

"Rhodes Revisited" by Sonja Bilé



"We had some family living on Rhodes..." This sentence proved to be the key that opened a sesame of lost genealogical information when I discovered a document in my parental home some 8 years ago. It was issued in 1919 by the Spanish embassy to Belgium stating my paternal grandfather was a descendant of the Jews of Spain. All I had ever known was that he had come from Turkey, spoke French and was a Jew, which did not make much sense to me as a child. Years went by, our parents had died and there I was at the age of 54, totally ignorant of my Jewish roots and heritage. This was caused by the trauma my father and my 2 aunts suffered after WWII. They had lost their uncle in the Shoah and only escaped by miracle themselves from the Nazi horror, my grandfather having died a natural death 13 years before the war and my grandmother being Belgian and non-Jewish.

Neither my cousins nor I had ever been told we descended from Sephardim and when I started to browse the Internet, more questions than answers arose. My surname BILI (BILE) did not pop up in any database and I concluded I would never succeed in knowing more about my ancestors... Until I decided to send an e-mail to Dr Jef Malka, webmaster of a very comprehensive website. And I specifically mentioned the isle of Rhodes... My surname did not appear in his database either, but he forwarded my mail to a friend of his who also has connections with Rhodes. Half an hour later I got a message from Leon Taranto saying "Dear cousin Sonja ...". His great-grandmother and mine had been sisters.

Leon provided me with the maternal Béresi family tree of our great-grandmothers and referred me to Dov Cohen in Israel for further info on the paternal Bili line. Very soon I had my family tree back in Izmir, Turkey, to 1750. It revealed the 2 "Belgian" Bili brothers also had had 4 sisters of whom 2 emigrated to the US, one to South-America and one to Rhodes. Searching the Belgian Archives and tracing my US cousins was the most obvious step to follow and very quickly the picture of our common family history broadened.

Soon after my great-grandfather had died in Izmir, the boys and one girl emigrated. The widowed mother and the 3 remaining girls left for Rhodes around the turn of the 20th century.

The story of the emigration of one of them, the Franco-Bili family is a very particular one. As many families did at the time, the father and the oldest son left first to seek a job and earn some money in order to pay for the rest of the family to join them in their new country later on. After a few years the second son Eli also left, leaving Rosa with the 3

girls in Rhodes. The eldest girl Juana was about 17-18 when her mother Rosa and aunt Caden had plans to match her to one of the boys of Caden's husband's earlier marriage. Juana, however, had a rather stubborn character and did not at all approve those plans, because she had her eyes set on another boy who was to leave for the US too. Juana took a rather decisive action that would change the plans and timing for the whole family. She went to the bank to sell her mother's house. By a lucky coincidence there was a certain Mr. Menasce who was looking for a house. The banker agreed and Juana wasted no time to buy tickets for the crossing to the US for the whole family, as the departure of the ship was imminent. Coming back home she simply told everyone to pack. Mother Rosa had no other choice than leaving somewhat earlier than expected to join her husband and sons in the US. Juana married the boy of her dreams in Atlanta and lived happily ever after. She died at the age of 93 and her children and grandchildren still proudly remember her as a real matriarch of their family.

Another Rhodes connection of my family had started one generation up. My great-grandfather's sister, Rivca Bili was the only one of 6 siblings not born in Izmir. She was born in Rhodes and seems to have lived there all her life. She married Isaac Levi, had 2 children, Rocha and Ruben Levi.

So far, the information I had gathered during the first 4 years. I was able to trace nearly all my American cousins, but I did not succeed in finding any lead to trace Alberto and Selma Levi, my great-aunt Caden's children.

It was time to visit Rhodes myself...! Full of expectations my husband and I visited the wonderful old city with the Jewish quarter quietly situated in the eastern corner. From the Rhodes censuses I had found some of the old addresses where my family had lived. Also the 'Juderia' section on the Museum's website showed some useful information.

A very particular story told to me by the granddaughter of my great-aunt Rosa Bili-Franco caught my attention. She remembered well her grandmother telling her about the house they had lived in for about 20 years before emigrating to the US. She described the narrow street where all the houses had single doors whereas theirs was the only one having a double door with particular round door handles. Armed with my cousin's information about the location of the street I was eager to discover the original house with the double doors. To my surprise I did. It is located in the "Calle de los Ricos" (Gavala Street) very near the small triangular square at the beginning of the street. The double doors are still there, painted in ochre yellow. The door handles have changed, but the imprint of the original round ones is still clearly visible through the paint. What an amazing feeling, standing before the door of my great-aunt's house, 100 years after she had lived there with her family. It was not difficult at all to imagine a picture of the kids playing around on the little square. The whole atmosphere of the narrow streets, very tranquil and nearly unchanged over the years, is an experience never to forget.



Having checked the census records again for the address of my other great-aunt, Caden Bili and husband Giacobbe Levi, I went to see “Calle de Kahal Grande”, now Thisseos Street. My great-grandmother Mazaltov Bili-Béresi had lived with them for about 35 years and finally died there at the age of 80. They lived at number 18 nearly across the remains of the great Synagogue. The street is still there but unfortunately a small row of houses has been destroyed, number 18 being one of them. Starting from the last existing row house, I tried to figure out where the original house must have stood. I ended up on the spot where today grows a very big nice tree, the only one in the whole street. Under the blue sky of this very quiet and warm April afternoon I was moved by the thought of being on the very spot where my great-grandmother had lived half of her life and finally died. It gave me a good feeling that the only tree is growing exactly there and I touched it as though I would have touched the house that had stood in its place so many years before.

The next goal of my journey was to try to get some civil records from the Town Hall of Rhodes. Although I was warned it would not be easy to convince the Greek civil servants to search their files, I succeeded in getting the death certificate for my great-grandmother, as well as the marriage certificate for Alberto Levi. This document proved to be of utmost importance in my further search for their descendants since I now knew the exact name of his wife, Stella Bega, as well as the date and details of their marriage.

Back home I decided to put a comment on the website of the Rhodes Jewish Museum, mentioning their names together to ask if anyone would have some information on their whereabouts after they left for Argentina. For the second time in my research I was extremely lucky. Only the next day I received an e-mail from the grandson of Alberto, now living in Costa Rica. His son has to do an ancestry school project and as they nearly have no information on his great-grandparents Alberto and Stella Levi-Bega, apart from their names and their origin from Rhodes, they decided to just ‘Google’ both names and see what would come up. The first hit on their screen was my note, only put some hours before on the museum’s website. Bingo..! We have been in touch ever since.



I learned that some of the Soriano branch of my family moved to Brazil. I have tried to contact them, yet without much success so far. Anyhow, you won't hear me complain at all. My trip to Rhodes was very successful, wonderful, and emotional. Apart from enjoying the magnificent scenery, the tranquility and authenticity of the old Jewish quarter, the Square and its little side streets, I have appreciated the wonderful Jewish Museum and the Synagogue and the help and support from Mr. Aron Hasson and the staff at the Jewish Community's Office, adjacent to the Synagogue.

I would strongly recommend anyone with ancestors in Rhodes to go to and enjoy this wonderful place.