Doña Gracia Mendes (Part 1): Rescuing Jewish refugees from Spain and Portugal

FORGOTTEN GIANTS

Doña Gracias Mendes (1510-1568), also known as Doña Gracia Nasí, was probably the woman who did the most for the Jewish people in the diaspora of the post-biblical era. As happened with Ester HaMalka, who used her position of queen of the Persian Empire to save the Jews who lived in her kingdom from genocide, Doña Gracia used her power –an immense fortune and an extensive network of commercial, financial and political contacts – to rescue and save from death, misery, and slavery tens of thousands of "anusim", Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal. Her life story is fascinating and seems to belong more to the genre of fantasy and legend than history. However, the documentation that exists about her life, including the most incredible data, is well documented in articles and books that are now available to anyone interested in learning more about this extraordinary soul. I'm going to write about her for the next few weeks. My hope is that this information arouses the reader's curiosity and helps rescue the memory of this great woman from Israel from oblivion.

FROM SPAIN TO PORTUGAL

She was born in Lisbon, Portugal, in the year 1510. Her birth name was "Beatriz de Luna". Let us remember that in 1492, between 600,000 and 800,000 Jews were expelled from Spain. Approximately 120,000 of those Jews fled to Portugal, where King Joao II demanded a huge sum of money, 100 gold coins or ducats per family, to grant them permanent residence. Most of the Jewish refugees had abandoned everything they had in their native Spain, and could not afford the exorbitant costs. The king then offered them to stay in Portugal temporarily, for 6 months, paying 1 gold coin per person.

THE NASI FAMILY

Some 600 wealthy Jewish families were able to pay the 100 coins to obtain residency in Portugal. Beatriz Nasí's family – that's what they called themselves before she forcibly adopted

the surname “de Luna” – was one of those. The history of the tremendous difficulties that the Jews suffered in Portugal at this time is too long and complex to describe in a few lines. But let’s say briefly that after endless negotiations around the year 1500 an agreement was reached with King Manuel, King John’s successor: Jews would “formally” convert to Christianity, but the King would not allow the tribunal of the Inquisition to be established in Portugal. The Inquisition was in charge of verifying –and punishing with death– conversos who practiced their old religion in private. Now, with no Inquisition, Jews would live a double life: outwardly they were forced to pretend that they lived as Christians, but in privacy, and with discretion, they were practically free to act as they wished. Beatriz de Luna was born and raised in this environment. And as was usual in those times, it was not until she was 12 years old that her parents revealed to their daughter that she was Jewish, because telling a child under that age their secret identity could be very risky and dangerous for the family and for the child himself.

MARRYING A CONVERSO RABBI

At the age of 18, Beatriz married Francisco Mendes. “Mendes” was the non-Jewish surname that had been adopted in these circumstances by the “Benbeniste” (or Benveniste) family, a dynasty of rabbis and Tora scholars. The wedding ceremony took place in the cathedral of Lisbon. After the Christian ceremony, as it was customary for conversos (Jews that were converted by force, or their descendants), they celebrated the Chuppah –the Jewish wedding ceremony and the signing of the Ketuba– in the privacy of their home. Francisco Mendes was not just another “converso”. Francisco was a man who loved and observed Judaism and was very knowledgeable about religious practice. So much so that he acted as master of ceremonies in religious events. He was known as the RAB HA-ANUSIM, “the rabbi of the conversos”. And it was thanks to her illustrious husband that Beatriz became interested and learned in Tora. And it was because of her husband that her love for the Jewish people became the passion of her life.

BUSINESSES FROM THE SEA

Francisco was not just a converso and a Tora scholar. He was also the most brilliant businessman of his time in Lisboa. Together with his brother Diogo (or Diego, originally “Meir”)

they grew immensely in business. The two brothers were in charge of marketing and commercializing all the cargo that arrived in Portugal from Brazil, Africa, and India. Let us remember that the beginning of the 16th century was a time of immense economic boom for Portugal, which on the one hand had discovered the best route to reach India, through Cape Town (South Africa), and on the other hand, exploited its rich colonies in Brazil. Commercially, Portugal was the most important gateway to Europe for all the exotic goods (black peppers, tobacco, wood, metals and precious stones, etc.) that arrived in Lisbon. All this trade that benefited the Portuguese crown was managed from start to finish by the Mendes brothers. This lasted for approximately 30 years. The success of the Mendes and their fortune was so great that they also created a bank, "La Casa Mendes" (see this interesting Wikipedia article in French), which became the second most important bank in Europe in the 16th century.

DOUBTFUL INTENTIONS

Not only the Mendes were doing economically well in Portugal. Spanish Jews were famous for their skill in commerce, an area that was not the specialty of Gentiles in the Peninsula. And now free to develop their talents, the Sephardic refugees in Portugal went on to achieve a great level of wealth. But after 35 years of prosperity, the situation for the Jews of Portugal became complicated. The Pope insisted on installing the Inquisition in Portugal. Beyond the religious reasons, the establishment of the Inquisition was an excellent source of income for the Church, since when the inquisition discovered that a converso observed any Jewish ritual even in private, the accused was sentenced to death by burning "and all his money, goods, and property were confiscated and passed into the hands of the church". It became almost a historical custom that the Church pressed to establish its tribunal of Inquisition after Jews were allowed to become economically successful so that their numerous assets could be confiscated. Portuguese Jews tried by all means to delay the arrival of the Inquisition, but finally, in 1536 the papal pressure prevailed and the dreaded court was installed in Lisboa. From that moment on, it was impossible for the Jews to stay there.

SAVING LIFE AND DIGNITY

In 1538 Francisco Mendes passed away, and he left his position

and his fortune to his wife Beatriz. That same year Beatriz, her daughter Ana, and her brother-in-law Diogo Mendes settled in Antwerp, Belgium, the most important financial center in Europe at the time, and continued with their successful company. Beatriz still kept her Jewish identity a secret. In Antwerp and together with Diego Mendes, and later with the help of her nephew Yosef Nasí, the Duke of Naxos, Beatriz begins to transform into a gigantic figure for the Jewish people. First of all, she used the trade routes of the Mendes company to help the Jews of Portugal to escape clandestinely in the company's ships from the hands of the Inquisition. These families escaped hiding on the Mendes' trading ships, which had free and safe passage throughout Europe. Tens of thousands of refugees poured from Lisbon to Antwerp, from Antwerp to Venice or Ancona in Italy, and from there many continued on to Turkey, where the Jews, as we shall see later, were very well welcomed.

Beatriz not only saw to it that the Jewish refugees were able to escape Portugal alive and reach their destination safely, but she also prevented them from losing all their belongings. How? Through her many loyal agents, Beatriz's company was buying and selling the properties and assets of Anusim Jews in Portugal before they were confiscated by the Inquisition, and the money from these proceedings was sent to the property owners' hands through the Mendes bank.

To be continued