Doña Gracia of the House of Nasi

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Gracia Mendes, the Younger
About 1553
medal made by Pastorius de' Pastorini in Ferrara
Benveniste, with all their families and households. In the event, however, they preferred to be called, not by their husbands' name of Benveniste, but by the ancestral appellation of Nasi; and it is as Doña Gracia Nasi that our principal character was henceforth known.

A new chapter now opened in her life. She was no longer a Marrano, but a proud, eager, almost chauvinistic Jewess.

CHAPTER IV

Ferrara

The bustling city of Ferrara was at this time at the height of its prosperity and fame, under the rule of that typical Renaissance paladin, Duke Ercole II, of the House of Este. This ducal line, combining close autocratic rule with an exceptionally enlightened economic regime, tried to enhance the prosperity of their dominions by encouraging immigration as much as possible as a cardinal point of public policy. The nationality and creed of those who came were to them a matter of indifference, so long as they could contribute to the general welfare.

There was a relatively old-established colony of Italian Jews in the city, whose numbers had been augmented in the course of the fifteenth century by arrivals from Germany fleeing from the persecutions endemic in that land. In 1492, a handful of refugees from Spain, barbarously treated elsewhere, found a warm welcome in the Este dominions and set up a synagogue following the Iberian (Sephardi) rite in the capital. As early as 1538, asylum had been offered to Portuguese Marranos as well, and when, in 1540, the arrests took place in the duchy of Milan, a certain Solomon de Ripa was sent there by the duke to secure the release of those who could legitimately claim his protection. By now, the colony had attained numbers and distinction. Time after time, scandalized
Catholics or disappointed renegades, returning to the Peninsula, gave an account of men they had encountered there frequenting the "Portuguese" synagogue and known as Jews, though it was notorious in the city that they had lived formerly as Catholics at Lisbon or Coimbra.

This was the environment in which the Nasi family settled on leaving Venice in 1549/50 — the two sisters, Gracia and Reyna (as they must now be called): their young daughters, named with sororal reciprocity Reyna and Gracia respectively (the latter, it is reported, was called Gracia la chica, or "The Small," for the sake of differentiation). Their nephew, João Miguez, was, it seems, only an occasional visitor, at the best; but his younger and less vigorous brother now joined the family circle, also reverting to Judaism under the name of Samuel Nasi (his former appellation is unknown). He later espoused his young cousin Gracia, Doña Reyna's daughter, who was henceforth also known as Gracia Nasi. It was a typical expedient to keep the family fortune in the family; but it had the incidental result of establishing that volatile young lady firmly in Judaism.

The outstanding personality in the community at the time of Doña Gracia's arrival in the city was, as it happens, another woman — it is to be hoped her friend, although her rival. This was Doña Benvenida, a member of the great Jewish family of Abrabanel which, on the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, had originally settled in Naples. She was the daughter of Don Jacob, brother of the famous Don Isaac Abrabanel, the philosopher-statesman, who was as familiar with the courts of Europe as with the profundities of Holy Writ. Her husband was Don Samuel, Isaac's son, long the head of Neapolitan
Jewry, of whom contemporaries said that he was \textit{Trismegistos} or Thrice Great — great in knowledge of the Torah, great in nobility and great in wealth — and that he combined all the characteristics which, according to tradition, are requisite for the gift of prophecy. His wife shared his great qualities. Don Pedro de Toledo, the viceroy of the kingdom of Naples for the Spanish sovereign, thought so highly of her that she was associated in the education of his second daughter, Leonora, who (it is told) called her “mother,” and continued to turn to her for advice even after she became grand duchess of Tuscany. This association may have postponed but could not avert the expulsion of the Jews from Apulia and southern Italy, at the insistence of the implacable Emperor Charles V, in 1541; and the family then settled in Ferrara, being eagerly welcomed there by the reigning duke.

Here the Abrabanes lived in magnificent style. Their affairs continued to flourish. Their charity was on a princely level. Their mansion was a center of cultural life, thronged by Jewish savants and well frequented by Christians also. When Don Samuel died in 1547 through taking an overdose of scannony (Amatus Lusitanus tells the story), his widow continued his business on a grand scale, securing important commercial privileges in Tuscany thanks to her relations with that Court. Her Jewish sentiment was as profound and eager as might have been anticipated from a member of that great house. When a remarkable apocalyptic pretender, David Reuben, had come to Italy on a pretended mission on behalf of the lost tribe of Reuben (of which his brother, he said, was king), she had been his most eager supporter,
and he carried with him on his travels a magnificent silken banner, embroidered in gold with the Ten Commandments, which she had worked for him with her own hands. The report of her profound religious feeling and her many acts of charity penetrated as far as Egypt and the Holy Land. She was deeply pious, and indulged in frequent fasting. It was her delight to dower penniless orphans. No poor person who came to her house was ever turned away. She was a munificent patroness of learning. She is said to have ransomed over a thousand Jewish prisoners out of her own means. Immanuel Aboab, the chronicler, who knew the family personally, describes her in a passage that has become classical: "One of the most noble and high-spirited matrons who have existed in Israel since the time of our dispersion: such was the Señora Bevenida Abrabanel — pattern of chastity, of piety, of prudence and of valor." At the time of Doña Gracia's arrival in Ferrara, she was past her prime (she was to die in 1560) but still active; and the two doubtless indulged in a friendly competition of well-doing.

Nor were there lacking, at this time in Ferrara, Jewesses who were of mark in a different sphere, though of lower social status. This was the place of residence indeed of the Modena family, which was memorable for the scholarly women which it produced, who in turn provided the model and inspiration for a succession of famous rabbis. At the time of Doña Gracia's arrival, there was still living there, in all probability, Pomona Modena, the mother of Abraham ben Daniel Modena, who had celebrated her piety in his poems: she, we are informed, was versed in the Talmud as well as any man, and Rabbi David of Imola addressed her on one occasion a detailed responsum on a point of Jewish law, which only a scholar could have understood. Yet more famous was her kinswoman, Bathsheba (Fioretta), the wife of Solomon Modena and mother of the physician Mordecai Modena, and ancestress of a whole line of scholars, including Leone da Modena, pride and shame of the Venetian Ghetto in a later generation, and of Aaron Berechiah da Modena, one of the last of the inspired synagogue hymnologists. She, we are told by one of her grandchildren, was constantly engaged in study, had a considerable acquaintance even with the Zohar, was expert in the writings of Maimonides and had a regular sequence of study each week; and her influence in developing and in maintaining the love of Jewish learning in her family was gratefully recognized. Ultimately, as an old woman, she emigrated to Palestine, ending her days very shortly afterwards in the Holy City of Safed. At the time of Doña Gracia's arrival in Ferrara, she was as yet in her prime. It is not too much to suggest that she may have had some influence on the other's mental development and perhaps assisted to familiarize her with the Jewish background from which, owing to the circumstances of her life, she had hitherto been estranged.

Of Doña Gracia's immediate circle, upon whom she relied heavily for advice in business and practical matters, the most noteworthy was of course her nephew, João Miguez, who visited Ferrara from time to time; the main seat of his activity, however, at this period seems to have been abroad, especially at Lyons. His brother, Samuel Nasi, the younger Gracia's husband, was apparently content with that position, playing throughout his life a
minor role. Another member of the family circle, though less immediately related, was Agostino Enriques (known secretly as Abraham Benveniste, though he had not yet embraced Judaism in public)—an adroit man of affairs who had been with her at Antwerp and whom Diogo Mendes had nominated in his last will as co-guardian of his daughter with Miguez should Doña Gracia die. As her brother-in-law had advised, she took his advice in every matter of importance. Ultimately it turned out that he was basically dishonest, and it is probable that he had been swindling her right along. Of an entirely different type and vastly superior character was Duarte Gomez, who belonged to the old Jewish family of Zaboca—a graduate of the University of Salamanca, where he had studied medicine, but now a business man and the trusted agent of the firm. He had a strong literary bent, translated Petrarch into Spanish verse in a masterly fashion in the manner of the original, contributed laudatory poems to works by other writers, patronized letters, and was on terms of familiarity with many Italian litterateurs—a typical specimen of the highly-cultured Marrano magnate of the day. At least twice in his lifetime, he was arraigned by the Inquisition on the charge of Judaizing, but on both occasions without result; though after his death one at least of his sons returned to Judaism and had to answer before the Holy Office for the possession of various heretical works from his father's library.

Of the less conspicuous members of the community we are minutely informed in some cases, thanks to the depositions discovered in the Inquisitional archives at Lisbon and elsewhere. Some of them were indeed old friends and acquaintances from Antwerp, who had sought refuge in Ferrara when their colony there had been disturbed. Among the rank and file of the community perhaps the most prominent was a young goldsmith named Abraham Saralvo (formerly Gabriel Henriques) who exerted himself to bring about the admission of fugitive Marranos (hundreds of them, it was said) to the Covenant of Abraham; later on, he was to pay dearly for his devotion, being burnt alive on the Campo de’ Fiori in Rome in 1583. Amatus Lusitanus was there too, occupying some sort of position at the University, and once more in medical attendance on the family. Nor can there be any doubt that they were on familiar terms with the other notables of the city and distinguished strangers who came there from time to time—not only Jews: it is known at all events that they entertained the French ambassador to Venice on one occasion when he visited the inland duchy.

The brilliant, tolerant, but not too exalted Court of the Estensi was at this time at the height of its fame. Jews were not strangers to it. (We know how in an earlier generation a member of the local community had lost 3,000 ducats at a single sitting when playing cards with the Duke!) It was natural therefore that, while Doña Gracia immersed herself in her graver preoccupations, the other members of the family had more worldly diversions. Of this, one supremely interesting relic has survived. The Jews of Renaissance Italy had the same tastes and interests as their neighbors, and some of them had portrait-medals struck, in the spirit of the age. (We know those of Benjamin, son of the physician Elijah Beer, of 1503(?); of Elias and his mother Rica de Lattes, of Rome, 1552; of Abraham Emanuel Norsa, most probably
Gracia la chica followed suit, entrusting the commission to the fashionable Ferrarese artist, Pastorino de' Pastorini (1508–1572) who was also to be responsible for the last of the three mentioned above. His production, showing the young lady at the age of eighteen, is a delightful one. Her face is molded in profile, facing right. She is dressed in the height of mid-sixteenth-century fashion, like any noblewoman of the time—décolleté bodice with a stiff, heavily-embroidered collar supporting the back of the neck, pearls in her headdress from which a cascade of veiling falls over her shoulders, elaborate earrings and costly necklace. Her newly-found Jewish pride is demonstrated in the fact that, though her age is indicated in Latin (a. æ. xviii) her name, Gracia Nasi, is given in exquisitely-engraved Hebrew characters. The face is grave and beautiful, though perhaps a little heavy. It is a delightful representation of a Jewess of the upper class in Italy at the heyday of the Renaissance, and among the most charming artistic relics of the period. Add a few years to the features, and perhaps a few gems to the jewelry, and you doubtless have Doña Gracia the elder, still not past the prime of life.  

It was at this time that Gracia Nasi became known as a patroness of letters. Just after her arrival (the two phenomena are surely not unconnected) Ferrara began a new tradition in Jewish literature, by first producing works in the vernacular, for the benefit of recently-arrived Marranos who were ignorant of Hebrew. The lead was taken by a certain Yomtob Athias, known in his Marrano days as Jeronimo de Vargas, who in 1552 completed the production of the first published Spanish version of the traditional prayer book (Lybro de Oracyones de todo el año: Ferrara, 1552). This proved to be the precursor of a notable series of such works.

The most important of them all was a translation of the Hebrew Bible ("The Ferrara Bible," it is generally called) produced in collaboration with a certain Abraham Usque or Duarte Pinel, probably at Doña Gracia’s expense. (It was not in fact a new version, but the traditional word-for-word translation which had been current among the Spanish Jews for centuries, revised here and there in minor details.) There are certain incidental facts about this famous work—a noble folio, printed in black letter—which endow it with a dramatic interest. It was published in two editions, one for Jews and one for Christians. The most striking and obvious differences between the two are at the beginning and the end. Both forms, according to the title-page, were "seen and examined by the Office of the Inquisition," and both appeared "with the privilege of the most illustrious duke of Ferrara." The dedication following this, and the colophon at the close of the volume, are, however, strikingly different in the two issues. The one, intended for general use, or perhaps for export to the Peninsula, is dedicated to the duke of Ferrara, dated in accordance with Christian convention, and signed by those responsible with their Marrano names, Duarte Pinel and Jeronimo de Vargas; the other, intended for the Jews, gives the Jewish equivalents of these names, Abraham Usque and Yomtob Athias, bears the Hebrew date and is dedicated to the noble-hearted Jewess, Doña Gracia ‘Naci.’ (There is an incidental difference also in the text, some copies translating a famous passage of Isaiah
7.14, "and the virgin," and some "and the maiden shall conceive and bear a child."  

It is worth while to give here the dedication to the "Jewish" version, with all its characteristic sixteenth-century rhetoric, at length: —

Prologue to the Very Magnificent Lady:  
Doña Gracia Naci

It would not seem proper (most magnificant Lady) that now we are about to print the Bible in our Spanish tongue (translated from the Hebrew word for word — so rare a work, never before known until our day) it should be offered to persons whose favor could not help it, but to one so noble and magnanimous, that it would adorn her nobility. Therefore we desired to direct it to Your Honor, as being a person whose merits have always earned the most sublime place among all of our people — both because your greatness deserves it, and because your own birth and love of your land imposes this well-deserved obligation upon us. We pray Your Honor to accept it with the good will wherewith we offer it, and to favor it and guard it with the same mind wherewith you have hitherto always favored all who thus far have obtained your help. And because your nobility is naturally accustomed to these offices, we are quieted of any misgiving we might have by reason of the diversity of opinions; beggning you that your memory will not forget our desire, which is so profoundly inclined for your service. May our God guard your person and prosper your magnificent estate for very ample years.

The servants of Your Honor,  
Yom Tob Attias and Abraham Usque.

[March 1, 1553]

Later in the same year another work appeared at Ferrara under similar auspices — one of the most notable in the record of vernacular Jewish literature. This was the famous Consolaçam às Tribulações de Israel, or "Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel," by Samuel Usque — no immediate relation so far as is known of Abraham Usque, who published the volume for him in 1553. It is a prose-poem in Portuguese, in the form of a pastoral dialogue between "Ycabo" (i.e., Ichabod: it is also an anagram for Jacob), "Numeo" (i.e., Nahum, the Comforter) and Zachariah (i.e., God's Remembrance), which passes in review the whole of Israel's history, recalls the unutterably long sequence of suffering and brings together the divine promises of hope contained in the Bible, with other arguments that should save the agonized Jew from despair. It was written, says the author in his preface, for the express purpose of assisting the crypto-Jews of Portugal and prevent them from being overwhelmed by what they had undergone. The third dialogue consists largely of a chronicle of Jewish martyrdom in Christian Europe, embodying much information to be found in no other sources. It is a remarkable work, written in a style of such exquisite beauty that it is today regarded as a Portuguese classic and read in the Portuguese schools — a curious irony of history, considering where and why it was composed.

This work also appeared under Doña Gracia's auspices and was dedicated to her in moving terms: —

Since my first object is to serve with this little branch of new fruit our Portuguese nation, it is proper to offer it to your Excellence, as the heart of this body; because in the remedies which you have given you have felt, and still feel, its travail more than any other. I for my part cannot conceal that I am, Illustrious Lady, your creature, whom I wish to serve with works and writings and deeds so as to show my gratitude in part for the many favors I have received from your hand. For, ever since you began to show your light, even the least creatures of this people began to babble this truth, in whose bones your name and happy memory will be carved forever...
The work was indeed a distinct success, and Doña Gracia's name was closely associated with it in the minds of readers. There is a curious illustration of this in an Inquisitional denunciation discovered not long since, from which we learn how, as early as 1554 — the year after its publication — it circulated in England, and was even copied by hand; the copy, it seemed, lacked its title page, and was entitled (so the deponent stated; it is probable that his recollection to some extent misled him) "To Beatriz de Luna, wife of Diogo Mendes."

Meanwhile, Doña Gracia was continuing her great work on behalf of her fellow Marranos, helping them to escape from Portugal, assisting them to transfer their property and enabling them to settle in the ever-open haven of Turkey or, under her own aegis, in Ferrara. It was with this work especially that her grateful contemporaries associated her. In the dedication to the Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel, Samuel Usque lauded in unmeasured terms "what you have done and still do to bring to the light the fruits of those plants that are buried there [in Portugal] in darkness." This is amplified towards the close of the work in the memorable passage in which "Numeo," the consoled, enumerates the many manifestations of Divine Providence that had saved the Jewish people from disaster in the recent period of stress and oppression. One entire section of this is devoted to Doña Gracia's work in organizing the flight of the refugees from Portugal. No exact details are given, but the language used conveys some idea of her devotion, her unremitting energy and the scale of her work, not hitherto appreciated to the full. There is no such panegyric to a woman in the whole of Jewish literature:

Nor should you forget the help which you have had in the travails which (as you say) you have experienced on the road from Portugal until you arrived in safety. Who has seen, as you have, the Divine mercy reveal itself in human guise, as He has shown and continues to show you for your succor? Who has seen revived the intrinsic piety of Miriam, offering her life to save her brethren? the great prudence of Deborah, in governing her people? that infinite virtue and great sanctity of Esther, in helping those who are persecuted? the much praised strength of the most chaste and magnanimous widow Judith, in delivering those hemmed in by travail? Such has the Lord sent to you in these days from the most supreme rank of His armies, embodying them in a soul of His which by high chance and your happy lot is installed in the most proper womanly body of the fortunate Jewess Nasci. She it is who at the beginning of their journey greatly helps your necessitous sons, who are prevented by penury from saving themselves from the pyre and undertaking so long a road, her hope giving them strength. As for those who have already left and have arrived in Flanders and elsewhere overcome by poverty, or who stand distressed by the sea in danger that they will not be able to fare further, she helps these her dependents with a most liberal hand, with money and many other aids and comforts. It is she who shows them favor in the asperity of the stormy Alps of Germany and in other lands, and in the extreme misery when the many horrors and misfortunes of the long voyage overtake them, helping them willingly with her succor. It is she who aided you with motherly love and heavenly liberality in the dangerous and urgent necessities which you experienced in the unexpected exile from that Italian city [which you know] providing for all the magnates in a time when they could not help themselves out of their own means; succoring the multitude of necessitous and miserable poor, refusing no favor even to those who were her enemies and [sending] boatsoads of bread and necessities to all, in such wise that she almost revived them from the grave which threatened them in those waters. In such wise, with her golden arm and heavenly grasp, she raised most of those of this people from the depths of this and other infinite travail in which they were kept enthralled in Europe by poverty and sin; she brings them to safe lands and does not cease to guide them, and gathers them to the obedience and precepts of their God of old. Thus she has been your tried strength in your weakness; a bank where the weary rest; a fountain of clear water where the parched drink; a fruit-laden shady tree where the hungry eat and the desolate find rest;
and for you, more particularly, she was part of that great succor, and remains at all times a tried relief in all the miseries of the Portuguese people—a strong column to support many who were once prosperous and to help them with her own fortune. In brief, the wide pinions and outspread wings of this eagle have saved a great part of your sons in their flight from the cruelty of the Portuguese, so that she thus imitated the Lord at the time of the Exodus from Egypt.

That is all we know. An infinity of suffering, of charity, of adventure, of organization, seems to be suggested by this passage; but the details, even then familiar to few, are irrecoverable today. One can only imagine the great house at Ferrara, and the constant coming and going of envoys bearing new terrible accounts of the ravages of the Inquisition and messages from those who were anxious to escape, and the consternation of the charitable lady who received them. It is more difficult to reconstruct in one's mind the full picture of the elaborate organization—the agencies maintained in Portugal itself to coordinate plans, the observers in England, Flanders, France and Germany who assisted the fugitives—all perhaps agents of the Mendes banking-house—the elaborate arrangements for directing them from stage to stage and transmitting their money, and finally the arrival in Ferrara and the immediate visit to the Nasi mansion to pour out a thanks-laden heart before Doña Gracia herself. It seems obvious from the almost hyperbolical terms of the passage quoted that one of the beneficiaries who owed his escape to her was the author, Samuel Usque himself.44

Against all expectation, she had to extend her relief work even to her place of refuge—"the most secure haven of Italy," as Usque called it. In 1551, not long
after her arrival, there was an outbreak of plague in the city, the infection having been brought, according to the general opinion, from Germany and Switzerland. Who should have carried it, men asked, but the Marranos who travelled that way on their devious journey from Portugal? As the plague spread, so the anti-alien agitation grew, until the duke was compelled in spite of himself to order the newly-arrived Portuguese to leave the city — not because of fanaticism, for once, but as a purely sanitary measure. Their sufferings were increased by the fact that the timorous population, fearing infection, would not enter into any sort of contact with them meanwhile for any price. The time-limit expired at night; and in the darkness old men tottered down the roads, carrying everything they possessed, so as to cross the boundary in time. On the river-bank, where boats awaited them, many of them were despoiled by the men-at-arms sent to protect them. Later on, several lost their lives as they wandered from place to place in Italy, or were assailed on the high seas on their way to the Levant. Great as the disaster was for them, it would have been greater still but for the singlehearted devotion of Doña Gracia, who organized their movements, helped them with supplies and money, and despatched up the river boats laden with food to relieve their immediate distress. However, in due course the scare died down and the exiles were allowed to return to the city, the Marrano community now attaining its greatest prosperity.

It seems that Doña Gracia herself had been among those who were compelled to leave Ferrara as a result of the scare: for there is no other reasonable explanation of the fact that, just at this period, we find her in Venice again.
We happen to know that while she was there in this year she purchased from the viceroy of India a rare gem, believed to have medicinal properties and to be an antidote against poison, which cost her as much as one hundred and thirty ducats. It was unwise to venture into the very lion’s mouth — even that of the bookish lion of St. Mark — so shortly after her recent misadventures and escapes, while the edict of expulsion of the Marranos was so fresh in the public recollection and everyone was well aware that she had so recently made public profession of her Judaism. There is reason to believe that she was again arrested — presumably this time on the well-grounded charge of apostasy from Christianity — or at least submitted to cavalier treatment. The news was soon reported in Constantinople where the interest of the sultan was again enlisted. (It was believed that Dr. Moses Hamon, the imperial body-physician, still anxious for a marriage alliance between the two families, was again, as on a previous occasion, the principal intermediary.) Once more, a Court messenger was sent to Venice to make representations. His report of the manner in which Doña Gracia had been treated threw the Grand Signior and his ministers into a fury. A minor diplomatic crisis ensued. There was consternation among the European observers at the Sublime Porte. The Venetian bailo journeyed especially to Adrianople after the Court in order to calm the troubled waters, but without success, and his despatches home dealt with the matter as being one of primary international importance. Once again, Doña Gracia escaped unscathed, returning in due course to Ferrara, where the panic had by now subsided; but the experience forced her to reconsider her position.

The Italian sky was rapidly clouding over. Cardinal Caraffa was now all-powerful at the papal Court, and the Counter-Reformation had begun. The Jesuit Order had been founded, the Inquisition had been reorganized, a propaganda for securing the conversion of the Jews had been set in motion, a coterie of apostates was carrying on a whispering campaign in Rome, with results that were to prove extremely serious before long, and the grand assault on Hebrew literature was in preparation. To persons compelled to think ahead of events, and with special sources of information, the anti-Jewish reaction which was to culminate so drastically a year or so later was already tragically obvious. Christian Europe, its skies darkened by the smoke from the Inquisitional pyres, was no environment for former Marranos, who might at any moment be pounced upon and prosecuted if the tolerant whim of the temporal ruler changed, or another person acceded to authority. Only Turkey held out the prospect of unbroken tranquility. Already a great part of the family property had been transferred thither, thanks to the warm benevolence of the Sublime Porte, more and more anxious to acquire these fresh valuable subjects and to become the seat of the activities of one of the greatest of European business houses. The requisite safe-conduct had long since been obtained, while further arrangements were made with the states, large and small, through which the immigrants had to pass on their journey. All the difficulties were at last overcome. In August, 1552, Doña Gracia left Ferrara, with her family and an enormous retinue, her face set towards Turkey.