. He became part of an ingenious plan to provide Jews under Nazi threat of arrest and extermination with documents identifying them as Salvadoran citizens "with all the rights and duties inherent with this nationality."

Honoring Castellanos in this way would come at a time when the Israel-El Salvador relationship could use some shoring up. It also comes at a time when El Salvador could use a public-relations boost. Ricardo Moran Ferracuti has been in the thick of the campaign for Castellanos in the role of coordinator of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Committee for Historical Research. He said recently, "Most unfortunately, El Salvador has been in the news for bad things. It's the guerrillas, it's the gangs, it's deporting the illegals. We also have to show the world that we have good people who did good things for humankind. It will be an honor for us to have a picture of Col. Castellanos in Yad Vashem. It's a matter of pride for El Salvador." Yad Vashem is the Israeli holocaust institute and museum.

Castellanos' name would be added to 21,758 others on the Wall of Honor there. Late in the war, Castellanos was approached by a Jewish friend, Gyorgy Mandl, a Hungarian according to the El Salvador Embassy, but other accounts make him a Romanian. Mandl was in fear of his life. His family, except for his son, had fled to Hungary, where they thought they would be safe from the Nazis, but they were deported and never heard from again. To protect him, Castellanos appointed Mandl first secretary in Geneva, where Castellanos was consul-general. It was an ad hoc appointment; the post had not existed prior to the hire. The job came with a diplomatic passport and a new name that sounded a bit more Latin, George Mandel-Mantello. With his made-up job came made-up authority. The two started issuing blank nationality certificates for Jews across Central Europe, signed by first secretary Mandel-Mantello. To add an air of authenticity, and perhaps to hedge against the fact that El Salvador had declared war on Germany, the two went about Geneva getting other consulates to apply their official stamps to the blank documents.

In its account, the Hungarian press added that the two men did this trusting that "the obsession of Nazi Germany and its Axis allies with official documents would offer some protection." It did. Moran Ferracuti called the resulting papers "certificates of life." To deal with the inconvenient fact that suddenly thousands of Salvadorans with Jewish names started turning up all over Europe, the pair successfully planted the idea among Swiss and Hungarian officials that there was this huge,

though not well-known, Salvadoran diaspora in Central Europe. Many of the documents went to Budapest, where they were sent to Carl Lutz, the Swiss vice consul.

Lutz has already been named a Righteous among the Nations for his contribution to the process. He had rented an abandoned glass factory in Budapest, where he created a safe haven for thousands of Jews, many of whom had become overnight Salvadorans. Coordinated with these activities, and to provide further cover, the Salvadoran foreign minister had contacted the Swiss government to officially request full protection for Salvadorans in Hungary. Salvadoran Jews not going to Lutz's glass house were not deported to death camps but rather were taken to detention centers where, at war's end, allied liberators found them.

Deputy Foreign Minister Eduardo Caliz said this narrative was the result of a two-year investigation into the facts of Castellanos' efforts. Foreign Minister Francisco Lainez delivered the report of the finding to officials at Yad Vashem. There is a public committee led by a retired supreme court judge that will deliberate the case and decide on the official designation of Castellanos. The report, Jose Arturo Castellanos: Heroe del Holocausto, was presented at a press conference at the El Salvador Embassy in Washington. Also presented was a documentary film, Glass House, named for Lutz's factory refuge. The producer-director of the film, Brad Marlowe, said he hoped it would make El Salvador's role in saving thousands of Jews more widely known.

Castellanos has been honored elsewhere for his acts. Most notably, he is listed by the Raul Wallenberg Foundation. Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat, is famed for having saved thousands of Jews and then turning up missing in 1945. But, for the most part, Castellanos is unknown, reportedly because he declined to talk about this publicly.

He died poor in El Salvador in 1977. His daughters, Frieda Garcia, Yvone Castellanos Carpani, and Blanca Luz Castellanos, did not know of his exploits until shortly before his death. "The memory of our father is out of the desk, out of the drawers, and on the table again," Frieda said at the embassy event. "When I asked him why he didn't tell me anything before, he answered, 'Anybody would have done the same in my position.'" It is estimated that Castellanos and Mandl saved between 25,000 and 30,000 people from slavery and extermination.

A pivotal figure

The research on Castellanos started around the time, in 2006, when El Salvador announced plans to move its embassy in Israel from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv. Until then, El Salvador and Costa Rica were the last holdouts to remain in Jerusalem. The move was attributed to the fact that President Antonio Saca is of Palestinian descent and had spoken as early as 2004 about moving the embassy (see NotiCen, 2004-03- 25). Castellanos represents something of a turning point for El Salvador with respect to Jews.

At the beginning of World War II, El Salvador was anything but friendly to Jews. President Maximiliano Martinez Hernandez (1931-1944) admired Hitler and celebrated his birthday publicly. Martinez named several Nazi German nationals to senior governmental positions, and the Escuela Militar was run by German national Gen. Eberhardt Bonstedt. In 1939, Martinez barred the entry of

50 Jewish refugees who had paid for Salvadoran visas in Budapest and Amsterdam. On arrival, the visas were declared fraudulent and the refugees returned to Germany.

Diplomatically, El Salvador supported Italian and German influence in Franco Spain, while the Hitler-birthday parties led to substantial public support for the Third Reich and the Italian Fascisti of Benito Mussolini. After the war, on Sept. 11, 1948, El Salvador recognized the state of Israel. In 1956 the Comunidad Israelita de El Salvador (CIES) was founded among the country's old but tiny Jewish population. Many Jews left El Salvador during the civil war, but some returned afterward.

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