

# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 15<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.'<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.’<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.

Of the taboos in place in Curaçao one of the most strategic (after intermarriage between the races, essential to keeping blacks out of the middle class) was intermarriage between the religions. This was vital to maintaining harmony in the union of convenience between the upper-class Protestants and the Sephardic Jews, both of which groups deplored the notion, the Jews as much as the Protestants. For the *Sephardim*, though far from stringent in their religious observance, were strict in the preservation of their pure, in their eyes aristocratic, bloodlines. Their reaction to the prospect of a son muddying their lineage by marrying a Protestant girl would be just as vehement as the innate repugnance felt by Protestant parents at the thought of their daughter marrying a Jew. Neither side would have used quite those terms, of course. It was 'simply not done', and 'would not work' sounded far better and, seeing as both parties were in complete agreement, were just as effective. As long as none of the young people took it into their heads to fall in love with the wrong person, all was well. The alliance held stand and served its purpose.

But while lawful marriage was regimented along racial and religious lines, no such restrictions applied to the taking of mistresses. Wealthy men on Curaçao commonly had long-term liaisons with women of colour and mixed-race offspring, sometimes by more than one woman at the same time. It was an entrenched tradition, widely accepted – by the men at least; and by no means a secret, although how much the upper-class women knew, and what they thought, about the situation is anyone's guess.

The practice has been referred to humorously as 'the Jewish lady's birth control', and although it is safe to say that Jewish men were not the only ones on Curaçao with illegitimate families, they were undeniably the ones who were famous for it, the Maduros in particular. Jossy, the family historian and genealogist, kept in later years among his papers a thick envelope marked '*Maduros ilegítimos*', the contents of which document cases of out-of-wedlock Maduro offspring going back to the 1700s, some of whom had petitioned the courts for the right to take the Maduro name.<sup>13</sup> It was no mere convention, thus, when S.E.L., Beca and Jossy's entrepreneur grandfather, specifically 'named as his heirs his children born in wedlock or his children's children, also born in wedlock'; it was a safeguard against control of the company going to Maduros born on the wrong side of the blanket.<sup>14</sup>

(Herein lay an advantage to the extra surname 'Levy', the exact legal

status of which is unclear: it seemed to function either as a surname or as an optional given name, depending on the requirements of the situation. But no illegitimate offspring, petition the courts though they might, were ever granted the right to take the name 'Levy Maduro'. It was the mark of the genuine, legitimate article.)

Given the mores of the day it is hardly necessary to note that such sexual freedom was accorded only to men. Any upper-class woman who dared to have an affair, or better said, was caught in one, was ostracised and treated with contempt. If that affair were with a black, Heaven help her, for her peers would not. Divorce, though generally accepted among the Protestants, was severely frowned upon within the Sephardic community, the onus falling more heavily upon the divorced woman than the man. It was the order of things.

#### THE WOODEN LADY

In the social configuration of Curaçao Jossy and Beca, representatives of not only the island's most powerful family, but also one of its very oldest (only two families could claim ancestors who had arrived earlier than the first Maduro had) occupied an enviable place at the top.<sup>15</sup> All doors were open to them, and Jossy's position with the firm brought them into contact with anyone and everyone of importance who visited the island on business. They entertained frequently, and their parties and receptions were legendary. Besides friends and relations, their guests often included naval officers – the Royal Dutch Navy maintained a permanent presence in Willemstad harbour, and did a great deal of business with S.E.L. Maduro & Sons – as well as government dignitaries and businessmen connected with such companies as Royal Dutch Shell, which opened a subsidiary on Curaçao in 1917 and engaged S.E.L. Maduro & Sons to build tankers to transport their petroleum.

This active social life was to yield Jossy and Beca an inordinate number of acquaintances, many in high places, and a smaller number of lifelong friends. Of the latter the only one worth mentioning here is Carl Aronstein, a Dutch career naval officer who most likely met the Maduros when the *Tromp*, the ship of which he was commander, visited Curaçao. Born in Breda, the Netherlands, in 1872, Captain Aronstein was the son of a re-



nowned professor and had married into a prominent Protestant military family, the Vaillants; as the name suggests, he was Jewish, though non-practicing. When exactly the friendship between him and his wife, Jeanne, and the Maduros began is unknown, but two things are evident. Despite the age difference (Carl and Jeanne were a good twenty years older than Jossy and Beca) the two couples were close, and this friendship was to have direct impact on George's life.

Beyond business and cocktail parties there was another link, mildly bizarre and mostly humorous, between the navy and the Maduros. It centred on a hunk of wood: a figurehead in the form of the bust of a woman, believed to have adorned the bow of the Dutch frigate *Alphen* when it exploded and sank in Willemstad harbour on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 1778. The most popular story goes that the figurehead had been dragged up by fishermen's nets fifty years after the sinking; given to the harbourmaster; placed by him as a decoration in his front yard; then a few years later sold, along with the house, to a member of the Maduro family, who left it where it was. There are other versions, and the wooden lady's provenance remains the subject of some debate, but what is certain is that she disappeared mysteriously from her spot in the Maduros' garden one day in 1875: kidnapped, as it turned out, by crew members of a visiting naval vessel, and taken with them in triumph on their voyage back to the Netherlands. A figurehead belongs on a ship, and this one was a traitor for taking up a post on land, was the rationale given for the kidnapping and for the name, the *Looden Verrader* – the 'Leaden Traitor' – with which the bust was dubbed. The 'leaden' part might have referred to the wooden lady's weight, which was a hefty 27 pounds, or have been a bastardisation of 'redden', for her red-painted tresses: no-one knew for sure, or ever will know.

The bust was duly returned to its owners on the next return voyage, the Maduros having complained and the Admiralty (however much they sympathised with the principle of returning ships' figureheads to the navy, or the necessity of sailors having their fun) being unwilling to condone thievery. It was kidnapped again on the first opportunity, returned again, kidnapped again, returned again, kidnapped again and returned again: and thus it went on, the Maduros resorting in time to the likes of bank vaults and guards and the intrepid men of the navy to disguises and midnight break-ins through the roof. The lady's attraction can hardly have lain in her looks, as 'homely' is the word that comes to mind; but looks, after all,

are not everything. The ‘Traitor’ became the Dutch Navy’s best-known and best-loved mascot, and her travels back and forth across the oceans the stuff of legend and, occasionally, newspaper articles, welcome comic relief on dull news days.<sup>16</sup>

#### FAMILY AND BUSINESS

This was the community into which young George made his entrance that July morning in 1916, and very welcome he was indeed. These were golden times for S.E.L. Maduro & Sons. War might be raging throughout Europe, but in neutral Holland it was business as usual and in Curaçao, her sun-drenched Caribbean colony, business had never been better. The opening of the Panama Canal in August 1914 had exponentially increased the potential of Willemstad’s harbour, and along with it that of S.E.L. Maduro & Sons’ shipping concerns. The company was expanding as never before; it was good to know that there was a male heir to take over one day. The qualifier ‘male’ was of course superfluous to the term ‘heir’ in this case. Daughters were given ample dowries and expected to make strategic matches, but only sons could inherit, and only sons could enter the business. That, too, was the order of things.

Only a boy born to one of the families directly involved in S.E.L. Maduro & Sons could challenge George’s claim to future leadership, but as the years progressed, no such boy made his appearance – to Jossy’s secret satisfaction, one suspects.<sup>17</sup> The families – at least, ahem! the legitimate ones – remained small. A handful of female cousins were born on Curaçao, all of them only children; and then there was Sybil. Sybil Lois Levy Maduro, Jossy and Beca’s second child and George’s only sibling, came into the world on 26 September 1917 at Beau Séjour, where George had been born a little over a year previously, and was to become a very important person in his life.

A number of professional photographs, featuring the siblings in different poses and costumes, exist from those early years. George, still with his baby fat, looks sleek and somewhat bored in most of them; Sybil has a beguiling mixture of docility and mischief on her face. It was certainly a privileged and by all accounts a happy childhood. ‘Chibby’ and ‘Joop’ or ‘Joppie’, as the two were known – it was a family of nicknames, and Sybil and George were no exception – were surrounded by a doting extended family,

and had plenty of playmates among the sons and daughters of the other patrician families of the island. They were looked after by their *yaya*, who had been *yaya* to Beca and her four siblings and was held in great esteem in the family. Later letters show that she doted upon young 'Master George' – '*Shon* George', in Papiamento – but wasn't afraid to reprimand him if the occasion warranted. Her name was Maria Adam, but she is referred to in letters only as *Yaya*, and her own letters were unsigned.<sup>18</sup>

There is no record of George and Sybil ever attending school on the island; family members believe that they were taught by a tutor or governess who accompanied the family when they travelled.<sup>19</sup> This they did both frequently and widely, starting most likely in the early 1920s once the war was over and the children were out of their infancy. Photographs show the siblings on camelback, on a horse-drawn sleigh in the snow, and in different countries of Europe; other destinations included Trinidad, the US and Mexico. George's first known literary effort, a letter in Papiamento to his grandmother, was written from somewhere in Europe probably when he was about eight or nine. In the letter 'Mamocha', or 'little Granny', is addressed in the third person, the proper Papiamento style when speaking or writing to an older person. The missive is short, and ends:

'We are going to spend the Christmas holidays in Switzerland so we can ski. I think it will be a lot of fun.

I am sending Mamocha a ship that I painted that Mamocha can hang up in her room. It is a little New Year's present from me to Mamocha and I hope that Mamocha will like it.

With 1,000,000 kisses for Mamocha and best wishes from Mamocha's grandson who loves her very much,  
George.<sup>20</sup>

'Mamocha' was Beca's mother and Jossy's aunt, Sarah Jesurun Henriquez. She was the children's only remaining grandparent, as Jossy's mother, Adela Naar, had died in 1918. Usually referred to as 'Machi' (Papiamento for 'little mother', or something along those lines) by her offspring and their spouses, Sarah was the matriarch of the Maduro clan on Curaçao, most of whom lived in close proximity in the predominantly Sephardic enclave Scharloo and were constantly in and out of one another's houses. Sarah was loved and revered, but cast a long shadow. She wasn't the only one, of