

**Esther Piza**  
**Joshua Piza's 8<sup>th</sup> child**

1831-1917

From the time of the marriage of Joshua and Hannah in 1816 until twenty-one years later, there was seldom an interval of more than two years of their lives that was not punctuated by the birth of a baby. Their sixth child, Esther, arrived just two years and one week after her sister Sarah.

Like the rest of the Piza girls, she grew to be tall and handsome, but in that family of vivacious young women, she was notable for her calm, even, undemonstrative temperament. As she matured she had many admirers, and as had been the case with Judith, most were among the Christian set. There was an attractive Cuban captain, but because of their different faiths, she sent him on his way. There was also a Danish officer, Sonderberg – and he declared himself astonished that she could be so narrow as to refuse him on account of his religion. Esther's cool well behaved heart never led her to do anything that her sensible, clear-thinking head did not advise. Her parents never felt any cause to worry on her account. And she was not without charm for her own set: young Solomon Maduro, a youth about her own age was desperately in love with her, but he did not especially appeal to her.

One evening, about two years after old Joshua's death, the family sat at the table finishing the evening meal. The widow, in her black lace cap, presided at the head; while at the foot sat her son Jacob, home on one of his occasional visits from Panama. Along the sides of the board – which had formerly stretched to a considerable length – were disposed only the four girls, Esther, 21, Rebecca, 19, Leah, 11, and Rachel, 15; for the two step-sons and the three eldest daughters were married and had their own homes, while Samuel was now, as almost always, away on business. However those present formed an eager audience for whatever the eldest son of the house might say. Between bites of a juicy mango he was relating the events of the day. He mentioned that one Belisario, a particularly reserved English gentleman, had called on him at his office and surprised Jacob by his cordiality and the earnest request that he visit him. Coco had been so taken aback by the unexpectedness of the invitation that he had almost forgotten his manners and failed to return him the compliment. But he had run after Belisario to invite him to call at the Piza household.

Scarcely had he finished repeating the incident, and listened to the wondering comments of his mother and sisters that a man known to be so coldly distant as that English salesman should have sought him out, when there was a ring at the doorbell and there stood Henry Mendes Belisario. He had followed close on the heels of the enforced invitation.

Perhaps Esther was not as surprised as the other were, for at synagogue the preceding Sabbath, seated between her sisters Judith and Sarah, Esther had felt the eyes of this stranger focused on her all through the service. Her embarrassment was not relieved by the whispered comments of the young matrons: "That man is surely in love with you, my dear!" "I never saw a man show so plainly he was in love!"

The young matrons were right, and it did not take the Englishman long to declare himself. He had chanced to hear her voice when he first arrived in St. Thomas as he was strolling behind her while she conversed with a friend. Though he could not see her face, he had fallen in love with her soft melodious voice and gentle dignified bearing. Inquiring, he easily found out that she was Esther Piza and he had taken the opportunity of seeing her at the Saturday morning service. Esther accepted her suitor and they were married on the Eighteenth of August, 1852.

Belisario's business took him to Baltimore and the bride accompanied her aristocratic husband. There was an interesting story about the origin of his beautiful name. In early days one of his ancestors had been attached to the Spanish Court. An opera called "Belisario" was to be given before the king, when the principal singer fell ill. The young Jew offered to take the role, and filled it with such distinction that the king gave him a coat-of-arms, and the name "Belisario". Henry's family was

connected by blood with the best Jewish houses in England. He was related to Grace Aguilar. In due time news came back to St. Thomas that a son was born, and that they had called him Jacob after his father and her brother. Then came more news, bad news: Belisario was dead. Coco made the trip and brought home his sister and her infant to his mother's house. Henry had not left his widow provided for; he was only a salesman, and with his death his income ceased. She returned to live with her dependent mother.

Meanwhile there was a constant stir of life in the active Piza clan. Something was always going on in the way of births or weddings. In the four years after Esther became a widow, her two younger sisters, Rebecca and Leah, were married, and Esther herself, doubly interesting as an experienced young widow, began to be recognized as eligible. With an amused smile at his name which suggested to her the infernal regions, she dismissed Mr. Hellman, a German. But her old admirer, Solomon Maduro, son of *Hazan* S.L. Maduro, began to be persistent. Esther did not want to marry this young clerk. Her marital happiness had been brief, and she had suffered tortures in nursing her baby. She was content to stay in her mother's house; her unemotional nature did not demand more. But her mother did! Hannah spoke often on the subject of marriage. She argued with her placid daughter, and held up the spectre of lifelong dependence on her brothers and married sisters as the

alternative to settling down with this worthy young man. The battle was waged for a long time, and as was generally the case the Matriarch won. On September first, 1858, Esther Piza Belisario became the wife of her suitor, faithful for so many years, at a ceremony performed by the groom's father, the Reverend S.L. Maduro.

They began life together with very small means. Esther's calm even temper and philosophical outlook saw them placidly through the adjustments incident to the second marriage. Children came fast. Samuel born in 1859 was named after Solomon's father, the minister. Joshua, who arrived in 1861, was called so for Esther's reverend parent. He was followed by Judith in 1863 (named after her paternal grandmother), and Ann in 1865, slightly modifying the name of the maternal grandmother. It was a constant struggle to keep the growing family comfortable.

But Jakie Belisario had an aunt in London, wealthy and childless, who had long besought Esther to give her her brother's child to bring up. She could do so much more for the boy than his mother and stepfather could. Sadly, for the welfare of her son, Esther acquiesced, and Jakie, a lad of eleven, was taken to London.

The necessity for more money, finally led Solomon to venture into business for himself; and soon he began to make a

good living. More children came, until their offspring numbered eight. Henry, born in 1867, was, surprisingly, named after his mother's first husband. Miriam arrived eighteen months later, then Lilla and when their youngest was born in 1873, Esther called him Montefiore, after Sir Moses Montefiore, for whose character and career she had a tremendous admiration. (She declared that had it not been for the great philanthropist, Queen Victoria would not have been born in England, and so could never have reigned as queen).

The business prospered, and Esther went with Solomon on a trip to the States. We remember this visit for it was on this occasion (1862) in Philadelphia that the Maduro and Brandon families met for the first time. While Esther sat talking to Mrs. Jacob Brandon, whose seven-year-old son David was playing about the room, Esther was carrying unborn the little daughter Judith, who would seventeen years later, marry him.

When Sam was twelve and Josh was eleven, they were sent to Hamburg to receive a thorough education. With them went Bienvenida's boy, Sam Lindo, about the same age. The lads boarded with the David Pardos, but their uncle Ben Luria kept an eye on them. By the end of four years Solomon Maduro's business was showing definite signs of reverse, and the students were sent for. Not only was the expense of their board and schooling more than could be spared from a large and hungry

family, but their actual help was needed. The lads must go to work. Solomon taught them book-keeping and methods. Then his store failed, and the unhappy man, weighed down by his debts, collapsed in health and spirit. But the boys took hold at once: Josh went to Costa Rica as clerk to his uncle Elias Maduro; while young Sam, at seventeen, departed for Panama to enter business on his own account. He was entrusted by his father with merchandise stock from his ruined business amounting to four thousand dollars.

Esther remained at home and did what she could to help the family exchequer. A "droga-bowl" or "tray" was the solution in those days when the young lady who worked away from her own home was unknown. This was a method of selling wares that had been taken up by several of the more enterprising women of St. Thomas. They imported from abroad small articles, such as fine scented soaps, perfumes, laces, ribbons and braids and the jeweled hair nets that were so much the vogue. They sent out pleasant Negro women, crisply dressed, wearing gay bandanas on their heads, they carried wide wooden vessels much on the style of chopping-bowls, heaped up with the fineries. Announced by the cry "Droga-bowl going by!" they went from house to house with their wares, selling their luxuries among the wealthier classes. Esther had three or four of these 'sellers' working for her. Some of them developed qualities of

real salesmanship; so she eked out enough to carry them through the darkest of their days.

But her clear eye saw no future for their family in St. Thomas, and she pleaded with her husband to leave. Let them all go to Panama where Sam for six months had been struggling to make a success of his venture. But confidence seemed to have deserted the unhappy Solomon; he could not bear to think of starting anew in a strange country at his age (he was forty-seven). "How can I leave my beautiful St. Thomas?" he faltered. "And will the beauty feed us all?" his practical wife inquired. As he could not summon the resolution to move, Esther gathered up her six children and departed for Panama, to make a home for Sam. The lad was working valiantly, and soon became the mainstay of the family. His mother had saved a little from the "droga bowl" undertaking and this she invested in her boy's store. As a business-woman her judgment was clear and far-sighted, and the lad found her advice well worth taking. In six months Solomon joined them and their business became known as "Maduro e Hijos" (Maduro and Sons), for Josh had left his position in San José, and joined them in the store.

Young Sam was virtually the head of his mother's household. It was he who punished the younger children and made rules for their behavior; for Solomon was soft and easy going. Children's conversation was not permitted at meals: they must sit just so

(except little Monty who always did exactly as he pleased about everything.) Esther brought them up to be industrious and economical. Her lack of imagination in training them is illustrated by an incident which occurred when the girls were small: before she went out one day she set Dudu and Anna to work helping Cookie to make a prune pudding. Her parting injunction was "Don't put prune seeds in your nose!" Days later attention was called to little Anna by a stubborn snuffle which did not yield to the ordinary treatment for cold. The child suffered with catarrh for months, and then she began to be troubled with intense headaches. When a new physician was consulted, he found that a prune-pit had been shoved up her little nose and was sprouting. With the removal of the cause, the illness disappeared.

Solomon died at the age of fifty-seven. Maduro e Hijos had paid many of the debts incurred by his fall in St. Thomas. But on his death-bed Solomon made Sam promise not to leave one creditor unsatisfied. It was customary, in the case of a failure, to make an arrangement for the settlement of debts, but Sam would accept no compromise, and paid one hundred cents on every dollar owed.

The younger boys, Henry and the handsome Monty, were given the good education that Sam and Josh had to forgo. They studied in London and in New York. It was in New York that

Monty later studied and practiced medicine. Henry later entered the family business and successfully managed the retail end.

Jacob Belisario, the half-brother adopted by his wealthy aunt, had met with a sad fate. Always a retiring artistic lad, he had kept in touch with his mother by letter and her occasional visits to England to see him. Just after his schooling was completed he paid his first visit to his family in St. Thomas. Mrs. Raphael, his foster mother, had died and made Jakie her heir. He arranged that on his return to England from his trip, he would invest his money in land and live the life of a gentleman farmer. But on his visit to his mother's house he behaved strangely – imagined himself watched and the victim of persecution. Soon he became so violently insane that he had to be taken to an asylum. He lived for ten years but never recovered his mental health. When he died in a Philadelphia *maison de santé* his mother inherited \$25,000 that remained from the fortune left him by his aunt. This money was expended mainly on Monty's expensive medical education, European trip and elaborate office equipment.

Esther's later years were placid and comfortable. Her eight children all married. The conscientious Samuel would not form any alliance until he saw his sisters cared for, and his mother established at ease. At the age of thirty-three, he married Lilian Brandon. Josh had married her sister Blanche three years before,

but she had died at the birth of their baby. Judith, when not quite seventeen, had married David Brandon; she in time found herself the aunt-in-law of her two older brothers! Lilla Maduro at nineteen had wedded her cousin Jacob Luria. Anna had married Edward L. Salmon who was twenty-one years her senior. Miriam was twice wed: first to Marcus Ascoli, a middle-aged Frenchman who died shortly after their son René was born; then practically duplicating her mother's experience of double matrimony, wedding her first admirer, who in this case was Herbert de Sola. Monty, "Dr. Maduro", united with Lydia Wolf in 1900. After eighteen years of widowhood Josh again took a mate: he chose Estelle Delvalle, the girl who as an infant had been adopted by her childless aunt. Henry married in New York Fanny Eder, whose father had pioneered in Columbia. Esther's grandchildren, scattered over the earth, numbered more than three dozen.

Interrupting its even tenor only by an occasional trip abroad, Esther lived out her comfortable old age in Panama. She continued to be a partner in her sons' business and was consulted on all matters of policy. A branch store, selling men's clothing and furnishing, was about to be opened in New York; when Esther discovered it was to operate on the Sabbath, she refused to have anything to do with the enterprise. The venture was not a success; and she undoubtedly saved herself much worry by her decision. Desirous that the young people of the Panama

community should know something of their religion, she organized and financed a Sabbath School which was led by her brother-in-law, Jacob Maduro.

In the big rambling house above Maduro e Hijos' store the placid widow lived, devotedly cared for by her daughter Anna, who had returned with her three boys to the maternal roof after the death of her husband. They kept open house, and sumptuous meals were served there. Early guests would always find their hostess ready, rocking calmly in her favorite chair on the balcony-sitting-room that looked out on the courtyard; her agile fingers were usually engaged in the cross-stitch embroidery with which she showered her relatives. (What household of the family is without a "God Bless Our Home" done by her hand?) While her sister Bienvenida Lindo had cared to read only newspapers and current events. Esther Maduro, otherwise practical and matter-of-fact, reveled in romantic novels.

She died in 1918 in her eighty-eighth year of life, and in the full possession of all her faculties. She was the longest lived of her long-lived generation.

Reprinted from: *The Chronicle of Joshua Piza and His Descendants*, by Vida Lindo Guiterman, New York.

Copied with courtesy of Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati Campus, Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion.