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Knight Without Fear
and Beyond Reproach

The Life of George Maduro 1916-1945

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For Reinoud

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Preface

This book began with a phone call.

During the summer of 2014, while my husband and I were visiting my mother in New Hampshire, my aunt Vivienne called from Tennessee to ask me to go to Madurodam for her and buy four booklets, one for her and my uncle Ted and one for each of my three cousins. I knew just what she meant: the type of booklet, with glossy photographs, a bit of history, and perhaps an interview or two, that one buys for ten dollars in the lobby of a theatre or in the bookshop at an exhibition. We live a great deal closer to Madurodam than my aunt does, and were happy to oblige. By way of explanation, I grew up in the US but have lived in the Netherlands since 1980, when my husband, who is Dutch, and I were married. And also by way of explanation, my aunt's maiden name is Maduro (she is my aunt by marriage) and she is a first cousin of George Maduro, for whom Madurodam is named.

We went to Madurodam after our return from the US but failed to find any booklets. The park had been modernised in 2012, making the old booklets obsolete, and new ones had yet to be produced, as I later found out. I like Madurodam (there has always been something fascinating to me in a city where the birds on the rooftops are twenty times the size of the people on the streets; and aside from that there is something fundamentally cheerful about the place) and therefore did not regret the trip, but I did feel badly about disappointing my aunt. I decided to go online, find a few Dutch-language articles about George Maduro, translate them into English and send them to her as consolation. This book grew out of that search.

‘Madam, I cannot stop thinking about George. Could we who knew him not write everything down, you must have an acquaintance who writes, I would so love to have a book about such a dear hero,’ wrote Janny Verboog-Teske, George’s old college landlady, to his mother Beca Maduro in 1945. Seventy-one years later, this book is my answer to her, as it is to my aunt (without whom it would never have been written). I offer it to the reader in the hope that he or she will enjoy meeting this ‘dear hero’ as much as I have enjoyed writing about him.

Kathleen Brandt-Carey
Schagen, June 2016

I

Sunday's Child

Curaçao 1916-1926

‘... you were born under a charitable star.’

- *All's Well that Ends Well, Act 1 Scene 1*

If there is any truth to the old nursery rhyme claiming that ‘the child that is born on the Sabbath Day’ will be blessed with the perfect combination of this world’s gifts, George Maduro should most definitely have been born on a Sunday.¹ The fates that presided over his birth saw fit to make him handsome, charming, clever, good-natured and rich: a Sunday’s child with all the world before him and his future assured.

It was a Saturday, however: Saturday 15 July 1916, at nine in the morning, and the place a stately villa in a wealthy enclave of Willemstad, the principal (in fact, only) city of Curaçao, an island in the Dutch Antilles just north of Venezuela and a little over a thousand crow’s miles south of Cuba. The birth was reported two days later by the proud father, with two male relatives in attendance as witnesses, to the clerk at the town hall – or rather, *ambtenaar van de burgerlijke stand*; for Curaçao was a colony of the Netherlands, its buildings colourful stucco versions of the intricate façades that lined the canals of Amsterdam, and its institutions and principal language Dutch.

The name on the birth certificate was George Joshua Levy Maduro. ‘Levy’ had been added to the already long-established surname Maduro in 1619, after the marriage of Rachel Maduro to Moseh, a son of the priestly tribe of Levi: for the lucky star presiding over this birth was a Star of David.² The middle name was for the 24-year-old father, Joshua Moses Levy

Maduro, known to his voluminous social circle as Jossy. The name George, making its premier appearance in this family-proud clan that recycled the same given names over and over, even multiple times within the same generation, was chosen presumably because Jossy and his wife and cousin, Rebecca Deborah, liked it.

It is a stalwart English name, George; a name of monarchs and dragon-slayers, capable of being translated into Dutch without unduly offending the ears, but above all solidly Anglo-Saxon, and not in the least Jewish-sounding. That last aspect may, at least in part, account for its appeal. For Jossy was a far-seeing young man, and such considerations had come to be important to the Sephardic Jews of Curaçao even back in 1916, when Adolf Hitler was still an unknown Private First Class in the Bavarian army, and another two years must pass before Germany capitulated in the war that was thought, in those days, to be the one that would end all wars.

Rebecca Deborah – or rather Beca, as her friends and family called her – was a few months shy of her 21st birthday when George, the couple's first child, was born. She and Jossy had been married 14 months previously, on 20 May 1915; the bride was 19 and the groom 23.³ Her maiden name was Maduro as well, for her father, Elias Salomon Levy Maduro, and Jossy's father, Moses Salomon Levy Maduro, were brothers. Dutch law and custom stipulate that a married woman keep her maiden name, hyphenating it to her husband's for formal use, so upon her marriage Miss Rebecca Maduro had become Mrs Rebecca Maduro-Maduro. One hardly supposes that she minded the repetition. If you were a Maduro on Curaçao, you were somebody.

The Maduros were Sephardic Jews, meaning essentially that their forebears stemmed from the Iberian Peninsula, from which all of their religion had been muscled out by royal order in the late 15th century. To themselves, however, being *Sephardim* meant a great deal more than that. They were a proud, energetic, insular group, known for setting up far-reaching and immensely profitable trading networks based on kinship, and known also – certainly to themselves – as the elite, if not the aristocracy, of their faith.⁴ After leaving Portugal, the early Maduros had made a long stop in Amsterdam, then settled in the mid-1600s in Curaçao, where they remained and prospered. The most famous of them, Salomon Elias Levy Maduro – Beca and Jossy's grandfather – began a general store on the Heren-

straat in Willemstad in 1837, at age 23; he then expanded into contracting, shipbuilding and supplying the early steamships that plied the city's busy harbour with coal.⁵ A giant had been born. By the time of Beca and Jossy's marriage their grandfather's business, now known as S.E.L. Maduro & Sons, had grown into a powerful shipping, transportation, infrastructure and banking conglomerate with offices in Willemstad, Havana, New York, and Caracas. It was the largest employer on Curaçao and had catapulted the family into wealth and a firm position among the first citizens of the island.

S.E.L. Maduro & Sons was many things, but a democratic institution it was not. Females were excluded from any participation in the family business whatsoever, and decisions as to which of Salomon Elias's numerous sons and grandsons would be asked to join the firm were made behind closed doors. Jossy, though born in Curaçao and a grandson of the founder, had not originally been one of the chosen. For one thing, his own father, Moses, had not been involved in S.E.L. Maduro & Sons, but had pursued business interests of his own; and then Jossy's early career had not exactly been stellar.

'Like all the boys of the community, Jossy ... attended the Reverend Joseph H.M. Chumaceiro's Hebrew School,' wrote his friend and fellow researcher, Isaac S. Emmanuel, adding, 'Spirited and independent, he would not submit to a certain discipline, even in the island's elementary school, and was expelled.'⁶ It was a tactful way of dealing with an incident that Jossy seems to have regretted more the older he got. According to family members, the expulsions from the Hendrikschool and Rabbi Chumaceiro's Hebrew lessons had taken place at age 13, and 'spirited and independent' was putting it mildly. He was hot-headed, headstrong and generally a handful.⁷ His father – one suspects, with a sigh of exasperation – had him privately educated on the island, and it is certainly true that his letters as an adult testify to a broad general knowledge and fluency in French, English, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese. In terms of education he caught up with and eventually surpassed his peers, becoming an amateur historian of some note; but the painful fact remained that he had no diplomas and no formal schooling after the age of 13.

CAPTAIN AND FIRST MATE

What Jossy Maduro had, however, was a strong will and a naturally dominant nature: when he set his sights on something he amassed all the force of his considerable personality towards achieving it, and did not give up until he had. At what point he first set his sights on his cousin Rebecca is unknown, but once he did, several facts could not have escaped his notice. She was beautiful; she had, as Emmanuel put it, ‘inherited her ... father’s kindness and docility and her mother’s intelligence and prudence’, and her family controlled the access to the firm of S.E.L. Maduro & Sons.⁸ Marrying Beca was a strategic move. It brought Jossy into the inner circle of this dynamic and influential family business, and it placed his son – should he have one – in line as a leading competitor for future leadership.

Jossy’s and Beca’s fathers had both died in 1911, so the negotiations – at least as far as dowry and business possibilities were concerned – were carried out with Beca’s brothers.⁹ Assurances of good behaviour were no doubt required, and were no doubt given. Business aside, it was a love match, and for the most part a happy one. Beca was to write years later, on the occasion of a different wedding – her daughter’s:

‘Married life is always a turbulent sea, but we have every reason to believe that both Captain and First Mate will form a worthy team, with much happiness, prosperity and understanding for one another.’¹⁰

She might have been speaking of her own marriage. There can be little doubt either that life with Jossy tended towards turbulence, or that he was the dominant partner in their union – both the mores of the day and his assertive nature ruled out any other possibility. Beca, however, was to prove herself a deft first mate and generally a contented one, at least in the early years. After the ceremony the pair posed for the photographer: the groom, handsome and imposing in white tie, with top hat and gloves in hand, looks the picture of ambition and portly responsibility (he struggled with extra pounds throughout his life; judging from their wedding photo the struggle had begun early) while the bride, slender, swanlike, decked out in lace and flowers, gazes gravely beyond the camera. The young couple moved soon afterwards into an elegant villa in the most desirable section of Willemstad; Jossy had already moved into a plum position as deputy

manager with S.E.L. Maduro & Sons. Their life together had begun.

The villa, Beau Séjour, at Scharlooweg 55, is a government office today and retains virtually all of its former charm – even more charm when one takes into account the air conditioning, an undeniable blessing in Curaçao's year-round 80 and 90 degree temperatures, and of course not present in 1875 when construction was completed, or in 1915 when Jossy and Beca, the second owners, took up residence.¹¹ They had other ways back then: a strategic positioning to catch the trade winds, air holes in the floors, and above all an open, airy layout centred on an inner patio. Beau Séjour's patio was rectangular, with pillars, a patterned tile floor in shades of ochre, terracotta and olive, and a profusion of potted plants. It was the heart of the house, much more so than the formal *salas* – living rooms – at the front, elegantly decked out in the style of the day with Louis XV furniture and damask curtains, and used mostly for entertaining. Twin rows of spacious bedrooms opened out to the patio right and left, as did a small kitchen and pantry, suggesting that the family took at least some of their meals here. A staircase led from the pantry down to the cool, low-ceilinged basement, a labyrinth of small rooms and narrow corridors encompassing the length and breadth of the house, with a large cistern for rainwater under the patio in the centre. Here Beca's household staff tended to the real work of the household – the cooking, the baking, the washing, the ironing – while she devoted herself to the many tasks required of one of the busiest and most popular young hostesses on Curaçao.

THE ORDER OF THINGS

The island's elite was comprised of the descendants of a group of European families that had settled there between the 1660s and the 1840s.¹² Most were Protestant; some, the Maduros among them, were Sephardic Jews. These two groups, the upper-class Jews and the upper-class Protestants, socialised on terms of perfect friendship and equality, but it was a harmony born of practicality rather than brotherhood. Class, on Curaçao, trumped religion. By banding together across religious lines the upper class managed to successfully exclude all outsiders from their ranks, including Catholics, *Ashkenazim* (Jews of eastern European origin, looked down upon with contempt by the *Sephardim*) and blacks or people of

mixed race, far and away the majority group on the island. The lucky few met at Club Curaçao or the Curaçao Sport Club for parties, dances, and sports; the gentlemen drank and played cards and dominoes at male bastions such as *Club de Gezelligheid* and the men-only bar of Club Curaçao; the young people danced and went to the beach together, and the ladies paid visits, played bridge and gossiped. In fact, everyone gossiped. Rumours sprang up and blossomed overnight, like weeds after a tropical rain; everybody knew everybody's business, or at least a version of it. Anonymity was as far away, in that confined and regimented society, as autonomy.

Those were the days in which paying calls was an important part of the social landscape, and calls in Curaçao were leisurely affairs, not to be hurried (those who had lived there any length of time knew there was no sense trying to rush things on Curaçao anyway; the island had its own pace). The ladies all had little hand bells, usually of silver or brass, with which they summoned *kokkie* from the kitchen to order one delicacy after another while they and their visitors sat on the shady patio and drank coffee or *awa di lamunchi*, fresh limeade, and discussed at length the goings-on at the club, the next ball or the neighbours' marriage. There was no hurry, for what else was there to do? The house was kept clean by the *cria di cas*; the lush garden was kept in trim by the gardener; and the children were capably looked after by the *yaya*, one of the tribe of devoted Afro-Curaçaoan nannies, dressed in spotless white, who taught their charges everything from native folklore to etiquette and had been known to raise three generations of one family.

It was in many ways a gracious way of life – for the upper classes, that is; certainly not for the cheap Afro-Curaçaoan labour on which their leisure depended. Although they all spoke Dutch and many, like the Maduros, English, French and Spanish as well, the elite spoke Papiamentu, the Creole language of Curaçao, to one another, indicating a degree of identification with the island that jars somewhat with the detachment so rigidly maintained between themselves and its true life. For beyond the all-pervasive, mutual dependence of masters and servants, 'no mingling' was the order of the day, as it was in all colonies where a European minority ruled over a native majority. Of course there was mingling; there always has been, one of the many reasons why such systems were all ultimately found to be untenable. But while they lasted, a set of unwritten rules, of taboos and punishments, remained in place to tamp down human nature and keep the various groups firmly in their places.