

# **Belinfante Family Odyssey: Around the World from Portugal by Randall Belinfante**

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In the dark days of 1526, my ancestor Joseph Cohen Belinfante, collected his family about him and boarded a ship bound for Dalmatia in the Balkans. They left behind them what must have been a relatively prosperous home in Lisbon, Portugal. Yet, they were a family of Marranos, and they could no longer tolerate life in the Catholic nation of Portugal.

The Portuguese kings had at first welcomed the Jews -- back in 1492 -- when they were expelled from Spain. Indeed, the independence enjoyed by the Jews aroused resentment, especially among the clergy in Portugal. In 1496 however, the Portuguese King Emanuel I (the Fortunate--1495-1521) decided to marry the daughter of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain; and they demanded that he first expel or convert all the Jews within his country's borders. Not wanting to lose his financial middle men, the king tried to allow the wealthiest Jews to remain, on condition that they converted to Christianity. This last was not an easy task, since the Jews were not enthusiastic about converting. When the Jews refused to convert voluntarily, Emanuel tried to force them. On March 19, 1497, government officials forcibly seized and baptized all the Jewish minors they could lay their hands on, hoping that this would prevent their parents from attempting to flee. When a large group of some 20,000 Jews still insisted on emigrating, the order went out directing them to assemble at Lisbon. When they were assembled they were ceremonially baptized and declared to be "New Christians." Unintimidated by this turn of events, many of the conversos still attempted to emigrate, prompting King Emanuel to try to stem the tide by withholding the right of emigration from the New Christians. He was thus determined to keep the Jews in Portugal.

Yet, despite the King's appreciation of the conversos, there was little love lost among the Portuguese majority for the unwelcome guests. Indeed, in the spring of 1505, 2,000 New Christians were massacred during a Lisbon riot, thoroughly convincing the Jews or "New Christians" that they were not welcome, even if they had converted to Christianity. The Jews were actually stuck in a kind of religious limbo: they were no longer Jews (supposedly) and yet few considered them to be true Christians either. They were just Marranos. In actual fact, we don't know the extent of the Belinfante family's Christian faith, but we know that they must have at least postured or they would not have been permitted to remain as long as they did. Yet, they must also have clung to their Jewish faith because we know that Joseph's grandchildren worked as Sofers (writers of Sifre Torah) and Hazanim first in Dalmatia and then Belgrade after they escaped Portugal.

Faced with lives embittered by prejudice and religious persecution, the Belinfantes fled

the Iberian Peninsula for safer regions in the Balkans. We don't know if it was their intended destination, and the sea voyage must have been horrendous (the chances of being drowned in a shipwreck or being captured by pirates were very great). Yet, somehow, the Belinfante family managed to find its way to the shores of Dalmatia.

Upon reaching the Balkans the Belinfantes must have gone through the painful process of openly becoming Jews once again. They had not lost their links with their faith, but those links had been severely weakened. In the restorative atmosphere of the Balkans, their faith was revived, and by the end of the 15th Century, Joseph's great grandson, Meir Cohen Belinfante was serving as a Sofer in the Croatian town of Split. Split was a free port, governed by the Venetians, which was perched right on the edge of Ottoman Empire. There the community was protected from the Inquisition, and maintained as a link between the Christian and Ottoman worlds. Those Jewish merchants who settled in Split were exempted by the Ottoman Empire from paying the residence tax, while at the same time, they enjoyed immunity for their capital from the Venetian government.

From Split, Meir's son Joseph, moved to Belgrade in Serbia. There he became a Hazzan (Cantor) in one of the Belgrade Synagogues. The community there appears to have found security with the Turkish conquest in 1521, and it continued to dwell there until the approach of Austrian invaders in 1688. In all probability, the family dwelled in the Jewish mahala ("quarter"). This would have allowed them to be near other Jews, and would also have allowed them to walk to the synagogue on Shabbat. Tensions apparently increased during their lifetimes, climaxing in the Austrian invasion in 1688. Anticipating the invasion, Turkish anissaries attacked and plundered the Jewish quarter. The Austrians attacked a few months later, and after capturing the city, their soldiers indiscriminately burned, looted, and killed the entire population. Most of the Jews were deported and sold into slavery, but a few escaped. Among the escapees were Joseph's son, Meir, and his grandson, Zaddik, who appear to have departed the region in 1689 and moved to Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Our records indicate that Zaddik was born in Belgrade in 1675, and so he would have been a young man of 14 years at the time.

Once they reached Amsterdam, Meir pursued a career as an author and a teacher of theology. One of his sons, Zaddik was to grow up to become a Rabbi, preacher, and a Talmudic writer in Amsterdam. Other children were to also continue in his path as theologians. Not everyone was to remain in Amsterdam however. One of Meir's grandsons was to journey to the other side of the world, and was to become a Hazan in Barbados. Others found themselves settling in Jamaica, Curacao, and other points in the Caribbean. And still others were to follow Menasseh ben Israel and settle in England-- there are a long list of Belinfantes recorded in the marriage and burial records from London's Bevis Marks Synagogue.

Among the more notable descendants of Joseph Cohen Belinfante was the poet and preacher, Isaac Cohen Belinfante. What struck me as most interesting about this particular figure was that he possessed a passion for libraries and books. Indeed, some of his poetry proclaims the marvels of books, and suggests that they actually possess the power to strengthen and invigorate the individual.

Another major figure in the Belinfante family was Moses Cohen Belinfante. Moses

Cohen Belinfante was instrumental in introducing the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) to Holland. Living from to Moses was a friend of Moses Mendelsohn, and he worked to make Judaism readily accessible to the Jewish community in the Netherlands. Translating large quantities of material into the vernacular, Belinfante strove to make Jewish literature available to those with less extensive training in Jewish studies. He hoped in this way to make the material available to the general Jewish population.

Sadic Cohen Belinfante b: 27 Jun 1732 Amsterdam d: 31 Oct 1786 was yet another outstanding scholar and rabbi. Growing up in Amsterdam, he emigrated to the Hague where he became the Chief Rabbi in 1783. There he served until the end of his life in 1786.

Hundreds of members of the Belinfante family died during the Holocaust, mainly at Sobibor and the death camp, Auschwitz. At first the Nazi's did not include the Sephardim with the other Jews, thinking them somewhat different. In the end, however, the Sephardim were included and rounded up, to be shipped off to the camps. Among these was the Journalist Emilie Josephine (Emmy) Belinfante b: 11 Jan 1875 The Hague d: 7 Jul 1944. Emmy Belinfante was a pioneer, a fiery woman journalist, but her life was ended in the death camp of Auschwitz.

Some of the Belinfantes managed to avoid this disaster by moving to England in the middle of the 1800's. Among these were my Great Great Grandfather, Isaac Cohen Belinfante, and my Great Great Grandmother, Rachel Levy Montezinos. Both were born in Amsterdam but moved to London, and were married in the Bevis Marks Synagogue on November 20, 1867. A second cousin, David Cohen Belinfante, still attends services there to this day.

In 1913, my family landed on the shores of America. They lived in a part of Brooklyn that is now known as Borough Park. Coincidentally, they lived just six blocks from where I live today, although growing up as a sun-worshipping kid on the beaches of Southern California, I never could imagine that I would end up in Brooklyn. Though comments about "those d--ed Jews" were to follow them across the country, my Grandparents had no interest in their religion or their heritage, and they made little effort to pass them on to my mother. Thus my mother grew up with little awareness of her Jewish heritage.

My grandparents did not experience great success in the New World. My grandfather considered himself an artist and an inventor, and was never able to settle on an occupation. When the Great Depression hit, it depleted what little funds the family had, and so he decided to load up their few belongings and strike out for California. With no car and little money, they were like corks carried out by the tide, carried wherever the current happened to send them. Dressed in scouting uniforms, they managed to hitchhike across the US, down into Mexico, and then back up to the sleepy town of Los Angeles. "Nothing," my grandfather said, "Would ever become of LA", and so they moved on to the still smaller town of French Camp, CA. Here they settled in, with my grandmother working at the State Hospital, and my grandfather making plans for the rest of their lives.

I did not come face to face with my Jewish heritage until after my first trip to Israel, when a number of the pieces of the puzzle came together. I became determined not to

remain ignorant and began delving into Judaism. I began by taking Hebrew classes, then moved on to taking Hebrew literature and law classes, and then left my home to study at a yeshiva in Jerusalem. I was to discover that all Belinfantes are somehow related and one merely had to make the connection in order to join the giant family network. In my case, this also entailed adopting my mother's name (after my father died in 1985). After more years of study, I moved to New York City. There I met my wife, Hannah Miryam, and joined Congregation Shearith Israel, the oldest Jewish community in North America. I also became librarian for the American Sephardi Federation, and began collecting books and archives from major figures on the American Jewish scene. I recently completed a thesis dealing with the librarian Isaac Cohen Belinfante, mentioned above. It was appropriate that I, too, should become a librarian and follow in the footsteps of my ancestors.

Randall Belinfante, Librarian/Archivist of the American Sephardi Federation, has written for HaLapid on Bevis Marks Synagogue in London to which he refers above. He is a member of SCJS.