



A lesson on Dona Gracia Nasi for children aged 10-12 years

The Jews who stayed on in Spain and Portugal after the expulsion had no choice but to convert to Catholicism.

But....

They did not give up. Many continued to practice Judaism in secret while others returned to their Jewish faith whenever they escaped to other lands where it was safe to do so.

A few went on to become the most distinguished Jews of later centuries.

Here is the story of one of them. Her name was [Doña Gracia Nasi](#). She was a woman who felt so strongly about the agony of the converted Jews - who faced discrimination by the rest of the population even if they did not continue to practice their Jewish rituals - that she spent her life and her fortune helping them. It also shows how even 400 years ago certain women could rise above their domestic status to become successful business and community leaders. Her deeds were so outstanding that she was often compared to Queen Esther in the Bible.



Sephardic grandmothers like to tell this story to their granddaughters. Let's look in upon Estrella, a grandmother in Seattle, as she begins to tell the story to her 12-year old granddaughter, Sarah.

A DRAMATIC PRESENTATION



Select members of the class to read the parts of **Sarah** and the **grandmother**. Select two persons for each part by dividing the story between Act I and Act II. The readers should stand facing the class, looking towards one another from time to time, as appropriate.

ACT I

The Grandma: Today I'm going to tell you the story of a very special lady who had a warm heart and a generous nature and who helped many Jews escape from persecution. She became one of the most important women in the history of the Jewish people.

Sarah: What was her name, grandma?

The Grandma: Her name was **Doña Gracia Nasi**. She was born in Portugal in 1510. Her mother and father had fled there to safety in 1492 at the time of the expulsion of the Jews from neighboring Spain. They had been community leaders in Spain and felt strongly about preserving their Jewish heritage and faith. But Portugal did not prove to be as hospitable as they expected. Soon after her parents arrived, the Portuguese forced them all to convert to Catholicism. As such they were called *conversos*.

Sarah: So did they stop being Jewish one day and start being Catholic the next?

The Grandma: Well, yes and no. They were not allowed to light candles on a Friday night or say Jewish prayers. They had to go to Mass on Sunday so people would think they were good Catholics. But many of them continued their Jewish ways secretly at home anyhow. Many of them, like Doña Gracia's parents, even wanted their daughter to marry someone from a family like their own.

Marriages back then were normally arranged. When Doña Gracia was 18 years old she was chosen to be the bride of a distant relative who had become the richest spice merchant in Lisbon. His name was **Francisco Mendes**.

Francisco ran a big banking house with his brother **Diogo**. They bought and sold precious goods from the Far East. Francisco was based in Lisbon while his brother had gone to Antwerp in the north of Europe where they could more easily sell their spices and goods for a large profit.

Unfortunately Francisco died only eight years after the wedding. He left half his fortune to Doña Gracia and the other half to their baby daughter, **Anna**. The king of Portugal wanted the money for himself. So right away he tried to snatch Anna from her mother. Doña Gracia had no choice but to flee to Antwerp with her baby daughter. She took along her sister **Brianda** and a nephew called **Joseph**. They packed all their treasures from the family house in Lisbon in huge trunks.

They traveled on a special ship sent by **Diogo**, sailing first to England and then onto Antwerp. It was considered the safest route.



Sarah: Were they sad to leave Lisbon?

The Grandma: They must have been. Travel was dangerous in those days. But Doña Gracia was clever enough, even at 27 years old, to know this was the right move. She was never afraid to take action as soon as danger faced her. She never sat back and complained that nothing could be done. That was the hallmark of her character and courage.



But we must move on with the story. The family business in Antwerp grew and grew. Diogo Mendes became known as the “Spice King of Europe.” His doctor described him as “the wealthiest merchant of the age.” This made Doña Gracia wealthy, too, since they were now working as partners. She showed a real talent for business, something unusual for a woman at that time. Meanwhile Diogo married Doña Gracia’s younger sister, Brianda.

Sarah: Were they able to practice their Jewish religion openly, now they were in Antwerp?

The Grandma: No, not openly. Antwerp was in a Catholic country like Spain and Portugal. They had to be very careful. But they did manage to get permission from the Pope to hold services privately in their own home, instead of being forced to attend public Mass like everyone else. This way they could create services that were more Jewish than Catholic.

Meanwhile, back in Portugal, an Inquisition had been started like the one in Spain. It had begun arresting dozens of *conversos* and throwing them into dungeons. Doña Gracia and Diogo desperately wanted to help them escape. So they used their wealth and business agents to set up a sort of “underground railway.” This way they could help move these *conversos*, along with their money and belongings, to countries where they would be safer and could also practice their Jewish faith openly again. One of their secret agents in England was a cousin known as “The Tall Jew with One Eye.”

Sarah: Was he frightening to look at? How did he help the Jews escape?

The Grandma: His appearance may have been odd, but he was a very kind man. When the spice ships arrived from Portugal, he would go aboard and see if there were any *converso* on board. He would warn them if it were safe to go on because, from time to time, the authorities in Antwerp would arrest the incoming refugees. He helped them sell their property and then gave them local money in exchange.



Many of them were anxious to move onto Italy or the Ottoman Empire, where it was even safer even than Antwerp. So Doña Gracia and Diogo sent them from one secret agent to the next. They had to have special instructions. They were told which roads they could take and which ones had to be avoided; which inns were the safe and where they could obtain help and advice. The Mendes family helped them all the way.

Sarah: Were there any non-Jews that they could trust and who were kind and willing to help them?

The Grandma: That's a good question. Yes, there were. One of them was called **Daniel Bomberg**. He was a printer who lived in Venice. He was also an underground agent working for Doña Gracia and the business. He secretly received property sent by the Mendes family for the *conversos* who settled in Italy.

They had to do everything very discreetly because agents of the Inquisition were all over Europe looking for *conversos* who were trying to revert to Judaism. One time even Diogo himself was arrested on suspicion of practicing Jewish rites in secret and helping others return to their Jewish faith. But it was only for a few months.

He was so wealthy and so important to the business life of Antwerp that he was allowed to go free. Yet even this did not stop Diogo believing that the family had a mission to help those *conversos* who were not as rich and powerful as themselves. His brother, Francisco, had believed the same thing. And they passed this idea along to Doña Gracia. By saving the *conversos* they felt they were saving the Jewish people as *conversos* represented a large segment of the Jews living at that time.

ACT II (*remember... change actors*)

The Grandma: Five years after Doña Gracia arrived in Antwerp Diogo fell ill and died. He left the entire family fortune and business under her control-- not to his wife, Brianda, who was a sort of party girl and not very reliable – but to Doña Gracia. He had now worked with her long enough to know she was a brilliant businesswoman who also shared his sense of mission. She was soon in total control of the entire **House of Mendes**, one of the biggest banks in Europe. But behind the scenes Brianda was furious.

This move had instantly made Doña Gracia one of the wealthiest and most powerful women in Europe. She immediately expanded the underground railroad. But she had to leave Antwerp quite soon afterwards. King Charles V, the ruler of this part of Europe, had also wanted to steal the family fortune by arranging for her daughter to marry one of his favorites. Once again Doña Gracia refused. But by doing so she had no choice but to run away a second time.

She headed this time for Venice in the hope of taking a ship to the Ottoman Empire. But first she had to collect all the loans that the House of Mendes had outstanding in Europe. Otherwise the family fortune would have been lost.

So she rented a palace in the center of Venice, something the family was able to do so because they were still living outwardly living as Christians. Their house became a haven for refugees from Portugal passing through the city.



Sarah: Why didn't Doña Gracia want to live in the ghetto like the other Jews?

The Grandma: Because if she had publicly admitted that she was planning to return to Judaism she might have had her loans and other property confiscated. But this strategy only worked so long as nobody went to the authorities and actually told them.

Then trouble came from an unexpected quarter. Brianda – the sister who had married Diogo while they were still in Antwerp – resented the control that Doña Gracia had been given over Diogo’s money. Brianda wanted to stay in Italy. And she was terrified that Doña Gracia would leave her penniless or force her to go along.

Sarah: So what did Brianda do, grandma?

The Grandma: She demanded a half share in the family property. Doña Gracia refused. She said that she had been put in charge of the fortune as well as Brianda’s daughter. And they should *all* go to the Ottoman Empire. This way the fortune would be safe from greedy monarchs who were their enemy. Also, the money would allow them to continue their work on behalf of the *conversos*. Brianda flew into a rage.

She told the authorities that her sister was a secret Jew who was about to leave for enemy territory with her massive fortune (the Ottoman Turks were the enemies of the Venetians at the time and Venice feared anything that would help make the Ottomans even more rich and powerful). It was the only way Brianda could persuade the Venetians to force Doña Gracia to hand over her part of the family fortune.

Sarah: So did Doña Gracia have to give up most of her fortune... just because of Brianda?

The Grandma: No, Doña Gracia had one more card to play. One of her influential friends was **Moses Hamon**, the physician to the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. She managed to spread a story that she would give her daughter in marriage to Dr. Hamon’s son if he could persuade the Sultan to help her leave Venice with *all* the money. Of course, the Sultan was interested in the news that Doña Gracia and her great wealth would be coming into Istanbul to enrich his domain.

But it took a long time for messages to pass back and forth in those days. And Doña Gracia had no intention of giving up half her fortune to her sister in the meantime. So she ran away once again – this time to the nearby state of Ferrara. It was a place where Jews and *conversos* were safe. It also put her fortune beyond the reach of the Venetians. Meanwhile she could continue making arrangements to go on to Istanbul.

While she was there, Doña Gracia helped finance the printing of all sorts of important Jewish books. The most famous was a bible written in Judeo Spanish, so the *conversos* could understand it, as most had never had the chance to learn Hebrew. It was called the **Ferrara Bible** and it was dedicated to her.



During this time Doña Gracia decided to compromise with Brianda. She agreed to leave Brianda and Brianda’s daughter enough money so they could remain in Italy. Now she was ready for her move to Istanbul. When she got there she was welcomed like a Queen by all the refugees that she had helped over the years. She arrived in a state procession. There were four coaches with the ladies and their servants all expensively dressed, and an escort of forty armed men.

She moved into a beautiful house surrounded by a garden and was waited on by dozens of servants, some who had come with her all the way from Antwerp. It was rumored that she fed 80

poor Jewish people every day at her table. The Jewish people began calling her *La Señora* (Our Lady) out of respect. She provided the money to build synagogues and Jewish schools for them.

However, one year after she arrived, sad news reached Doña Gracia. In [Ancona](#), an Italian port city, group of about 40 *conversos* had been arrested and tortured. Twenty four had been burnt at the stake for having dared to practice Jewish rites in secret.



Doña Gracia was furious. She tried to get all of the Jewish traders who did business between [Ancona](#) and [Istanbul](#) to boycott the port of [Ancona](#).

The hope was that the city would soon face financial ruins. But sadly, her efforts did not succeed. The Jewish community could not agree that it would do any good. But she had shown that it was important to stand up to tyranny.

It was also her dream to start a modern settlement for the Jewish people in the Holy Land (Israel). In those days it was ruled by the same sultan; a man she knew well. So she persuaded him to allow her to begin to rebuild the ruined city of [Tiberias](#).

She wanted to bring in Jewish refugees from Europe. A mansion was prepared for her on the banks of a lake in [Tiberias](#). However, though nobody knows for sure, it is believed that she died before reaching her final destination. The colony did not survive.

Jews all over the world were filled with sadness when they heard that she had died. They prayed and gave thanks for all the wonderful work she had done and how she had made them feel proud to be Jews.

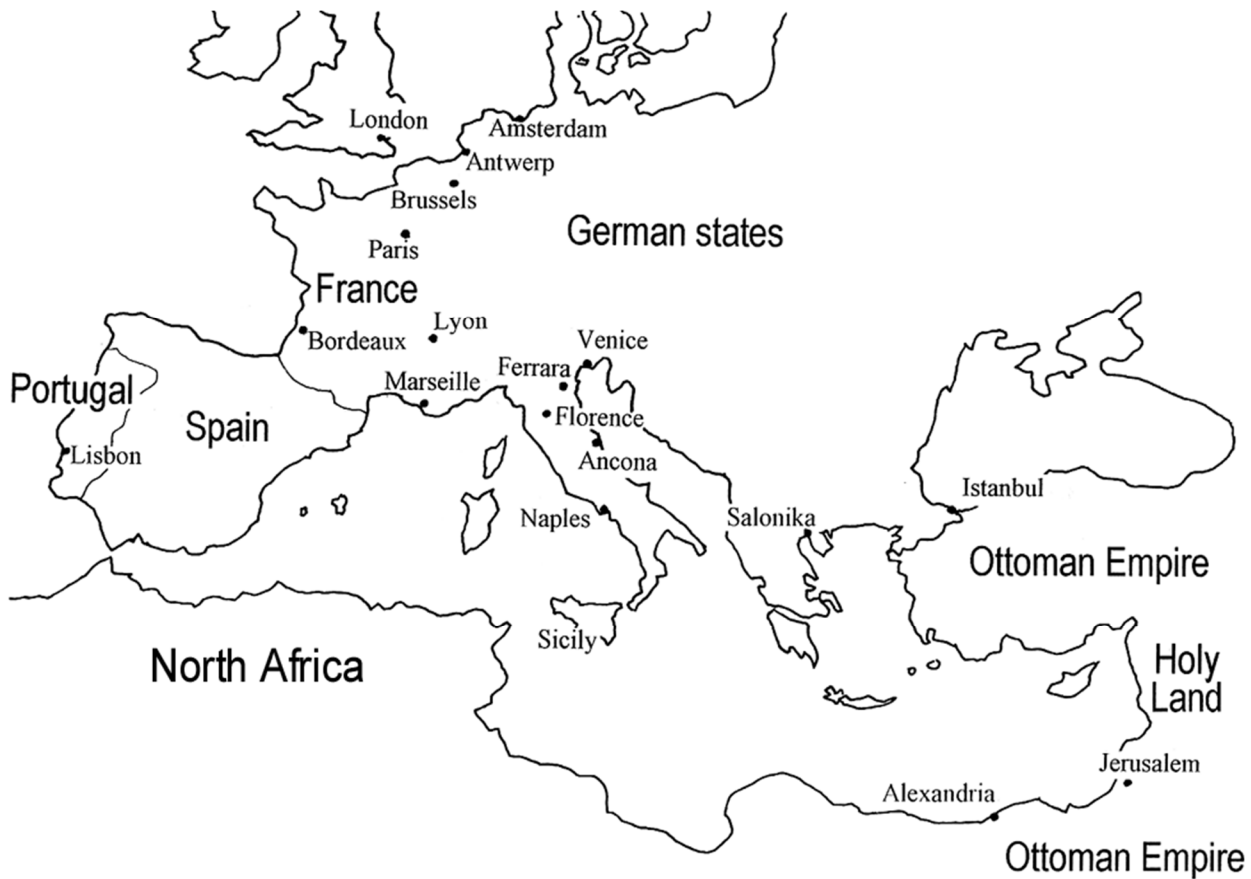
Task 1:

Make a list of the cities and countries where Doña Gracia lived.
Start with Lisbon in Portugal.

1. Lisbon, Portugal.
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Task 2:

Now, on the map on the following page, trace her journey using a sharp pencil.



Task 3: Questions

1. In Portugal, Doña Gracia's family had been forced to become Catholic, but in secret they were still Jewish. How did they give the impression they were good Catholics?

.....

2. (a) What was the name of the man Doña Gracia married and (b) what was his business?

(a)..... (b).....

3. Why did Doña Gracia go north after her husband died?

.....

4. How did their secret agent in London help the runaway *conversos*?

.....

5. Were there any non-Jews who helped the *conversos* escape?

6. (a) Why did Brianda lose her temper? (b) What did she do?
 (a)
 (b)
7. What was the name of the famous Bible dedicated to Doña Gracia?

8. What was Doña Gracia's reaction to the news of the burning of *conversos* in the Italian port city of Ancona?

Look at the portrait medal on the right! It is a likeness of Brianda's daughter (Doña Gracia's niece) when she was 18 years old and living in Ferrara in 1558. Does it surprise you? If so, why?



Courtesy: The Jewish Museum (NYC)

Task 4. Discuss as a class:

1. Why Doña Gracia is so important to Jewish history?
2. What personal qualities did she possess that made her into such a strong leader?
3. She may have known in advance that she might not succeed in all that she tried to do, but she made an attempt anyway? Was this a waste of time?
4. What sort of person was her sister? Have any members of the class ever felt the need to take revenge on a sibling for any reason? What happened?
5. Can you think of any examples of non-Jewish people helping the Jews today, perhaps from stories of the Holocaust?

OUT OF SPAIN

Contents of all books in the series

BOOK I: Ayer: Our Spanish Heritage

Five lessons covering the history of the Jews of Spain prior to the expulsions of 1492

Optional addition: a 12-minute teaching video starring Theodore Bikel

+Lesson 1. Who are the Sephardic Jews? An introduction including a 12-minute video.

- Lesson 2. The Great Invasion: The impact of the arrival of the Moors in Spain.
Lesson 3. Heroes of the Golden Age and Beyond: poets, songs, medicine and science.
*Lesson 4. Music in the Castles: birth of the Romanza and favorite instruments.
Lesson 5. Expulsion or Conversion: The Great Expulsion of 1492.
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- Lesson 1. Where are we going? ... And the Horrors on the Way.
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Lesson 3. Morocco
Lesson 4. Italy
Lesson 5. Dangerous Secrets: what happened to those who stayed behind
Lesson 6. A True Story: The amazing life of Doña Gracia Nasi.
Lesson 7. The Caribbean Trading Game: the Sephardic merchant networks.
Lesson 8. Arrival in the New World
Lesson 9. American Sephardim in Modern Times
-

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Seven lessons covering the customs, music, festivals and food of the Sephardic Jews

- *Lesson 1. The Legend of the Key.
Lesson 2. Similarities and Differences: Ashkenazi customs vs. Sephardic customs.
Lesson 3. Language Mixtures and Puzzles; the making of Judeo-Spanish language.
Lesson 4. Food glorious Food: the history and practice of Sephardic cooking.
*Lesson 5. A Sephardic Seder
*Lesson 6. A Crypto-Jewish Seder
*Lesson 7. A Sephardic Hanukkah

***A music CD is available (and recommended) to accompany certain activities in these lessons + Book I, lesson 1 is designed to be used with our DVD, "Ayer: Our Spanish Heritage"**

BOOK IV: Teacher's Notes and Resource Guide:

**An additional book covering all lessons to guide teachers through the series.
Includes a *Resource Guide*: lectures, field trips, videos and books for the family to share
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