

**La Señora**  
**A historical novel in letters about the life & times of Dona**  
**Gracia Mendes Nasi**

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**A Translation:**

**Prologue**

I first encountered the name "La Señora" – Gracia Nasi – over a decade ago whilst wandering in the museum of Judaism, *Musee d'art et d'histoire du Judaisme*, in the Marais quarter in Paris. The name was written in Hebrew characters on a small silver medallion, which was engraved in its center with the profile of a woman jeweled on her neck and in her hair. The year 1558 was printed on the medallion in Roman characters. I was intrigued by this for several reasons. First, to the best of my knowledge, Jews at that time were very strict regarding the second commandment, and so I was surprised to see a figure on a Jewish medallion, let alone the figure of a woman. Furthermore, this woman dared to print her name in Jewish characters for everyone to see, in an era when the skies of Europe were gloomed with clouds of the counter-reformation, an ominous sign, especially for the Jews.

Eventually I learned that the young woman whose fair face I encountered in the medallion was not that of Gracia Nasi, also known as "La Señora", but of her niece, who carried the same name, but by then, I was already totally enchanted by the life story of "La Señora"...

Dona Gracia Nasi was born in 1510 in Lisbon as a Christian, baptized under the name Beatrice De Luna. She passed away as a Jewish Lady in 1569, presumably, in Istanbul. During her life, Gracia Nasi – who was widowed at twenty six and inherited from her husband a worldwide spice trade commercial empire, and was one of the richest women of her time – journeyed from Christian Portugal in the west to the edge of the east - the Othman Empire, governed by a Muslim Sultan. It was both

a physical and a spiritual journey alike. A journey between different countries and between opposite cultures, who felt threatened by each other and fought one another during the entire 16<sup>th</sup> century. But more so, it was a lifetime spiritual journey, certainly an uneasy one, from a Christian identity, through a vague half-Jewish inner identity that was a life endangering one – if it were to be exposed, while living in an exterior Christian disguise, to a both internal and external Jewish identity, which was none the less of a nature not always certain even to its owner, and one which was not always welcome among other Ottoman Jews, who unlike the converses, lived their entire lives as Jews.

The book in front of you is a result of falling in love with the exceptional character of the 16<sup>th</sup> century young widow who never remarried (presumably not because of lack of suitors, but of a choice to stay an independent "free" woman – a legal and economic status available only to widowed women at those days) ,and who succeeded – mostly on her own – to lead safely her family and the enormous family fortune in a world run solely by men, in troubled and dangerous times of religious persecution, political aggressiveness, financial blackmailing and constant danger, and to bring them and thousands other converses refugees, who depended on her, to safety.

"La Señora" is the fruit of a long and punctilious historical research. I did my best to adhere to the facts and to tell a story of the life of Gracia Mendes-Nasi, which will be an accurate image of her life, or rather of what they might have been like. However, this book is a fictional work.

As the 16<sup>th</sup> century is in a sense trapped between general interest in the Renaissance of the century which preceded it, and the scientific revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century which followed it, I have decided to add at the end of the book – for the benefit of those who might be interested in it – several notes regarding some historical issues.

Naomi Keren

A Letter from the Mendes house, Lisbon,  
To Dona Violanta, wife of Don Manuel  
Fernandez, Sunday, September 19<sup>th</sup>,  
MDXXXVII the year of Our Lord the  
Savior (1537)

My dear Violanta,

By the time you would have read this letter, if I were to send it at all, I will no longer be here. I am leaving our beloved land of birth, Portugal, never again to return. My petrified legs will carry me up the ramp to board the caravel which is to take me to my shores of safety. I do not yet know if I am eventually to gather up the courage to do what I want to do most before my departure – that is to clarify to you of all people, so that you will understand the meaning of the decade that has now passed between us. The meaning of the wall I have erected between us, against my own will. But to send this letter to you, meaning to entrust it with a servant to carry it to you, whilst I don't know if I may trust his loyalty, just a moment before my feet will be detached from the solid and fare ground of Lisbon, could prove to be a most dangerous, unwise and illogical act. If I were to do so, I will be entrusting you with my secret, with the safety of my future and my life, and not those alone, but those of my family as well. Am I capable of that? I do not know yet...

And even so, would you be able to comprehend? It is of great importance for me to be able to explain to you, so that you would know, so that you would understand. You might even find it in yourself to forgive me... but the cost, the cost might be enormous, perhaps too costly to bear... I want to trust you, but then I am so afraid...

If you could have seen me right now, my dear Violanta, you would not have recognized your best friend from past times – a curly girl, mischievous and spoiled, noble and elaborately dressed – I assure you, you would not have believed your eyes! I am sited now all by myself on the cold floor of the dark exedra, my back hunched against its wall like the most foul of slaves. I am wrapped by the blue thick wool scarf you knitted for me once, when we were still both in our innocent youth. I am writing to you on my knees (please, do forgive me for the ink stains) a letter I might never send.

I am surrounded by the worst of chaos which I myself have created, my various fancy dresses and the best of my garments are spread all over, the fine silk fabric, my starched underwear, my whale bone expensive corset and the indulging mole fur – everything that by midnight was packed in impeccable order, on which my servants labored for two whole days, in the huge travelling boxes, now standing wide open in front of me, with their heavy spiral iron keys hanging out, awaiting impatiently to fulfill their purpose. For the last few hours I have been searching with desperate fingers inside the boxes, amongst the fabrics and the dresses. Only just now have I found that which I was looking for, and have calmed down from the horrifying fear that grasped me yesterday, after putting little Anna to sleep. I was terrified that my precious piece of cotton was left behind, was it? Was it lost? Was it forgotten and not packed? Do you remember it, Violanta? The white lace cotton? My dear mother's cotton nightgown? The one I made her for her birthday? The one that on its left lapel, close to where the heart is, you helped me sew with your tiny and hardworking fingers the purple campanula and the yellow chrysanthemum betwixt the dark green grass? After long hours in which I have been searching in the boxes in the cold darkness of the exedra, I am now finally holding it safely in my hands, close to my skin. I am cradling it, the tips of my fingers caressing the lines of the soft embroidery, trying in the darkness to guess the shapes of the flowers and their colors by their touch. I do not know what I would have done had I not found it, the nightgown. I could not have left this place without it. Imagine, Violanta, that even now, after a whole decade has past since that horrible night, I cannot fall asleep in my bed before my fingers feel the coarse, comforting touch of the embroidered flowers, between the silk white pillows of my bed. Apart of Rachella, my nanny, I have not told this secret to anyone, ever. Yes, I hold such secrets as well, Violanta. Imagine, that even my dear Francesco, who slept by my side for six years, died without ever knowing it.

My entire body is aching now. The chill coming from the floor and the walls is sending shivers down my spine. Autumn came early this year, and if its cold chill is the foreteller of the coming winter, it is to be an exceptionally dreadful one. The big burning fireplace has but a few blazing coals left. Even the many goat milk candles, which good old Pedro took the trouble to light on the exedra's wall many hours ago, before he laid himself to sleep, while resting a worried look upon me, understanding that tonight, too, his Lady will spend sleeplessly – are now nearly all extinguished. Only two-three of them are left twisting in their death rattles upon the wall. It appears

to me that dawn is about to break soon, though it is doubtful whether the soft, bright light will be able to shine through the thick mist that for two weeks now has been laying upon the roofs of Lisbon and upon the souls of its inhabitants. Tonight the pouring rain has not ceased to strike upon the dark glass window panels. From the alleys of the port's market and the yards of the nearby houses rises the sound of the gates and doors that have not been fortified in advance, clashing against one another as if they were quarrelling fiercely. I cannot tell the exact hour. The other noises must have overcome the tin rattle sound of the blind man who wanders around in the dark alleys at nights to tell the turning hours. The last I heard this tin rattle was when I kissed little Anna in her bed a goodnight kiss after we kneeled together, the little one and myself, and prayed to good Santa Ester to guard ourselves and our loved ones (by "loved ones" I include you too, my dear Violanta, as I have always done).

It appears to me that dawn is managing to break through the claws of the dark night. Though still only darkness reflects from the windows, the sound of people shouting, of a squeak of something being dragged emerges – the first sound of the waking harbor, the voice of the nearby Tejo port stevedores, beginning to gather at the docks, having their labor day begin. No sound is as pleasant to my ear as that of Tejo's port waking up to a new day. I recall that even as a little girl, the first thing I used to do as I woke up in the morning was to run up to the window in my room, which overlooked the busy port and the square domes of the new fort that was being erected in its entrance, the tower, Belém meaning, Bethlehem, as a token of gratitude to the bold sailor Vasco de Gama who dared break through the boundaries of the unknown, encircled the black continent from its south, and discovered for our beloved King the desirous sailing route to the spice treasures of the Indian islands. How I rushed back then, in my childhood, to swallow with my small eyes, still entangled with sleep, the sight of the harbor. Though I was forbidden to do so, I would open wide the shut windows and breath in all its smells... the smell of the salty Tejo waters, the smell of the fish, those dead and those alive, the smell of the far sea and that of the intoxicating mix scents of the different spices – pepper grains, clove, cinnamon buns, Muscat nuts, Jensen roots and Aniseed stars – that rose from the big sackcloth, which then appeared to me as gigantic monsters moving here and there by themselves, sluggishly slow (for my short stature did not allow me yet to notice the stevedore's feet running around underneath them). I would then fill my small lunges with the spicy smell of the fresh lacquer that was rubbed on the wooden posts of the royal Portuguese

"Perfume Fleet" - the ships that one after another discovered new and marvelous sailing routes to the far reaches of the world. I would imagine in my mind those far away countries whose streets are paved with gold and good stones, and upon them birdous weird beasts and strange creatures walk jauntily (who, were it not for their dark skin, would have probably looked like giant humans, descended from the gods), naked as the day they were born, expressing hope with a swing of the pelvis – these same countries, about which I loved so much to read in the decoratively bounded books of my father, the weird and fresh smell of the print rising from their quarto pages. Have I read about those creatures in *Il Milione*, the fascinating travel journal of the Venetian Marco Polo on the Silk Road? Or whether I heard about them from my father who liked to translate to me sections of a hand written embroidered and expensive scroll, of "Benjamin's travels" written by 'the Jew of Tudela'? Or is it not that my memory is mixing the stories from these two magnificent books with one another? That girl who I was back then could not have even dreamt that one day will come and she herself, meaning me, myself, will become the wife of the dignified man who was thought to be as rich as Korach - the owner of all these ships with shiny long masts and white sails, found in abundance along the docks of the Tejo port, surrounded by stevedores who labor endlessly on unloading their aromatic cargo and loading them with others, the man who holds the royal Portuguese concession over the trade of eastern spices, that which the common folks call "The Royal Perfume Fleet".

My dear Violanta, I am having difficulties writing, for above the sound of the storm striking upon the roofs and windows now emerges the sound of shouting, though dim and afar, rhythmic and steady. Obviously this is the voice of the commander of the rowing black slaves, the man who is navigating the first steps of one of the ships scheduled to sail this morning – who knows where? To Antwerp? To Venice? To the far away Maluku Islands in the Indian Ocean? The exquisite Spice Islands, discovered by, Magellan, the Portuguese sailor. I will miss these smells, these sights, my dear Tejo, upon whose banks I was born and raised. How will I be able to live without ever again breathing in its smells? How will I be able to live so far away from your companionship, Violanta? From your wisdom and calmness? From your profound and innocent faith in me?

A wall of secrets and lies was erected between us on that horrible night, a decade ago - the night of my mother's death. I know well how much it had wounded your heart

but it was not my fault, my dear Violanta, for you were my dearest friend of all, my soul mate. You must have not understood then. For how could you? Hundreds of years, and thousands of lives and deaths of people, which neither you nor I ever knew or heard of, suddenly separated us that night. Nevertheless, you did not turn your back on me then. You did not hold grudge against me, even though you did not understand. Yes, we continued being best friends, though we both knew that something was cracked, something was broken. There was so much I had to hide from you since that night. Oh, I wish I could erase the happenings of that night. You must have thought, as others did, that it was the death of my mother Philippa that changed me that night. But now, as I leave Lisbon never to be back, I wish to confess to you, my dear Violanta, and tell you the truth. Yes, Violanta, the death of my mother was difficult for me. Too much to bear. And yet losing her was not the only thing that changed in my life on that horrible night.

Ah, yet another squeak emerges from the port, disrupting my line of thought. Do you still remember, dear Violanta, those afternoon hours we spent together, just before this horrible night, a decade ago, started? How we sat on the stone bench in the inner court of my parents' house, under the lemon tree? I can still smell the intoxicating smell of its white blossom. Spring was at its peak then. We were embroidering, perhaps knitting – I cannot remember, but I do remember well enough how my finger got pricked by the needle, and you licked my blood. And I also remember how we were whispering excitedly about the bride of our young king. Fortunately, your nanny preferred the company of the other nannies, or rather, that of the servants in the kitchen (I recall she was bounded to one of the horse groomers, whose name I might have forgotten, but not his pockmarked face – several months later he was caught stealing from our granary, and my father fired him) and left us under the supervision of my Rachella, who with great wisdom left us alone to play for a while and sat at some distance. We talked about the rumors regarding the crazy love of Juana "La Loca", the king's bride's mother – Caesar Carlos the 5<sup>th</sup> mother as well, towards her husband Philippe "the hansom" of Burgundy, heir to the Habsburg's thrown. We talked about how he, surrounded by his abundance of lovers, who crumbled at the sight of his soft, long curls, humiliated his princely wife in public time again and again, and locked her in her chamber, and how, upon his death in prime of life, the young and mournful woman refused to depart from his dead body, and roamed all over the Iberian peninsula with the casket of the remains of her beloved Philippe "the

hansom", opening it at nights and wrapping herself with his soft long curls which continued – as rumors had it saying - to grow, in dim candlelight ceremonies.

Oh, my dear Violanta, please forgive me, for the ink in my inkstand is dwindling, I must find some fresh ink somewhere...

Here, I am back, it is much better now. It is fortunate that yesterday night I saw my young brother in law Gonsalo bringing in new ink jars, which arrived in one of our ships, and so I knew where to find it, though of course I spilled some of the ink as I opened the jar, for I am not well trained in doing so, as it is usually Pedro who takes to such tasks. And here, now, ink stains are everywhere, but I shall not be bothered by that. Yes, we were so amused, you and me, by the stories about this unfortunate and desperate princess – two girls, too young to understand. Now she is being kept, the poor woman, for many years, as far as I can remember, in a narrow jail cell, as has been ordered by her own son, the almighty king of the world – the Caesar. But, my dear Violanta, let us go back to that night, a decade ago. I must remove this burden off my chest, before I depart, must finally remove this pain of betraying you, Violanta, my one and best friend ever, the betrayal of all the lies that were weaved between us all these years until it became a web entangling me all over. I must tell the truth...

I cannot recall the exact time that night the aching shrieks of my mother began to emerge from the upper floor. All of a sudden she went into early labor, much too early. Was it before we began to eat our dinner accompanied by our nannies, or some time afterwards? I remember well how when the first shrieks emerged we ran to my mother's chamber, you and me, while Rachella was following us ordering us to return immediately. Needless to say, we did not comply. It seemed as if in that moment, the entire household rushed into my mother's chamber. As to ourselves, the young maidens, we were expelled from the chamber immediately. But they could not expel from our ears my mother's shrieks. It was too much to bear. They echoed throughout the house, slotting the window glasses and scorching its walls. I remember how I cried as each of her shrieks sliced through my body, and how you pulled me together, hugged me with your skinny arms, trying in vain to protect me from that which was happening all around me, from reality. It all happened so fast. They sent to the village for the midwife, but she was too late to arrive. Servants entered the chamber, rushed out and then hurried back in, each time the pile of bloody sheets piling higher in their arms. She sounded like a wounded wild beast, my mother. I can still hear her shrieks

pounding in my mind. In all that tumult that was happening all around the house you found a shelter for us in the salty malodorous storeroom, behind the servants' kitchen, our favorite hide & seek place. But this time it turned out to be a big mistake. Through the cracks of the storeroom's doors a new horror was revealed to our virgin ears – the terrified servants were tempestuously exchanging whispered secrets. They talked of "The Monster". "The Monster", that is tearing my mother apart from within, her body struggling in vain to emit it. True – they said –the body is a baby's body! But the face?! The face is that of a foul drooling wolf, a face covered with boils! A monster, how else could you call it?! They all agreed it was no wonder! They all knew this would happen, it was obvious, so they agreed upon, gathered horrified behind the storeroom's doors, trying to belittle as possible the noise of their existence, considering the drama that was unfolding at those moments in the upper floor, revolving around the wooden-carved canopy bed of my mother. "No wonder this had happened, this is what always happens under such circumstances", they said, "of course this disaster befell upon her, upon our Dona Philippa, our beloved Spanish Lady of the house, because of that one time in which a wolf invaded the backyard of the house while the Lady was there, and even though Pedro (who was then still a young man, his hunchback yet to be stall) was able to shout to the Lady not to turn her face, not to look upon the beast's face! But she turned to look at it, and then, then it happened, the gaze of the our dear Spanish pregnant Lady (my mother!), encountered the evil look in the eyes of the drooling wolf, amongst whose bald spots and filthy dwindling leftover fur gaped the open wounds, flowing with pus, and that demon, that horrific demon, was forever embedded upon the face of the new life which were being created and carried in her womb..."

I wanted to scream. I'm not sure I remember well, but I think I might have even vomited. I was so terrified back there, in the salty storeroom, by all we have heard on the lower floor, and by the screams that went on and on ceaselessly on the upper floor. There, in the darkness of the closet, amongst the stench of the hanging salty meat chunks, standing below the greasy dripping coming from the paper wrapped dead fish, I felt myself leaking away. Erased. Lifeless. Perhaps I even fainted, I do not know. I must have paled, very much so. I remember you caressed me and gently dried my tears which I did not feel at all how they curved along my face, stalling for a little while on the edges of my lips, and then dropping on my mother's white nightgown, the one with the embroidery of the purple campanula and the yellow

chrysanthemum betwixt the dark green grass, which we have once embroidered together. Suddenly I noticed I was holding it crumpled, very tightly, my fingers fastened together painfully. How did it get there? Perhaps, without noticing it, I pulled it from the edge of my mother's bed right before we were expelled from her chamber? Who was the one to find us hiding in the storeroom, I cannot recall. Neither who, nor when. You were taken away from the tumult – tore apart from my arms, as I was raging and squeaking like a chicken being butchered – and were sent hastily away from the house accompanied by your nanny. As for what happened next, oh, you do not know a thing about that. But now, the time for me to tell you - has come.

Later that night, my father sent for me. I found myself standing miserable and all covered with tears in front of the tall and gloomy gazed person that was my father. The dark and heavy wooden doors of his chamber were shut heavily behind me. He asked me if I have comprehended that which has just now happened. I was dumbstruck, but made a great effort to nod. He demanded I respond with the words of humans and not by motions of beasts. I froze. I could not understand how he could be so sever at a time like that, while my mother's faint grunting were still emerging, her shrieks dimming, as her body was struggling to emit the monster and escape the claws of death. I tried to reply with my shaky weak voice, but then, suddenly, I was filled with courage I didn't even know until then existed in me, and hurled at him the question which had been causing me misery ever since things went wrong that night – has a priest been sent for? Why isn't he here yet?! At first he did not reply, but looked at me with a stern gaze, and then he said in a low but definite voice: "No! and neither will one be sent for!", then he mumbled in a voice that appeared for a moment to be cracking, "Anyhow, not now, not before she is dead... perhaps later... so that no one would be able to say... to accuse...". Did my ears hear correctly?! I remember feeling pain all over my body instantly. How was this possible? You, Violanta, must surely remember as well as I do the threatening sermon on Sunday Mass in the cathedral from the stern bishop, the one always stood with ascending stature and a pointy nose behind the pulpit, wrapped in a heavy scarlet mantle, embroidered with gold, his hurled voice echoing across the vaults of the white stone in the inner huge and graceful space of the Lisbon cathedral. For he used to emphasize to his listeners, with graphic detail, the tormenting afterlife of the impure souls in the purgatory, the horrible torments of Tantalus they will experience over and over again, forever, and each time anew, in the fires of hell. Such would be my poor mother's fate unless a

priest will be immediately rushed for in order to perform the redeeming last sacrament! How did my father dare deprive my beloved mother of the holy sacrament? How could he be so cruel? Deprive her of her last confession? And if it is to be deprived of her, how would her miserable soul and aching body – after being borne by Charon, the sailor of death, his eyes as black as coal, in his ship to the land of the dead in exchange for a golden coin to be placed, as customary, under her tongue – be saved from the consuming fiery hell which devours the sinners, if she is not to be pure? And how could she be pure of all sin without being given the last sacrament? How would she be able to enter the gates of heaven, undoubtedly the rightful place for my beloved mother, if a priest is not sent for before it is too late? But my father's eyes remained sealed and stern. If he felt grief or pain, it did not show on him, and it did not soften his rage. By a nod he ordered me to sit in the chair in front of him, then he went to the big doors, checked no servants were ear dropping behind them, pulled out of his pocket the long chain that is frequently hanging on his neck, pulled off of it an iron lock that seemed big and heavy and locked the doors. Then, and only then, he sat heavily in his armchair. That night was the longest night of my life, Violanta. A night which in many senses has been going on ever since, devouring me into it. Everything I knew until then about myself, about my family, my life, everything I ever believed in – was torn apart into pieces that night. Ever since then I was not allowed to be myself anymore, the same Beatrice as you knew me. From then on I was forced to erase myself even from myself, to be different, to think differently, to believe differently, even to be referred to inside myself by a different name – Gracia, or rather Hana, in the tongue of the ancient Jews, but simultaneously remain outwardly the same Beatrice that you and all the others around us knew. Will you ever be able, my dear Violanta, to understand me? To guess the meaning of this terrible form of being in a double life? A life under masks? Of this ceaseless disguising? Living under the shadow of a day-to-day lie, whilst not being able to share with others what you really are, not even with those most close to your heart, such as you yourself, Violanta? Can you imagine the immense mental strain it involves?

As the time went on that night, as my father's story deepened, I became more and more shriveled and shrink in the chair in front of him. I tried to ignore his words. To dissipate. All I wanted was to be away from my father, to be with my mother. To curl up in her warm bosom, to hide betwixt her soft, caressing, comforting fingers from

the words that were being hurled at me. Above all, I did not want to listen to what he had to say. I hated him. I never loved him, but now, on that night, I really hated him. But he went on and on, telling the story he wanted to tell – as if to himself, as if I wasn't even there. Not even once did he raise his eyes to look into mine. He just talked and talked all night, continually. By the time he was finished, a new day had begun. A day when my mother was no longer amongst the living, and neither was the Beatrice which you knew, which I myself knew. Inside I was already a different person, a completely different person. Hurt, shocked, angry and bitter. At once I was thrown into a life I did not desire. A life that was forced upon me. I hated it, I hated my father, and I hated myself. The house had already fallen into silence by then, and the sounds of my mother's dying were no longer to be heard.

The story told to me by my sealed faced father that night began a long long time ago, somewhere in the northern part of the kingdom of Aragon, in the wild mountain landscape of the Pyrenees, in Luna – The city where my great grandparents were born, and whence from, as I was then hearing for the first time in my life (though it was of no interest to me at the time), came my father's name, Elvaro de Luna. But perhaps I am mistaken, perhaps the story begins someplace else – here, in Lisbon, in the court of King João III, only a year or two earlier, before the night of my mother's death. This story is about a small dark man called David Ha Reubeni. I suppose, Violanta, you have no idea who that person is. I had no idea neither up until that moment, and I wish it were to have stayed that way. This David Ha Reubeni was one of those hundreds and perhaps thousands persons, whose faith, life and death are the abyss that separates between who I was, Beatrice de Luna, the innocent girl of the year 1527, and who I am today, at 1537, only pretending to still be Beatrice de Luna, who is known as the widow of Don Francesco Mendes. This is the abyss that also separates from within between me and you, Violanta. This Ha Reubeni, so I was told by my father that night, was a brown skinned, small statured and thin peculiar man, who spoke in a bizarre tongue and said he had come from beyond the mountains of Kush. He arrived in 1525 here in Lisbon, claiming to be the son of King Solomon and the younger brother of King Joseph, kings of Hebrew kingdom, heirs to the biblical tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of the Menashe. This kingdom, he said, according to his translator, lies in a far away land, at the top of a high mountain whose air is pure and clean, which is surrounded by seven wells with waters as sweet as honey, a two days walking distance from another city named Medina. This kingdom holds an army of

300,000 strong brave soldiers, which he himself commands.. The gaunt prince arrived at Lisbon from Rome, holding a warm recommendation letter, sealed with the purple seal of The Holy Pope, addressed to His Royal Highness King João III. Behind the brown skinned prince trailed an old servant, who, were he not deaf, would answer to the name "Old Solomon Prato". He held in his distorted hand a big white silk flag, upon which were embroidered the ten commandments in golden threads, the handwork and generous donation of a Dona Bienvenida Abarbanel, a woman of a distinguished Jewish Spanish origin. She, my father stretched with an unconcealed pride which I could not understand at the time, was the niece and daughter in law of Don Isaac Abarbanel, the royal treasurer and close consultant to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, "The Catholic Kings" who refused in the year of 1492 – at the time when Jews were forced to choose between conversion to Christianity or deportation – to the plead of the kings for his conversion and staying at their side. Despite his age, eighty years old, he preferred to embark on a caravel, and as the head of his family and of his exiled people left the Iberian Peninsula by sea, never to return. He and his family settled down in Italy, in the Spanish kingdom of Naples. That lady, Dona Bienvenida Abarbanel, as my father told me, is today one of the richest and most influential woman in the kingdom of Naples, and is associated with the royal court. She is also renowned for her wisdom, beauty and good manners.

A horrible shriek from the upper floor, from my mother's chamber, terrified the entire house and brought me back to the solid ground of reality – how does all this relate to me? Why does my father insist, as my mother is agonizing up there, while he should be at her side, not to send for a priest, not to do something! Anything?! Why does he insist on telling me now such weird stories of a foreign and bizarre prince holding a flag, and of a Hebrew matron with association to the royal Spanish court in Italy? What do I care about them? Now, of all times...? With God as my witness all my wishes at that time were to get up and run, run to my mother. But the fear of my father was apparently stronger. Paralyzing. I did not dare to move in my sit, not the least bit. And besides, what exactly are the Hebrews? The Jews? As far as I knew these were not but wicked people who lived once, a long time ago, and spited our lord the savior. The people who mocked his sermons, defiled him and were the cause of his horrible crucifixion!!! In Lisbon there were no such people, as to the best of my knowledge. Apart from the sacred books, I heard this word only in the bishops' sermons, when he used to enjoin it with the scornful nickname "Marrani", those filthy and hypocrite

pigs! You must remember as I do his furious sermons at Sunday Mass, in which he used to warn his flock, meaning us, of the hypocrisy of the Marrani, "The newly converted Christians", the Neofiti. With his loud voice he told us that they are nothing but Jiudaizzanti, meaning, they are nothing but Christians on the outward, but Jews on the concealed inward, and all their appearance as good and honest Christians is nothing but a mask – may God save us from their wickedness! Several times they would return, warn and repeat to us, as they were teaching us our prayers, the Carmelite nuns of the nearby abbey, that if ever we were to find out about a neighbor or a visitor, let alone a family member, who practices the customs of the Jews, such as changing their underwear on Friday, or whether, may God forbid, are refraining during Mass at church from looking at the icon of our lord savior, his blood flowing from his wounded arms, and were not appearing to be praying whole heartedly – we must inform such cases to the priest at confession, immediately. All that time, while my father's voice was striking my temples, I was outraged by his words. My father must be losing his senses. So I was convinced at the time, for no other explanation was plausible. He did not even notice me at all. Only his violent, petrifying gaze stared at me every once in a while. He kept on and on about that little prince David, and his Hebrew army. How he was welcomed with great honor and splendor at our King João's court, and how he asked of his highness, in the name of his brother and King Joseph, to be majestically kind and to bestow their kingdom with eight ships equipped with cannons and guns, and servants too, so that they could teach his soldiers how to use these weapons. And so, my father's story unfolded, prince David stayed on in Lisbon, while the royal court was pondering whether the dark skinned Hebrew prince is the long time awaited emissary from the Christian kingdom of the aged Queen Helena and Presbyter Johan of the far away barbarian land of Africa, whose arrival was expected for several years? or whether this man was merely mentally ill (an option which they were inclined to favor, but were also struggling to face due to the warm recommendation of his holiness, the Papa, the representative of saint Pateros upon the earth, whose terror upon King João was exceptionally felt)? The mere fact of the stay, even it being temporary, of a member of the despised and humiliated Jewish faith on the soil of Portugal, regardless of him being a prince, was a thing unconceivable! For since the royal, publicly compelled conversion at Rossio Square in 1497, the conversion of hundreds and thousands of Jews, there were no, nor could there have been, anymore Jews in Portugal, much like in the royal lands of the

Catholic Kingdoms of Castil and Aragon, where since already five years ago no Jews were allowed to be. If so, the stay of the Jewish prince David in Lisbon in the autumn of 1525 was allowed solely by the power of the protection of his holiness, Papa Clemens the VII of the house of Medici, which was bestowed upon him for an unknown reason. On that horrible night I learnt from my father that the majority of the Marrani, "The newly converted Christians", came to the land of Portugal merely five years earlier, when they were deported from Castile and Aragon due to their insistence on adhering to their Judaism, and after they were granted a special permission by the King Manuel "the lucky one", the deceased father of King João III, to settle in the land of Portugal with a promise to be protected as Jews by the king himself in exchange one hundred Cruzardos per household – an imaginary sum that only about six hundred families could have afforded to pay. The Portuguese public conversion of 1497 was an act of fraud: the Jews were told to gather at the square and wait for ships that the king had promised to provide for them, since he could no longer let them stay in his kingdom as Jews, as he was now to marry the rich daughter of the Spanish Catholic Kings, Ferdinand & Isabella. And so they gathered in the square and waited in silence and great fear, whilst being squeezed with no water nor food for a whole three days and nights, the king's guards preventing them from escaping. Suddenly, on the forth day. the windows of the second floor of Palácio dos Estaus, its heavy buildings surrounding the Rossio Square, were opened wide and a dozen priests standing in the windows poured holy water on the trapped crowd heads, while mumbling Latin words of prayer, thus baptizing the immense crowd against its will.

As I am writing you now my father's dark story, I am reminded of that square when we were both young. Do you remember the times when my nanny, Rachella, my, used to take us, with my little sister, Brianda, to the square to watch the glorious religious parades or the royal animal circuses so adored by King João III, who enjoyed showing off his collection of tigresses, elephants, parrots or displaying publicly his newest acquisitions of black slaves which were added recently to his royal collection of bizarre animals he liked to gather from the different parts of the globe, and to boast about its being even more glorifying than that of the Pope.

That forced baptism in Rossio Square, explained my father, was the result of a hasty decision made by King Manuel "the lucky", who wished to marry the Infanata Isabella, The bride's parents terms for the desirous marriage were the conversion of

the Jews of the kingdom of Portugal, or at least their deportation. Though the king did consider deportation, as the one made by Ferdinand and Isabella themselves in their kingdoms of Kastil and Aragon, he was convinced at the last moment by his advisors that by doing so he will forever lose the fresh blood (however malodorous it may be) that was integrated into his kingdom's economy, for ever since the six hundred Spanish Jewish families settled on his land with their wealth and their world wide trade associations and family connections – the king's empty treasury started to get filled.

Meanwhile – if to go back to the story of the dark skinned little Hebrew prince named David, the royal debate weighing his request for the grand military assistance lengthened considerably due to pitiful circumstances, which the prince himself was unaware of. (Ho, am I hearing the voice of Pedro the servant's dragging legs? Could he be up and awake already? Or is the hour already late?) Well, anyhow, meanwhile the Hebrew prince was dining at the tables of Lisbon's most distinguished families. Not in all of them, but in those that, though they were never referred to as such explicitly, but everyone suspected them of being – so said my father - "Marrani", newly converted Christians, practicing secretly Judaism. Though the little prince constantly insisted that he was a mere General in the kingdom of his brother Joseph, they, the newly converted Christians, insisted on regarding him as nothing less than a Messiah, son of David! The mere thought, my father insisted on explaining to me, though I cannot recall asking him to, that somewhere beyond the seas and the mountains exists a lost Hebrew kingdom yet to be found, where there are priests who can speak the ancient holy language, which keeps an army of proud Hebrew warriors, who put their weapons to rest on Saturdays and Jewish holidays due to the sacredness of God – was for the Marrani nothing less than a realization of the promised salvation at last, after all the bitter misery that was their share ever since the disaster of the 1492 deportation from Spain, their beloved native land, and the disastrous decree of the forced conversion by King Manuel "the lucky" at Rossio Square in Lisbon...