Doña Gracia Mendes (Part 2) and the Spanish Bible of Ferrara

SUMMARY

We are briefly reviewing the life and work of Beatriz de Luna, later known as Doña Gracia Mendes. Let us remember that when the inquisition was established in Portugal it was impossible for the Jews to continue living there, and in the year 1538, when her husband Francisco Mendes died, Beatriz, together with her daughter Ana and her brother-in-law Diogo, moved to Flanders (today Antwerp, Belgium), the financial capital of Europe at the time. There she was in charge of the successful international trade company and the bank that her deceased husband had founded. Beatriz used her fortune and her influence to help her Jewish brothers escape from Portugal and reach Turkey.

IN THE NETHERLANDS

Flanders then belonged to the Empire of Carlos V of Spain. And therefore religious matters were under the authority of the inquisition. For that reason, and until she reached her final destination: Turkey, Beatriz was still hiding her Jewish status. With her high profile, any small mistake could cost her and her family their lives. And as we explained earlier, it was very tempting for the inquisition to accuse her of "judaizing" (practicing Judaism) since if she were found guilty the Church would be able to keep her immense fortune. While she was in Flanders, Beatriz continued to grow in fame and success. She dealt commercially with King Henry II of England; with Emperor Charles V; with the King of France and even with Popes Paul III and Paul IV. These relationships involved commercial activities, loans of huge sums of money to

the monarchs, and bribes to the church so that the inquisition would not persecute the Jewish *anusim* (converts against their will) in Spain and Portugal. The whole story of Beatriz in Flanders is fascinating, but too long to be told in a few lines.

BEATRIZ IN VENICE

In 1544, after a political move against her trying to unmask her Jewish identity, Beatriz escaped from Flanders and settled in Venice. At that time Venice was a "republic" independent of the papacy and had territories in Croatia, Slovenia, Greece and even Cyprus. The Republic of Venice was known for its pragmatism and Beatriz was very well received there, as her trading company benefited this city immensely. At that time Venice had its own rules to deal with the Jews. On the one hand, Venice offered guarantees to the *anusim* so that they could discreetly lead their lives without being disturbed by the Inquisition. However, those who wanted to live openly as Jews had to settle in the city's famous Ghetto. Let us remember that the first Jewish Ghetto in history was that of Venice, established in 1516. Beatriz continued in Venice until 1549.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CALLING YOURSELF "GRACIA"

From Venice, Beatriz moved to Ferrara, at that time an exceptional place for Jews. Ferrara was the only city-state in Europe in which Jews were allowed to freely and openly practice their religion (this good situation lasted only until 1597). By the end of the 15th century, Ferrara had accepted more than 20 Sephardic refugee families, granting them civil liberties unthinkable in other regions, such as the right to practice medicine. And it was there, in Ferrara, in the year 1549 where "Beatriz" finally left behind her gentile name fro good and call herself "Gracia" (the typical Sephardic translation of the name "Chaná"; "Chen" in Hebrew means "Grace"), "Nasí", her Jewish maiden name. For the first time

in her life she began to openly practice her beloved Jewish religion. In those days there was also an incipient but very important Jewish community, mostly Sephardic refugees, in Erets Israel, especially in Tsefat (Safed). There was, for example, Rabbi Yosef Caro (1488-1575), his teacher, Ribbí Ya'aqob Berab, and his students, such as Rabbi Moshe Alshekh haQadosh and other geniuses of Torah and Qabbala. Doña Gracia and the Jews of Ferrara financially supported these Jewish colonies and Rabbinical academies of Tsefat and Yerushalayim.

JEWISH EDUCATION FOR THOSE WHO NEEDED IT MOST

Doña Gracia continued to help the "conversos" of Portugal and Spain to escape the Inquisition. But her task was not limited to materially helping the anusim. One of the most important projects that Doña Gracia Mendes initiated was the sponsoring of Jewish books in Spanish. Why was this so important? Because there were tens of thousands of Jewish refugees from Spain and Portugal who could not read Hebrew – or did not understand it – and their only access to the Bible, for example, was through Christian translations into Latin, such as the Vulgate, which in the key texts presents an anti-Jewish version of the Book of Books. But the Bible was not the only book that she had to translate. A prayer book was needed so that the Jewish refugees would understand what they were saying when praying and thus strengthen their faith in God. In 1552 Doña Gracia financed the "Book of prayers for the whole year", translated by Rabbi Yom Tob Atias (whose former name was "Jerónimo de Vargas".) She also financed the publication of "The Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel", a book of Jewish history and stories written by Rabbi Samuel de Usque, published in 1553. In that same year these two rabbis were in charge of the first "Jewish" translation of the Bible into Spanish: the famous "Bible of Ferrara ". In the introduction, both Rabbis wrote him an emotional letter of dedication and gratitude that we can see below.

Dedicatória da Bíblia de Ferrara (1553)

PRÓLOGO A LA MUY MAGNÍFICA SEÑORA DOÑA GRACIA:

No parescía razón, muy magnífica señora, que aviéndose de ymprimir la Biblia en nuestra lengua española traduzida del hebreo palabra por palabra (obra tan rara y hasta nuestros tiempos nunca vista), fuesse a parar en personas de cuyo favor no se pudiesse valer, sino a alguna tan noble y magnánima que a su nobleza acrecentasse ornamiento. Por la qual causa la quesimos dirigir a vuestra merced como a persona que sus méritos entre todos los nuestros siempre tuvieron el más sublime lugar, assí por sus grandezas lo merescer como porque la propria naturaleza y amor de la patria nos pone esta obligación tan devida. Vuestra merced la acepte con la voluntad que nós se la offrecemos y la favoresca y defienda con el ánimo que siempre favoresció todos los que su ayuda hasta oy ympetraron. Y porque su nobleza naturalmente es acostumbrada a estos officios, quedamos seguros de algún recelo que por diversidad de juizios podríamos tener, pidiendo que su memoria non se olvide de nuestro desseo que tan ynclinado es a su servicio. Nuestro Señor por muy largos años guarde a su persona y prospere su magnífico estado.

Servidores de vuestra merced, Yom Tob Atías y Abraham Usque.

This is my own translation from old Spanish.

It did not seem right, very magnificent lady (Doña Gracia), that having the Bible printed in our Spanish language translated from Hebrew word for word (a work so rare and never seen until our times) would end up in people whose favor we did not could be used, but to someone so noble and magnanimous that her nobility did not increase ornament. For which cause we wanted to dedicate it to your grace, as to people whose merits among all of ours (= the Jews) always had the most sublime place, so for their greatness they deserve it as because nature itself and love for the homeland (= the nation of Israel) places on us this very due obligation. May your grace accept it with the will that we offer it to her and favor and defend her with the spirit that always favored all those who until today begged for her help. And because her nobility is naturally accustomed to these trades, we are sure of some suspicion that due to diversity of judgment we could have, asking that her memory not forget our desire that is so inclined to her service. May our Lord keep her person for many long years and prosper her magnificent state.

Your servants, Yom Tob Atias and Abraham Usque.

THE JEWS OF FERRARA

The Jewish community of Ferrara was made up entirely of Sephardim who had arrived from Spain a little before 1492, and who, living in total freedom, were progressing there in their spiritual life and flourishing materially. Prosperity attracted more Jews and before the end of the 16th century, more than 3,000 Jews lived there, representing approximately 10% of the total population. The privileged life dedicated to the Tora and philanthropy (Ma'asim Tobim) of Ferrara Jews at that time, is described with sublime beauty by Cecil Roth in his book "Doña Gracia". Let us briefly say that the most prestigious families in the city such as the Abarbanels (the sons of Rabbi Don Isaac Abarbanel), the Modenas and the Nasí were benefactors of any Jewish cause that arose. The houses of these patrons and philanthropists were always open to welcome Talmide Hakhamim (Rabbis and Tora scholars), supporting them financially and providing them access to something very precious and difficult to find at that time: libraries. Filled with Hebrew books and manuscripts, that these wealthy families owned in their homes. The freedom enjoyed by the Jews of Ferrara was relatively short-lived. In 1597 the last Prince died, leaving no male heir, and very quickly the Pope claimed and took the Kingdom after a brief resistance. Amid the shouts of joy from the people who greeted the Pope, a new and unusual cry was also heard in the city: "Down with the Jews!" Great anxiety gripped the community, especially the *anusim* who feared the rule of the Pope and the Inquisition. About half of Ferrara's Jews emigrated to Modena, Venice, and Mantua.

To be continued….