

# Dona Gracia Mendes Nasi

A renowned business woman who defied kings and the Inquisition to  
help ferry thousands of Jews to safety



# Portrait Gracia Mendes Nasí

Born in Portugal 1590 also known by  
her Christianised name of Beatriz De  
Luna Miques.





- ◆ INTRODUCTION

- ◆ Beatrice Nasí, who would come to be known as Doña Gracia, one of the wealthiest women of Renaissance Europe.
- ◆ Dona Gracia Nasí was a Jewish woman who lived during the 16th century and was known for her business acumen, philanthropy, and her support for the Jewish community. Her life is a testament to the resilience of the Jewish people during a time of great persecution, and her story continues to inspire people around the world.
- ◆ She was born 1510 in Portugal, her mother was of the noble family of Benveniste from Castile & Aragon, who had fled from Spain in 1492 escaping the Spanish Inquisition. However, they were forcibly-baptised in 1497 and she was named Beatriz de Luna Miques. Her name Gracia is Spanish for the Hebrew Hannah which means Grace.
- ◆ During her hugely successful business career, she worked tirelessly to find a safe place for Jews, setting up an underground network to help Jews leave Portugal, possibly helping some of my own ancestors, as my father's great grandfather was called David Rodriguez and we can trace the family heritage all the way back to Bragança Portugal and leaving in 16th Century to Amsterdam, before moving to England in 19th Century.
- ◆ Dona Gracia would later move her family to Antwerp, Venice, Ferrara, and finally Constantinople, where she assumed a role of leadership in the Sephardi world of the Ottoman Empire.



♦ LISBON

- ♦ In 1528 she married her uncle Francisco Mendes in the great cathedral of Lisbon and then had a private Jewish wedding with the signing of the Ketubah.
- ♦ Francisco Mendes also a Converso/Morano from the Benveniste family had built up a very successful business with his younger brother Diogo Mendes, trading in Pepper and precious stones. Diogo moved to Antwerp and started an important banking Establishment with their relatives the Benveniste's which would become one of the leading banking and Finance dynasty's of Europe.
- ♦ In 1538 her husband Francisco Mendes died and split his wealth between Gracia and his brother Diogo. At the same time Pope Paul III had ordered the Portuguese Inquisition and fearing for her safety Dona Gracia left Portugal with her daughter Ana and sister Brianda to join Diogo in Antwerp.
- ♦ Gracia invested her wealth into the family business and also helped arrange for her sister to marry Diogo. However in 1542 Diogo died and left his share of the business empire to Gracia and her daughter Ana, much to the dismay of her sister Brianda.
- ♦ Now in total control of this enormous wealth, it enabled her to influence Kings and Popes to help protect her fellow conversos as-well as financing her escape network. This escape network involved hiding conversos on her spice trading ships from Lisbon via Southampton and on to Antwerp. From Antwerp the family would give them money and transport across the Alps to Venice and then on to the Ottoman Empire (Greece/Turkey). At that time the Ottoman Empire under the Muslim Turks welcomed Jews to their lands.
- ♦ Under Dona Gracia the business dealt with many dignitaries, including Henry VIII, Henry II of France, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and Popes Paul III & IV.



<https://youtu.be/LCn2oH7rRik>

“Before there was the House of Rothschild there was the House of  
Mendes and at its head was .... A women”

Andree Aelion





- ◆ ANTWERP 1538-1544

- ◆ During her time in Antwerp, she had to fend off many aggressive attempts by various monarchs to marry her daughter which would have meant a large portion of the family wealth would have been lost due to it being under control of the new husband. She resisted all attempts which often put her in personal danger.
- ◆ Antwerp was still under Spanish rule and she had to make a large bribe plus an enormous loan to Charles V Holy Roman Empire to quash a charge of crypto-judaizing against her deceased husband.
- ◆ Fearing further attempts to confiscate her wealth, she was able to organise the family's flight to Venice in 1544. Angered by the family's flight Charles V placed an embargo on both the property and debts owed to them. It required skilful negotiation by her nephew Joseph Nasi (1524-1579) to arrive at a settlement.



- ◆ VENICE 1544-49

- ◆ In Venice they took up residence on the Grand Canal, maintaining a Catholic facade for strategic reasons and self interest as the Jews of Venice were confined to the crowded Ghetto.
- ◆ Unfortunately, a dispute broke out with her sister Brianda over who should control her inheritance, and she exposed Gracia as a Jew. She was arrested, put in prison and her assets frozen. The Venetian Tribunal ruled that half the Mendez fortune was to be handed over to the public treasurer until her niece (Brianda's daughter) was 18.
- ◆ However, her nephew Joseph Nasri, again came to the rescue. He was now living in Turkey and had become a minister to Suleiman the Magnificent, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. Using his influence the Sultan was only too glad for an excuse to start trouble with the competing Venetian Traders. His Govt sent a special envoy to Venice to request the release of Gracia. After two years of negotiation and threats of war, they agreed to release her..
- ◆ To avoid the Venetian ruling Dona Gracia left Venice to the nearby state of Ferrara, where the Duke of Este agreed the terms of Diogo's will, so the wealth could move to his city.



- ◆ Ferrara 1549-1553
- ◆ In Ferrara, Beatriz, for the first time in her life, was able to openly practice Judaism in a distinguished Sephardi Community and in a city that recognised her rights.
- ◆ She chose the Hebrew name Nasí instead of her own Latin/Jewish name Benveniste and she became known as Dona Gracia Nasí.
- ◆ She also helped finance the Ferrara Bible and Consolations Tribulations of Israel. Both published in 1553.
- ◆ However the move did not end the quarrel between her and her sister over the inheritance. She briefly went with her sister back to Venice. There a visiting Turkish ambassador mediated and agreement was settled in the Venetian Senate.



- ◆ CONSTANTINOPLE 1553-1569

- ◆ After the settlement she moved with her daughter and a large entourage to Constantinople (now Istanbul), where she later arranged for her daughter Ana to marry her husband's nephew Joseph Nasi who had helped her so much..
- ◆ This move was timely as the political atmosphere in Counter-Reformation Italy became hostile. The port of Ancona was a place where ex-conversos had lived openly as practicing Jews, as it was protected from Inquisition by papal consent, to encourage trade with the Ottoman Empire.
- ◆ In 1555 a new Pope Paul IV, suddenly initiated inquisition and the entire community was placed under arrest. Dona Gracia persuaded the Sultan to try and intervene but to no avail and 24 conversos were sent for Execution by burning at the stake. In response Dona Grazia organised a trade embargo, one of the rare acts of organised Jewish resistance to persecution. Unfortunately the boycott bitterly divided the Ottoman Jewish Rabbis and it fizzled out.
- ◆ The Conversos often divided the local Jewish community, as some were not happy they stayed and converted. To combat this prejudice Dona Gracia opened her own Synagogues in Istanbul (still standing) and Salonica (Greece).
- ◆ In 1558 she was granted a long term lease in Tiberius in Galilee by the Sultan. Her aim was to make Tiberius into a major new centre of Jewish Settlement, trade and learning. One of the earliest attempts at a modern Zionist movement.
- ◆ Dona Gracia Mendes Nasi. Died in 1569



- ◆ SUMMARY

- ◆ Dona Gracia Mendes Nasí, was a remarkable woman whose life and accomplishments continue to inspire people today. Despite facing persecution and adversity, she was able to build a successful business, support the Jewish community and help those in need. Her legacy serves as a reminder of the resilience and strength of the Jewish people and her story is an important part of Jewish History. By studying her life and accomplishments I have gained a greater appreciation for the contribution of women and the role of business in Jewish History and how another person who has my Hebrew name may have helped my ancestors escape persecution which has cursed Jewish people for thousands of years.



