

## A MARRANO ON TRIAL

Before the Holy Office of the Inquisition

**MARCOS AGUINIS**

Translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni and Susan Ashe

**M**arrano, an Epic, the sixth of Marcos Aguinis's seven novels, deals with a little-known subject in Latin American history—the persecution and ultimate burning at the stake of Jews by the Inquisition, in Lima, in the viceroyalty of Peru, in the early seventeenth century. This is the story of a father and son, both men of learning and distinguished physicians, who are brought up in the Catholic faith and who at great cost to themselves and their families revert to the faith of their fathers, pitting themselves along the way against the might of the ecclesiastical authorities of imperial Spain. It is a gripping, heartbreaking tale, rich in tragedy, humor, poignancy, and original characters. At the same time it is both a family saga and a portrayal of man's indomitable spirit in the quest for freedom of conscience.

The seven chapters presented here form the core of "Abyss and Pinnacle," the fifth and final section of the novel. (These sections also bear the names of the first five books of the Bible.) The saga opens in Ibatín, what is present-day Tucumán, in northwestern Argentina. Diego Núñez da Silva, born in Lisbon in 1548, is the descendant of Jews expelled from Spain and is now what is known as a New Christian. His wife and four children are practicing Catholics, but all these years—unbeknownst to them—Don Diego has been a secret Jew. Eventually he reveals the fact to his elder son, telling him, "On the outside, so as to survive in the flesh, we appear to be Christians. But inside we are Jews so as to survive in the spirit."

When Don Diego feels the long arm of the Inquisition reaching out for him, he takes his wife and children south to Córdoba, but in due course he is arrested and torn from his family. He is taken to the Inquisition's secret prison in faraway Lima. The family becomes destitute, the elder son is also arrested and sent to Lima, and the remaining children are closely watched and carefully educated by the church. The two girls finally enter a convent, and the youngest boy, Francisco, enters a Dominican monastery. On completing his studies, he goes to Lima to take up a career in medicine as well as to try to find his father.

There the two are reunited. The father, now old and bent, has saved himself after torture by revealing the names of other secret Jews. Disgraced both outwardly and inwardly, he is forced to wear the sanbenito, the garment that marks the penitent who is



*Elevation to Heaven*

Photograph by  
Abraham Altchuller  
Used by permission

reconciled to the church. Francisco begins to wonder whether his father is a sincere Christian or still a secret Jew. In time, through his own reading and intellect, Francisco comes to question certain teachings of the church. Don Diego admits that, as hard as he has tried, he has not been able to embrace Christianity. The Jews are their history, he tells his son: "No other people has so cultivated history and at the same time been so punished by it." Francisco determines to break the walls of such imprisonment.

After his father's death, Francisco leaves Lima and goes to Santiago de Chile. It is now 1617. In due course he practices medicine and marries the governor's stepdaughter. But he too has been observing the Sabbath in secret, isolated, alone, and without his devout wife's knowledge. In time he makes contact with other secret Jews in Santiago, and they celebrate Passover deep in a wine cellar at the home of one of them. Among those present are an itinerant rabbi and a local monk. After ten years Francisco renews contact with his sisters back in Córdoba. One is now a nun. They join him in Chile. One day Francisco opens his heart to his older sister. Distraught, she reveals her brother's secret to the sister who is a nun, and she denounces him. Francisco returns to Lima in chains.

It is at this point that "Abyss and Pinnacle" begins. Francisco pits himself against the minds and the wit of his inquisitors; then, after six years' imprisonment and twelve audiences before his judges, he is condemned to death. Yet, before he meets his end at the stake, another six years will pass.

—Norman Thomas di Giovanni

9

I had been associated with Marcos Aguinis for nearly ten years before he asked Susan Ashe and me to translate *La gesta del marrano*. We had previously translated a story and a few other pieces of his, but my link with him was also based on our mutual repugnance toward Argentine military fascism. Of course, Aguinis's novel,

in Spanish, had suffered the fate of most Latin American fiction. It had not been sufficiently edited before being turned over to the printer. We undertook the work on the condition that, as we translated it, we could also trim and shape the book to conform to standards in the English-speaking world. Aguinis visited us twice in England, read the new version for himself, and gave it his unqualified approval. He also authorized the German version of the novel, *Der Ketzler von Lima*, to be made from our English.

—N. T. di G.

Francisco and his guards cross an empty hall, enter a dark passage, and begin to descend a long stone stairway. A lantern held by one of the party turns the rough, uneven walls and ceiling into the hide of an endless lurking monster. Tangled in the chain that runs from his wrists to his ankles, Francisco stumbles. Where are they going? They seem to be losing themselves in the depths of a labyrinth where the air is damp and fetid. One of the guards, a black man, stops before a wooden door, turns a key in a lock, and lifts an iron bar. The other guard grips Francisco's arm and shoves him forward. The door closes. Through a chink, Francisco can still see a flicker of light from the receding lantern. Then, in darkness, he gropes about to find the walls and discovers a stone bench. Exhausted, he collapses.

Alone again, this time in the dungeons of the Holy Office, he knows he will be left to languish until his resistance softens. They had done this to him in Concepción and in Santiago. He recites a psalm, then another and another, to steel himself against an enemy as powerful as Beelzebub.

But he is unfamiliar with the Holy Office's arbitrary nature. Within an hour, the bar outside his door is lifted. A face appears above the flame of a candle. Have they come to take him to the torture chamber? The black face is that of a woman. She approaches cautiously, holding up the candle to peer at his wrists and ankles. She

says nothing. Putting the candle on the floor, she goes out and returns with a pan of warm milk. She looks like a younger version of their old servant Catalina, which prompts Francisco to want to understand why she is there.

He drinks and feels comforted. The black woman sits down beside him. She smells of kitchens, of frying.

“Thank you,” he whispers.

She looks at him, still silent. Francisco points his chin toward the open door.

“Open or shut, it’s all the same,” she says with a shrug. “Nobody ever escapes from here.”

He asks her who she is and why she’s there. Her name is María Martínez, she tells him. She was arrested for practicing witchcraft and, to

pass the time while she awaits sentencing, she works in the prison governor’s house. What sort of work? he wonders. Bringing milk to the prisoners? Leaving the doors open to prove to them that it’s not worth trying to escape? Pumping them for information?

Unbidden, she tells him she was arrested for promiscuous association with a young widow. The commissary who seized her said that for his part he would have stabbed her to death on the spot for committing so repugnant an act. In his view it was far worse than the other things she had done—telling the future from dregs of wine and sticking pins into a pigeon’s heart to keep the young widow in her thrall. The inquisitors, however, wanted to know about the rituals she had used to enlist the devil’s help.

The woman shows Francisco how she pricks her nostril with a toothpick and hides the blood in a handkerchief so that Santa María will protect her from being tortured. The governor, she says, has gone out for a little while and has asked her to welcome Francisco.

“Welcome me?”

“Aren’t you the doctor they brought from Chile?”

Francisco tries to fathom what is happening. After his repeated confrontations with seri-

ous, high-minded clerics in both Concepción and Santiago, he had pictured himself entering the portals of this infamous palace and immediately being set upon by officials and torturers. Instead, he has been casually handed over to a sorry black woman who is herself a prisoner. Is madness rife in the Holy Office?

The woman asks him about his crime.

“Crime?” exclaims Francisco. “I’ve committed none.”

She laughs. “No one here admits to a crime.”

“I’m not denying what I am charged with,” he says. “I only deny that it’s a crime.”

**The woman shows Francisco how she pricks her nostril with a toothpick and hides the blood in a handkerchief so that Santa María will protect her from being tortured.**

“Was it bigamy?” she asks. “Or killing someone?”

“I’m a Jew.”

The woman stands and straightens her coarse tunic.

“A Jew,” repeats Francisco, raising his voice. “Like my father and his father before him.”

“Them too?”

“Yes, all of them.”

She looks at him in astonishment, crosses herself, and calls on Santa María.

“Aren’t you afraid?” she says.

“Yes, I am. Of course I am.”

“Then why do you say you’re a Jew?”

“Because I am. And because I believe in one God, the God of Israel.”

“Don’t say any of that to the governor or they’ll send you to the stake,” whispers the woman, her eyes wide with fear and sadness.

“But that’s what I’ve come all this way to say. I need to say it.”

“Hush!” She covers his mouth with her hand. “The governor may be in a violent mood when he gets back. If you tell him what you just said, he’ll have you put to death.”

She picks up the empty pan and the candle.

“He’ll do the same even if he’s in a good mood,” she continues. “So keep quiet.”

Francisco shakes his head. The poor woman would never understand. Still, for her clumsy kindness she deserves some explanation. He sighs. It has been some time since he gave an account of himself, and soon he will have to do just that to his inquisitors. Sooner or later they will summon him and want to hear his story from his own lips. Perhaps he should try out his tale now on this simple woman.

“Do you want them to kill you?” she mutters, clutching the pan and candle to her.

Francisco opens his mouth to begin, but he hears the distant slam of a door and then approaching footsteps. María pokes her head out into the corridor and quickly turns back to warn Francisco that the governor is coming.

“Stand up!” She helps him to his feet, smooths his hair, and adjusts his shirt.

Bartolomé de Pradedá, a short, stocky man, enters the cell, followed by a servant with a lantern. Going up to Francisco, the governor examines the prisoner from head to foot as if to impress on him that stature is of no consequence. Pradedá’s eyes express contempt. He snaps his fingers, and the black woman scuttles out with her pan and candle. The governor withdraws, and Francisco too is ordered out. He does not resist. He knows that his body will be subjected to outrages in an attempt to break him, but his aim is for his soul to triumph. No matter, he tells himself, he will find some way of defending his beliefs. Weighed down by his shackles, Francisco follows the guard along the passage, which seems to undulate in the lantern light. The chain clanks on the stone between his feet. The tunnel branches off. They turn right and shortly after come to a stop in front of a massive door. The guard lifts the lantern and strikes a small knocker. A voice orders him to enter. Behind a table lit by a candelabra sits the governor. Francisco stands and waits. He is bone weary.

The governor peruses the pile of papers in front of him and says nothing. Francisco sup-

poses them to be the evidence against him compiled in Chile. Pradedá lingers over each page, seeming to read with difficulty. Francisco’s ulcerated ankles throb with pain, and a mist veils his eyes. From time to time the governor peers over the papers to make sure that the accused is still there.

“Identify yourself,” he orders in a neutral tone.

“Francisco Maldonado da Silva.”

Pradedá gives no hint that he has heard. He is still immersed in the sheets of paper.

“Do you know why you were arrested?” he asks after a long pause.

Francisco shifts his weight onto one leg. The events of the past two months have taken their toll, and he won’t be able to stand there much longer.

“Because I’m a Jew, I suppose.”

“You suppose?”

“I’m not the author of my arrest,” says Francisco, his lips twisted in a grimace.

At the insolence, the governor’s face reddens, and his hand goes to his sword. “Crazy too, I see,” he barks.

Francisco shifts his weight to his other leg. A load seems to bear down on his neck and shoulders. Objects in the room waver and fade.

“I command you to speak the truth,” says Pradedá pompously.

“That’s exactly why I’m here,” Francisco blurts out.

The mist takes over, his knees buckle, and he collapses on the floor.

The governor gets slowly to his feet, walks around the desk, and stops beside the prisoner. With the toe of his shoe he prods Francisco’s shoulder. Cowards and tricksters are nothing new to him. He buries his shoe in the prisoner’s ribs and motions to the guard to throw water on the haggard face.

“A weakling,” he says in contempt.

He goes back to his chair, strokes his chin, and deliberates for a moment or two.

“Take him back to the cell and feed him,” he then says.

2

Two blacks roughly dress him in a friar's habit, then offer him milk and a chunk of newly baked bread. Francisco is still lightheaded from lack of sleep and when he eats his jaw, throat, and gullet ache.

"On your feet!" one of the blacks orders.

"Where are you taking me?"

They give a little laugh and shove him into the corridor. Will they start with the rack as they did with his father? Francisco is suddenly aware of the governor strutting along beside him. Where did he come from? Francisco is so tired he can no longer think properly.

"Where are you taking me?" he asks again.

"To a hearing before the tribunal," answers Pradedá bluntly.

Francisco stumbles; the governor grabs him by the arm and hauls him along. The prisoner can hardly believe how fast events are unfolding. For months he has been shut away, forced by Inquisition underlings to feel helpless and abandoned. Now, in the bowels of the Holy Office, its high-ranking officials seem to be hurrying to see his face and hear his voice. He has the impression that doors are opening before he reaches them and that silent men are watching him.

He is led into a sumptuous room lit by tall candelabra. Someone brings a wooden stool, and Pradedá grips Francisco's arm again to invite or to force him to sit down. Francisco has to cling to the stool with both hands. He retches.

Before him, on a raised platform, are three imposing chairs covered in green velvet and a long mahogany table with six legs shaped like sea monsters. In a place where no detail is arbitrary, what can these creatures mean? At each end of the table stands a candlestick, and in the middle a glinting crucifix. Francisco sees the miraculous Christ that his father had told him about. Set to one side of the platform, it is a somber, almost life-size figure whose eyes gaze down at the prisoner's feet. Don Diego said that if the accused told a lie the statue shook its head.

In the right-hand wall are two closed doors. Is one of them the way to the secret torture chamber? A shudder runs through Francisco's body, and he opens his eyes wide. He must take in each object in the room in order to establish his bearings and control his fear. What do those black curtains hide? Black is an expression of the church's mourning for the suffering inflicted on it by heresy, and green its hope for the sinner's repentance. Every item here is a weapon that will be fired at his mind. Francisco covers as he identifies the Holy Office's coat of arms, a proud banner that reminds prisoners of their abject state. He is transfixed by it—a green cross on a black field, on one side an olive branch promising clemency to those who repent and on the other a sword that will deal justice to the obstinate. Beneath the cross and its flanking olive and steel burns a thornbush as proof of the church's inextinguishable wisdom and of the fire that will consume those who persist in their rebellion. These emblems are encircled by the words *Exurge, Domine, et judica causam tuam*—Arise, O God, plead thine own cause—from the Seventy-fourth Psalm.

Francisco cannot take his eyes off the banner. It is like a monstrous ear that hears the confessions of a stream of prisoners and then goes forth to preside over the autos-da-fé. Finally, lifting his gaze to the ceiling, Francisco is dizzied by the famous vault that is the talk of the whole viceroyalty. Vividly painted, it consists of thirty-three thousand dovetailed pieces joined without a single nail and carved out of a noble wood brought by sea from Nicaragua.

Bailiffs sit in the corners of the room and keep an eye on him. One of the doors opens, and in comes a pale, bespectacled man. A shadowy figure, he neither looks up nor seems to register Francisco's presence but moves ponderously to the table and, with the deliberation of a priest at the altar, he sets down a pen, an inkwell, sheets of paper, and a tome bound in parchment. Then he arranges these items—the inkwell and pens to one side, the paper to the other, and the book in the center. He sits down

and joins his hands in prayer. Fixing his eyes on the black-and-green banner, he becomes as still as a corpse.

Soon the door opens again, and three judges in black gowns process through in single file. The atmosphere thickens and gives off a smell of death. The trio approaches the platform, where the tall chairs have been drawn back to receive them. The clerk, Juan Benavídez, rises and bows. The governor squeezes Francisco's arm to make him stand, and the sound of his clanking chains profanes the macabre pomp. Halting by their chairs, the judges cross themselves and pray. Then, as one, they sit down. The governor tugs at Francisco's

**Before him are three imposing chairs covered in green velvet and a long mahogany table with six legs shaped like sea monsters. In a place where no detail is arbitrary, what can these creatures mean?**

arm. The clerk turns his head, and his spectacles glare at Pradedá. Disconcerted, the governor drops Francisco's arm and leaves the room. So do the bailiffs. Only the three inquisitors, the clerk, and the prisoner remain. The trial begins.

### 3

This is the moment Francisco has been waiting for. Day after day and week after week he has imagined the court's questions, turned them over in his mind, and minutely rehearsed his answers. Now fear seizes him, and his mind goes blank. He knows only that the tribunal will treat him with the same spite it showed his father. His judges will ask him to speak the truth, and each of his words will be carefully set down and used against him at any given point.

Smoothing his thin mustache, one of the members of the tribunal orders the clerk to announce that the court is in session. Francisco learns that it is Friday, the twenty-third of July, 1627, and that the examining judges are the eminent doctors Juan de Mañozca, Andrés Juan Gaitán, and Antonio Castro del Castillo.

Inquisitor Gaitán—Viceroy Montesclaros's old antagonist—stares into Fran-

cisco's eyes. "Francisco Maldonado da Silva," he drones. "You will swear to tell the truth."

Francisco stares back. The two men's eyes meet like a first clash of swords as their opposing dogmas are set against each other. One man is a rigid defender of conformity, and the other a sensitive—and equally determined—proponent of dissent. The inquisitor hates and unwittingly fears the prisoner; the prisoner fears and unwittingly hates the inquisitor. They are about to lock horns in the uncertain pursuit of truth.

"Place your hand on this crucifix," the inquisitor commands.

From where Francisco sits the heads of the judges seem to be propped on the table,

with the backs of their chairs rising behind them like green crowns.

The three disembodied heads are ashen and gloomy. Although Francisco does not stir, he finds it hard

to control the trembling in his fingers.

"Sir," he says after a deep breath, "I am a Jew."

"That is the charge on which we are judging you."

"And that is why I cannot swear on the cross."

The clerk's face jerks up and his pen breaks.

"It is procedure," snaps Gaitán. "You must abide by procedure."

"I know."

"Do so, then."

"But in my case this procedure makes no sense. I beg you to understand."

"Are you telling us what does and does not make sense?" The judge glowers at the insolence. "Or are you trying to pass yourself off as a lunatic?"

"No, sir. But no oath will have meaning to me unless I swear on what I believe."

"What you believe has no meaning to us."

"But it does to me. As a Jew, I can swear only by the living God, who made heaven and earth."

As Benavídez scribbles away his handwrit-

ing grows larger and more uneven. The timbers of the ceiling creak. Its thousands of skillfully fitted sections have never before heard a reply like this one. To prevent the prisoner from having any idea of the effect of his words, the inquisitors armor themselves with calm.

“Are you trying to impose your beliefs on us?” asks Gaitán, making an effort to control his voice. “Your attitude will do you no good.”

“If I swear on the cross I’ll begin with a lie.”

Gaitán turns to the other inquisitors, and the three huddle together trying to bring their opinions into accord. The prisoner’s affront has disconcerted them. Francisco watches and waits.

“The prisoner may take the oath in his way,” says Juan de Mañozca in due course, “but let his obstinacy be put on record.”

For the first time ever the chamber echoes to the strange new oath. Now at last Francisco can throw off the mask he has worn for so long—a mask of shame, cowardice, and betrayal. No longer need he betray God, others, or himself. The interrogation begins, and he answers fully and directly, not hiding his alleged sins, not denying that he is a Jew or that he has practiced so-called abominations. He makes no attempt to confuse or mislead his judges.

The inquisitors are confronted by a problem they have never before come across. The prisoner seems sincere, and although he offers them a mixture of insult and frankness he neither evades their questions nor shrinks at the gravity of the charges against him. Yet he appears to derive morbid pleasure from pronouncing a word full of evil resonances, for he keeps repeating that he is a Jew.

Francisco tells them that he is a Jew, as was his father, a man punished by this tribunal, and his father’s fathers before him all the way back to the land of Israel. At the same time, he informs them that his mother was an old Christian, who died in her faith. He himself had been baptized in faraway Ibatín, he says, and confirmed in Córdoba by Bishop Trejo y Sanabria. Francisco then describes his solid reli-

gious background, saying he was a Catholic until the age of eighteen, at which time he was reunited with his father in Callao. Owing to the way his family had been treated, he had begun to have doubts, yet he continued to confess, to receive communion, to attend mass, and to live the obedient life of a good Catholic. But it was not until he read the *Scrutinio scripturarum* that his doubt took root. The book nauseated him. The poverty of the bogus debate between young Paul and senile Saul had revealed to Francisco not the church’s triumphs but its abuses. It was then that he had asked his father to teach him all about Judaism.

The torrent of blasphemies makes Gaitán and Castro del Castillo squirm. Juan de Mañozca, however, cuts in on Francisco and orders him to give evidence of his Catholic upbringing by crossing himself and reciting parts of the catechism.

Francisco falls abruptly silent. What is the point of this request? Is his Christian learning to be reduced to an examination for the illiterate? Are his judges making fun of him? Do they think he has not been speaking the truth? Then it comes to him that they want to find out if an admitted Jew can perform Catholic ritual acts without flinching.

“God’s law is not damaged by my making the sign of the cross or reciting prayers,” he says. He crosses himself and recites a few prayers and then the Ten Commandments.

The inquisitors look on with impassive faces. The clerk’s hand tears across the pages. He is on his fourth pen.

“Continue,” orders Mañozca.

Francisco moistens his lips with his tongue. Now that he no longer need hide his identity, now that he is no longer emasculated, he can present his life story generously, as between equals. He tells the inquisitors that he married one Isabel Otañez, an Old Christian born in Seville. They have a daughter and are expecting a second child. He describes the suffering that their separation has caused his wife, and he begs the eminent inquisitors for news of

her and implores them not to confiscate all of his property and belongings but to leave his family enough on which to subsist with dignity. His wife is a devout Christian, he emphasizes, and does not deserve to suffer for a faith she knows nothing of.

“With whom did you share the secret of your Judaism?” asks Gaitán.

The inevitable question at last. “They want names,” his father had told him. “They demand names. It’s not enough for them to see you repentant and in tears, but you must name someone else.” Francisco is not surprised by the question and knows they will ask it over and over again. He has an answer ready and prepared and he will use it, awake or asleep, in the courtroom or in the torture chamber. He says—and plans to go on saying—that he has spoken of his Judaism only with his father and his sister Isabel. His father is dead and his sister has denounced him.

“And nobody else?” demands one of the inquisitors.

“Nobody else,” says Francisco. “Had I not spoken to my sister, I would not be here today.”

#### 4

On his way to the dungeon to which he is being transferred, the prisoner is still in the grip of fear, but he thinks that so far he has acquitted himself reasonably well. He has confronted the most feared men in the viceroyalty and thrown in their faces his love for his Jewish roots. He has made the name of the one God resound from the rafters and, although weak and ill, has defied the tribunal’s arrogance. How many before him can have shown the judges that they are not all-powerful? Francisco’s body feels as light as a pack animal’s when suddenly relieved of its load. But in case he too should become arrogant, he reminds himself that he is little more than an unworthy servant of the Eternal One. Used to cowed prisoners, who lie to defend themselves, his inquisitors will now have to look on his case in another light. Perhaps the

shining angel that dwells in each human being, even the most pernicious, will help them see that right is on Francisco’s side.

His mind awirl, he pays no heed to where he is being taken. What does it matter? He barely notices when the tiles become adobe bricks and then a dirt floor. The darkness increases. He hears the clank of iron shackles and the groans of unseen prisoners. The Holy Office has held its preliminary hearing and has decided that Francisco is no longer an unclassified criminal but a full-fledged Jew, whose blood and spirit are contaminated. As such, he belongs in a small, damp space where his fiendish thoughts will be macerated. His blood cannot be changed, but his mind can be washed.

His jailers turn the key and bar his cell door. Everything has been arranged to make Francisco Maldonado da Silva accept that his insubordination has led him nowhere but to this pit and to acknowledge that on setting foot inside the prison vaults he has relinquished all his rights forever.

Meanwhile, the inquisitors exchange the pages that the clerk took down during the hearing. Although he has failed to record some of the prisoner’s infamous statements and been unable to duplicate the haughty tone used by da Silva when pronouncing them, Benavidez has managed to supply enough evidence to justify a harsh sentence. Further, what he has written bears out the records compiled in Chile after each interrogation, including the testimony of Isabel and Felipa Maldonado.

None of this, however, gives any clue to the degree of repentance that can be expected from the prisoner. His past history, his learning, and his evident courage may help him regain the true faith or, conversely, may lead him farther astray. Conviction for practicing Judaism has four possible outcomes. If there is reconciliation with the church, voluntary or forced, the guilty party does not forfeit his life. Should he not be reconciled and therefore be sentenced to the

stake, the Jew who repents at the eleventh hour will be spared the flames and mercifully granted a speedier death on the gallows or by garroting.

Andrés Juan Gaitán lays a paperweight on the pages and rests his head against the back of his chair. He is still angry at his colleagues for allowing da Silva to take the oath in his own way, an act that is tantamount to insulting the cross and that will only increase the prisoner's confusion. Mañozca and Castro del Castillo must be reminded that the Almighty is on one side alone, and that there is but one truth.

That da Silva is solely responsible for his actions, Gaitán does not doubt. The native-born doctor appears to be a solitary man, and there is no reason to believe that he has practiced Judaism with anyone other than his dead father or spoken about the subject to anyone other than his devout sister. Yet rather than accept his paltry significance and shrink before the majesty of the Holy Office, rather than tremble, sweat, and fall on his knees, the wretch impugns the true faith with his oath on the God of Israel. The man is clearly rebellious in the extreme.

Gaitán is tired. He must read reports, weigh evidence, evaluate confessions, judge, sentence. He has long since had enough. For the past two years, vexed by the troublesome viceroyalty of Peru, he has repeatedly requested permis-

sion to return to Spain. He knows full well, however, that his request will not be answered soon. The services he renders to the faith with incorruptible severity will be assessed, and he will be asked to continue to perform them for several years to come.

## 5

Francisco's wrists and ankles are now free, for there is no escape from the dungeon where he is kept. His narrow cell is furnished with a stone slab for his pallet and a box for the belongings that he brought from Chile. For hours on end, he stares at the high grill through which a mea-

ger shaft of light filters from an inner courtyard. The slow unfolding of the hours under Lima's perpetually overcast skies wearies him, and time and again he wonders whether he will be able to endure the trials to which the Holy Office has begun to subject him. The worst of these is being kept inactive inside the four walls of his cell.

The blacks who bring his food are despised creatures who take solace in despising those worse off than themselves. They let drop like crumbs the occasional phrase or word to tell Francisco that he may neither read nor write nor communicate with other prisoners, let alone with the outside world. He may, however, request a few comforts—a cloak, food, a stick of furniture, more candles—that may or may not be granted. Such privileges will be paid for with the money confiscated from him. Should his money run out, his privileges will cease.

After four days, he is made to put on the sackcloth again for a second hearing. As if he could possibly run away, the guards shackle his ulcerated limbs. Once more he is escorted by the prison governor and two blacks. Francisco is now aware that his cell is in the depths of the gloomy fortress, for he has to make his way along endless tunnels, climbing up and down

**The inquisitor hates and unwittingly fears the prisoner; the prisoner fears and unwittingly hates the inquisitor.**

steps, and passing through many doors before he enters the terrible chamber, whose coffered ceiling mocks him with its creaks and sighs.

Here again are the three high-backed, green-cushioned chairs, the six-legged table, the two candelabra, and the crucifix on which he refused to take the oath. In comes the gaunt Benavídez, who stares glassily at the desk on which he spreads his writing materials. He sits down, joins his hands in prayer, and contemplates the Holy Office's coat of arms. The side door opens and the three inquisitors enter. The hearing is a ceremony with a rigid sequence of

actions that allows for no change. The judges strut to the dais, their chairs are drawn back for them, and they stand momentarily still to make the sign of the cross and mutter a prayer.

Mañozca orders the prisoner to tell them anything he may have omitted at the previous hearing. Does this mean that they have accepted what he said before and will be more disposed to believe him this time? Francisco wonders whether the shining angel in each of them has persuaded them to recognize that his Jewishness is not an offense to God. He decides to press his advantage and show them that his behavior is not arbitrary but obeys the commandments laid down in the Bible. He confesses to having kept Saturdays holy, as the Book of Exodus ordains, and he recites the pertinent passage. He goes on to say that, to strengthen his spirits, he has often called to mind Deuteronomy, chapter 30, in which God commands Moses to make a covenant with the children of Israel. Again Francisco recites the passage.

Despite their impassive faces and the way one of the judges tries to hide his amazement by drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair, all three inquisitors are astounded to hear Fran-

conclude that the accused is no longer adding anything new. Then the governor and his assistants escort Francisco back to his cell. Now, in the asphyxiating abyss, he sits for days, for weeks, for months, waiting to be summoned again.

How long will they keep him here in utter solitude? The door to his cell opens only to let food in or to remove his slops. The isolation instills dread in him and lets loose an avalanche of despair. He talks to himself until he almost goes mad. An indistinct doorway looms. Beyond it is the void, the loss of hope. This is the moment the Inquisition is waiting for.

## 6

The Holy Office is confident that long, empty hours will erode a prisoner's resistance and deaden his convictions. But the Holy Office does not know Francisco Maldonado da Silva.

Fighting off apathy, Francisco decides to fill his waking hours with the one activity that the Inquisition cannot deprive him of. He will exercise his mind; he will think. Thought is his only weapon, and he must cherish it. Calling on memory, logic, and rhetoric, he intones prayers and recites aloud his beloved Psalms. He sum-

mons up texts from the depths of his mind and rehearses answers to thorny ques-

tions. At the same time, he dreams up questions to undermine dogmatic assertions. Little by little, he builds from inside himself the conversation his inquisitors deny him. He asks, he answers, he refutes, and again he asks. For each hearing his opponents grant him, a hundred hearings will take place in his mind.

His judges, meanwhile, have other matters on their hands. They are dealing with cases of idolatry and disputes with both civil and ecclesiastical authorities. Matters of protocol crop up daily. Financial problems are an ongoing concern. The viceroyalty is beset with blasphemy, dangerous visionaries, bigamy, and superstition,

**The Holy Office has decided that Francisco is no longer an unclassified criminal but a full-fledged Jew, whose blood and spirit are contaminated. He belongs in a small, damp space where his fiendish thoughts will be macerated.**

cisco voluntarily confessing his crime. Nor can they help being impressed by his mastery of Latin and his knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. The prisoner detects this and knows he has penetrated their tough hides. The clerk scribbles furiously but is resigned to being unable to set down such a stream of words in both Castilian and Latin. He limits himself to stating that the accused fluently recited the psalm *Ut quid Deus requilisti in finem* and a long prayer that begins *Domine Deus Omnipotens, Deus patrum nostrorum Abraham, Isaac et Jacob* as well as other prayers of Jewish significance.

The hearing goes on until the inquisitors

not to mention the sins of the clergy itself—seduction in the confessional, celebration of mass by those who are not qualified, friars taking wives or mistresses.

To Andrés Juan Gaitán it rankles that a Jew should have the nerve not merely to acknowledge his tainted blood but to rejoice in it. Unlike other heretics, who soon enough plead for mercy, Francisco makes no attempt to do so. He languishes in chains, shut away from all human contact, almost a dead man, yet continues to behave as if he were oblivious to his treatment. The judges are confounded. Surely, they think, his father must have told him that the very stones of the Inquisition's prisons can be made to weep. Gaitán wants his colleagues to see that they were naive in the case of Diego Núñez da Silva and that their leniency in accepting his reconciliation allowed him to return to his Jewish practices. This, Gaitán says, led directly to the contamination of Núñez da Silva's son. Gaitán maintains that for order to exist, for Christ and the church to reign, the Inquisition must always demand that little bit more of itself. On this subject, he takes issue with Antonio Castro del Castillo, whom he regards as too faint of heart.

## 7

The black men who bring Francisco his food are startled to find him staring at the wall as if he were reading. When after a moment or two he turns his head toward them, they hand him a steaming pan.

"Reading is forbidden," one of the blacks reminds the prisoner, although in fact the cell contains no books.

Francisco nods and lifts the spoon to his mouth. The second black examines the wall, where he imagines that some words have been scratched. Seeing nothing, he runs his fingers over the surface to convince himself that his eyes are not playing tricks on him. Then he stares at the prisoner, who seems to have the magic power of capturing the invisible.

"Reading is forbidden," he echoes, "but you can ask for other things." His tone of voice is respectful.

Francisco raises his eyebrows.

"More to eat, another blanket, another chair," says the first man.

Francisco scrapes the pan empty. For once the two blacks have not been quick to leave. Something about the prisoner fascinates them.

"What's your name?" he asks one.

"Pablo."

"And you?"

"Simón."

"Pablo and Simón," says Francisco with faint eagerness, "there is something I want. I want to see the governor."

"You can," says Pablo, and the two smile.

That afternoon the crossbar is lifted, and a key turns in the lock. Bartolomé de Pradedá comes in with Pablo on his heels.

"What is it?" the governor raps out. He seems shorter and more potbellied than on previous occasions.

Francisco is not sure whether to make his request point-blank. The weeks have been heavy with silence, during which he has recited whole books of the Bible from memory and recollected a good part of his library. He had rushed through this activity in an effort to stave off the abysmal loneliness.

"I need to speak to the inquisitors," Francisco says.

"Another hearing?" Pradedá is sullen and reproachful. As head of the jail, however, he is obliged to deal with the prisoners' requests.

A few days later, wearing the sackcloth garment, Francisco is led in shackles before the three judges. One of them asks the clerk to record the voluntary nature of the hearing that is about to take place. They then stare at Francisco.

"I am Jew inside and out," he tells them with suicidal candor, hoping to move their souls and break down their granite hostility. "At first, I was only a Jew on the inside, but surely you

appreciate my decision not to hide behind a mask.” He pauses, weighing his words. “In telling the truth I have put my life in jeopardy. I may even have condemned myself to death. Yet I feel profound inner peace. Only a man who for years has had to live a double life and to hide his true self in fear and shame knows what such duplicity costs. It is far more than a burden. It is a hook that bites the flesh even in one’s dreams.”

**Should he not be reconciled and therefore be sentenced to the stake, the Jew who repents at the eleventh hour will be spared the flames and mercifully granted a speedier death on the gallows or by garroting.**

“It is wicked to lie, of course,” says Juan de Mañozca in an icy tone. “But worse when the lie conceals apostasy.”

At the inquisitor’s hard words, Francisco’s eyes shine as if with tears. “I did not lie to hide apostasy but to hide my faith,” he says. “To hide my ancestors, my heart, my very self, as if all of these were shameful.”

“They were shameful if they ran counter to the truth.”

“What truth?” Francisco asks, and he hears the slight echo of his voice in the high-ceilinged chamber.

“Why did you request this hearing?” demands Gaitán. “You have confessed nothing new.”

Francisco knows that he is less than David, while his judges are more than Goliath. He is not trying to defeat them, however, but to make them more human.

“I wanted to show you that I have not taken on my Jewish identity lightly,” he tells them. “For years my conscience was racked, and I could find no other moral course except the one I have taken.”

He pauses, and the inquisitors fidget with impatience.

“To be a full Jew,” Francisco goes on, “a man must undergo a painful test that God and Abraham agreed in their covenant, as is plainly set out in Genesis, chapter 17. May I remind

you of it? *This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you.* I say all this with respect so that you will give up the idea that on some whim or in an act of irresponsibility I have betrayed one faith—a faith I no longer believe

in, however much I try—and am dabbling in another. To take this step I have had to endure the fire of doubt,

to spurn danger, and to sacrifice innumerable privileges. I have had to wound my own flesh, sinking a scalpel into my body. I have fulfilled God’s command with all my heart. The faith of my fathers is no less demanding than Christ’s. It too demands fasting and suffering, yet it binds me with the Eternal One and makes me feel worthy. That is why I spoke to my sister Isabel—only to my sister Isabel—who is as sweet and understanding as my poor mother was. I wanted to bring her into the family of which we are part and which goes back to biblical times. Her fear, however, outweighed her reason, and she could not see that when one obeys the commandments one attains the peace of God. This is what I wanted you to know.”

Francisco bows his head. Antonio Castro del Castillo is so moved at the strength with which the prisoner defends his errors that he has to dig his nails into his palms to quell his churning bowels. Out of the corner of his eye Castro del Castillo glances at the stony-faced, uncompromising Gaitán, who a few days earlier had reminded him that a good inquisitor never regretted being too harsh but might find reason to regret being soft. The judge presses his hand to his belly and says a Hail Mary in an effort to control his emotions.

On the way back to the dungeon, the governor suddenly begins to show concern at the chain that keeps tripping up Francisco. The

black men are too scared to help the prisoner, but Pradedo bends down and lifts the dangling fetters. Never before has he extended such a courtesy to a prisoner. As they trudge along the dank passages, the governor gives Francisco a sidelong glance and commits another breach of regulations. He speaks to him.

“I managed to hear part of your deposition and I still find it unbelievable,” he says.

“What is it you found so astonishing?” asks Francisco.

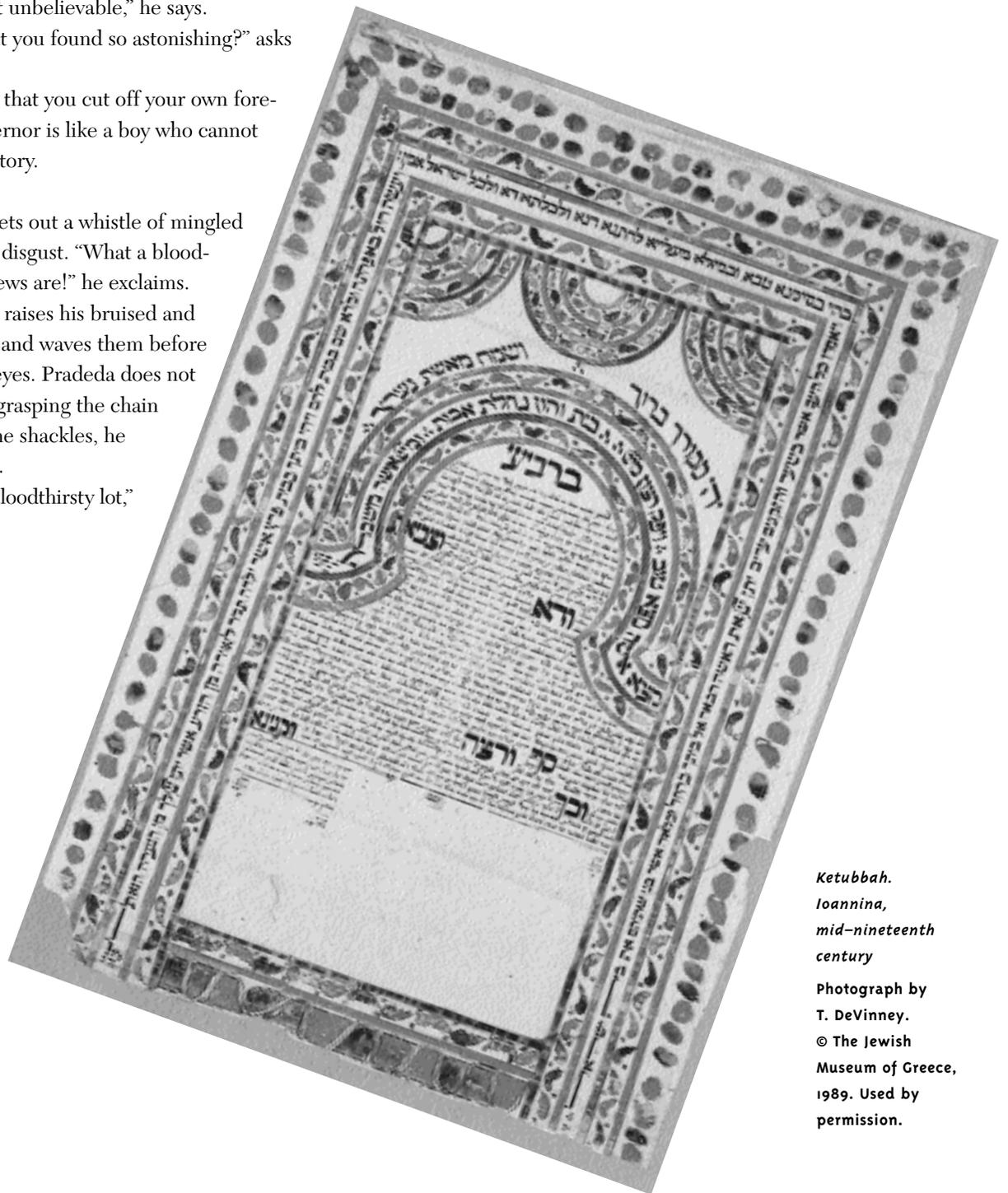
“Is it true that you cut off your own fore-skin?” The governor is like a boy who cannot resist a horror story.

“It is.”

Pradedo lets out a whistle of mingled admiration and disgust. “What a blood-thirsty lot the Jews are!” he exclaims.

Francisco raises his bruised and bleeding wrists and waves them before the governor’s eyes. Pradedo does not notice. His fist grasping the chain that connects the shackles, he shakes his head.

“What a bloodthirsty lot,” he says again. ◊



*Ketubah.  
Ioannina,  
mid-nineteenth  
century*

Photograph by  
T. DeVinney.  
© The Jewish  
Museum of Greece,  
1989. Used by  
permission.