

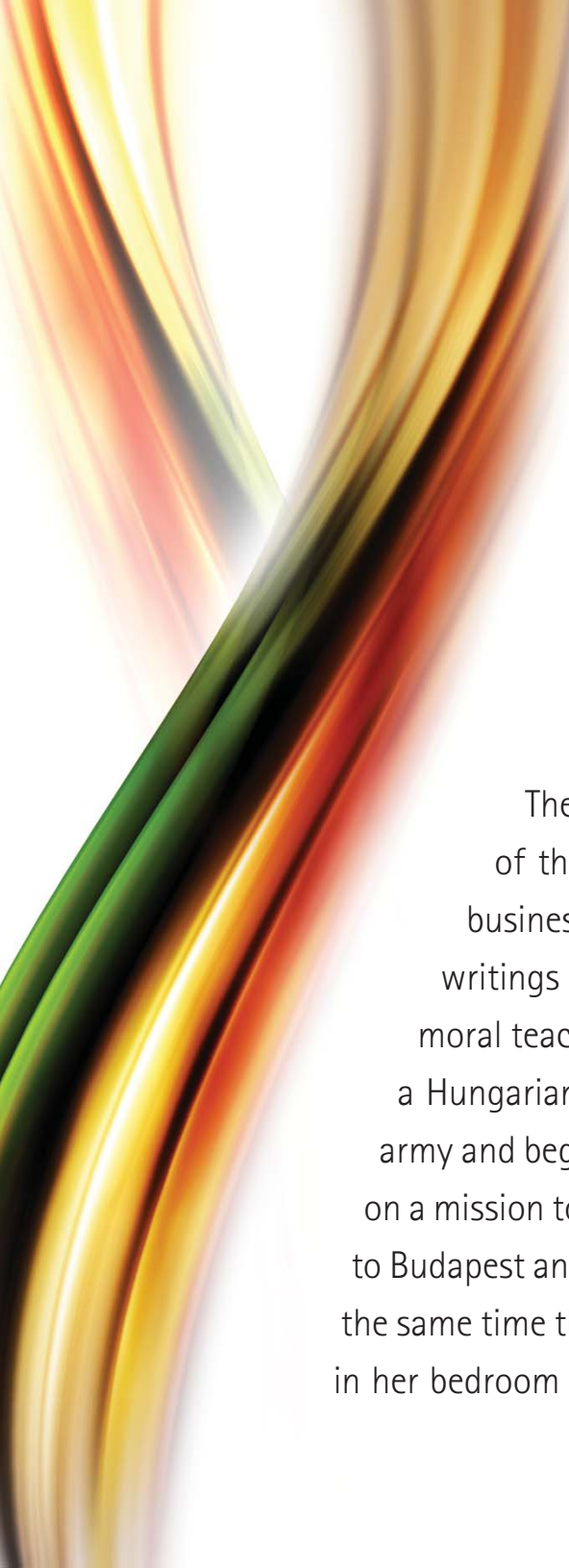
# *Extraordinary Jewish Women in History*

*Gracia Mendes Nasi*

*Gluckel von Hameln - Hannah Szenes*

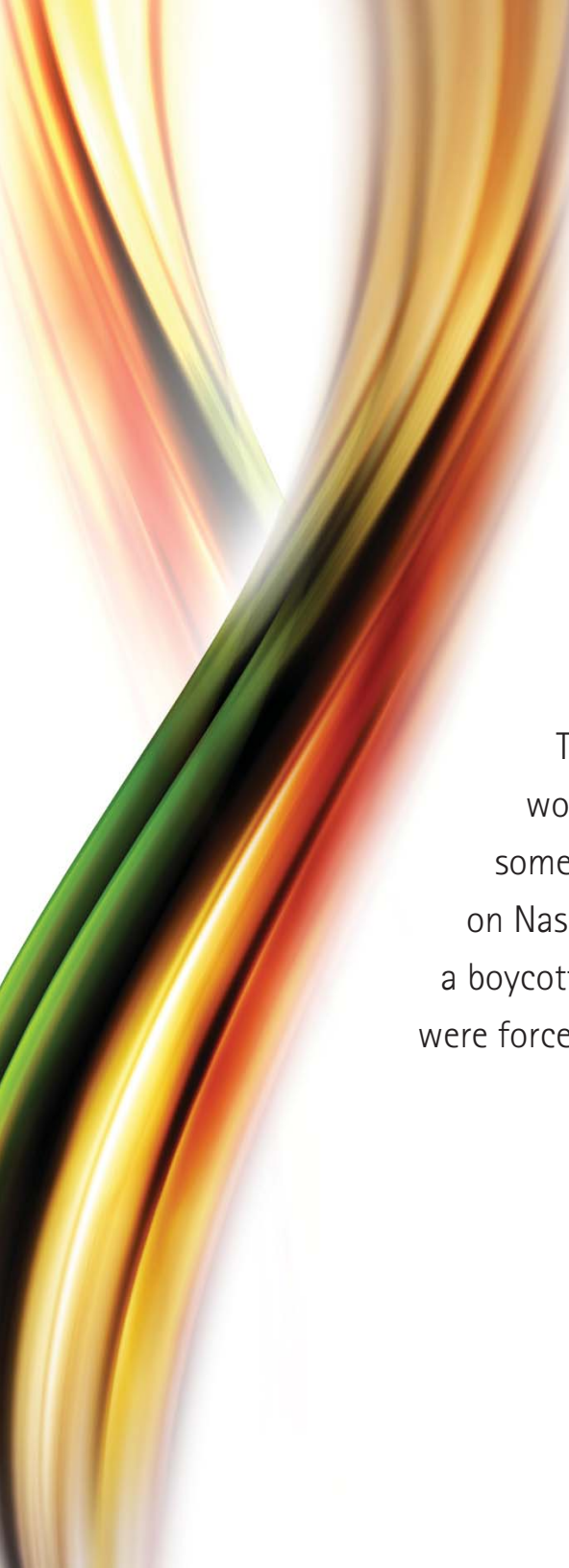
*Rita Levi-Montalcini*

By Sam Heller



**W**omen have had a profound effect on Jewish tradition. If it had not been for Eve, Genesis would be a dust-covered remainder in bookshops. Deborah was a fiery leader, whose skills could be used in the IDF, especially when it came to telling Barak what to do. And then there is Esther, the queen of Sushan, who knew how to twist Ahashueras around her finger to save her people. In this unit the lives of four Jewish women from later times whose deeds have brought honor to their culture. We begin with **Dona Gracia Mendes Nasi** (1510-1569) who took over the business of her deceased husband and established a far-flung business empire, but also boldly led an economic boycott of the Italian port of Ancona in reprisal to the burning at the stake of local Jews by the Papacy.

Then we go north to Germany where Gluckel von Hameln lived. This pious woman kept a diary of the financial and daily life of her family in Hamburg where her first husband enjoyed great business success. But her life took a turn for the worst when her second husband's failed. Her writings are a precious example of early Yiddish, her entries tell much about life at the time, and her moral teachings to her children are models of Jewish ethical thought. Hannah Szenes (1921-1944) was a Hungarian Jewess who immigrated to Palestine to work on a kibbutz. In 1943 she joined the British army and began training as a paratrooper. She, Yoel Palgi and Peretz Goldstein parachuted into Yugoslavia on a mission to save Hungarian Jews from the Germans. Caught by Hungarian border guards, she was taken to Budapest and tortured but refused to identify her compatriots. She was tried for treason and executed. At the same time that Hannah was in prison, Rita Levi-Montalcini (1909- ) was performing biology experiments in her bedroom in Italy. Not allowed to continue her studies in Italian universities because of her faith, she



traveled to America after World War II and became a world famous researcher after her discovery of nerve growth factor for which she won a Nobel Prize. So now we begin an exploration of the lives of four outstanding Jewish women and their roles in the history of our people.

## *Dona Gracia*

### **Aims:** Role model for people today

The life of **Donna Gracia** will be examined striving to educate students on this influential woman in Jewish history. Titled, "Standing Up to the Monarchs," the project strives to examine some of the history and themes on **Dona Gracia Nasi**. The program's goals hope to be informative on Nasi's role as an early feminist Jewish leader who stood up against anti-Semitism by organizing a boycott. It also seeks to elaborate on the plight of the Jewish people during the Inquisition as they were forced to convert to Christianity or practice Judaism secretly as New Christians.



## Project Objectives

1. A bibliographical description of **Dona Gracia Nasi**
2. Express the significance of the Ancona boycott in Jewish History

## Background

### Timeline

**1510:** Born to a prestigious and wealthy New Christian Portuguese family in Lisbon.

**1528:** She married Francisco Mendes, a prosperous New Christian banker and spice merchant from Lisbon at the age of 18.

**1535:** Mendes died leaving behind a widowed **Gracia** and a young daughter. Gracia moved to Antwerp to run her late-husband's spice business with her brother-in-law Diogo Mendes. Mendes was a renowned dealer and was known as the "spice king of Europe."

**1535-1543:** **Gracia** and Mendes helped organize an underground network throughout Europe to aid New Christians flee the inquisition in Portugal.



**1539:** Diogo married Gracia's younger sister Brianda.

**1543:** Diogo passed away in 1543 and his will appointed **Gracia** supervisor of their firm and also the guardian of his daughter La Chica

**1545:** Tired of the bigotry toward the New Christians in Antwerp, Gracia moved to Venice. As a New Christian, **Gracia** did not live within the newly established Venice ghetto. However, Gracia's sister Brianda condemned her in front of the royal court in Venice as a secret Jew.

**1548:** **Gracia** fled to Ferrara, 60 miles to the southwest. Gracia received protection from the Duke of Ferrara and she may have lived openly as a Jew for the first time. Gracia was a philanthropist of the Jewish arts and helped fund translation of many Jewish texts into Spanish. The best-known text was the *Ferrara Bible*.

**1553:** **Gracia** and her family subsequently moved to Constantinople , the capital of the Ottoman Empire, after Cardinal Giovanni Pietro Caraffa renewed persecution of the Jews.

**1555:** In the Italian port city of Ancona, 51 Jews were arrested by authorities of the Church for practicing Judaism. After a trial, 25 were burned at the stake. In response, the international banker **Dona Gracia Nasi** organized an economic boycott of Ancona.

**1569:** **Nasi** died near Istanbul

## *The Ancona boycott of 1556*

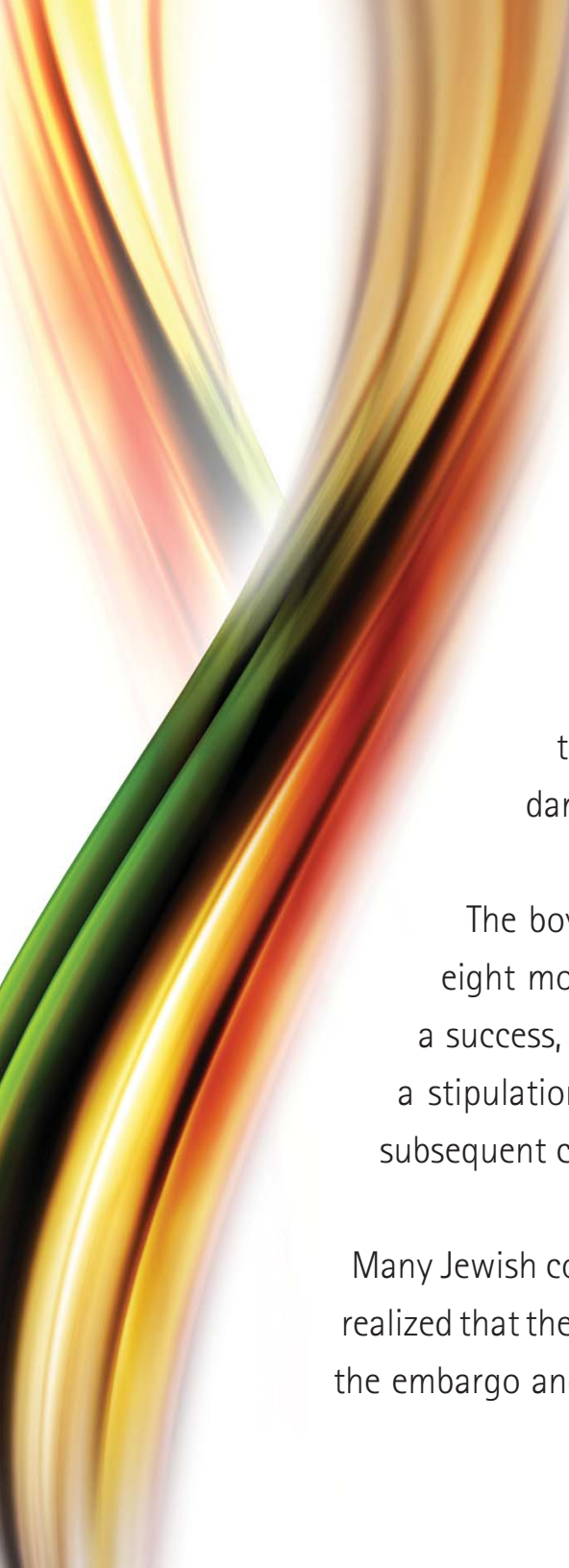
In 1555 in the Italian port city of Ancona, 51 Jews were arrested by authorities of the Church for practicing Judaism. After a trial, twenty-five were burned at the stake. In response, the international banker **Dona Gracia Nasi** organized an economic boycott of Ancona. This was the first known attempt by Jews to change government policy by means of monetary sanctions. How successful was it?

Less than two months after being anointed Pope, Paul IV on July 17, 1555 issued the Papal Bull *Cum nimis absurdum*. Paul IV was infamous for his hatred of Jews - he had influenced Julius III's decision to burn the Talmud in Campo de' Fiori in September of 1553. Paul IV denounced the Jews in this passage of the Papal Bull:

The Pope's agenda consisted of fifteen laws and prohibitions against the Jews. Jews were to be segregated from the residents of the Christians, they were ordered to live in the same location together. They were only allowed to have one synagogue in each city or village and had to destroy all others. Jews had to wear blue clothing so they could be identified as Jewish. Christians were not allowed to be servants or be nurses for the Jews.

Before the establishments of the ghettos in 1555, Jews who resided in the Papal states were able to live anywhere. The exception was Venice, where a ghetto was established in 1516.

Paul IV sent agents to Ancona in August of 1555 to gather New Christians who practiced Judaism and throw




them into prison. Ninety New Christians were arrested overall. The Catholic Church wanted 30,000 scudi for release of the prisoners. The Jewish community counter-offered with 15,000 scudi. But the negotiations were of little use as the Pope ordered that the inmates be tortured so they would abandon their faith. In response, Jewish trading in Ancona was brought to a halt.

Ancona was an extremely vital trading port along the eastern Mediterranean. There was no precedent for an economic boycott in Jewish history when the council of leaders which included **Dona Gracia Nasi** gathered together in Constantinople in 1556. The ex-prisoners wanted the Pope and residents of Ancona to suffer an economic recession from the boycott because of the way the prisoners were treated. The hope was that the financial damage would reverse the authorities' attitudes towards the New Christians.

The boycott was unanimously ratified, and an embargo of Ancona was agreed upon for the next eight months ending with Passover. However, the boycott leaders realized that in order for it to be a success, they needed the collaboration of Jewish merchants in other Ottoman cities. They prepared a stipulation that if the other communities approved the boycott for the eight month trial phase, a subsequent conference would be held to approve longer sanctions against Ancona.

Many Jewish commercial traders ignored the boycott and continued to trade. The Pesaro Jewish community realized that the boycott was in grave trouble, so they approached **Dona Gracia Nasi** for help. **Gracia** supported the embargo and combined forces with Don Joseph Nasi, her brother-in-law, to regain momentum. **Gracia**



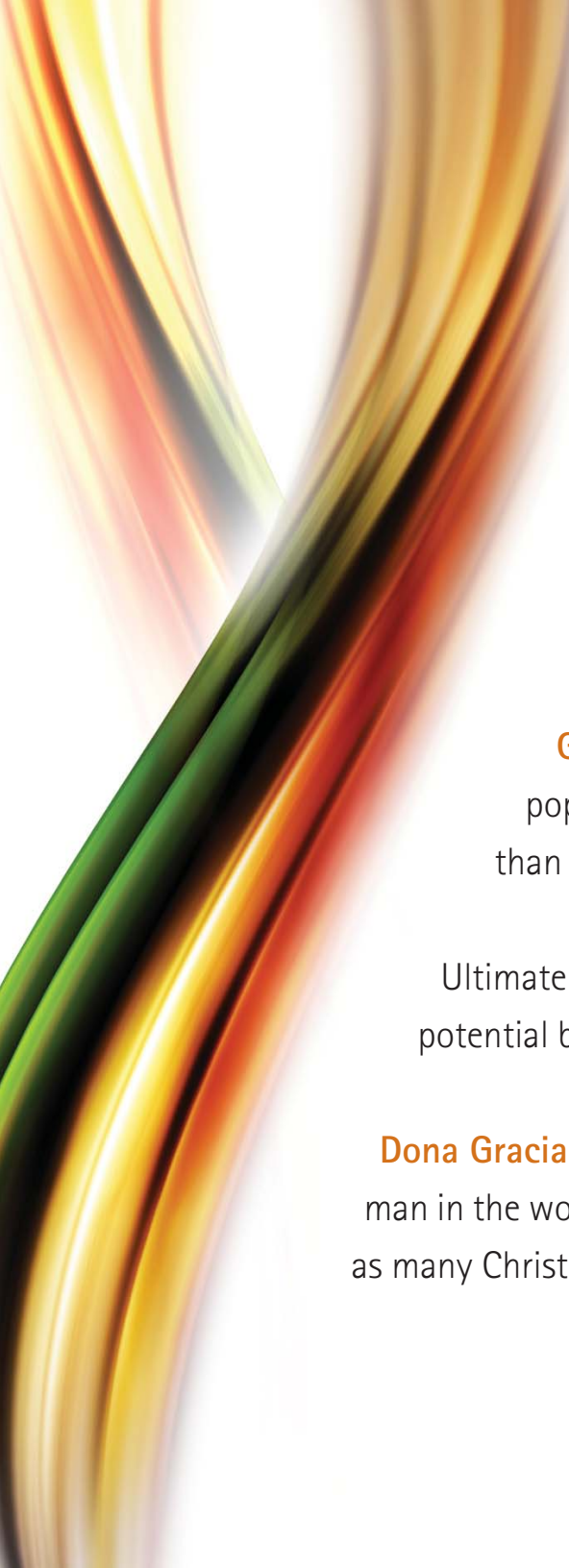
ordered the foremost rabbinical authorities in Constantinople to sign a document which ordered the Jews to follow the boycott, "because it was a matter of saving life in Pesaro."

However, Rabbi Joshua Soncino refused to support the boycott. Soncino condemned the refugees that settled in Pesaro and criticized them for being selfish and greedy by settling in Christian territory instead of settling in the Jewish-friendly Ottoman Empire. He accused them of valuing money over their fellow Jews. Soncino maintained that if the expatriates had left for the Ottoman Empire the Jews would not be in the position to debate the boycott. Soncino also had reservations about the success of a boycott which would lead to discord amongst the Jews.

**Dona Gracia Nasi** was enraged. Soncino and two other rabbinic figures from Constantinople were invited to convene with Don Joseph Nasi. It was a contentious gathering, however Soncino was persuaded to sign but with one condition. If the Ancona Jews' account was factual, he would be allowed to tell his rabbinic colleagues that his signature didn't proclaim that he was necessarily a supporter of the boycott.

**Gracia** decided to attempt a different approach bypassing Soncino entirely. She shifted her strategy to the Jewish community of Constantinople. She convinced the Sephardic residents of the city to publicly support the boycott and to back a decree that anyone who violated the embargo would be excommunicated from the Jewish community. A less influential Ashkenazi group joined their Sephardic brethren in supporting





the boycott. The Ashkenazim joined the boycott because they were threatened with lack of financial aid from Don Joseph Nasi. Soncino responded by issuing a detailed testimonial which stated that the boycott decree had no authorized standing within Halakah - Jewish law, based on two interpretations. First, the boycott was approved under pressure, and second, the rabbi considered it a violation of a Talmudic ideal, that a individual can not defend himself at the expense of someone else. Additionally, Soncino expressed the notion and concern, that the lives of the Ancona sufferers would be of minor significance compared to the Jewish population's loss of synagogues being destroyed in Pesaro, 115

**Gracia** attempted to influence the rabbis to get their communities to support the Jewish population in Pesaro, stating that the protection of their fellow brethren was a bigger priority than economic hardships in Ancona.

Ultimately there was no unanimity within the Jewish community. The boycott never reached its potential because many merchants continued to trade in Ancona.

**Dona Gracia Nasi** was a courageous pioneer who boldly defied the Pope, at that time, the most powerful man in the world. Although, the boycott faltered and Gracia was humiliated, it was not a complete disaster as many Christian merchants had their careers ruined by the boycott.

## Activity:

### Dona Gracia and the Trade Embargo of Ancona

In order to grasp a better understanding of the boycott, students will act the roles of the major characters who were involved in the boycott. Additionally, so that it is entertaining and educational, there will some made-up characters that were impacted by the boycott. The players speak to the Jewish community (rest of the students) and argue their points of view. Each character gets to speak for five minutes, then the class can discuss the issues based on the arguments they have heard.

#### Aims:

1. For students to learn a great appreciation of the significance of the Ancona boycott organized by **Gracia Nasi**.
2. Students would also get exposure to the horrific struggles of the Jews in Europe after being expelled from Spain.

**Time:** 45 minutes



## Roles to be played by various students

**Dona Gracia** – wealthy leader who is angry at Pope Paul IV for burning innocent Jews at the stake in Ancona, Italy, an Adriatic seaport owned by the Vatican.

**Joseph Caro** – the renowned Jewish scholar living in Sfat who supports Dona Gracia and offers a decision endorsing the embargo

**Isaak** – who owns a restaurant that makes bagels covered with cheese and spaghetti sauce – he's afraid the embargo will hurt his business

**Menocchio** – a righteous Gentile who fears that a boycott will cause the Jews physical harm

**Rabbi Yehoshua Tzunatzin**, rabbi of the Italian community in Constantinople – who argues against the embargo as it will harm Jewish business interests