

CHAPTER ONE

The story of Rabbi Yossi Wallis and of Arachim starts long before 1979, when the organization was first formed.

Perhaps it begins a few hundred years ago, with one Rafael Vallis, the last Jew to be put to death at a public auto-da-fé in Spain. Rafael Vallis was a Jew of iron will, a Jew who would not bend, a Jew who stubbornly resisted the Catholic Church until the last breath had left his tortured body.

Every person is partially a product of his DNA and Rabbi Wallis is no exception. In order to understand who Rabbi Yossi Wallis is and how he developed into the person he became, one has to go back to that evil time when Jews were targeted by the Catholic Church for conversion or death.



Having grown up without the luxury of grandparents—his had been murdered in the Holocaust—Yossi Wallis’s sole connection to the past was through his parents. As he got older and felt the need to fill in the blanks in his family history, he naturally turned to his father for assistance.

“Abba,” Yossi said, “I would like your help in sketching a family tree. Tell me about your father and your grandfather.”

“I remember, as a child back in Poland, a *Chumash* that occupied a prominent place of honor in our home,” his father replied. “It was ancient, passed down from father to son for generations. When you opened the cover you’d find a list of all the people who had owned this *Chumash*. Every father inscribed his name on the inside cover, and also wrote down what country the family was living in at that time. When the owner passed away and the *Chumash* was handed down to the next in line, his first task would be to inscribe how many years his father had lived and when he had passed away. This *Chumash* was a precious family artifact that was to be preserved at any cost. It would have been my greatest pleasure and honor to preserve this link to our history, but our entire family was sent to the camps and, as you know, there were no personal libraries there for the inmates’ use. The *Chumash* and most of the information contained on the front cover were lost forever. But there are a number of details that I remember, such as the name of the first person on the list and some of the countries that our ancestors passed through on their improbable journey through Europe to Poland.

“The first name on the list was Rafael Vallis from Majorca in Spain.”

“What happened to him?” Yossi, intrigued, asked his father.

“Rafael Vallis was put to death—burned at the stake in an *auto-da-fé* at the hands of the Inquisition, but I don’t recall the dates.”

“What else do you remember from the *Chumash*?”

“I remember that we passed through Holland and Italy, and that our family made a stop in Vienna, Austria, before moving to Poland, where we remained until the war.”

His father reflected for a moment before continuing.

“The fact that the Wallis family owned such a *Chumash* wasn’t really so remarkable. There were many families who recorded similar lists in a favored prayer book or *Chumash*, which they handed down from father to son just as we did.”

“Why was this such a common tradition?”

“Take my family for example,” his father replied. “When they were exiled from Spain they had no idea where they were heading or what awaited them when they got there. All they knew

was that life was filled with challenges and the world was a difficult place for a Jew. So they wrote down the barest details—just enough information to make sure they never forgot their roots—where they were from and why they had to leave.”

Yossi listened with rapt interest. This was the first time he was hearing any of this and it was fascinating. To think that the Wallis family had its origins in Spain of all places! But though it was interesting information, he didn't see what relevance it had for the Wallis family in this day and age.



The years flew by. Having organized seminars in South America, Arachim had a team of lecturers on staff who were proficient in Spanish. With the idea of organizing a seminar for Spanish Jews germinating in his brain, Rabbi Wallis invited Yisroel Friedman, editor of the Israeli daily newspaper *Yated Ne'eman*, to travel to Spain with him to investigate the Jewish situation in cities like Madrid and Toledo. He explained to Rabbi Friedman that the Wallis family was able to trace its roots back to Majorca and that he was curious what a trip to Spain would uncover about his own family history.

“Let's see what we come up with. Who knows, maybe there's a story buried amid the ancient buildings and artifacts of a long-ago world.”

As a journalist, Rabbi Friedman was intrigued. As the CEO of Arachim, so was Rabbi Wallis. The pair traveled to Spain, did some groundwork, and considered possible locations for seminars. It was a fascinating trip, but as he returned to Eretz Yisrael Rabbi Wallis wasn't sure what kind of future (if any) Arachim had in Spain.

One afternoon sometime later, Rabbi Wallis's son Asaf traveled to visit a friend in a Haifa hospital. While sitting in the waiting room, he happened to pick up a copy of the newspaper *Mekor Rishon*. An article immediately caught his attention.

The government of Spain consented to allow a team of researchers to enter the official archives of the Inquisition for historical research purposes.

The investigative team uncovered the name of the last Jews to be burned at the stake, in 1691. They were Rafael Vallis, his student Rafael Benito Terongi, and Terongi's sister, Catalina Terongi. They lived in Majorca and theirs was the last official auto-da-fé carried out by the Inquisition on Spanish soil.

Asaf called his father on the spot. "Abba, remember when Saba told you about his family's *Chumash* with the names inside the cover and how the name Rafael Vallis from Majorca, Spain, was the first name on the list?"

"Yes?"

"A team of researchers from Eretz Yisrael just returned from a trip to the Inquisition's archives in Madrid and they discovered that not only was Rafael Vallis burned by the Inquisition, he was one of the last Jews to be killed in that way in Spain."

The article had been written by an Israeli journalist named Birnbaum, who had been part of the team that had gone through the Inquisition records. Originally from Argentina, Birnbaum spoke Spanish fluently and was apparently quite an expert on Spanish-Jewish history. Rabbi Wallis called him, introduced himself, and asked the journalist to come meet with him at Arachim headquarters. Mr. Birnbaum accepted the invitation and, sitting with Rabbi Wallis in his office, related the epic story of Rafael Vallis and the Inquisition.

"In all probability," Birnbaum told the Arachim CEO, "this Rafael Vallis was your great-great-great-great-grandfather. The fact that he was from Majorca is in itself proof of this, because the name Vallis, which means 'valley' in Spanish, was bestowed upon the family by the Church when they originally converted. The Vallis name was only given to one Jewish Marrano family—and that family resided in Majorca."

"You have gotten us off to a very good start," Rabbi Wallis told the journalist, "but I need more information. This is my family history we're talking about and you've whetted my appetite for more. I want to know what happened to the family after the auto-da-fé. I want to know if there are any members of the Vallis

family still living in Majorca or any other part of Spain. I want to get to the bottom of this.”

“I’ll be very happy to help you out,” Birnbaum offered.

With the Spanish-speaking journalist on board, Rabbi Wallis was ready to return to Spain. He picked up the phone, dialed Yisroel Friedman from *Yated Ne’eman*, and told him that things were moving.

“Yisroel, I think we’re standing on the cusp of a tremendous story. Let’s return to Spain and check this whole thing out.”

Rabbi Friedman didn’t need to be asked twice. Any journalist would have jumped at the opportunity. A few days later, they were boarding a plane. Destination: Madrid, Spain—Inquisition headquarters.

Team Wallis was allowed into the archives—a seemingly endless array of documents describing the thousands of cases handled by the Inquisition over its years of operation. Mr. Birnbaum knew in which section to look, and it wasn’t long before they were holding the case file of Rafael Vallis in their hands. It was over 1,000 pages long, filled with the densely flowing script of the Inquisition scribe who covered the trial and the dramatic events that transpired in the Inquisition dungeons and torture chambers in copious—and horrific—detail.

Historically, the Inquisition’s official job was to investigate any Spanish citizen who had accepted the Church’s offer to convert, making sure that they had not reverted to their original religion. When King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella first instituted the Inquisition, many Spanish Jews sold their businesses, converted their savings into gold and diamonds, and abandoned Spain for friendlier shores. Unfortunately this was not financially viable for people who made their money from the leasing of property. Selling was not an option, since they would have received a fraction of the value. They were trapped. It was those Jews who often ended up converting to Christianity, Marranos’ living secret lives as Jews.

* There are several terms for the Jews forced to convert to Christianity in Spain. *Anusim*, literally “coerced,” is a halachic term for any Jew forced to convert to another religion. *Conversos*, literally “converts,” was coined by the Christian

Secret Jews who were found to be derelict in their relationship to their adopted faith were arrested, their property confiscated and divided between the Church and the Spanish government. Of course, avarice being what it is, this meant that the Inquisition focused on the wealthier Jews, and an entire network of spies were soon operating within the *converso* neighborhoods.

The Vallis file was an eye-opener. Since the majority of the family's wealth had been in property and buildings, the Church had been keen to find a reason to arrest them. But the extent of the family wealth ended up being detrimental to both church and state, since the lawyers for the government and the Church weren't able to arrive at a mutually satisfactory agreement. According to the case files, the warring factions never managed to come to terms and the property had never been divided, remaining embroiled in legal holdups until this very day! This meant that the Vallis family fortune was still theoretically available to be reclaimed from the Spanish government, and it also meant that the file had never been closed and remained active despite having been left to gather dust in the archives for a few hundred years.

There was one gigantic question running through Rabbi Wallis's brain: Why did the Inquisition arrest Rafael Vallis? What crime had his ancestor been accused of?

After reading through a few hundred pages of Spanish script, they eventually uncovered the answer. The Vallis family lived in Majorca, an island off the coast of Spain. It made sense for them to use the adjacent ocean for commerce. Rafael had been a successful businessman, specializing in import/export. His line of work had put him in touch with sailors and ship captains on a regular basis, and made him the de facto liaison between his community of *anusim* and the Jewish world that existed outside Spain. Vallis had been placed under scrutiny by the Holy Office of the Inquisition and their network of spies had been given strict

Church. *Marrano* literally means "swine" in Spanish, and was a derogatory term for the Jews in Spain who chose to convert. In this book I have tried to use whichever terms seems the most appropriate.

orders to keep him under close surveillance. No one doubted that Vallis was breaking the law; the only question was how.

With an entire team of Inquisition spies working full-time on the Vallis operation, it wasn't long before the order was given for his arrest.



Ten o'clock in the morning. Palma de Majorca. The palm fronds were swaying silently in the crisp ocean breeze as the powerful Spanish sun began its inevitable climb to the center of the sky. The city streets were serene and undisturbed. All was silent save for the sound of a child laughing in a neighboring courtyard.

Suddenly the tranquil atmosphere was replaced by terror as a black coach pulled by two powerful horses turned the corner, coming to a halt outside the Vallis home. A squat monk in a black cloak emerged from the coach, a rolled-up scroll of parchment clutched tightly in his hand. If the street had been previously silent, now it had acquired the feeling of a tomb.

The monk strode nimbly around the coach and up to the front door. He knocked three times. The door was opened by a maid in uniform, who stared at the visitor, her face chalky white.

"Please call your master," said the monk.

It wasn't a request.

"Yes, Father," she replied, and scurried off to do his bidding.

Rafael Vallis presented himself to the monk within minutes.

"Good morning, Father, how can I help you?"

"You are ordered to accompany me to the headquarters of the Inquisition."

"On what charges?"

"You know your crimes. Pack a bag and come with me."

Vallis returned a few minutes later, satchel in hand, a grave expression on his face. His weeping wife stood in the doorway as he was ordered into the dreaded black coach with the Inquisition crest on its doors. With a casual flick of his whip, the coachman sent the horses down the peaceful street in the direction of the Inquisition headquarters of Palma de Majorca. On arrival, Rafael Vallis was tortured and

interrogated ceaselessly and mercilessly, as the agents of the Inquisition attempted to learn everything they could about his sins.



The Vallis file, now in his Israeli descendant's hands, cited some of the instructions that Rafael, under torture, admitted having received from rabbinical authorities abroad.

"We recommend that you instruct your coreligionists in one particular mitzvah which should be carried out, come what may."

The team was very curious. Which mitzvah had the rabbis from abroad chosen for the Jews of Spain to perform no matter what?

"We suggest that Spanish Jews keep the Fast of Esther to the best of their abilities. This is the most vital mitzvah for your community to keep right now."

The Inquisition files detailed the interrogations to which Rafael was subjected as they attempted to uncover the extent of his crimes.

Inquisitor: "Why did you specifically instruct your fellow Marranos to keep the Fast of Esther? What is so special about that particular commandment?"

Rafael Vallis: "I was given to understand by the rabbis from abroad that the reason it is so important that the Jews of Spain fast on that day is because through this action, they will never forget who they are and where they come from."

Inquisitor: "How so?"

Rafael Vallis: "Queen Esther was the first Marrano in Jewish history. On the surface she pretended to be like everyone else, but on the inside, she never ceased keeping the commandments and acting like a daughter of Israel. Remembering the Fast of Esther, which commemorates her bravery, will also remind us who we are and the life we used to lead. Another additional reason for choosing a fast day for our commandment is because it is a very easy commandment to keep from a practical point of view, since nobody has to know if a person is choosing not to eat."

The files stated that Rafael Vallis was charged with spreading the awareness of this commandment to his male coreligionists,

including his student and relative, Rafael Benito Terongi, who was also being held by the Inquisition. Terongi's sister, Catalina Terongi, was arrested for doing the same among the community of female conversos. After being subjected to unspeakable tortures on the dreaded rack and wheel, the Inquisition obtained Vallis's confession and he was put on trial, where an Inquisition judge, face covered with a cowl, read out his sentence in flat tones.

"You have been sentenced by the Holy Office of the Inquisition to be burned at the stake for what you've done. If you would have contented yourselves with performing a commandment or two in the privacy of your own home, that would have been one thing. But you didn't stop there. You were determined to instigate rebellion, while promulgating unrest within the newly converted members of our faith. By spreading the edicts of the rabbinical authority from abroad, you have overstepped all boundaries.

"And so, by order of the Church, all of you have been sentenced to be burned at the stake. Before you are taken to the pyre, however, you will be tortured in the Inquisitional dungeons for an additional two years in punishment for your heinous crimes against the church."



There were many ways to kill a Marrano. It all depended on the severity of his crimes and whether or not he had officially repented for his sins. Neither Rafael Vallis nor Rafael Benito Terongi or his sister Catalina Terongi had expressed any desire to repent and it was therefore decided to punish them in the worst way possible. Instead of binding them to the wood that would then be set on fire, the three were to be placed in close proximity to the flames—close enough for the flames to burn them, far enough for it to take an awfully long time. The Church, in its mercy, had their priestly representative standing by, cross in hand, waiting for the prisoner to express a desire for repentance. The moment this occurred, the priest would approach the burning Marrano, wait for him to express a sincere desire to repent, and then the man would be removed from the fire. (Generally, he would still be killed, but in a less painful way.) Rafael Vallis

and the Terongis had been provided with ample opportunities to do “*teshuvah*” throughout their incarceration, but had never once shown any interest in returning to the life of a Spanish Christian. The Church was very angry with them and intent on punishing them to the fullest extent of the law.

The handwritten files uncovered in the Inquisitional archives were fascinating to read: the tight, flowing script bearing testimony to the utmost seriousness with which the case had been treated. Yossi Wallis and his comrades read and read, assimilating every detail of the investigation, interrogation, subsequent years of punishment and torture, and the eventual execution.

Mr. Birnbaum translated further.

“On the day of the auto-da-fé,” he told them, “30,000 citizens of Palma de Majorca gathered to watch the spectacle in the grand square situated directly in front of the local municipal seat of government. In a complex religious ceremony that lasted half the day, the prisoners were eventually removed from the Palace of the Inquisition and led through the streets of the town for about a kilometer, until they reached the square where the auto-da-fé was to take place. A giant wooden cross was planted in the ground every 20 feet or so along the route to the pyre, and as they walked, the crowd accompanied them singing religious songs. Every religious symbol meant another chance for the prisoners to stop, to bow down, kiss the cross, and apologize for their misdeeds. The three prisoners did not utilize any of these opportunities.

“When they reached the square, they were manhandled onto the stage, the pyre was made ready for kindling, and they were tied to pillars just adjacent to the pyre. Close enough to feel the awful heat, far enough that death would be yearned for.

“The mayor of Majorca was honored with lighting the pyre.

“After some time tied near the stake, the heat grew so powerful that it was impossible to stand in close proximity to the stage...their skin blistering and singed...color a fiery red. They were being burned slowly...roasted alive...as the populace of Majorca watched in silent glee and the priests waited to see if they’d repent before the life was literally sucked out of them...

“At one point, Rafael Vallis tried to lift his hand. The heat must have become unbearable and he couldn’t stand it anymore. The merciful priest—crucifix in hand—had been waiting for the signal and came rushing over, intent on saving Rafael’s soul...

“Catalina was tied to a neighboring pillar. Upon seeing Vallis raising his hand, she screamed with her final bit of strength, ‘Don’t give in. They are only able to burn our clothing, they won’t be able to touch our souls!’

“The moment he heard those words, Rafael Vallis motioned for the priest to leave him alone. The disappointed priest retreated and the three were burned at the stake, dying in full view of the people they had known their entire lives.”

So concluded the Inquisition’s 1,000-page description of the Vallis case. Rabbi Wallis photocopied every single page of his ancestor’s story for his personal archives and left the Inquisition headquarters ready to investigate further. Somehow, he had a feeling that the story of Rafael Vallis was just beginning.



Team Wallis had been in the Palace of the Inquisition for hours. When they finally emerged from within, blinking and squinting from the rays of the powerful Spanish sun, Rabbi Wallis knew that while his journey may have begun in Madrid, it wouldn’t be over until he visited Palma de Majorca. He needed to stand in the same cobblestoned square where they’d burned his ancestor hundreds of years earlier and to walk the route where they had led him from the Inquisition building to the pyre. Most importantly, he had to meet the people of Majorca.

They hailed a cab and made the return drive to the airport, where he booked three tickets on the next flight leaving Madrid for Palma de Majorca, a magnificent vacation island on the coast of the Mediterranean. It was time to revisit the Wallis family history. Rafael Vallis was his great-(several times over) grandfather, and Rabbi Wallis owed it to him to uncover as much of his life and story as he could.

After all, this was his *zeide* they were talking about.

