

THE ABRAVANEL FAMILY NEWSLETTER

"Basta mi nombre que es Abravanel"



Issue No. 1
November 1987

AN INTRODUCTION

"The Abravanel Family Newsletter" was first introduced to many readers in a letter sent out in August of this year. The newsletter is intended to be an occasional report of articles of interest to members of the Abravanel family.

All readers are encouraged to submit stories or information regarding the family in the world today, or the history of the family in the world of the past. All readers are also urged to send names of other Abravanel family members who might like to receive copies of the newsletter.

In a sense, the letterhead reveals the intent of the newsletter:

The Name. Because the editor of the newsletter uses the spelling "Abravanel," editorial discretion dictates the spelling of the family name. Benzion Netanyahu, in Don Isaac Abravanel, his definitive study of the life of the most famous Abravanel, reports that the name Abravanel has numerous spellings, including "Abravanel," "Abarbanel," "Barbanel," "Barbanella," "Barbinellus" and "Ravanella." All members of this extended family, however they spell their names, are invited to participate in the gathering of information for this newsletter.

The Quotation. The six words in quotation appearing in the letterhead -- "Basta mi nombre que es Abravanel" (It is enough that my name is Abravanel) -- constitute an old Ladino expression cited by Rabbi Marc Angel in his work La America, a study of the Sephardic experience in the United States. Rabbi Angel believes that the expression represents the feeling of Sephardics "that regardless of the present circumstances, one's noble Sephardic name and its great historical associations were enough to maintain one's dignity."

The quotation also emphasizes, however, that any story that deals with the Abravanel family will be considered newsworthy and, subject to some editorial restrictions, printable. It is enough that the subject is Abravanel.

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The Crest. The crest of the Abravanel family was found in the archives of the Spanish and Portuguese congregation in Amsterdam. At least one source has indicated that it was awarded to the family by the Ottoman Empire. Other sources date the crest to the family's sojourn in Spain. Information that any reader may have regarding the crest's origins or meaning will be most welcome.

OUT OF THE NIGHT AND FOG

JACK ABRAVANEL (Seattle, Washington) recently discussed the remarkable route by which he and his brother SYLVAN ABRAVANEL (Los Angeles, California) and their family journeyed to the United States. Jack, an engineer employed by The Boeing Company, was born in Salonika, Greece, the son of Isador (Israel) Abravanel, one of eight children of Jacob Abravanel. Three of Jack's father's siblings are still alive, with two residing in Salonika and one residing in Nice, France.

The family lived a prosperous life until World War II and the invasion of Greece by Italy and Germany. All of Greece was occupied by the Axis powers by April 1941. Of the tens of thousands of Jews residing within the occupied zones, only 640 Jews, including Jack and his family, claimed Spanish citizenship. This claim enabled them to receive some limited protection from the Spanish consular officials in Greece, who interceded with the German occupation forces on behalf of these Spanish citizens.

In February 1943 the deportations of Jews from Salonika into the "Night and Fog" (as the Nazis referred to their policy of extermination) began. For whatever reason, General Francisco Franco, who ruled Spain as an ally of Germany, ordered the Spanish consular officers to continue to provide protection to Jews claiming Spanish citizenship. A complete description of this effort is set forth in Spain, the Jews, and Franco, by Haim Avni.

Avni reports that by July 1943, nearly all the Jews in Salonika had been deported. Because of the delaying efforts of the Spanish consul in Greece, the only remnants of the community remaining in Salonika were the 367 Spanish Jews, including Jack and his family. At last, over Spanish protest, they were also deported, arriving at Bergen-Belsen on August 13, 1943. With Spanish demands for their safety, however, they were kept in special quarters at the infamous camp. After six months of protracted negotiations between Spain and Germany, Jack and his family and the other Spanish Jewish refugees from Salonika were transferred to Spain in February 1944. During all of World War II, they were the only Jews permitted by the Nazis to emerge from out of the night and fog.

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Representatives of the Joint Distribution Committee arranged for their transport in June 1944 from Spain to a refugee camp near Casablanca. From Casablanca, they were transported by the United Nations Relief Agency to the Gaza Strip, from which they were eventually allowed to disperse throughout Palestine. As the war ended in Europe, Jack was studying at a school in Jerusalem, the survivor of an horrendous, but miraculous, journey.

THE 1937 BERLIN EXHIBITION

The 500th anniversary of the birth of Don Isaac Abravanel occurred in 1937. That year marked the publication of many books about the life of Don Isaac, and the opening of exhibitions throughout the world about the Abravanel family.

BETTY ABRAVANEL PICKOVER (Yonkers, New York) has sent me a copy of an article provided to her by JOSEPH BARBANEL (Coconut Creek, Florida) that appeared in the Berlin Jewish community newspaper in 1937. The article, entitled "The World of Abarbanel," described an exhibition held at the Berlin Jewish Museum about the Abravanel family. Artifacts from this exhibition, or from a similar exhibition held at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York at the same time, may still survive.

The reporter described the contents of the exhibition, including a study of the family's travels through Turkey, Holland and England after the expulsion from Spain. The article has an irony than can only be appreciated today: the reporter suggests the surprise of discovering that a large number of Abravanel descendants and other Sephardic Jews were living in the Berlin community. "The Abarbanel descendants hold their family tradition in high esteem, and it was touching to watch how a member of this family reacted when he saw a picture of his grandfather, Zvi Hirsch Abarbanel," the reporter noted. The location of these descendants is unknown. Readers are urged to submit information about any of these descendants who survived the Holocaust.

The reporter also mentioned the famous physician, Eduard Abarbanel, who, during the Ruhr epidemic in the 1840's, became famous for his work in Upper Silesia, and praised Dr. Abarbanel's daughter, Mrs. Jeanette Abarbanel Schwerin, who was the founder of many charitable social organizations in Berlin.

THE PORTUGUESE CONSUL GENERAL

The Consul General of Portugal in Istanbul, Turkey is named Jacques Jose Abravanel, who claims to have a family tree that traces the origins of his family back for two centuries. Direct contact with Consul General Abravanel will be attempted, and future newsletters will hopefully contain stories that he, in his position in Turkey, may be in a unique position to relate.

ALICE ABRAVANEL

Maurice Abravanel is the best known member of the Abravanel family in the performing arts. Alice Abravanel, another family member who gained fame as an actress, was apparently well known during her acting career. Can any reader provide more complete information regarding this person?

A MEDAL FOR CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

The Judah L. Magnes Memorial Museum in Berkeley, California, a non-profit institution that calls itself "The Jewish Museum of the West," has issued a series of medals honoring three Sephardic Jews who helped make the voyage of Columbus possible: Luis de Santangel, Abraham Zacuto and Don Isaac Abravanel. The medal features the individual portraits of Santangel, Zacuto and Abravanel, and highlights the first meeting in 1486 between Columbus and the Spanish monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella. Inquiries regarding the medal, which was originally available in bronze, silver and gold, should be addressed to the Museum at 2911 Russell Street, Berkeley, California 94705.

ON BEING AN ABRAVANEL

SYDELLE BERENSON ABRAVANEL, the mother of the editor of this newsletter, has often thought that she was somehow related to the art critic and occasional scoundrel, Bernard Berenson. Her theory was tested by obtaining a copy of Being Bernard Berenson, a recent biography of his life. She proved she was a relative of Berenson, but not in the way she expected. Early in the discussion of Berenson's life, his biographer notes that Berenson's mother, born in a small town in Poland, proudly claimed descent from Don Isaac Abravanel.