

THE NASI FAMILY

FROM PORTUGAL TO CONSTANTINOPLE - 16th CENTURY

The compulsory baptisms in 1497 Portugal left the Mendes family residing in Lisbon as Christians. They were bankers with wide connections, with branch offices in the Netherlands and debts due them from the kings of France. They were also engaged in the spice trade (particularly pepper) in the East Indies. For years the members of this family looked for an opportunity to escape to a land where they might revert openly to Judaism, especially after the introduction of the Inquisition into Portugal in 1536. Before this could be achieved, the two brothers (Francisco and Diogo), the heads of the banking firm, died in 1535 and 1543 respectively. The role of heads of family now devolved to their wives, particularly to Dona Gracia (formerly Beatrice, 1510-1569), wife of Francisco. Dona Gracia (nee de Luna) was a shrewd businesswoman, having been trained personally in the family's finances by her husband prior to his death.

Dona Gracia initially fled to Antwerp, part of the Spanish-ruled Netherlands, where Diogo had resided until his death. Her daughter Reyna was now sought after in marriage by numerous Christian nobles, and Dona Gracia's refusals began to cast suspicions on the entire family's loyalty to Christianity. From there she quickly relocated to Venice, 1545, and eventually to Ferrara where she began to live openly as a Jew. She now began to finance Conversos fleeing from Portugal and aided them in their resettlement to either Italy or the Ottoman Empire.

A nephew on her father's side, Don Yosef Nasi (1524-1579) had already resettled in Constantinople where he continued to add to the family's fortune. Dona Gracia eventually returned to Venice where she was arrested and accused of the sin of Judaizing. Her nephew Don Yosef intervened with the sultan of Constantinople and arranged for his aunt to be under the sultan's protection. Dona Gracia was thus able to once again escape and to set sail from Venice in 1552, fortune intact.

Don Yosef then married his cousin Reyna, keeping the family finances under one roof. Joseph continued to rise high in the favor of the sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent, and later under his son Selim. He was eventually even declared Duke of Naxos. He then turned his attention to aiding his brethren in Palestine, particularly those in Tiberias. Both Dona Gracia and Don Yosef devoted the rest of their lives and fortunes to aiding their fellow Jews. They dispersed huge sums to charity, aided other fleeing Conversos, provided relief to Jewish captives, and supported numerous rabbinic scholars, yeshivas, and synagogues.