

THE ABRAVANEL FAMILY NEWSLETTER

"Basta mi nombre que es Abravanel"

Newsletter No. 18
December 1993

MARRIED TO THE MOB

Menasseh ben Israel (1604-57), a great rabbi, author and printer, who played a pivotal role in the readmission of Jews into England, came to the Abravanel family by a circuitous route. He was born and baptized Manuel Dias Soeiro in the Madeiras Islands. His parents, Joseph Dias and Juana Soeiro, were descendants of Jews forcibly converted to Catholicism in Portugal in 1497. Fleeing the Portuguese inquisition, Joseph Dias and Juana Soeiro took their family to Amsterdam, where they were formally converted to Judaism. Joseph took the name "Joseph ben Israel" and renamed his two sons Menasseh and Ephraim ben Israel.



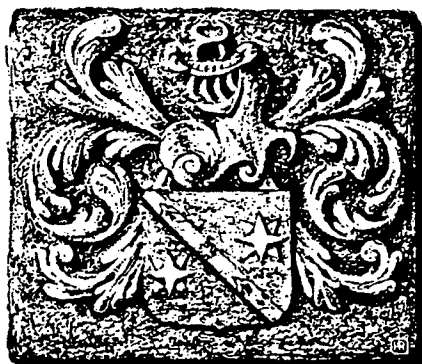
MENASSEH BEN ISRAEL
Original etching by Rembrandt, 1646

The career of young Menasseh advanced rapidly. In 1622, at the age of 18, Menasseh was appointed rabbi of a small Jewish synagogue, Congregation Neveh Shalom. His parents died soon thereafter, leaving Menasseh responsible for Ephraim and their sister, Esther. A few months later, Menasseh became engaged to Rachel Abrabanel, of a family that had recently arrived in Amsterdam from Guimaraes, Portugal. Rachel's father, Don Joseph Abrabanel, had been a physician of eminence in Amsterdam, but, like the parents of Menasseh, Don Joseph and his wife had recently died. Cecil Roth, in his 1934 biography of Menasseh, reports about Don Joseph Abrabanel:

"In their native land (where some of the family still remained), the father had been known by the purely Gothic name of Luis Gomez de Medeiros. They boasted, however, that they belonged to the ancient Jewish family of Abrabanel; the generation contemporary with Menasseh being, indeed, the great-grandchildren of the great Don Isaac Abrabanel..."

"Rachel Abrabanel was two years older than Menasseh. She was, seemingly, by no means well-dowered; but, in her bridegroom's eyes, her ancestry more than compensated for this. For the Abrabanel family itself claimed descent from King David; and, by

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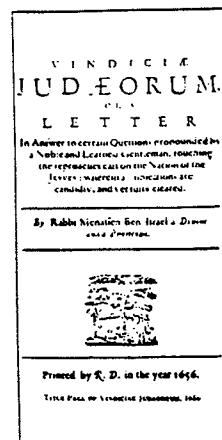
alliance with it, the young Amsterdam rabbi might have the satisfaction of knowing that the blood of the ancient royal house of Israel, from which the promised Messiah was to descend, would course in the veins of his children."

Roth reports that Menasseh frequently spoke of his children's royal lineage:

"Of his children's royal ancestry, he was inordinately proud. He recounted it to all his friends, Gentile as well as Jewish; he mentioned it repeatedly in his books; and he even went so far as to dilate upon it from the pulpit in his synagogue."

The bonds with Abravanel were to be doubled, however, for Menasseh's sister Esther was attracted to Rachel's brother, Jonas Abrabanel. On September 6, 1623, the marriages of Menasseh and Rachel, and Jonas and Esther, were performed.

Although a great printer and orator, as well as a leader of the Amsterdam Jewish community (the portrait above was painted by Rembrandt), Menasseh is most famous for his 1655 petition to Oliver Cromwell, begging permission for Jews to hold "priuvate devotions in our particular houses" and to be buried "in such place out of the cittye as wee shall thinck Convenient (sic)." The petition was followed by a pamphlet authored by Menasseh entitled "Vindiciae Judaeorum," a defense against the libels and exaggerations contained in anti-Semitic pamphlets that were circulating in England.



Cromwell delayed his decision, however, and Menasseh returned to Amsterdam without success. Menasseh died in 1657, but a few years later, after the restoration of the English monarchy, Jews were formally admitted into England.

Menasseh and Jonas were not merely men of religion, but also active merchants, who took a large role in the development of affairs with Brazil, after the Dutch captured the Portuguese colony of Recife in 1631. They may account for the Abravanel family in Surinam (see Newsletter No. 17). Jonas was also a known writer, as was his apparent brother, Manoel Thomas, author of O Phenix da Lusitania and other poetical works. Unlike the other members of his family, Manoel Thomas did not convert to Judaism, but remained a Catholic in Portugal. Jonas also had two sons, Dr. Joseph Abrabanel and Menasseh Abrabanel (the latter presumably named after his famous uncle). According to Cecil Roth, Menasseh Abrabanel's son, also named Jonas Abrabanel, is the last traceable member of Menasseh ben Israel's family.

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THE PASSING OF THE BATON

The following obituary appeared in the September 23, 1993 edition of the New York Times:

Maurice Abravanel, 90, Champion of Kurt Weill

By ALEX ROSS

Maurice Abravanel, a conductor who led a long, colorful career on several continents and headed the Utah Symphony Orchestra for more than three decades, died yesterday in Salt Lake City. He was 90.

He died of natural causes, said Jeff Paris, director of marketing for the Utah Symphony.

Best known as the inexhaustible music director of the Utah Symphony, which he headed from 1947 to 1976, Mr. Abravanel did much to promote 20th-century American and European music, most notably through a series of recordings on the Vanguard label. He is best remembered for his long association with Kurt Weill and for his recorded cycle of the Mahler symphonies, which remains the only such cycle made entirely with an American orchestra.

Conducting at 16

Descended from a long line of Sephardic Jews — his roots can be traced back to Don Isaac Abravanel, the chancellor under Queen Isabella of Spain — Mr. Abravanel was born in Greece in 1903. He grew up in Lausanne, Switzerland. His parents guided him toward a career in medicine, but thanks to the influence of the conductor Ernest Ansermet, a neighbor in his family's apartment building, he took up conducting at the age of 16. Moving to Berlin in 1922, he studied composition and performance with Kurt Weill, who was three years his senior. He thought Weill to be a "lousy teacher," but became his close friend and enthusiastic interpreter for two decades thereafter.

Entering the turbulent atmosphere of Weimar Germany, Mr. Abravanel moved in the circles of Weill, Bertolt Brecht, Paul Hindemith, and Bruno Walter. His conducting appointments took him to Zwickau, Altenberg, Kassel and other German cities; at the Kassel Opera in 1930, he conducted a triumphant performance of Weill's complete "Mahagonny."

By the early 30's, he was guest-conducting at the Berlin State Opera, but as the Nazis rose to power in Germany, he took his career abroad. In 1933, he was music director for George Balanchine's Ballets 1933, leading the world premiere of Weill's "Seven Deadly Sins."

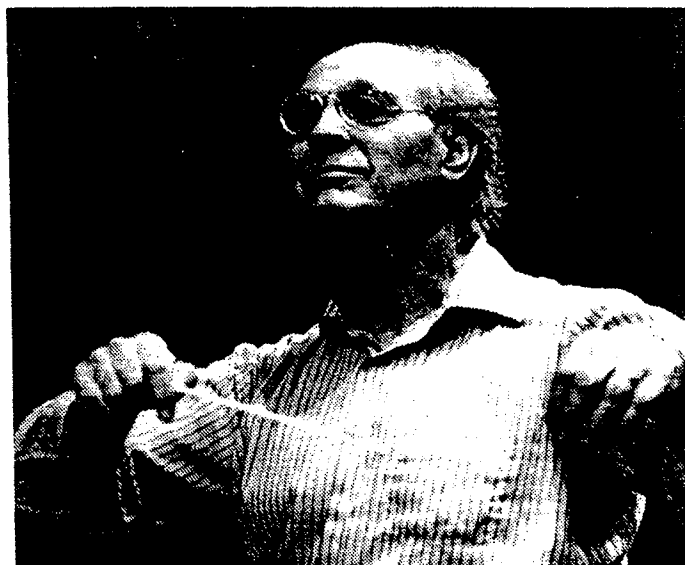
Building the Utah

In 1936, on recommendations from Walter and Furtwängler, he became the youngest staff conductor at the Metropolitan Opera, where he made his debut with "Samson and Delilah." But his Met career lasted only two years, cut short by conflicts with the management over rehearsal time. He then conducted for several years on Broadway, leading first performances of Weill's "Knickerbocker Holiday," "Lady in the Dark," "One Touch of Venus" and "Street Scene."

In 1947, he took up the appointment at the Utah Symphony began building a minor orchestra into a widely respected ensemble. Concert music was not an active feature of the state's musical life at that time, but Mr. Abravanel made it so, reaching out to rural communities and eventually making the orchestra so popular that Utah achieved the highest per-capita attendance at symphony concerts of any state.

Tellingly, he accomplished this with a repertory liberally stocked with 20th-century works, by Weill, Bloch, Honegger, Varèse and his close friend Milhaud. Once he began his long and active recording career with Vanguard, he continued this emphasis, making the first recordings of Honegger's "Judith" and "King David." He also conducted ballet and opera, winning a Tony Award for his work in Marc Blitzstein's "Regina."

His Mahler cycle gave him the broadest fame of his career, perhaps owing to a psychedelic marketing strategy at Vanguard that once used the slogan "Mahler Is Heavy." But his interpretations were serious and well



Utah Symphony, 1977

Before his retirement in 1979, Maurice Abravanel appeared as a guest conductor during the 1977 Mostly Mozart Festival in New York.

disciplined, somewhat too speedy for many listeners' tastes but a welcome contrast to the more flamboyant readings of Leonard Bernstein. "I loved Lenny," he later said, "but sometimes, I felt, he tried to make Mahler too different, too neurotic. I didn't try to perform the music as a music of extremes."

He retired in 1979 but remained active in the musical world. In his final decade, he appeared every summer at the Berkshire Music Center at the Tanglewood festival in Massachusetts, teaching and serving as a generous mentor to younger musicians. Last summer, well past his 90th birthday, he was still attending concerts at Tanglewood and was seen laboring over the score of Stockhausen's "Gruppen."

Mr. Abravanel is survived by his third wife, Caroline, whom he married in 1987, and by two sons, Pierre and Roger, both of Los Angeles.

DAVID ABARBANEL LINDO

A leader of the London Jewish community, David Abarbanel Lindo (1772-1851) represents an unusual tie to the prominent Jewish community of 18th and 19th Century England. David knew the Disraelis (see Newsletter No. 1); his stern adherence to Orthodoxy was probably the reason for the Disraelis' departure from Judaism. As described below, however, the paths of the families crossed again in later years.

David was the son of Elias de Isaac Lindo, a Sephardic gentleman who traced his London roots back to 1675. Elias was in turn the son of Isaac Lindo and Bathsheba Abarbanel, the daughter of Haim Ephraim Abarbanel. In 1785, when David turned 13, he was awarded 50 pounds per annum from Rachel and Jael Abarbanel, (perhaps David's aunt and uncle, who died in 1788 and 1790, respectively, according to the records of London's Spanish & Portuguese Jews' Congregation), on condition that he assume the name of Abarbanel, and call himself David Lindo Abarbanel. In 1801, he obtained permission by a Home Office Warrant to change his name to David Abarbanel Lindo.

David Abarbanel Lindo had many sisters, one of whom, Bathsheba Lindo (presumably named after her grandmother Bathsheba Abarbanel), married Joshua (later George) Basevi, the uncle of Prime Minister Disraeli. Thus, Disraeli's aunt was the granddaughter of Bathsheba Abarbanel.

David Abarbanel Lindo also had a brother, Ephraim, whose daughter, Olivia, married Charles Trevor, a non-Jew; their daughter Katherine married Ralph Disraeli, a younger brother of the prime minister. Coningsby Disraeli, the son of Ralph and Katherine, was the last male bearer of the Disraeli name. Thus, the last male of the Disraelis was the great-great-great grandson of Bathsheba Abarbanel.

FROM THE GHETTO

ELINORE ABRAVANEL BROWN (Dallas, Texas) reports that on a recent trip to Florence, Italy, she purchased a copy of a volume entitled The Ghetto of Venice, by Riccardo Calimani. The work has a preface from Nobel laureate Eli Wiesel, which includes the following paragraph:

"Read this book and you will discover characters who astound you with their wisdom, their piety, and their imagination as well. In it you will find my great hero, *Don Isaac Abarbanel*, who renounced fame and fortune at the court of Ferdinand and Isabella and chose exile rather than conversion. It was to Venice that he came to write his mystical works and his biblical commentaries. Did you know that in them he compared the Constitution of Venice to the Mosaic Law?"