

The Legend of Luna Levi

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Il faut que le roman raconte.
— STENDHAL



For my aunt, Klara Levi

Prologue

IN EARLY SPRING OF THE YEAR 1492, after fierce fighting, the armies of the Catholic kingdoms of the north conquered Granada in the deep south of Spain, the last outpost of many centuries of Moorish rule. When the proud city surrendered, representatives of the influential Jewish community gathered in anticipation of a messenger from the court in the capital, dispatched by the Spanish king and queen. Calmly, ceremoniously, as if hastening to announce a change of name of some city square, the royal herald bore in his hands the Edict of Expulsion, a document that was to be decisive not only for the Jewish people of Spain, but for the survival of all Israel.

Bearded elders seated in their costly robes waited in stony silence, in a state of dejection hitherto unknown to them, their gaze fixed on the distance, empty and aimless as that of dying men about to quit this world with no inkling of what awaited them in the next. Like the dying, rabbis, scholars, philosophers, financiers, interpreters, healers, physicians and counsellors feared being driven out of the familiar world of their beloved Spain, into another world, unknown and therefore unloved. Their presentiment was not just a reflection of the fears of old age, a matter of causeless and random speculation; it had been confirmed by countless portents, corroborated by a host of blood-chilling facts. In recent years, their nostrils had stung from the wind-blown smoke of Jewish flesh burning at the stake; friends and kin had vanished into the cellars of the Inquisition and their cries as they were tortured into

admission. or to death, had reached every ear; the property of those who possessed it had been confiscated; a widespread fear of informing on others under threat or pressure spread like a contagion; a web of lies, treachery, imputation, forced confession and mental torment wove itself around every Jew or convert hounded into adopting Christianity if he was to keep his life and his country; from day to day, the fear grew of being branded a *judaizante*, one who appeared to accept Catholicism while secretly remaining Jewish at heart, a fear that was fed by the murder of so many suspected of it. In a word, the assembled dignitaries of Granada's Jewish community were aware that their entire nation was exposed to deliberate degradation and extermination.

Crushed by anguish and grief, the elders recalled the one and a half thousand years of their existence on the Iberian Peninsula where they had arrived at the time of the great Roman Empire. Early writings told of how they rose and flourished in the golden age of the Caliphate. Side by side with Arab thinkers they had studied the works of the ancient Greek philosophers, astronomers and astrologists, advised illustrious caliphs, proudly taken their place as statesmen, bankers, emissaries and builders, leaders of negotiations with other states, sometimes of military campaigns where they followed the precepts of the great military strategists, enjoyed freedom of thought and expression and the basic human right of practising their own faith. They bore children, grew to adulthood, married and died in obedience to the laws God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai after he had led the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. And they sinned, certainly, because only to Man had the Almighty given the freedom to choose between good and evil, the fatal power of decision for which men must atone in their earthly existence more than the lion, the eagle or the serpent. For their sins the Creator chastised His chosen people more harshly than any other, and so the Jews, scattered throughout the known world, lived in constant expectation of the Messiah, saviour and redeemer of all sinners, and thus of return to their homeland, the heavenly Jerusalem.

The more pragmatic among the elders wondered who would now lead them out of Spain if it came to the worst and King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile signed the already prepared Edict of Expulsion. Would Rabbi Don Isaac Abrabanel, State Treasurer to the

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court of Spain, cleverest of the clever, stubbornest of the stubborn and wealthiest of the wealthy, play the part of a new Moses? Had the Lord designed him for this role? Did the Almighty even know the extent of the curse that was about to descend on the children of Abraham? Was it He who would visit this misery on them just as He permitted all that the eye sees, the ear hears, the finger touches, the nostrils smell, together with all that the human senses cannot apprehend but nonetheless exists? Was it their sins that had called down this horror? After this most terrible of all persecutions would the Jews at last be shown the meaning of the Universe, or would God cause it simply to disintegrate, angry at mankind's study of the celestial bodies? Would He have mercy on all of them and once more lead them in the path of Man's mission on Earth? Divide the sea? Prepare a fiery furnace for the enemies of Israel? All possible, thought the old men, but hardly likely.

Despite everything, hope in a happy resolution of the Jewish question in Spain still flickered in the chamber where the Jewish council met. The leaders of the tribes of Israel in Granada had not yet learned of the outcome of Don Abrabanel's audience with the royal couple. The great man had undertaken the mission in the hope that momentary greed would carry the day over the relentless idea of an ethnically pure Catholic state, and that human and royal weakness would save Spain's Jews from pitiless destruction. Rabbi Isaac offered the king and queen the unheard-of sum of thirty thousand ducats for a tiny but crucial shake of the head, a quietly murmured "no", or a postponement, some semblance of refusal to sign the Edict of Expulsion on which the Inquisition was insisting. Monarchs are people too, thought the wealthy Jews, and many teachers agreed with them, they will surely waver in the presence of such riches. Rulers may be people, but usually of the grasping sort. Catholics are people too, and if not of the overly pious type, cherish a considerable fondness for gold.

It was only later that news was to reach the gathering in Granada that would confirm their fears. The Jewish sages were not wrong: the king and queen were ready to sell their signatures, or rather to allow the Jews to buy them. After a lengthy, persuasive and beautifully composed speech full of reason, logic and humble allegiance, Rabbi Isaac noticed a softening in His Majesty's eyes, then in the gaze of Her Majesty, as she

toyed with a gold ring. Just as he was joyfully concluding that his work was done, this grandiose act, this historical enterprise was frustrated by the Grand Inquisitor, Tomás de Torquemada. Dogged and unyielding, hopelessly suspicious of everyone and everything, the examiner had concealed himself behind a secret door hidden by a fine painting of a hunting scene by Asperoso de Camarilla, in order to eavesdrop on the lengthy audience. At the crucial moment, just as an imperceptible smile was beginning to light up Rabbi Isaac's pale countenance, the Grand Inquisitor burst into the apartment with a loud rustle of robes and a piercing yell, clutching a crucifix in both hands above his head:

“The traitor Judas Iscariot sold our Saviour for thirty pieces of silver, and Your Highnesses are prepared to sell Him for thirty thousand ducats! Here He is, take Him and sell Him! I declare this act to be the second betrayal of the Son of God!” Slamming the crucifix down on the table, he rushed out of the chamber. Shocked, the royal couple showed that they served a more powerful kingdom than their own: the mighty Catholic Church. Startled and dismayed, they at once affixed their signature to two edicts instead of one: the first expelling all Jews from Spain and obliging them to leave the country by 31 July 1492, the second ordering Christopher Columbus to set sail at the head of a fleet on 3 August the same year.

The first proclamation arrived at the splendid mansion that housed the Jewish council in the heart of Granada, casually clasped in the hands of a messenger whose official escort opened the heavy door with difficulty. After a brief but courteous greeting, he began to read its terrible content, heedless of the commotion, the hum of voices of the desperately worried dignitaries, transformed in a trice into ordinary, shaky, teary-eyed old men:

“Don Ferdinand and Doña Isabella to the Prince Don Juan, Our very dear and much loved son, to the princes, prelates and to the residential quarters of the Jews of this city and of all cities, towns and villages of Our kingdoms. Salutations and grace.

“You know well or ought to know that whereas We have been informed that in these our kingdoms there were some wicked Christians who Judaized and apostatised from Our holy Catholic faith. This fact has been proven beyond a doubt, its great cause being centuries of

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interaction between Jew and Christian. For this reason, in the cortes which We held in the past year of one thousand, four hundred and eighty, We ordered the separation of the Jews in all the cities, towns and villages of Our kingdoms and dominions and that they be given quarters and places where they should live, hoping that by their separation this widespread and above all dangerous and most contagious crime would cease. Furthermore, We procured and gave orders that inquisition should be made in Our aforementioned kingships and dominions, which as you know has for twelve years been made, and by which many guilty persons have been discovered, as is very well known, by the dedicated work of the inquisitors and other devout persons, ecclesiastical and secular.

“Great injury has accordingly resulted since Christians have engaged in social interaction and communication with the Jews. For it has been clearly shown: the Jews have had ways and means to subvert and steal faithful Christians from Our holy Catholic faith and to separate them from it and to subvert them to their own wicked belief and conviction, instructing them in the ceremonies and observances of their law, holding meetings at which they teach and read to Christians and their children, giving them books from which they may read their prayers and declaring to them the fasts that they must keep and the study of their Bible, indicating to them the festivals before they occur. They carry to them and give them from their houses unleavened breads and meats ritually slaughtered, instructing them about the things from which they must refrain, and persuading them to hold and observe the Law of Moses, shamefully convincing them that there is no other law or truth except for that one. This proved by many statements and confessions, both from these same Jews and from those who have been perverted and enticed by them, which has redounded to the great injury, detriment and opprobrium of Our holy Catholic faith.

“Notwithstanding that We were informed of the great part of this before now and we knew that the true remedy for all these injuries and inconveniences was to prohibit all interaction between the said Jews and Christians and banish them from all our kingdoms, We desired to content ourselves by commanding them to leave all cities, towns and villages of Andalusia, where it appears that they have done the greatest

injury, believing that it would be sufficient so that those of other cities, towns and villages of Our kingdoms and dominions would cease to do and commit the aforesaid acts.

“We therefore punished the Jews whose guilt for great crimes against Our holy Catholic faith was proven. Unfortunately, neither that step nor the passing of sentence against the said Jews has been sufficient remedy to obviate and correct so great an opprobrium and offence to the faith and the Christian religion, because every day it is found and appears that the Jews continue their evil and wicked purpose wherever they live and congregate. So that there will not be any place where they further offend Our holy faith and corrupt those whom God has until now most desired to preserve, as well as those who had fallen but amended and returned to Holy Mother Church, the which according to the weakness of our humanity and by diabolical astuteness and suggestion that continually wages war against us may easily occur unless the principal cause of it be removed, which is to banish the said Jews from Our kingdoms. Because when a crime is committed by members of any organisation or community, it is reasonable that such organisation or community should be dissolved, otherwise the lesser members disappear and suffer in the name of the greater, and the minority in the name of the majority.

“Therefore We, with the counsel of Our prelates, great noblemen of Our kingdoms and other persons of learning and wisdom of Our Council, and with their consent, resolve to order the said Jews and Jewesses of Our kingdoms to depart and never to return or come back to any of them. And concerning this We command this our charter to be given, by which We order all Jews and Jewesses of whatever age they may be, who live, reside, and exist in Our said kingdoms and dominions, who by whatever manner have come to live and reside therein, that by the end of the month of July next of the present year, they depart from all of these our said realms and dominions, along with their sons and daughters, menservants and maidservants, Jewish familiars, their new-born and their dying, and they shall not dare to return to those places, neither temporarily on the way to somewhere else nor in any other manner, under pain of death and the confiscation of all their possessions by the Royal Treasury, without further trial or sentence.

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“And we command and forbid that any person of the said kingdoms, of whatever estate, condition or dignity that they may be, shall dare to receive, protect, defend or hold publicly or secretly any Jew or Jewess beyond the date of the end of July and henceforth forever, in their lands, houses or any other part of our kingdoms and dominions, under pain of losing all their possessions, vassals, mansions, fortified places and other inheritances, immediately and without further trial, and beyond this of losing whatever favours and privileges they hold from Our Court and the Royal Treasury.

“So that the said Jews and Jewesses may be able to dispose of their possessions until the end of the month of July, we receive them under Our royal safeguard, that they may travel and be safe to sell, trade or give in gift all their moveable goods and estates. During the said time, no one shall harm or injure them, no wrong shall be done to them against justice, to their persons or to their possessions, under the penalty incurred by those who violate the royal safeguard.

“We likewise give license to Jews and Jewesses to export their goods out of Our kingdoms and dominions by sea or land if they be not gold or silver or coined money or other things prohibited by the laws of Our kingdoms, including bonds. And we command all councils, justices, dignitaries of Our kingdoms, *caballeros y escuderos*, nobles and treasurers, officials and landowners in the city of Avila and other cities, towns and villages of Our kingdoms and dominions, and lordships and all vassals to comply with Our charter and all that is contained therein, to give assistance and favour in its application, under penalty of loss of Our favour and confiscation of all their possessions.

“And because this must be brought to the notice of all, We command that this our charter be posted in the plazas in this city and of the principal cities, towns and villages of its bishopric as an announcement and that it be read aloud by the town criers in the presence of a public notary.

“And no one shall do any damage to it.

“Given in Our city of Granada, the XXXI day of the month of March, the year of the birth of our lord Jesus Christ one thousand four hundred and ninety-two years.

“I, the King, I, the Queen,

“I, Juan de Coloma, secretary to the King and Queen, our liege lords, have caused this to be written at their command. “

* * *

And so, in their hundreds of thousands, the Jews of Spain began the long journey into exile. They left the cracked, parched soil of Andalusia and the shadeless plateau of Castile, carrying with them the laments of ancient romance songs. Rich and poor blended as the rich sold off entire estates for a mule, and all that they took with them would have formed a poor man's entire property: the Torah, a *tallit* or prayer shawl, some food, a chest of clothes and perhaps a memento – but nothing of precious metal.

Snaking like the course of a stream, the lines of people crisscrossed the yellow soil of the country that had been both mother and step-mother to them, pouring towards the ocean and the sea, for the dry land would have no more of them. As one chronicler of that unhappiest of times noted, the Jews flooded the roads, fields, mountains, woods, deserts and olive groves of a country suddenly alien to them, but which was to remain forever in their hearts. In their distress, some fell and others raised them up, some sickened and others died, some gave birth. From time to time a Christian, pitying their misery, would call upon them to convert. Succumbing to wretchedness, a few did. In hunger and thirst, the roads and days took them to the coast, to the port where ships would bear them away to the east or the south. As they swarmed towards the sea, they wept for their dead and for their new-born, tended their sick, soothed their children. Bent under the weight of their belongings, they no longer stooped to retrieve items that dropped along the way but left them lying by the side of the road.

As the groans, cries and pleas for help rang out to the skies of Sefarad*, an old rabbi, Solomon Reuben ben Israel of Toledo, ordered the women, young girls, widows in mourning and young brides to sing, and the men, young and old, to play the flute and tambourine. A long-drawn-out, melancholy refrain arose in the harsh Spanish tongue.

* Spain (Hebr.)

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Long, long ago it had become their mother tongue and its words spoke of love for the country they considered theirs, but which they would gladly abandon for one glimpse of the wall of the ruined Temple in Jerusalem. In death and in birth, noted Rabbi Solomon, with aching hearts and a song on their lips the children of Israel, trekking once again into the unknown, arrived at the ports of Cadiz, Tortosa and Barcelona, begging God in their prayers to turn their exile into return, that they might awake in Jerusalem the golden, that the Almighty would spare them. But their prayers were not to be answered and no miracle would come to their rescue this time.

Gravely sinning against humanity, the royal couple, rulers of the greater part of Iberia, finally cleansed all of Spain: Castile, Valencia, Catalonia, Aragon, Andalusia, together with all their cities: Avila, Zaragoza, Barcelona, Geron, Tortosa, Tarragona, Toledo, Madrid, Segovia, Salamanca, Burgos, Cordova, Granada, Seville, Malaga, Ciudad Real, Cartagena, Leon, Lérida, Teruel, Allariz, Monzon and Gibraltar, where the African continent almost touches Europe; all its rivers: the Guadalquivir, the Ebro, the Tajo, the Duero; its islands: Majorca, Menorca and Ibiza; its mountains and highlands, its olive groves and vineyards, its estates and castles and towers. Stained as it was with blood, to them their country seemed milk-white as the sea foam, snatched clear at last from the murk of the Jewish slime. Ferdinand and Isabella had relieved their Catholic kingdom of its burden, killing or expelling all Jews and Arabs, who were known as the Moors.

The last Moorish ruler of Granada, Beni Ahmera, leader of the Sons of the Red, in 1487 by the Christian calendar sent an embassy to the mighty Ottoman sultan, Bayezid. Although then on campaign in Karaman, the Sultan both sent and received emissaries. The aged Moorish leader begged him humbly and urgently for help, for Ferdinand of Aragon and Castile was pressing him ever harder and more remorselessly out from his age-old domains. Bayezid quickly dispatched a fleet which indeed raided the Spanish coast, but did not halt the Catholic break-through.

The grey-bearded Turkish historian, Amin ben Assad, wrote at the time: "When the illustrious Sultan Bayezid heard of the evils visited by

the monarchs of infidel giaour* Spain on the innocent Jewish population, he shewed pity for the outcasts, and when word reached him that they were seeking a resting-place for their weary, blistered feet, he sent out hundreds of messengers and dispatch-riders to all places bathed in the glory of the Ottoman Empire, which stretched from Persia to the northern Balkans. And town criers in their thousands read out the imperial firman†, written in the hand of the Padishah's favourite scribe, Ismail, ordering that no one among Bayezid's slave-dignitaries, neither beylerbey nor aga, pasha, sanjak-bey, dizdar, alai bey, mufti or kadi, from the lowest chaush, akinci, or *yasakçi* to the Grand Vizier himself, should dare to drive away the Jews, but all were to receive them kindly."

The story continued to be related to new generations by the learned historian and rabbi, Elijah Almunzin of Crete, as from his watchtower he saw the ships sailing the Great Sea from west to east, their hulls deep below the waterline under the weight of the multitude of his people that sweltering, ill-fated day of the Jewish year 5252: "Deathly fear of the great Padishah and Sultan Bayezid, mightiest in the world, filled his subjects of all religions: Turks, Arabs, Armenians, Greeks, Aromanians and Slavs, and they bid the Jews welcome and gave them shelter and protection. Thus thousands and tens of thousands of the exiled children of Abraham came to the eastern kingdom and filled the Ottoman Empire from Safed to Istanbul, from Thessalonica to Sarajevo with their mournful but useful presence. And they founded numberless rightful communities and generously helped those of their compatriots who moved from town to town, from country to country on the way to Istanbul. In that great resettling, many of them returned to their ancient country, Israel, as the Prophet Jeremiah had foretold."

And the worthy chronicler also wrote: "The mighty Bayezid was a great military leader and a shrewd man, and he ridiculed the bigoted Catholic kings who had driven out the most valuable among their subjects in the name of religion, although they knew of their diligence, intellect, literacy, knowledge of languages, skill in trade and the art of negotiation, their ability to earn and to pay taxes and tributes without a

* Christian, non-Muslim (Tr., Per.)

† The Sultan's written mandate stamped with his *tughra* or seal (Per.)

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murmur, regularly and in due time. And the wise Sultan saw that their need coincided with his own: theirs to find a new point of departure on their constant journeyings, his to find for his sprawling and turbulent empire a new source of skilled knowledge, ability and revenue.”

Thus wrote the chronicler for the new generation, and his words were true.

Expulsion

AS THE SUN ROSE, the dawn brought no breeze to cool the heat of that summer day. Neither had it on a day that preceded it by two thousand seven hundred and eight years when the Babylonians overran Judea, demolishing the First Temple in Jerusalem; or one thousand four hundred and twenty-two years before when Roman legions destroyed the city's Second Temple. The present expulsion was thus the third *cherem** of the Jewish people.

As the sky gradually turned blue, the world of shade which should have been provided by trees and clouds remained elsewhere, by-passing the teeming sea port of Barcelona. The sun rose swiftly, following its fixed path, indifferent to all that had ever happened or would ever happen on the earth it was flooding with light. The people assembled at that place, however, paid scant attention. The relentless scorching heat seemed to go unnoticed by the hundreds of men, women and children pressing, weeping, sighing or silent, murmuring, lamenting, singing in turn or simultaneously, praying aloud or under their breath to the God who had once again forgotten them, or who was punishing them for the umpteenth time in their existence, only He knew how often.

The smell of the sea blended with the rank odour of sweating bodies, the sound of the waves with the piercing babble of a panic-stricken, demoralized crowd, the grey of the rocks with the motley of the multitude.

* Wholesale destruction, the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (Hebr.)

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The harbour, packed with refugees like a cauldron full of dense liquid on a fire, heaved and boiled over, hissing on contact with the embers lit by the earth and sky. The infirm fainted, children dozed feverishly or wailed, and only a few of the more composed wiped the sweat from their foreheads and tried to cool themselves at a nearby fountain.

Lying at anchor in the harbour was a boat that had seen better days and named the *Felicidad*—ironically, many thought with a wry grin, while others nonetheless hoped that she would bring them luck, for, like the lust for life, human hope never dies; particularly Jewish hope. The vessel did not seem capable of carrying all those who were waiting. Officers of the port tried to calm the crowd and introduce a semblance of order but without notable success. No one had yet gone on board and the burning question of how this was to take place—a question many considered to be Talmudic*—was the subject of much argument, down-shouting and bickering. Lengthy debates raged in groups around the all-important issue of who should go first. The waves of dispute radiated outwards from those closest to the harbour steps. As soon as word of one solution reached the end of the steadily growing crowd, news of another would start to spread from the rear towards the edges of the multitude.

Time crept inexorably on with no end to the tangled problem in sight. At last, a tall, lean man in costly garb, oddly unruffled after so much journeying, sprang on to a coil of rope and began to speak. His gaze was pensive, his bearing unobtrusive. Though quiet, his voice was filled with strength and determination, fire and challenge, its assuredness and clarity a good omen in the midst of the general wretchedness. The heaving mass quietened down and almost at once people began to listen.

The speaker introduced himself: “I am Solomon of Toledo, and I propose that you distribute yourselves as follows: let the families with children board first, for wherever we go, the new generation will continue our seed; after them come the young couples, for they will give birth to the new generations; then the rabbis and scholars, for without their knowledge and intellect we cannot survive; then boys and girls in

* The Talmud (Hebr.): primary source of Jewish religious law, consisting of the Mishnah and the Gemara.

the strength of their youth, for they can endure the scourge of fortune and wait for the next ship.”

“And the old?” cried a voice.

“Let them depart with their families, for to my knowledge, no Jew of their years, male or female, is without descendants.”

“And what if all their descendants have been killed?”

“Decide for yourselves: are they the ones who have suffered most and therefore should be allowed go first, or are their lives now meaningless and so they should be left in the rear?”

“They have suffered the most!” came back the voice of the multitude.

“I agree with your decision, my friends. Now tell me this: do you agree to the proposed order of departure?” asked Solomon of Toledo, the hint of a plea for the assent of all present underlying his calm. It was well received by the crowd who answered to a man:

“We agree, Solomon of Toledo.”

The crowd heaved and in a trice, instead of a seething, bewildered mob, an orderly line formed in conformity with the advice of the canny stranger. Although he was unknown, no one there wondered who the solver of the tricky question of the order of boarding was.

The only one to ask himself this question was Sanchez Toroña, clerk of the port, whose duty it was to count all the passengers on all the ships departing never to return, and to report to the authorities. He had noted Solomon of Toledo in the characteristic way of the mean observing the great, the weak the strong, a knave an honest man, the poor the rich, although he really had no way of knowing if Solomon was indeed great or strong or honest or rich. At first he thought he had never seen him before, but having observed him for a moment or two, it seemed as if they had met somewhere in the course of his forty years. He could not remember when or where, for he had changed occupations and masters many times, but he thought he might have once observed him from a distance as a person to be admired, envied and deeply respected, someone untouchable, a great dignitary. He wracked his brains, trawled his memory, counted on his fingers all the great men whom he had served, but the setting where he might have seen this man would not come to mind. In any case was it possible, he asked himself, that he, Sanchez Toroña,