

9 THE SPREAD OF SEPHARDI JEWRY

Through much of history, women served their fathers as they grew up, were sold to their husbands for payment, and served their husbands for the rest of their lives. Jewish women were generally treated with greater kindness and respect. The Talmud taught that women were not as socially important as men, but it also taught that women had full rights. Contracts of marriage, always favoring the woman, protected these rights. And the Jewish woman's role of educating children was considered holy and sacred. From time to time, women rose to leadership in Jewish communities; some, like Rashi's daughters, became great scholars.

In the sixteenth century, one Jewish woman became so important through her good works that she was called simply *La Senora*, "The Lady." Her full name was Dona Gracia Mendes Nasi and she lived from about 1510 to 1569.

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La Senora Both before and after the edict of expulsion in 1492, Jews left Spain to escape the Inquisition and its horrors. At first, the safest nearby country was Portugal; and it was to Portugal that the family of Gracia Nasi fled. Gracia was her Jewish name, but outside the house, where she pretended to be Christian, she was called Beatrice de Luna. Even in her teens, Beatrice was beautiful, and by the time she was eighteen, she married. Her husband was Francisco Mendes, a Marrano diamond merchant and banker. Nine years later, Francisco died, leaving Beatrice a wealthy young woman.

The Angel of the Marranos Before, people had seen only her beauty, but now her wisdom shone. When the Inquisition came to Portugal, Beatrice moved her family to the Netherlands, to the city of Antwerp, and she began to use her fortune to help other Marranos escape Portugal. In 1545, she left Flanders and moved to Venice, Italy.

All this time she had remained a Marrano, still pretending outwardly to be Beatrice, the Christian. But in Venice, the government discovered that she was Jewish. They threw her into prison, and there she waited for two years while her nephew Joseph Nasi tried to ransom her. Finally, a ransom sum was agreed upon, and she was set free. There was no longer any reason to pretend, so Beatrice began using her Jewish name: Gracia Mendes Nasi.

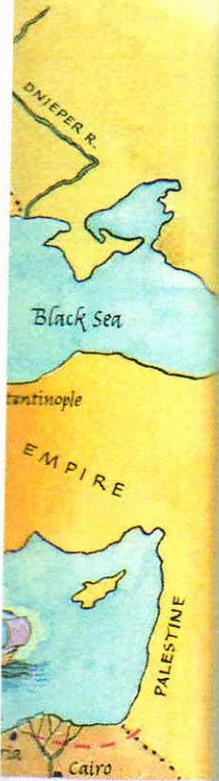
She and Joseph moved to Ferrara, Italy; and again she sent money to help Portuguese Jews. But even Ferrara seemed unsafe to her, and she looked elsewhere. To the east lay the Ottoman Empire of the Muslim Turks. Surely this was a place the Inquisition could not enter. But would the Turks allow the Jews to enter?

As a test, Dona Gracia herself moved to Constantinople. Here she found peace. She continued to send money to the Marranos of Portugal and to those in Italy, bringing many to live among the Turks. In her lifetime she helped so many of her people that they gave her the title, "Angel of the Mar-

Gracia Mendes Nasi,
"Angel of the Mar-
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ranos." So many Marranos came to settle in the Turkish empire east that a Jewish language was spoken there, a mixture of Spanish and Hebrew called *Ladino*.

Joseph Nasi Dona Gracia's nephew, Joseph, became a loyal advisor to the sultan. In return, the sultan made him duke of the island of Naxos, and allowed him to rule many other places, including the city of Tiberias in the Holy Land. Joseph fell in love with Tiberias and ordered it rebuilt. He brought mulberry trees and silkworms from the Far East to start a silk industry there. Then he sent an invitation to the Jews of Italy. Legend tells that one shipload of Italian Jews arrived in the Holy Land only to be captured by pirates and sold into slavery. Few others dared to come. For Joseph it was a great disappointment. Yet his years at the court of the sultan were good years for the Jews of the Ottoman Empire.

The Reformation and the Jews of Holland Not all Sephardi Jews headed to Turkey. Just as Gracia Nasi had done at first, many went to the Low Countries, especially Holland. It was the time of the Reformation in Europe, when the Catholic church split in two. The new movement was called Protestant because it "protested" the Catholic way of life. The people of Holland, the Dutch, were among the new Protestants. They revolted against Catholic Spain; and in 1579 became an independent country.

Among the Dutch, the Jews found new freedoms. By 1598, the Jews of Amsterdam were allowed to build a synagogue and to practice Judaism openly. From Holland, the Jews spread westward, too. A Dutch Jew, Manasseh ben Israel, traveled to England to meet the Protestant leader, Oliver Cromwell. The Jews had been expelled from England in 1290, but Manasseh convinced Cromwell to allow them to return. Thus the Jews of Spain scattered to new parts of the world and returned to places where Jews had not been seen for many generations.



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