

THE ABRAVANEL FAMILY NEWSLETTER

"Basta mi nombre que es Abravanel"



Issue No. 5
May 1989

LETTERS FROM ABROAD

The Newsletter has received a great deal of correspondence since the publication of Issue No. 4. Among the more interesting letters are these notes from abroad:

From West Germany: Stephan Abarbanell of Frankfurt writes:

"I was born in 1957 in Braunschweig, grew up in Hamburg and now live (since 1986) in Frankfurt. I am married and we, my wife Bettina and I, are expecting our first child in October....

"I am quite certain that there is only a very small branch of the Abarbanell family left in Germany. In fact, since my grandparents (my father's parents) have died in the Seventies the only Abarbanells I know of are my parents, my brother and my sisters and me.

"We obviously have to face the same problems as many other Abarbanells (Abravanel's etc.) in the world when we try to trace back our family history for more than four or five generations with the intention to find a linkage to the great past in Spain and Portugal. What I know is that my great-great-grandparents lived in Poland (in a small town called Bojanow) and that this great-great-grandfather was closely related to the famous Jeanette Abarbanell Schwerin [Editor's Note: See Issue No. 1 of the Newsletter]....

"My grandfather [Hermann Abarbanell] was a so called 'Half Jew' and he was married to a Christian-German woman. Even though he didn't like to talk about the dark years 1933-45, I know that he had a lot of difficulties during these years, but was never put into a concentration camp. He was in a so called 'privileged-mix-marriage' which quite likely saved him his life. My father (who is an ophthalmologist like my grandfather was) was not allowed to be a member of the 'HJ' ('Hitler Jugend'), but had to do his service in the German army when he was only 17 1/2 years old.

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"...My grandfather was a soldier during World War I. He then was very late in 1934 granted a kind of medal for being a 'hero' in combat in this war. The certificate was issued and then forwarded to him in the name of the 'Fuhrer und Reichskanzler.' You see that the administrative structure wasn't perfect in 1934 - but later it was, with horrible perfectionism."

From France: Mme. B. P. Edgar Abravanel of Paris writes of her late husband, Edgar Abravanel, about whom it was said in France, "that nothing big was done in the French Jewish community since the War without the participation of Edgar Abravanel." He was president of the Sephardic community in Paris for 30 years; president of Synagogue Berith Shalom; president of the Synagogue Don Isaac Abravanel, constructed in 1963, for which he was in charge of fundraising; and president of Co-Jasor, a charitable organization which distributed large sums of money for social welfare. He was also general secretary of the United Jewish Social Fund and vice president of the Consistoire de Paris, in which capacity he oversaw the construction of 31 synagogues and cultural centers in France.

From Argentina: Daniel Kestelboim-Abrebanel of Buenos Aires writes of his ancestry, tracing his lineage back through his mother, Edith Abrebanel; his grandfather, Alejandro Abrebanel (of Smyrna, Turkey); his great-grandfather, Moises Abrebanel (of Smyrna); and his great-great-grandfather, Ayer Abrebanel (of Salonika, Greece). With a master's degree in foreign trade, Daniel is active in international transactions. He explains, however, that the economic situation in Argentina has deteriorated to such an extent that he fears for the future of the economy.

A MEANING ALL ITS OWN

LILLIAN BROWN (Forest Hills, New York) sent the Newsletter the sheet music (copyright 1910) for "The Love Dance," an intermezzo from the operetta "Madame Sherry." This piece includes the famous "Every Little Movement (Has a Meaning All its Own)" song. It was, as the cover of the sheet music proclaims, danced by Mme. Lina Abarbanell (see the picture to the right), appearing in perhaps her greatest Broadway success.



Lina Abarbanell

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OUR DAVIDIC LINEAGE

Don Isaac Abravanel long claimed that his family was descended from the House of David. "After the destruction of the first Temple," he wrote, "two families of the House of David also came to Spain. One, of the family of the children of Daud, settled in Andalusia, and the other, of the family of the children of Abravanel, which is my own humble family, settled in Seville."

This tradition of nobility was inherited from his ancestors. According to one historian, Don Isaac believed in it implicitly, frequently signing his name, "Isaac, of the root of Jesse, the Bethlehemite, of the holy seed of the family of David."

Wealth and success, Don Isaac wrote, seemed to be sufficient confirmation of his royal background: "When thou seest wealth and leadership residing in one family for an unbroken period of several generations, thou mayest know that it is of the stem of Jesse." Commentators have observed that wealth and leadership resided with the Abravanel family for a longer time than with any other Jewish family.

At least one historian based a substantial part of his work on his analysis of the Davidic lineage of the Abravanel family. Hermann Reckendorf, a 19th century German scholar and author, argued that the line of David had never disappeared from Jewish history. He reasoned that the family passed from Zerubbabel, through Hillel and certain Jewish kings in Arabia, on to the Abravanel family. His assertions were based on his interpretations of various historical works and the Talmud. His conclusions are set forth in his work Die Geheimnisse der Juden, a five volume collection of sketches from Jewish history, written in German. His work was later translated into Hebrew by Abraham Kaplan and A. S. Friedberg.

CONTEMPORARY MUSICIAN

ALEX ABRAVANEL (San Antonio, Texas), a jazz musician and composer, sends a postcard to his fans; the latest edition contains the following information: "Just when you thought it was safe to look in the mailbox. Here's my schedule for the next few weeks and a few words about the soon-to-be-released album. It's called '...when everything changes.' It'll be available in April on cassette and maybe even CD. I hope to see you at one of the gigs. Drop me a note if you have any questions. It's always nice to find something other than a bill in my mailbox!" He can be reached at P.O. Box 290271, San Antonio, Texas 78280.

HOMAGE TO ERNEST ABRAVANEL

The Newsletter recently received a French-language brochure entitled "Homage to Ernest Abravanel." The brochure was published in 1980 on the occasion of the 80th birthday of Ernest Abravanel.

Ernest, an older brother of the conductor Maurice Abravanel, resides in Aran, Switzerland. He is one of the foremost exponents of the works of Stendhal, and the publisher of Editions du Grand-Chene. The brochure contains glowing reports by Ernest's colleagues and his nephew, Philippe, as well as an interview regarding his works. The brochure concludes with a bibliography of his works compiled by Maren Abravanel.

ABRAVANELS IN FACT AND FICTION

FREDDY ABRAVANEL (Athens, Greece) has sent the Newsletter a copy of "La Famiya Abravanel -- Su Orijin, Su Istoria I Su Mision," an article in Ladino written by JACQUES JOSE ABRAVANEL, the Portuguese consul in Istanbul (see Issue No. 2 of the Newsletter). The article is from the January-June 1988 issue of Aki Yerushalayim, the Ladino magazine published by Kol Israel in Jerusalem. The article chronicles the history of the Abravanel family, dating back, according to the writer, to the family's service as "Rex Judaerum," or "King of the Jews," over the provinces of Narvonne and Arles under the Emperor Charlemagne.

Freddy Abravanel has also forwarded a copy of "Un Tema del Teatro Djudeo-Espanyol: Abravanel," an article from the July-December 1988 issue of Aki Yerushalayim. The article, written by Elena Romero, contains a list of Ladino plays that involve Don Isaac Abravanel as the principal dramatic figure.

The first play, aptly titled "Abravanel," written by Aaron Menahim, was published in Bulgaria in 1889. The second play, of the same name, was written by Behor Azaria sometime before 1911. The third play, more directly entitled "Don Isaac Abravanel," was presented in Izmir and Salonika as late as 1912. The fourth play, more subtly entitled "Don Isaac," was written by Sento Semo sometime before 1910.

The production of Sento Semo's play appeared to meet with great approval. Oscar Straus, then ambassador of the United States in Istanbul, commented, "I consider 'Don Isaac' a remarkable historical production, with elements of a superb dramatic effect." The Marquis of Subiral, the ambassador of Portugal in London, added, "All the scenes of 'Don Isaac' are full of life and truly magnificent. This historical drama will be very successful."