

## CITY



Jim Estrin/The New York Times

Allan R. Abravanel, at center with his son, David, during a family reunion in Queens for all descendants of Don Isaac Abravanel.

## 130 Abravanel's Honor Heroic Name

By ARI L. GOLDMAN

Five hundred years ago Don Isaac Abravanel, a Jew who was finance minister to Queen Isabella of Spain, was given a choice: Convert to Christianity or be exiled forever from Spain. Together with thousands of other Jews, Abravanel chose exile, and in the words of one scholar, became the classic wandering Jew, journeying to Naples, Sicily, Corfu and Venice.

Over the weekend, 130 of his descendants gathered in Queens to pay tribute to the courage of Abravanel and to bask in his name. There were Abravanel, Abarbanel, Barbanel and Barbanell, among other variations, and they brought with them ancient books and documents and stories and family trees going back eight generations and more.

None could trace their heritage directly to Don Isaac, a Renaissance man on the eve of the Renaissance, a statesman, philosopher, Bible commentator and mystic. The standard for being accepted into the extended family could best be summed up by the family motto, "Basta mi nombre que es Abravanel!" or "It is enough that my name is Abravanel!"

The family gathering Saturday night, and an academic conference on the works of Abravanel held yesterday at Queens College, are among dozens of events around the world recalling the 500th anniversary of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. On March 31, the precise anniversary of the decree, King Juan Carlos of Spain is expected to formally rescind the order in a ceremony in a Madrid synagogue.

The expulsion came in the same year as Columbus's voyage of discovery. There are those who maintain that Abravanel and other Jews

helped finance the voyage, either voluntarily or through forced appropriation of their wealth, and still others who contend that Columbus himself was a Jew.

But little was made of the Columbus connection. The weekend belonged to Don Isaac Abravanel. People bearing his name came for the occasion from Florida, California, Oregon, Illinois, Texas, the Carolinas and all over the Northeast. Alain Abravanel came from Brazil; David

### Isabella's minister preferred exile to renouncing Judaism.

Abravanel came from Israel; Dr. Roberto Senor Abravanel came from Argentina, and Christian Abravanel came with his two children from France.

"I've been hearing stories about Don Isaac since I was this little," said Christian Abravanel, dipping his hand to half the size of his 12-year-old son, David. Mr. Abravanel, who owns a limousine company in Cannes, said that his mother was Roman Catholic and his father a Jew from Salonika, Greece.

He is a nephew of Maurice Abravanel, conductor emeritus of the Utah Symphony Orchestra, who could not make the gathering but sent a taped greeting that brought a roar of approval from the audience.

"We cannot be humble with a name like that," Maurice Abravanel said.

"That's impossible. The best we can do is try to live in a way that the grand old man would be proud of us."

Allan R. Abravanel, a lawyer from Portland, Ore., and the mastermind behind the family reunion, said that the extended family had both Mediterranean and Northern European branches — Sephardic and Askenazic. But no one is sure how, when or even if the migration north occurred.

Like other Askenazic family members, Jonathan Abarbanel, a freelance theater critic from Chicago, said that his paternal grandfather came from Ukraine at the turn of the century, the descendant of poor Russian peasant Jews. "But I've always felt ennobled by the name," he said.

Others said that ennobling or not, the name was sometimes a burden. Howard Barbanel, who grew up on Long Island and attended Jewish day schools, said he was greeted by more than one rabbi with: "Do you know who you are? Do you know where you come from?"

#### Trading Spelling Stories

As they gathered for a family photograph at the Sephardic Jewish Center of Forest Hills, where a reunion dinner was held, family members traded stories. "I spend half my time as a lawyer spelling my name," said Allan Abravanel. One parlor game was to describe the corruptions of the name by well-meaning listeners: Barbarelli, Barnell, Barbaro, Barbarillo. And more than a few admitted to checking phone directories for long-lost family members whenever they visit a new city.

Members of the clan also talked about famous relatives that they have yet to track down. There was talk of Oded Abarbanel of Tel Aviv, who, according to the family newsletter,



Don Isaac Abravanel, who was finance minister to Queen Isabella of Spain.

holds the distinction of being the only El Al pilot whose aircraft was ever hijacked. And there was Mickey Abarbanel, a baseball pitcher who played for an Indianapolis farm team, was featured on a White Sox baseball card as a "rookie star" and then dropped from view without playing in the major leagues.

Perhaps the most unusual story came from Maurice Abravanel, who said that even the sound of the Abravanel name inspired greatness. "When Beethoven did not know how to start his Fifth Symphony, he heard the name Abravanel," the conductor said, singing his name with an emphasis on each syllable but especially the last: ah-brah-vah-NEL.