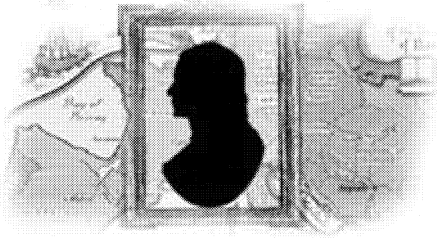


Doña Gracia



of the House of Nasi

Gracia Mendes Nasi

My name is Gracia Mendes Nasi, but I have other names, as well. Gracia is a Spanish or Portuguese way of saying Hannah. Do you have two names, one that you usually use and one that is used mostly in religious school? Me, too! My friends growing up called me Beatrice. I was born in Portugal in 1510. My family members were Marranos – Jews that were forced to run from Portugal when the Catholic rulers forced Jews out in 1492. We pretended that we were not Jewish so that we wouldn't be treated badly. In 1528, I married Francisco Mendes in a very public Catholic ceremony, but then we later had a secret Jewish ceremony. My husband died in 1536 and I was left with my infant daughter, Reyna. I moved to Antwerp (that's in the Netherlands) and took over my late husband's financial empire.

As I continued to run the business I realized I had the power and opportunity to help Jews in many places and I spent the rest of my life doing just that. Europe was a very dangerous place for Jews at this time and I used my influence and money to help Jews flee the Inquisition. The leaders of the Inquisition tried to take my money from me but I managed to escape from them.

I moved to Venice with my daughter, my younger sister and my niece. My sister didn't like me very much and she told the authorities that I was a secret Jew. I had a great deal of wealth in France at that time and the French government took it all and I was put into prison in Italy where I spent 2 years. The government of Turkey eventually helped me to get free and I moved there in 1550. It was in Turkey that I could finally live openly as a Jew and practice my religion without persecution. In 1551, a bubonic plague epidemic broke out in Venice and the Jews were blamed for it (isn't that ridiculous?). Jews were forced out of the city and I tried to help those who needed to escape.

I spent my money very wisely and was able to help a great number of people. I established yeshivot (schools) and synagogues, and spent a great deal of my resources trying to take care of the poor. I helped to get a translation of the Hebrew Bible printed called The Ferrara Bible. I helped many Marranos to escape persecution and move to Turkey where they could live without fear of anti-semitism. In 1556, the Pope sentenced a group of Marranos in Portugal to death by fire. I organized a trade embargo on one of the Pope's lands (that means I stopped people in that land from having things to buy like food and clothing). That forced things to get better for the Jews for a little while.

I got to meet and work with all kinds of famous people – King Henry II of France, King Henry VIII of England, King Charles V of Spain, Pope Paul III and Pope Paul IV, and Suleiman the Magnificent, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. I died in 1569 near Istanbul, Turkey. I tried really hard during my life to make the lives of Jews better and I hope you will be inspired to do the same.