

## Benvenida Abravanel's maternal family, birthdate, birthplace and descendants

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**ABSTRACT:** Among the Jewish women who lived in the past few are as famous as Benvenida Abravanel, as is attested by the many works that have been written about her, some during her lifetime. Those works portray some events in her life and focus on her charitable activities. However, some very basic information about her is still missing, for example the identity of her maternal ancestors. In addition, some of the available information about her is uncertain, for example the place and date of her birth. This study considers the items mentioned in the title of this article and shows that that she was born in Rome around 1500 and that on the maternal side she belonged to the prestigious family of Samuel Sarfati. Thus, her pedigree included two of the most distinguished Jewish families who lived in Italy during the Renaissance. Finally, family trees are presented for the branches of the families to which Benvenida belonged, beginning with their arrival in Portugal at the end of the fourteenth century, and ending in the last third of the sixteenth century.

**KEYWORDS:** Abravanel; Sarfati; Zarfati; Middle Ages; Renaissance; Portugal; Spain; Italy.

**TRANSLATED TITLE:** Benvenida Abravanel: familia materna, fecha y lugar de nacimiento y descendientes.

**RESUMEN:** Entre las mujeres judías que vivieron en el pasado pocas son tan famosas como Benvenida Abravanel, como lo muestran muchos escritos sobre ella, algunos durante su vida. Esos trabajos describen algunos eventos en su vida, enfocándose en sus actividades caritativas. Sin embargo, varios datos importantes acerca de ella son aún desconocidos, por ejemplo, la identidad de sus ancestros maternos. Además, cierta información publicada anteriormente es incierta, por ejemplo, el lugar y la fecha de su nacimiento. Este estudio considera los puntos mencionados en el título de este artículo y muestra que ella nació en Roma alrededor de 1500 y que por el lado maternal ella perteneció a la distinguida familia de Samuel Sarfati. Esto es, sus ancestros incluyeron dos de las más distinguidas familias judías que vivieron en Italia durante el Renacimiento. El estudio también presenta árboles genealógicos de las ramas de las familias a las cuales Benvenida perteneció, desde su llegada a Portugal a finales del siglo XIV hasta el último tercio del siglo XVI.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Abravanel; Sarfati; Zarfati; Edad Media; Renacimiento; Portugal; España; Italia.

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## PATERNAL ANCESTORS

In her testament, dated 17 February 1553, Benvenida Abravanel stated she was the daughter of Jacob Abravanel, which means she was an Abravanel on her own and did not get that surname by marriage<sup>1</sup>. However, she did not state the name of her mother or of any other maternal ancestor; as far as we know the name of that family remains unknown.

On the other hand, considerable information exists about her paternal ancestors<sup>2</sup>, and Fig. 1 shows the names of the known members of the Abravanel branch to which Benvenida belonged, beginning with Judah Abravanel, grandfather of both Benvenida and Samuel Abravanel. To facilitate the recognition of names, we use a number of simplifications. The first is the inclusion of a code that identifies the generation to which each mentioned person belongs. Thus, Benvenida belonged to the third generation shown in the figure, denoted by code (A3). Second, we omit the surname Abravanel as well as the prestigious Don and Doña with which each member of this family was addressed during this/her lifetime. In addition, because in some generations there were two or more individuals carrying identical names, we have added to the name of each such individual the corresponding initials of his/her father. For example, in generation A4 there were two individuals whose first name was Isaac: the son of Joseph Abravanel and the son of Samuel Abravanel. To distinguish them we write their names as Isaac-JA and Isaac-SA, respectively.

Continuing with the information about the Abravanel, we know that Judah (A1) left Spain after his father converted to Christianity and went to Portugal with at least two of his brothers and settled in Lisbon. It is believed that the move took place around 1391, during the wide-spread pogroms that were then taking place in Spain. We do not know the names of Judah's brothers but apparently he was younger than they<sup>3</sup>. Judah had three sons, the oldest of whom was probably Isaac (A2), born in 1437 in Lisbon<sup>4</sup>. Isaac's brothers, Iacob (A2) and Samuel (A2) were also born there. Their birthyears, shown in the figure, are estimates based on Isaac's birthyear.

Isaac had three sons, Judah (born first), Joseph, and Samuel (born last), and two daughters whose names are unknown. One was married to Isaac's nephew, Joseph-SA (A3), the other was married to a man belonging to Benvenida's maternal family, as described later. Of course, Isaac's children also belong to generation A3.

Now, according to Benvenida (A3) her father was named Iacob Abravanel, possibly the brother of Isaac, in which case she and her husband, Samuel Abravanel (A3), were first cousins. Of course, given that Joshua (A1) had at least two brothers, it is possible that one (or both) of them also had a son named Iacob Abravanel. In that case Benvenida and Samuel would have still been cousins, but not in the first degree. However, as mentioned later, there is some evidence that indicates that Benvenida's father was Isaac's brother.

In generation (A4) we see the children of Benvenida and Samuel. As Fig. 1 shows, we have set Isaac-SA apart from the remaining children because he was a 'natural' son of Samuel, meaning that his mother was not Benvenida. He appears first in the list because, as he argued in a long-standing legal dispute with Benvenida about his inheritance, he was Samuel's first son<sup>5</sup>.

## MATERNAL ANCESTORS

Although no information about Benvenida's maternal ancestors appears to be known, documentary evidence exists that allows us to deduce that her mother was a member of the prestigious Sarfati (often written as Zarfati) family. That evidence stems from a notarial document dated 3 March 1552 that states the following:

<sup>1</sup> Leone Leoni 2011, Vol. II, doc. n.º 858: 929-931 (hereafter Leone Leoni, *Ferrara-I or Ferrara-II*).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Netanyahu 1988; Tavares 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Netanyahu 1988, 6.

<sup>4</sup> We reserve the name Isaac to denote the son of Judah (A1).

<sup>5</sup> Leone Leoni, Ferrara-II, August 1551, doc. n.º. 699: 875

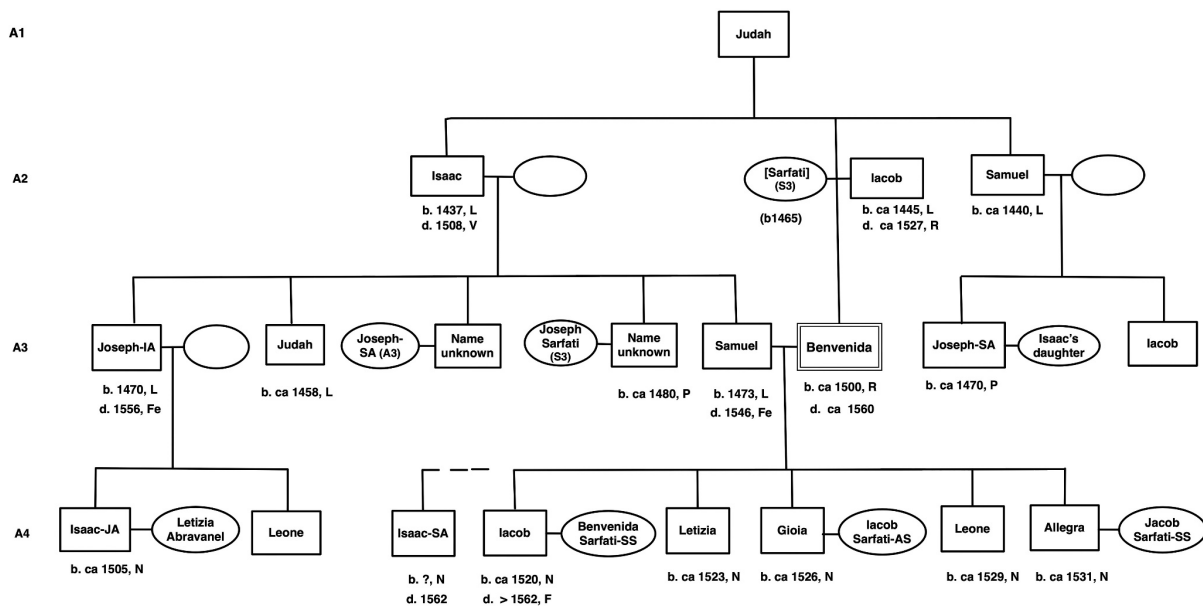


Figure 1. Paternal family of Benvenida Abravanel. Fe = Ferrara; L = Lisbon; N = Naples; P = Portugal; S = Seville; V = Venice.

D. Benvenida, widow . . . of Samuel Abravanel . . . appears in person with the consent of D. Samuel Sarfati, son of Joseph Sarfati, deceased, and of his son Iacob, residents of Ferrara, her closest relatives from both paternal and maternal sides. (*D. Benvenida, vedova . . . of Samuel Abravanel . . . agisce in presenza e col consenso di D. Samuele Sarfati [figlio] del fu Joseph e del lui figlio Iacob, abitanti a Ferrara, sui prossimi parenti tanto dal lato paterno quanto materno*)<sup>6</sup>.

This double-sided connection is remarkable as it specifies, indirectly, the surnames of the mothers of both Samuel Sarfati and Benvenida Abravanel. That is, in order for him to have been connected to Benvenida on her paternal side, his mother had to be an Abravanel. Similarly, for Benvenida to have been related to him on her maternal side, it is evident that her mother must have been a Sarfati.

It has been said that the surname Sarfati originates in France because that is what it means in Hebrew<sup>7</sup>. However, the branch of the Sarfati family that was related to Benvenida arrived in Portugal at about the same time as the Abravanel. There, some of them kept Sarfati as their surname; others took the Spanish (and Portuguese) version of Sarfati, namely *Francés*<sup>8</sup>. In this respect, two (nearly consecutive) records cite two individuals named Isaac that were awarded the same royal privilege in 1441: Isaac Sarfati and Isaac Francés<sup>9</sup>. We do not know whether either of these Isaacs was connected with Benvenida's family, but the fact that one of them was surnamed Sarfati indicates that he could have been her oldest Portuguese ancestor.

We now consider other individuals surnamed Sarfati who can be connected to Benvenida with a higher degree of certainty. To help the discussion that follows, we show our findings in the Sarfati family tree, Fig. 2, where we have used the same simplifications that were used in Fig. 1. Thus, Samuel Sarfati, the man who gave his consent to Benvenida in 1552, appears in the tree in generation

<sup>6</sup> Leone Leoni, *Ferrara-II*, 3 March 1552, doc. n°. 760: 890-891.

<sup>7</sup> Roth 1964, 217.

<sup>8</sup> About the Jews in Portugal before the expulsion from Spain see Tavares 1982.

<sup>9</sup> Carta de privilégio de D. Afonso V a Isaque Sarfati, Gibiteiro do Porto. Arquivo Nacional Torre de Tombo (hereafter ANTT), Chancelaria D. Afonso V, liv. 2, fl. 57r. The corresponding document for Isaque Francés appears in folio 58 of the same archival book.

S4 of the Sarfati family. Given that his son Iacob (S5) also gave that consent, we know that he was then at least 25 years old. This implies that Samuel Sarfati (S4) was then in his mid-fifties, that is, that he was born around 1497. He had another son, named Aron, and a daughter named Benvenida<sup>10</sup>. Because their names appear twice in the same generation, we denote these two children of Samuel Sarfati as Iacob-SS and Benvenida-SS. As shown in the figure both of them married children of Benvenida and Samuel Abravanel (A3).

About Samuel Sarfati (S4) we know that he was a book printer who had lived in Rome before moving to Ferrara in 1549<sup>11</sup>. Evidently, he was an important person for a document cited by Leone Leoni states that he had persuaded Pope Paul III to admit some Jews into the papal states<sup>12</sup>.

The foregoing is evidence that at least some of Benvenida's maternal family lived or had lived in Rome before 1549. Who were they? A hint is provided by Samuel's full name, given in the quoted paragraph above, which shows that his father was Joseph Sarfati (S3), the famous poet and personal physician of several popes<sup>13</sup>. It is believed that he died soon after the sack of Rome in 1527. Based on the birthdate of his son Samuel (S4) we estimate that he was born around 1460. Joseph's father was Rabbi Samuel Sarfati (S2) who, according to Roth, was an even more eminent personal physician of the popes. It is believed that he died around 1519. As stated later, and as shown in Fig. 2, we believe that he was the grandfather of Benvenida Abravanel (S4), that is, that Benvenida's mother was Joseph's Sarfati's sister.

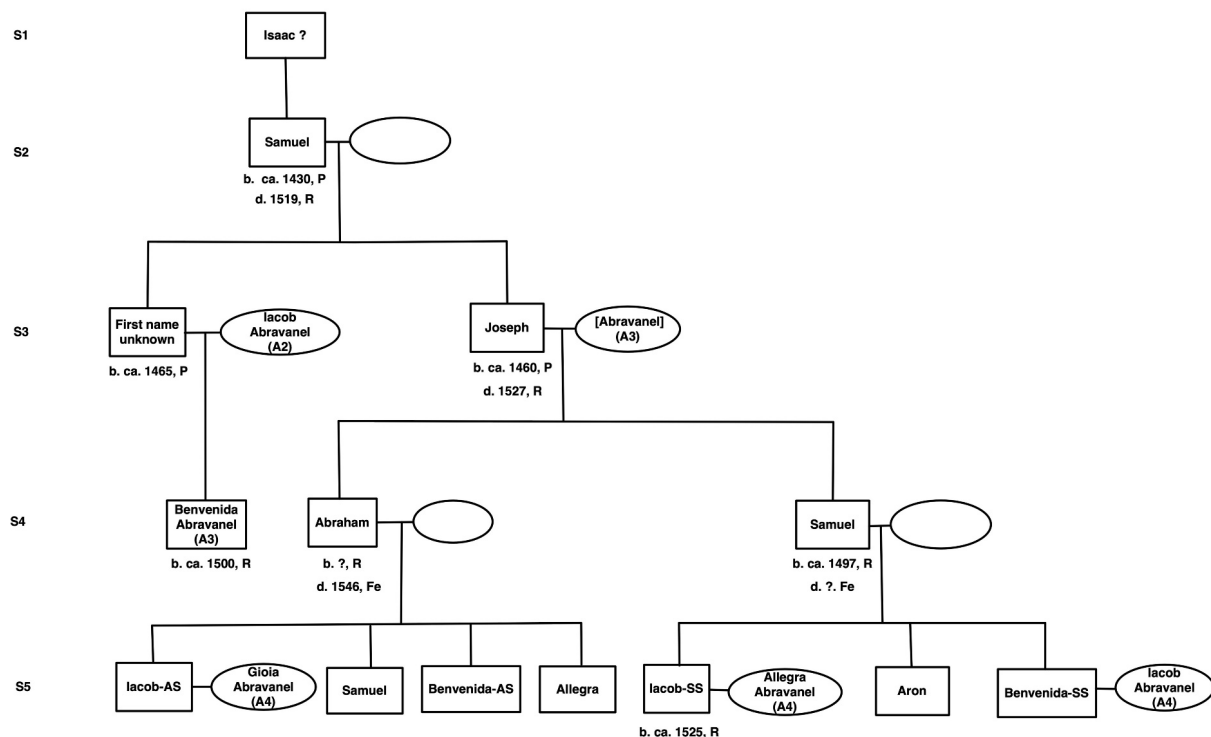


Figure 2. Maternal family of Benvenida Abravanel. Fe = Ferrara; L = Lisbon; N = Naples; P = Portugal; S = Seville; V = Venice.

<sup>10</sup> Leone Leoni, *Ferrara-I*: 329, n. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel set up his printing press in Ferrara in 1549, transferring it later to Yomtov Atias, the publisher of the first Bible in Spanish, now known as the *Ferrara Bible*. Leone Leoni, *Ferrara-I*: 329-330.

<sup>12</sup> Leone Leoni, *Ferrara-I*: 117.

<sup>13</sup> Roth 1964, 217.

The documentary evidence lets us identify some additional members of the Sarfati family: Abraham Sarfati (S4) and Salomon Sarfati. We believe that Abraham was a brother of Samuel Sarfati (S4) because he, like Samuel lived in Ferrara<sup>14</sup>. He had two sons, Samuel and Iacob-AS, and two daughters, Benvenida-AS and Allegra, all belonging to generation S5. In another document, Iacob-SA (A4) states that Iacob-AS and Iacob-SS were his cousins as well as his brothers-in-law<sup>15</sup>. Of course, the cousins relationship shows that the last-mentioned Iacobs were cousins of each other. The brother-in-law connection is considered in the accompanying note; it shows that Gioia Abravanel (A4) was married to Iacob-AS (S5)<sup>16</sup>. About Salomon Sarfati (not shown in Fig. 2) we only know that he was a son of a Roman banker named Isaac Sarfati and that he was a legal representative of the Abravenels<sup>17</sup>.

#### ABRAVANEL-FAMILY DISPLACEMENTS

To help us determine where was Benvenida born, we need review the paths followed by her family on their way to Italy. As stated before, her Abravanel-family branch moved from Spain to Portugal around 1391, apparently settling in Lisbon. It was there that Isaac (A2) and his brothers were born, raised, and married. Nearly a century after the family arrived in Portugal, Isaac was accused of participating in a conspiracy against King João II. Fearing for his life, he chose to leave Portugal in 1483. Later, in 1485, a royal decree sentenced him, in absentia, to death and to the loss of assets<sup>18</sup>. Three months later, Isaac's nephew and son-in-law, Joseph-SA (A3), was also sentenced but managed to escape<sup>19</sup>. Given the seriousness of the situation, it is likely that most family members also chose to leave Portugal.

Two years later, a Judah Abravanel was mentioned in another document<sup>20</sup>. It is possible that he was among those who stayed in Portugal. In fact, documents written there considerably later refer to individuals surnamed Abravanel<sup>21</sup>. In any event it is evident that Isaac's brothers, Samuel and Iacob, managed to leave Portugal around 1485. It is also likely that some members of the Sarfati family joined those who left. Among them was Benvenida's mother, for she was married to Iacob.

The events that followed the Abravanel's flight to Spain can be gleamed from Netanyahu's biography of Isaac (A2), cited earlier. For our purposes it is sufficient to jump to 1492, when Fernando de Aragon and Isabel de Castilla issued an edict ordering that all the Jews living in their kingdoms and possessions be expelled if they did not convert to Catholicism. Isaac and his family were among those rejecting conversion.

A safe place for most Jews leaving Spain then would have been Portugal and, in fact, many went there<sup>22</sup>. Evidently, the Abravenels could not. Instead, they chose to leave Spain by sea, to look for a place that would allow them entry. The closeness of Italy from Spain's east coast made Italy desirable. Of course, there were other reasons for wanting to go there. Perhaps the most important was that

<sup>14</sup> Leone Leoni, *Ferrara-II*, doc. n°. 346: 758

<sup>15</sup> Leone Leoni, *Ferrara-II*, 13 June 1558, doc. n°. 1563: 1170-1171.

<sup>16</sup> The condition that Iacob Abravanel (A4) was a brother-in-law of Iacob-SS is met in two ways. The first is through his own sister Allegra (A4) who was married to Iacob-SS; the second because he, Iacob Abravanel (A4), was married to Benvenida Sarfati-SS (see, Leone Leoni, *Ferrara-I*: 330, n. 13). Now consider the brother-in-law connection with Iacob-SS, the son of Abraham Sarfati (S4). Evidently, the only possible way to meet that condition is that Iacob-AS and Gioia Abravanel (A4) were married. Incidentally, Leone Leoni stated correctly that "Gioia married a Iacob Abravanel, but without evidence speculated that he might have been a son of D. Isaac [A4]." (Leone Leoni, *Ferrara-I*: 339, n. 2)

<sup>17</sup> Leone Leoni, *Ferrara-I*: 345 (n 110) and 346. Among Salomon's tasks was a litigation before the Apostolic Chamber, the most important Papal administrative organ, responsible for regulating temporal affairs, particularly financial matters.

<sup>18</sup> Royal sentence against Isaac Abravanel. ANTT, May 30, 1485. Gavetas 2, mç. 1, n°. 14.

<sup>19</sup> Royal sentence against Joseph Abravanel. ANTT, August 31, 1485. Gavetas 2, mç. 1, n°. 15.

<sup>20</sup> Carta de perdão for Judah Abravanel, October 4, 1487. ANTT, Chancelaria de D. Joao II, liv. 21, fl. 42.

<sup>21</sup> Examples are Henrique Fernandes Abravanel, who appears in several documents, one of them dated 20 March 1502 (ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, Parte 1, mç. 25, no. 106), and Diogo Fernandez Barbanel [Abravanel], mentioned as a witness in an Inquisition document, dated 11 January 1572 (ANTT, Inquisição de Lisboa, Processo n°. 2931, fl. 5v).

<sup>22</sup> Beinart 2001.

Jews had been living in Italy for a long time<sup>23</sup>. However, at the time of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, only the Kingdom of Naples had a tolerant attitude toward them<sup>24</sup>. Thus, after Genoa refused their entry, the Abravanel went to Naples where they were allowed to settle as permanently as conditions would allow<sup>25</sup>. Those conditions changed around 1510 when Charles V (Carlos I of Spain) made Naples a Spanish viceroyalty. Some years later Viceroy Pedro Álvarez de Toledo ordered the Jews to leave Naples, which the Abravanel did in 1541.

#### SARFATI-FAMILY DISPLACEMENTS

The origin of Benvenida's branch of the Sarfati family is unclear, but the 1441 record mentioned earlier indicates that the Sarfatis had been living in Portugal at least since the end of the XIV Century. In any event, because of the close rapport between the two families, it is likely that some members of the Sarfati family joined the Abravanel in their escape from Portugal around 1485, and that they left Spain together when the Jews were expelled from that country. The fact that we see some Sarfatis in Ferrara in the early 1540s indicates that at least some of them also arrived in 1492 in Naples together with the Abravanel. Less certain is what followed next. Perhaps they stayed in Naples only temporarily for the records show that some of them relocated elsewhere at a later time.

Among those who left was Samuel Sarfati (S2), mentioned earlier. It is said that he arrived in Rome in 1498 from France, a fact that caused some authors to believe he was born there. In any case, he lived in Rome to the end of his days. His family remained there for at least two generations after his death. It was then that his grandsons Abraham and Samuel, (both generation A4), relocated to Ferrara.

#### BENVENIDA'S CHILDREN

Although contemporary documents provide some information about the birthplaces and birthdates of several of the male ancestors of Benvenida, no such documents seem to exist about her. In what follows we estimate the year of her birth from the birthdates of her children, deduced from contemporary records aided by a number of assumptions, as explained below.

According to a document cited by Leone Leoni, Samuel and Benvenida Abravanel had two sons, Jacob and Leone, and three daughters, Letizia, Allegra and Gioia<sup>26</sup>, all belonging to generation A4. In addition, Samuel (A3), had a son from 'a previous bed,' whom we have denoted as Isaac-SA (A4). As mentioned before, he was Samuel's first-born son. The most important source we used to determine their ages is a document dated 3 September 1549, which states that "Leone, Gioia and Allegra were all younger than 25 ... [but] Letizia was over 25 years"<sup>27</sup>. Several facts follow from this statement. The first is that the order with which the names of the younger children were mentioned shows that Gioia was older than Allegra<sup>28</sup>. The statement that Letizia's age then was over 25 implies that she could not have been much older than that, for otherwise there was no need to mention that fact. Somewhat arbitrarily we take her age then to have been 26 years old, which gives her birth year to be around 1523. The birthyears of Leone, Gioia and Allegra are considered in the following note<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> The literature, lay and scholarly, on the Jews of Italy is rather extensive. Among those works in English that cover their existence there are Cooperman and Garvin 2000; Caffiero 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Netanyahu 1988, 62.

<sup>25</sup> See David Abulafia, 'The Aragonese Kings of Naples and the Jews', in Cooperman and Garvin 2000, 82-106.

<sup>26</sup> Leone Leoni, *Ferrara-I*: 329. As Leone Leoni pointed out, Benvenida had three daughters, not two as was previously believed.

<sup>27</sup> Leone Leoni, *Ferrara-I*: 329, n. 2.

<sup>28</sup> That order does not necessarily imply that Leone was older than both Gioia and Allegra because, normally, males appeared first in lists of this type.

<sup>29</sup> We begin with Leone (A5), whose age can be estimated closely. Thus, a document, dated March of 1552 states that he was then younger than 25 but older than 22. This shows that his age then could only be 23 or 24, which means that he was born around 1529. We know that Gioia was older than Allegra but do not know when were they born. A possible

It is also noted that the cited document does not state Iacob's age. The reason for that omission is that there was no question that he was an adult when the document was written. This implies that he was older than Letizia, although we do not know by how many years. Without any other evidence we assume that he was three years older than she, which indicates that he was born around 1520<sup>30</sup>.

#### BENVENIDA'S BIRTHYEAR

Having estimated the birthyears of the children of Benvenida, we are now in a position to consider her birthyear. Given that Iacob, Benvenida's oldest child was born around 1520, we estimate that Benvenida married Samuel around 1518 and therefore assume that she was then between 15 and 20 years old, a customary range in those days. If so, she was born around 1500. This date shows that Benvenida was not born in either Portugal or Spain for the family left Iberia in 1492.

#### BENVENIDA'S PLACE IN THE SARFATI TREE

While Benvenida's place in the paternal family tree is known, her corresponding place in the maternal tree is not. That is, although her birthyear defines her as member of generation S4 of her Sarfati family, we do not know where does she connects to the main stem of that tree. That connection is, of course, through her mother, but it is slightly ambiguous because she could have been a daughter of Samuel Sarfati (S2) or of another Sarfati male, for example Isaac Zarfati, the father of Salomon Sarfati, who represented the Abravanel in Rome. Given Benvenida closeness with Samuel Sarfati (S4), son of Joseph Sarfati (S3), it is likely that Benvenida's mother was Joseph's sister. This possibility is examined later. Unfortunately, her name remains unknown. A 1995 article by Stow mentions two women surnamed Zarfati who lived in the Roman Ghetto in the first third of the sixteenth century<sup>31</sup>. Their names were Donnina Zarfati and Simha Zarfati. Doninna, was a daughter of Rabbi Samuel Zarfati (S2). In 1519 she was seeking to annul her engagement, eight years earlier, to Judah Corbitto. We do not know her birthdate, but given that her engagement had taken place in 1511, she could not then be much older than 15, which means she was born around 1496, much too young to be Benvenida's mother. Similar comments apply to Simha Zarfati, who was seeking a divorce in 1536.

#### BENVENIDA'S BIRTHPLACE

Although the estimated year of Benvenida's birth and the place of residence of her maternal ancestors at that time seem to indicate that Rome was the place of her birth, it is possible that her parents were then living in Naples. After all, Iacob's successful nephew, Samuel Abravanel (A3) was living there. A clear hint that Rome was, in fact, the place where Benvenida's parents lived is found in David Reubeni's account of his own travels, where he mentioned that when he visited Rome in 1524 he first stayed three months in the house of "physician Rabbi, Joseph Sarphati." Afterwards, he "went . . . to the house of an old man, the brother-in-law of Joseph Sarphati"<sup>32</sup>. There is no question that this Joseph Sarphati was the man we have identified as Joseph Sarfati (S3), but who could be that old man be? Several candidates are available, all surnamed Abravanel<sup>33</sup>. However, the most likely

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arrangement, suggested by the six-year gap between Letizia's birth and Leone's, is to assume that Gioia was born three years after Letizia, and that Allegra was born three years after Leone.

<sup>30</sup> A sentence in Reubeni's travel diary (David Reubeni, in Adler 2005, 297) seems to imply that Benvenida had in 1525 a daughter born in Lisbon who had a son and a daughter there who were old enough to fast and pray. A simple analysis based on the birthdate of Benvenida's daughter Letizia, born in Naples around 1523, shows that the statement is untrue. It is possible that Reubeni had met (or heard of) a woman living in Lisbon when he was there who was surnamed Abravanel and assumed she had to be Benvenida's daughter. But the record show that there were several Abravanel living then in Portugal. It is likely that among them there were several women surnamed Abravanel.

<sup>31</sup> Stow 1995.

<sup>32</sup> David Reubeni, in Adler 2005, 271-274.

<sup>33</sup> One of the candidates could also have been a brother of Joseph Sarfati's wife, who was a daughter of Isaac Abravanel (A2). However, her oldest brother, Judah, was too young to be considered 'an old man' in 1525

candidate was Iacob Abravanel, Benvenida's father, for not only was he a brother-in-law of Joseph Sarfati but also was about 80 years old when Reuveni visited Rome. Thus, Iacob and his wife, the parents of Benvenida, were then living in Rome. It therefore follows that Benvenida was born there and that her mother was a sister of Joseph Sarfati (S3).

#### BENVENIDA'S PRIMARY LANGUAGE

As a member of both the Abravanel and Sarfati families, Benvenida was a highly educated woman who probably spoke several languages. However, the important question is what language did she speak when she was growing up in Rome. Of course, outside her home she spoke Italian. However, both her maternal and paternal ancestors had lived in Spain for a long time and had spoken Spanish at home. They continued to do so after relocating elsewhere, wherever that was. Thus, it is likely that Benvenida's primary language was Spanish, the same as her husband's<sup>34</sup>.

#### JOSEPH SARFATI'S WIFE

As shown before, the wife of Joseph Sarfati (S3) was an Abravanel. Her place in the Abravanel family tree is also of interest as it would add to our knowledge about that distinguished family. We do not know her name, but the fact that one of her sons, Samuel Sarfati (S4), was born around 1500 seems to indicate that she was born around 1480. This means that she probably was a daughter of Isaac (A2), whose other daughter was married to Joseph-SA (A3).

#### SOME IMPLICATIONS

The estimated times of the birthyears of the brides and grooms considered above shows that they were born in Portugal, for it was not until 1483 that Isaac (A2) escaped that country. However, given that Samuel Sarfati (S2) did not arrive in Rome until 1498, it is evident that both marriages took place in Italy.

Taken together, these connections show that the two marriages were between two Sarfati siblings and two Abravanel. These marriages involved some extraordinary people. Thus, Joseph Sarfati (S3), a distinguished physician, theologian and writer, married a daughter of Isaac Abravanel (A2), a distinguished statesman, philosopher, theologian and writer. Thus, those marriages represented unions between two of the most distinguished families in the Jewish communities in Italy at that time. While it could be that they were not the first between those families, those marriages cemented the very close connection between the two families that was to last at least several generations.

#### NAPLES

After their arrival in Naples in 1492, the Abravanel lived there largely, but not completely, free of persecution. That freedom ended around 1510 when Spain conquered Naples and made it a Spanish viceroyalty, a fact that meant that Jews would no longer be allowed to live there. However, the Abravanel managed to do so until Charles V forced their expulsion in 1540.

It is from that period that we have some information about Benvenida and her husband. Although most of it is well-known, certain elements of the story deserve a new look. Thus, we know that in 1532 Pedro Álvarez de Toledo was appointed viceroy by Charles V, and that Samuel Abravanel (A3) become his chief financier. This elevated position implies that the viceroy had met Samuel's wife and was very impressed by her, as his actions, described below demonstrate.

Benvenida's personality can be gathered from a brief note that appears in a book written in 1553 by Samuel Usque<sup>35</sup>, a man who knew both Samuel and Benvenida. After referring to Samuel (A3) in

<sup>34</sup> That the primary language of Samuel Abravanel (A3) was Spanish can be surmised from a letter he sent to Ercole II in which he used several Spanish words. Leone Leoni, *Ferrara-I*, 21 January 1541, doc. n°. 180: 686-687.

<sup>35</sup> Usque 1965, 210.

glowing terms, Usque added that Benvenida “was his (Samuel’s) peer in all virtues. Seeing the plight to which her brethren were subjected, she and several Neapolitan princesses petitioned the emperor [Charles V] to revoke the order of banishment against the Jews”<sup>36</sup>.

There is no question that Benvenida was Samuel’s equal in many respects. but given that her background was significantly different from his, she probably had some traits he did not. In any event, as a highly educated woman Benvenida must have provided her children with the best education that a child could have, Jewish or not. It is therefore no surprise to read in a book published in 1629 that:

While she [Benvenida] was in Naples, viceroy Pedro Álvarez de Toledo wanted that his daughter, Doña Leonor de Toledo, be raised under the supervision of Benvenida, and in her home. And after she married Grand Duke Cosimo de Medici and become the Grand Duchess of Tuscany, in her activities she always relied on Benvenida, who lived in Ferrara and whom she called mother, and as such she treated and respected her. (*Mientras que [Benvenida] estuvo en Napoles, siendo allí Virrey don Pedro Álvarez de Toledo, quiso que su hija se criasse debaxo de la disciplina de la Señora Benvenida, y en su casa. Y después que casó con el Serenisimo gran duque Cosimo de Medices y vino a ser Gran Duquesa de la Toscana, siempre en sus cosas se valía de la señora Benvenida que habitaba en Ferrara, a quien llamaba madre*)<sup>37</sup>.

While the statement was written more than eighty years after the Abravanel left Naples, it includes a number of items that are supported by other sources. It is nevertheless useful to review some of the points raised by it. First of all, Eleonora was not raised in Benvenida’s house. She arrived in Naples in 1534, when she was twelve years old, and left that city in 1539 to marry Cosimo I. Hence, she was under Benvenida’s tutelage for only a few years. Nevertheless, the impact of those years on her education must have been very significant. And given that Benvenida was the wife of the viceroy’s chief financier, it is likely that she was knowledgeable in financial matters and that she passed that knowledge to Eleonora. This may explain the duchess’ ability to deal with money matters, almost unique among her peers. It is also likely that under Benvenida Eleonora developed an understanding of the Jews, their religion and of their tribulations. This may explain why she gave some protection to the Jews of Florence.

As for Eleonora supposedly calling Benvenida *mother*, it is not difficult to see how that could have been. Eleonora was not the only child that was being educated in the Abravanel home during the time she lived there. Benvenida’s own children were there as well. Among them was Letizia, Benvenida’s oldest daughter. She was about Eleonora’s age and, like her, she was young, rich and soon to be married. It is very likely that they became very close. If so, it would be only natural for Eleonora to address Benvenida as mother. In this regard we need address the continued contact between them after the Abravanel moved to Ferrara implied in the above quotation.

## FERRARA

Because of Charles V’s pressure on Naples’ viceroy, the Jews living there were ordered to leave that city. Among them were the Abravanel. Given his high status and wealth, it is likely that Samuel Abravanel had several other options but accepted the invitation of Ercole II, Duke of Ferrara to settle in Ferrara. While the move probably took place towards the end of 1541, the earliest known document showing him there is dated 29 August 1543<sup>38</sup>.

The activities of the Abravanel in Ferrara are described in Chapter 13 of Leone Leoni, *Ferrara-I*, to which the reader is referred for details. Here we mention only some facts that are relevant to

<sup>36</sup> It is likely that one of those princesses was Leonora de Toledo, daughter of viceroy of Naples and future duchess of Florence.

<sup>37</sup> Aboab, 1629, 2<sup>nd</sup> Part, Ch. 27: 318.

<sup>38</sup> Leone Leoni, *Ferrara-II*, doc. n° 263: 728.

Benvenida. The first is that although Samuel died in 1546, his death did not prevent the Abravanel to continue to expand the family's banking business after his death, and that by 1548 they had obtained from the Duke of Florence permission to open banks in Florence and other places in Tuscany. This is not surprising for Samuel had given his son Iacob ample powers<sup>39</sup>. However, the permit was given to both him and his mother<sup>40</sup>. The specific mention of Benvenida is revealing for it shows the hand of Eleonora de Toledo.

It is of course likely that after arriving in Ferrara, Benvenida went to Florence to visit Eleonora more than once. While no contemporary evidence has surfaced that confirms those visits, a 1544 document cited by Edelstein states that "her excellency (the duchess) has passed some time with a Hebrew *Gentildonna*, who had come to see the duchess, disputing some beautiful things of the faith"<sup>41</sup>. Of course, there lived in Florence at that time a good number of Jewish women and it is possible that some of them may have visited the duchess. However, it is difficult to imagine any Jewish woman other than Benvenida arguing points of faith with Eleonora de Toledo, a devout Christian.

Also of interest is the arrival in Ferrara, around 1549, of two other Jewish families of great wealth: The Mendes-Benveniste and the Enriques-Benveniste. The first of these was the family of Beatriz de Luna (better known as Doña Gracia<sup>42</sup>), widow of Francisco Mendes. The second, was headed by Violante Enriques, the widow of Nuno Enriques, and by Enrique Nunes, brother of Nuno.

It has been said that the Benvenida Abravanel and Beatriz de Luna socialized a great deal, which must be true at some level, but little evidence of that has so far surfaced. In fact, most of the documented interactions between the two families seem to have been related to legal procedures. On the other hand, the Abravanel and the Enriques-Benveniste seem to have had a closer rapport. The interactions between them included several business transactions, a mayor conflict between Iacob (A4) and a member of the Enriques-Benveniste family, and the marriage of Leone Abravanel with Gracia Benveniste.

#### THE INHERITANCE CONTROVERSY

Samuel Abravanel died in 1546, apparently without leaving a recent testament. His death started a long legal battle about his inheritance between Benvenida and Isaac-AS, the 'natural' son of Samuel Abravanel, who believed he was entitled to a part of Samuel's assets. The legal arguments were complicated by the fact that a year after Samuel's death Benvenida presented a testament of his, presumably written years before his death. The controversy is of considerable interest but it is beyond the scope of this work. A concise summary of it appears in Leone Leoni's *Ferrara-I*, to which the reader is referred. The controversy lasted until November of 1557, when Benvenida and her two sons paid the second 4000 ducats of the 8000 that had been agreed to years earlier. At that time, Isaac-SA stated that "he endeavored to consider the case closed". We should add that some of the documents related to the controversy offer a view of Benvenida that, in the opinion of Leone Leoni "contradicts the image of the gentil and giving woman that the chroniclers of that era described"<sup>43</sup>.

#### FLORENCE

We do not know what Benvenida did in the last years of her life. Leone Leoni stated that the last notice he knows about her is dated 1558. We also do not know whether she stayed in Ferrara or moved elsewhere. We do know that the Ferrara policies toward the Jews had changed under Ercole II owing to the pressure that pope Paul IV had been exerting on him. The situation must have become more difficult after Ercole II died in 1559.

<sup>39</sup> Leone Leoni, *Ferrara-II*, 3 January 1546, doc. n°. 321: 750

<sup>40</sup> Leone Leoni, *Ferrara-II*, 21 June 1548, doc. n°. 423: 780-781.

<sup>41</sup> Edelstein 2000, 299.

<sup>42</sup> Roth 1977.

<sup>43</sup> Leone Leoni, *Ferrara-I*: 340 .

Although Benvenida and her immediate family were protected by a safe-conduct that allowed them to stay safely in Ferrara, it appears that the family decided to relocate to Florence. Evidence for this stems from an entry, quoted by Edelstein<sup>44</sup>, in the 1562 Florentine census which shows that “Iacob Abravanello Hebreo”, a resident of the Santa Croce parish, headed a home consisting of seven males and fifteen females. Evidently, this Iacob Abravanel was Benvenida’s oldest son. It is likely that the group he headed was an extended family that included both Sarfatis and Abravanel. In fact, the corresponding family trees show that the number of males in generations A4 and S5 is the same as that mentioned in the census. On the other hand, the corresponding number of females is smaller than fifteen. Two reasons may account for this difference. One is that the trees are incomplete because of the limited contemporary information that is available. Another is that some members of older generations could still be alive in 1562 and living in Florence, a likely example being Benvenida Abravanel herself.

## CONCLUSION

This study has considered Benvenida Abravanel’s maternal ancestors as well as her place of birth and her year of birth. The main results, previously unknown, are that she was born in Rome around 1500; that her mother was a daughter of Samuel Sarfati (S2); and that Joseph Sarfati’s wife was a daughter of Isaac Abravanel (A2). It is therefore evident that through these and several other marriages between the two families there was formed an extended family that included some of the most eminent Jews in Italy at the time. The evidence presented here has also enabled us to place Benvenida in genealogical trees of the Sarfati and Abravanel families. These trees summarize the results obtained in this study and include some previously unknown names and connections.

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The author of this article declares that he has no financial, professional or personal conflicts of interest that could have inappropriately influenced this work.

## AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Samuel Temkin: conceptualization, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing.

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<sup>44</sup> Edelstein 2000, 299.

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