

Video Clip: Dona Gracia Nasi

The Richest Woman in the World

Born in Lisbon in approximately 1510, Beatrice de Luna carried many names, including Dona Gracia and “*Ha-Giveret*,” Hebrew for “The Lady”. Celebrated as someone who devoted herself to her people in very trying times, even going against the monarchy, she had a captivating personality. Outwardly, she spent most of her life posing as a Christian, while covertly, she still maintained Jewish belief and practice, as a *converso*. She was known for her business prowess as well as her philanthropy.

Suggested Implementations

History

1. The unique aspects of the Spanish/Portuguese converso experience, particularly in the 16th century
2. Migration patterns

Philosophy

1. The Land of Israel
2. The role of women
3. The controversial boycott of Ancona and its implications for Jewish activism

Background

Born in 1510 in Portugal into a family of *converses* (New Christians, Spanish and Portuguese Jews who were forcibly converted in 1497), at her baptism she was given the name Beatrice. However, she was always called “Gracia,” the Spanish equivalent of her Hebrew name Hana. Scholars assume that the phenomenon of Jews taking two names, one secular or appropriate for the surrounding, gentile culture, and the other a Hebrew/Jewish name, must have originated in the Spanish Inquisition. Gracia married Francisco Mendes, a Portuguese *converso* himself. The Mendes family was able to extend banking privileges to the Portuguese kings, loaning them sufficient funds to mount massive maritime exploits and they would receive their payments after the ships came back. The family became extremely powerful and close to the king through their business connections.

In 1536, the Pope ordered the establishment of a Portuguese Inquisition based on the Spanish model. At that point, Dona Gracia was newly widowed and left Portugal for Antwerp with her daughter and sister, Brianda, in part to escape the threat of the Inquisition. She and her daughter Ana were heirs to half of her husband's fortune, and her brother-in-law, Diogo Mendes, controlled the remainder. In Antwerp, she and her brother-in-law expanded the business. They proved to be a good team, Diogo and Beatrice, as they set up an underground system to get conversos like themselves from Christian Europe to the Ottoman Empire. Her sister, Brianda, ultimately married Diogo. In his will, he also stipulated that Beatrice be the administrator of half of his fortune on behalf of his widow Brianda and their daughter. This developed a rift between the two sisters.

Aggressive suitors were seeking Ana's hand as a gateway to her inheritance. That may be the main impetus to the sisters' escape to Venice. But, following a feud with Brianda, Dona Gracia moved in 1549

from Venice to Ferrara where she openly declared her Judaism. From Ferrara she helped fellow conversos flee Portugal. It was there that she also began contributing to the printing of Hebrew books, the most famous of which is "The Ferrara Bible" (1553) which is a Spanish translation of the text.

Although in Italy Dona Gracia was able to more openly embrace her Jewish identity, she was persistent in eventually making her way to the Ottoman Empire in 1554, where she could be far away from the Inquisition's reach. In Istanbul, the Sultan graciously accepted the Jews and formally allowed the conversos to practice their Judaism openly. He personally welcomed Dona Gracia to Turkey and he held a royal ceremony in her and her crew's honor. In Turkey, she was finally able to go by her original Hebrew name: Hana Nasi. Although she greatly appreciated, and needed, the protection and acceptance of the Sultan, Hana Nasi demanded she be allowed to continue wearing her Venetian attire – grateful for her new country but adamant in preserving her identity.

In Istanbul she became a leading force in the community. Safe and finally secure, she also protected fellow Jews when she could. The most outstanding example of this is the boycott of Ancona of 1556. In response to the Inquisition's arrest and public burning of 24 conversos, including Dona Gracia's commercial agents, she spearheaded a commercial boycott of that port city. Although she obtained the cooperation of the Sultan of Ottoman Turkey, the Turkish Jewish community was divided about the wisdom and efficacy of a Jewish boycott. Ultimately the boycott failed but Dona Gracia's fame was reinforced by this unusual diplomatic maneuver.

In another grand move, Gracia essentially bought the city of Tiberias from the Turks. She received an exclusive grant to develop Tiberias in exchange for funds that would be produced and given to the Ottoman Empire on a regular basis. The modern-day city of Tiberias is a result of Dona Gracia's specific intervention and philanthropy in the 16th century. There she supported a full generation of scholars and their families.

Naomi Keren, who wrote the novel *La Señora* based on Hana Nasi's life, notes: "The phenomenon of the Portuguese Marranos was unique. People converted to Christianity out of fear of pogroms and death, and once that fear diminished, they returned to Judaism. They were new Christians that converted but returned to a Jewish life. Meanwhile, however, if you converted, you couldn't go backwards, you were under the Inquisition."

Questions for Discussion

1. Present the students with the following scenario: I am a hotel developer and I'm planning to build a new luxury hotel in Israel. The latest trend in hotel design is the "theme" hotel, in which a famous personality of history or literature is the inspiration and focus of the hotel's décor and facilities. The public rooms are decorated in such a way as to evoke associations with the famous personality's life, interests and accomplishments. I'm interested in Jewish history and culture, and I've heard of Dona Gracia Mendes Nasi. I don't know much about her, but I love the name. So, I've decided to build the "Dona Gracia Hotel," and you are the historians and consultants I am hiring to advise me on this project.

Things to consider

1. In the interests of historical accuracy and appropriateness, where in Israel should I build this hotel? Why?

2. What suggestions do you have about the décor for the public rooms (lobby, dining rooms, meeting rooms, etc.)? What type of furniture, what style, what country of origin? Why?
3. I'm thinking of decorating these rooms with portraits of Dona Gracia herself and members of her family. Who would you include or exclude, and why?
4. Would there be any problems with running this hotel as a well-publicized, strictly kosher, *Shomer Shabbat* establishment?
5. I'm anticipating that booking conventions and conferences at the hotel would be a significant source of income. I've already gotten some inquiries, but I would like to keep things as consistent as possible with the hotel's theme. Should we accept reservations from the following (why or why not?):
 - The Association of Jewish Outreach Professionals
 - The Ancona Chamber of Commerce
 - The Center for Jewish Philanthropy
 - The Association of Bible Translators
 - The National Museum of American History Underground Railroad Conference
 - The Istanbul Institute of Foreign Trade
 - The Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly the Sacred Congregation for the Universal Inquisition)

(When the activity is over, reveal, to the students that there actually is a Dona Gracia Hotel -- the "House of Dona Gracia" -- in Tiberias. <https://www.donagracia.com>)

2. Watch the video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-Fsz48x_DM about the Ancona affair (or have the students read about it).
 - a. Pros and cons of aggressive public action vs. quiet diplomacy (also in the context of American Jewish community during the Holocaust for fear of antisemitic backlash)
 - b. Moral and ethical issues involved
 - c. Causing other Jews who worked the port of Ancona to lose their livelihood
 - d. The propriety of using Jewish influence with government authorities
 - e. What modern parallels have you seen? Does this parallel with BDS?

Suggested Reading

Keren, Naomi Barer. *La Señora*. Or Yehudah: Kineret, 2013. (Hebrew)

Bodian, Miriam. "Doña Gracia Nasi." Jewish Women's Archive. Accessed October 26, 2021. <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/nasi-dona-gracia>.

"Doña Gracia Mendes-Nasi: From Portugal to the Promised Land." Momentum, June 1, 2021. <https://momentumunlimited.org/wov/dona-gracia-mendes-nasi/>.

Roth, Cecil. *Dona Gracia of the House of Nasi*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1977.



Ben Sasson, H.H., ed. "The Ancona Affair." A History of the Jewish People. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976, pp. 667-669.

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