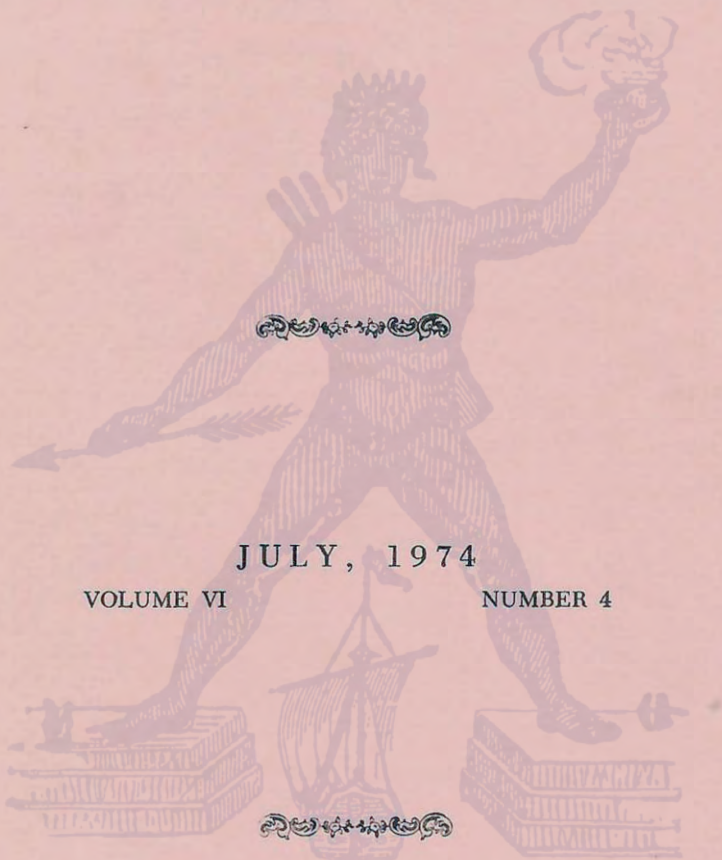


WESTERN STATES JEWISH HISTORICAL QUARTERLY



JULY, 1974

VOLUME VI

NUMBER 4

The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation

Published by the

Southern California Jewish Historical Society

WESTERN STATES JEWISH HISTORICAL QUARTERLY

NORTON B. STERN, O.D., *Editor*

VOLUME VI, No. 4

JULY, 1974

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| THE SEPHARDIC JEWS OF RHODES IN LOS ANGELES | 241 |
| By Aron Hasson ILLUSTRATIONS: <i>Picnic of Peace and Progress Society</i> , p. 244; <i>Palestine Mandate Celebration</i> , p. 246; <i>Florist Delivery by Victor Hasson</i> , p. 250; <i>Synagogue - 1935</i> , p. 253. | |
| MY FATHER WAS BORN A JEW | 255 |
| By Adam W. Adler ILLUSTRATIONS: <i>Lewis Adler in 1895</i> , p. 256; <i>An 1865 advertise- ment</i> , p. 257. | |
| LOS ANGELES JEWRY AND THE CHICAGO FIRE | 260 |
| By Norton B. Stern | |
| TO THE LADIES: <i>A Gallery Story</i> | 268 |
| THE JEWESS IN SAN FRANCISCO | 273 |
| By Rebecca J. Gradwohl | |
| PICTURE STORY NUMBER FOURTEEN | 277 |
| ILLUSTRATION: <i>Los Angeles Confirmation Seventy Years Ago.</i> | |
| THE JEWISH IMMIGRATION "PROBLEM" | 278 |
| By Marcus Rosenthal | |
| PERIODICAL REFLECTIONS | 290 |
| By the Editors | |
| THE JEWS OF OMAHA: <i>The First Sixty Years</i> | 293 |
| (Continued from the April, 1974 issue) By Carol Gendler ILLUSTRATION: <i>The Tornado's Destruction</i> , p. 302. | |
| BOOK REVIEWS | 305 |
| THE EDITOR'S PAGE | 307 |
| ILLUSTRATION: <i>William R. Blumenthal and Your Editor</i> , p. 307. | |
| INDEX FOR VOLUME VI | 311 |
| Compiled by Reva Clar | |



Our Contributors . . .

ARON HASSON. — Mr. Hasson is now a student at the University of California, Santa Barbara, but the original version of his article on the Rhodesli of Los Angeles was written while he was a student of our associate editor at California State University, Northridge. Mr. Hasson is himself a third generation Rhodesli of Los Angeles.

ADAM W. ADLER. — Mr. Adler was the son of Lewis Adler and his second wife, and he left a diary from which the sketch of his father was abstracted. The importance of Adam Adler's memoir lies in briefly delineating the career of one of the first men of Jewish ancestry who lived in California.

MARCUS ROSENTHAL. — Mr. Rosenthal, a Harvard graduate and a San Francisco attorney from 1871 until well into the twentieth century, was a leader in the Bay City's Jewish community. He was the older brother of the artist Toby Rosenthal, and served as the president of District Grand Lodge No. 4, B'nai B'rith, in 1902.

THE SEPHARDIC JEWS OF RHODES IN LOS ANGELES

By Aron Hasson

Shortly after the turn of the century a group of Sephardic Jews whose families had lived on the island of Rhodes for over 400 years, since their expulsion from Spain, emigrated to Los Angeles.¹ The first Rhodeslis to pioneer in this country were young men in their teens who primarily sought economic opportunities. Some settled in Los Angeles in important numbers during the 1910s and 1920s and have remained together due to their family and social life and the activities of their congregation, the Sephardic Hebrew Center.²

In 1492, due to the Spanish Inquisition, thousands of Sephardim were scattered around the shores of the Mediterranean. The following year two boats sailed from Cordova, Spain, to the island of Rhodes. This is believed to be the origin of the Sephardic community there. The Turkish sultan welcomed the exiled Jews to his empire, subsequently establishing large Sephardic communities in Constantinople (Istanbul), Izmir and Salonica, while smaller settlements were founded in cities around the Aegean Sea, including Rhodes.

The Sephardic population of Rhodes in 1900 numbered 4,000 families. It has diminished today to only a handful because of the massive emigration up to 1944, and the forced deportation of 1,700 Jews by the Nazis during World War II. Approximately 400 Rhodeslis settled in Los Angeles.

The Sephardim of Rhodes lived among two nationalities hostile towards each other, the Turks and the Greeks. The Jews lived in the Jewish quarter of the walled city with the Turks and comprised about one-fifth of the city's population. Because of the Turkish control of the island (until 1912) the Greeks lived outside the city walls, and were allowed inside only for business transactions. In fact, at dusk the gates to the city were closed, to

1. Rhodes is a Greek island (Turkish from 1522 to 1912, Italian from 1912 to 1946) situated ten miles from the southwestern mainland of Asia Minor. The Jewish community was located in the largest city of the island, also called Rhodes.

2. Maurice Levy, Los Angeles, Interview, September 8, 1973.

make certain that the Greeks did not enter to make trouble.³ The Jewish quarter, or "La Juderia," constituted a very closely knit community. Today, many Rhodeslis delight in returning to the island to see "La Juderia," where their families had lived.

Living conditions for the majority of the Sephardic families of Rhodes were primitive. Most homes consisted of one or two rooms and housed as many as two or three families.⁴ Life in the Jewish quarter did not change much during the 400 years from the end of the 1400s. The men worked primarily as merchants, occupying themselves as butchers, carpenters, money-changers, produce sellers, shoemakers, as well as participating in all phases of the clothing industry. The import-export business of the city was run by the Sephardic families of Solomon Alhadeff and Joseph Notrica. This business created many jobs for the Rhodeslis. Unfortunately, there were not enough jobs for everyone. Boys were taught trades for future security; while young women were taught household chores, such as cleaning, cooking, knitting and sewing. The stagnant economy of the island had developed very little since the Middle Ages, and the living conditions of the Rhodeslis reflected the general poverty.

The most important facet of the lives of the Rhodeslis was their Jewish heritage. Like Sephardim around the world they practiced Orthodox Judaism. Most men attended synagogue for prayer services every morning, while the remainder would chant prayers at home before going about their day's work.⁵ There were two large synagogues, the Kahal Grande and the Kahal Shalom, as well as four smaller ones. The Grande was the largest and stood next to the French school of the Alliance Israelite Universelle.⁶

It was destroyed by British bombings in April of 1944.⁷ The Kahal Shalom was built in 1593 and conducts services even today, especially on Friday evenings during the summer months, when tourists and former residents make up a minyan. One of the four smaller synagogues, the Tikkun Hasson, was attended by

3. Joseph Behor Hasson, Los Angeles, Interview, March 13, 1972.

4. Sepora Benon, Los Angeles, Interview, May 14, 1972.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Dr. Irving Benveniste, *B'nai B'rith Messenger*, Los Angeles, December 24, 1965.

7. Moshe Solam, Rhodes, Interview, by Pearle Hasson, March, 1972.

The Sephardic Jews of Rhodes in Los Angeles

the more aristocratic Sephardim. It was called "kehilla de los ricos," meaning the synagogue of the rich.⁶

The first Rhodeslis came to America at the turn of the century with the intention of making some money and returning to the island. As mentioned above they came seeking economic opportunities, lured by stories of the fortunes to be made in America. Another factor motivating some individuals to emigrate was the introduction of the Turkish compulsory military service, which increased the difficulties of supporting a family and interfered with religious observances. Evasion of the service as well as the increasing poverty prompted the Rhodeslis to leave.⁷ Several families emigrated to communities in Asia Minor, Palestine, Egypt and other nearby Dodecanese islands before coming to the United States.

The immigration began with just a trickle of young men, but by the 1910s and 1920s, the exodus was bringing over dozens of Rhodeslis on a single ship. They would take a small ship from Rhodes to a Greek harbor such as Pireaus or Patras, or the Italian port of Naples, and there transfer to a larger vessel to cross the Atlantic Ocean. At that time no immigration quotas existed; only records of the person's name and country of origin were kept. Arriving in New York, the main port of entry, they immediately found refuge in the Sephardic section of the city.

It was not easy for these immigrants to find jobs because of their inability to speak English. They spoke Ladino, the same Judeo-Spanish tongue used by their ancestors in medieval Spain, quite different from the Yiddish used by the Ashkenazic immigrants. Ladino sounds like Spanish and is written from right to left, using the Hebrew characters of the Rashi script. Besides Ladino, the Rhodeslis spoke Greek and Turkish, and everyone read Hebrew. Many Rhodeslis had also learned French and Italian. But because of their ignorance of the English language the first jobs of the immigrants were menial in nature. The early immigrants worked as shoeshiners and as candy sellers in New York theaters.

8. Sepora Benon, *op.cit.*

9. Dr. David de Sola Pool, "The Levantine Jews in the United States," *American Jewish Year Book*, 1913, p. 210; Joseph Behor Hasson, *op.cit.*; Dr. Irving Benveniste, Los Angeles, Interview, May 14, 1972.



The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation

Courtesy of the Louis Benveniste Family

PICNIC OF THE PEACE AND PROGRESS SOCIETY - 1921

The Sephardic Jews of Rhodes in Los Angeles

During the first ten years of the century the initial handful of immigrants earned small amounts of money, some of which they mailed back to their needy families on the island. This encouraged many more hopefuls to come to America.

The first Rhodesli to venture to the West Coast was Nessim Alhadeff who settled in Seattle in 1904.¹⁰ There he met three Sephardim from Marmara, Turkey, who had arrived in the city during the preceding year. Alhadeff peddled fish as did some of the other early Sephardic immigrants who moved to Seattle. Within a short time Alhadeff's brother-in-law, David Israel, joined him in the northwest city. By 1907 there were several Rhodeslis in Seattle and by 1909 there were enough to organize a congregation. It was called Koupa Ozer Dalim Anshe Rhodes, meaning, the fund for the aid of the poor people of Rhodes.¹¹ Today this organization is known as Ezra Bessaroth. This Sephardic community retains its cultural heritage more firmly than any other transplanted Rhodesli community. From Seattle some Rhodeslis traveled south to Portland, Oregon, and a smaller colony was established.

Between 1908 and 1910 the first Rhodeslis came to Los Angeles from Seattle and Portland. At that time Los Angeles was rapidly expanding and the new Angelenos found opportunities beyond their previous imaginings. Within the next twenty years Los Angeles became one of the largest centers of Rhodeslis outside the island. In 1913 these Sephardim numbered about twenty-five families. The early arrivals included: Eddie Almeleh, Aron Benon, Rahamin Benoun, Louis Benveniste, Isaac Berro, Baruch Capelouto, Behor Cohen, Yakir Cohen, Hacco Hasson, Joseph Behor Hasson, Joseph Bote Hasson, Mike Hasson, Abraham Hazan, Asher Israel, Aslan Israel, Leon Israel, Solomon Israel, Eliakim Leon, Yuda Mayo, Ruben Nahmias, Albert Notrica, Louis Notrica, Joseph Piha, Reuben Pizante, Morris Soriano, Vital Soriano and Marco Tarica.¹² The average age of these men in 1913 was twenty-one, and most of them were bachelors.

10. Joseph Capelouto, Los Angeles, Interview, April 26, 1972.

11. "A Glance at the Past," *Ezra Bessaroth Dedication Program*, (Seattle, Washington, 1970), p. 20.

12. Names and dates were calculated by using Los Angeles and Seattle city directories as well as interviews. Joseph Behor Hasson, *op.cit.*; Joseph Capelouto, *op.cit.*; Louis Benveniste, Los Angeles, Interview, April, 1972. (Capelouto arrived in Seattle in 1907, Hasson and Benveniste arrived in Los Angeles in 1912.)



The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation Courtesy of the Joseph Hasson family

PALESTINE MANDATE CELEBRATION - 1920
Showing the Peace and Progress Society at the former coliseum.

The Sephardic Jews of Rhodes in Los Angeles

The families of the early immigrants were gradually reunited in Los Angeles as funds for transportation were sent to them. The Rhodeslis families lived as close friends with the Sephardim from Turkish communities, which included some who had settled in the city before 1908. Social gatherings which included the Sephardim from both Rhodes and Turkey were common, and the relationship between the two groups has been maintained through the years. However, associations between the early Sephardim and the established Ashkenazim of Los Angeles were limited at first, because of the language barrier.

The Sephardic newcomers to Los Angeles settled in close proximity to each other in the south-central part of the downtown area. They lived between Sixth Street and Pico Boulevard, and between Maple and Central Avenues.¹³

The leaders of the new community saw the need to perpetuate the unique Sephardic culture and traditions. The Rhodeslis and the Sephardim from Turkey combined in 1912 to form a religious organization. In December of that year Congregation Avat Shalom was established and services were conducted at Burbank Hall on Main Street.¹⁴ The president of the congregation was Yacov Haim of Salonica. Joseph Behor Hasson, the treasurer, and Marco Tarica, the collector, were from Rhodes. The spiritual leader, Haham Abraham Caraco, as well as Ralph and Jack Caraco, were from Bursa, Turkey.¹⁵ Thirty-seven of the fifty-two families of the congregation were Rhodeslis. The basic functions of the congregation were to conduct religious services, to aid needy immigrant families and to serve as a burial society. Dues were ten cents a week. Joseph Behor Hasson, a dedicated leader of the Rhodesli community who served the congregation in its first years, still plays an active role in synagogue affairs today.

After a few years the Rhodeslis split away from Avat Shalom because of conflicts concerning social affairs. Within two months

13. Joseph Behor Hasson, *op.cit.*

14. Dr. David de Sola Pool, *op.cit.*, p. 214; Joseph Behor Hasson, *op.cit.*; Louis Benveniste, *op.cit.* Prior to December, 1912, prayer services were held in the various homes of the newly settled immigrants.

15. Joseph Behor Hasson, *op.cit.*

the Rhodeslis created their own congregation, the Peace and Progress Society. In 1919 Avat Shalom, comprised of the Sephardim from the Turkish communities, divided itself into three groups. These were the Sephardic Comunidad, the Haim Vaheset and the Yacov Tovee. The last-named group soon joined the Haim Vaheset. Later, the Sephardic Comunidad and the Haim Vaheset combined to form Temple Tifereth Israel.

The Peace and Progress Society, made up of the immigrants from Rhodes, came into existence February 5, 1917, at a meeting held at Fourth and Wall Streets. A state charter was acquired about three months later. Founding officers were: Morris Soriano, president; Jack Notrica, vice president; Joseph M. Mayo, secretary; Louis Israel, assistant secretary; Joseph Behor Hasson, treasurer; Marco Tarica, collector; and Victor Levy, Louis Benveniste, Abraham Hazan and Reuben Israel, trustees. For a few months the congregation was served by a haham from Shanghai. Subsequently, and for over ten years, Haham (Haji) Haim Levy, a Rhodesli, served as spiritual leader. In 1920 the Peace and Progress Society acquired the old B'nai B'rith Hall at Seventeenth and Georgia Streets.¹⁶

As conditions changed in the downtown area the Sephardim moved to a newer neighborhood five miles to the southwest. The transfer began about 1920 and soon the colony was living between Normandie Avenue and Broadway and between Vernon Avenue and Fifty-sixth Street.¹⁷ During the late 1910s and 1920s young women from Rhodes came to marry the many available bachelors. Several of these women came to Los Angeles as picture brides. The new families thus established plus the move to a new and better neighborhood caused the 1920s to become the foundation years for the Rhodeslis and Sephardic community of Los Angeles.

For the convenience of religious and social gatherings, the Sephardim found it helpful to reside near one another. This is evidenced by noting the two most densely populated blocks in the 1930s. On Fifty-first Street between Hoover and Figueroa, resided twenty Sephardic families, and on Fiftieth Place between Hoover and Vermont, eighteen resided. A walk along these streets frequently entailed short visits with relatives and close friends

16. *Sephardic Hebrew Center, Souvenir Dedication Program* (Los Angeles, March 17, 1935).

17. Ted Hasson, Encino, California, Interview, May 6, 1972.

The Sephardic Jews of Rhodes in Los Angeles

over coffee, biscochos and kolouras or whatever else had been baked that day.

In 1935 the community built a beautiful synagogue on the corner of Fifty-fifth and Hoover Streets. It was the center of religious and social life for the Rhodeslis for about twenty years.¹⁸ The president of the Sephardic Hebrew Center (formerly the Peace and Progress Society) at that time was Peter Alhadeff and the vice president and chairman of the building finance committee was Joseph Behor Hasson. The highly respected spiritual leader was Rabbi Solomon Mizrahi, who served from 1930 to 1947. For years the synagogue published a monthly newspaper, *El Mensajero*, printed in Ladino, Spanish and English, to inform its multi-lingual members of social events and other news of interest.

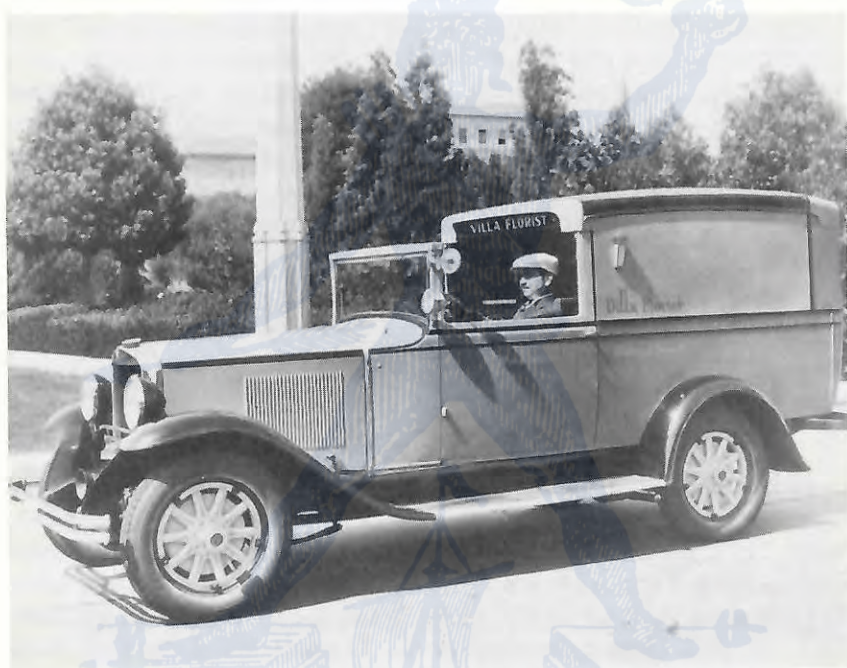
During the 1940s the Los Angeles Rhodeslis enjoyed a general prosperity. Sunday picnics and barbecues were among the more popular community social activities. Trips to South Park, Redondo Beach, Point Firman and Catalina Island were favorite excursions of the Rhodeslis. Many of these affairs were organized by committees of the synagogue.

By the end of World War II another change in residential neighborhoods was taking place, this time to the Crenshaw-Leimert Park area. In 1958 the congregation sold the synagogue building on Fifty-fifth and Hoover. Subsequently, services were held in a rented hall at 5969 Crenshaw Boulevard and High Holy Day services were conducted in the larger hall of the Crenshaw Youth Center. During this period the congregation enjoyed the faithful services of Rabbi Michel Albagli, a Rhodesli who now serves the Sephardic synagogue in Portland, Oregon, Congregation Ahavath Achim.

About 1960 many of the Rhodeslis began to move away from the Crenshaw-Leimert Park area. They now reside all over suburban Los Angeles, from the San Fernando Valley to Long Beach, with a large concentration in the Ladera area. But there still exist clusters of Rhodesli neighborhoods. For example, eleven Rhodesli homes are quite near each other in the Encino area.

The familiar process of Americanization has dissolved many

18. *Sephardic Hebrew Center, Souvenir Dedication Program, op. cit.*



Courtesy of the Victor Hasson family

FLORIST DELIVERY BY VICTOR HASSON - 1927

The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation

The Sephardic Jews of Rhodes in Los Angeles

cultural distinctions of the Sephardic way of life in Los Angeles. Rituals and traditions are understood primarily by the older members of the community. A prime example of a disappearing cultural skill is the Ladino language. The first Rhodeslis born in the city learned the language because it was spoken at home, but later generations have learned only a few words and phrases.

During the early 1960s the younger Los Angeles-born leaders of the Rhodesli community led the effort to build a new synagogue. The Sephardic Hebrew Center, located in the Ladera area on the corner of Fairfax Avenue and West Fifty-ninth Street, was completed in September, 1966. Ted Hasson was president of the congregation, and Edward Mizrahi was chairman of the building committee. The synagogue serves as the essential unifying force of the Rhodesli families in Los Angeles. Reverend Samuel Azose served the congregation until 1972. Recently a young Sephardic cantor, Daniel Waknine, was engaged.

When the first Rhodeslis arrived in Los Angeles they found it difficult to obtain employment because of the language barrier. And because of the insignificant capital which the immigrants brought with them they were unable to establish themselves in substantial businesses. Thus, in the early period (prior to 1920), they were occupied mainly in shoeshining, selling flowers and peddling produce. All three were street corner jobs, sometimes requiring a small license fee.

Shoeshining was the first work of most of the newly arrived immigrants. The young men gave shines for a nickel on the downtown street corners of the city. In the 1916 to 1919 period the Rhodeslis managed to set up shoeshine stands in good locations around the downtown area. It is interesting to note that in Rhodes shoeshining was done only by young boys earning a few extra cents, and it would have been considered shameful for a grown man to do such work. So it is surprising that many immigrants took on this job and quite ironic when it is known that the money thus earned was sent to help the poor, but proud Jewish community of Rhodes. Shoeshining as an occupation for the Rhodeslis began phasing out by 1920.¹⁹

19. Joseph Behor Hasson, *op.cit.*

Selling flowers has become the most successful occupation with the Rhodeslis. Second to shoeshining it was the most common job among the early arrivals. Flowers were sold on street corners, since capital to set up a store was not available. A typical day for such a florist would begin by filling a large basket with flowers and then riding the streetcars to different locations, in the attempt to sell the entire load. Many of these florists became prosperous enough by the early 1920s to set up small flower stands. Their businesses have been continued by the sons of the families in most cases. In the Los Angeles area today there are more than forty florist shops owned by Rhodeslis.²⁰ Victor Levy, who had two stores, was chairman of the Southern California Chapter of the Florists' Trans-world Delivery.

Selling produce from makeshift fruit stands in the downtown area was another typical livelihood for the early settlers. By 1925 there were as many Rhodeslis in the produce business as were in the florist trade. However, since the emergence of supermarkets in the past twenty-five or thirty years, many of the small produce stands owned by Rhodeslis have been phased out, leaving them with ten grocery stores in Los Angeles today. These stores, like the flower stands, were businesses established by the fathers and handed down to the sons.²¹

The family names of the Rhodeslis are easily recognized. Because Rhodes was somewhat isolated from other Jewish communities the marriages took place among a rather limited number of families. Consequently it was not uncommon for first cousins to marry, or even uncles to unite with nieces. This obviously

20. The following are the names of the owners of such stores (with father's name in parenthesis if the business was originally operated by them): Sam, Pinkie Alcana (Ruben); Haco Bardavid; Joe Berro (Sam J.); Joseph Capelouto; Mike Capelouto (Morris); Al, Jack, Kenny, Aron and Morris Cohen (Ruben); Ike, Joseph Cohen, Al, Bob Collins (Ezra); Ike, Leo, Bob, David Cordova; Morris, Joseph, Victor and Jack Fiss (Bill); Joe, Leon Franco (Haco); Al Hasson; Ronald Hasson (Victor); Leon Levy (Maurice); Victor Levy; Solomon, Joseph Mayesh (Jack); Morris Mazal; Mike Rava (Behor Mazal); Morris Soriano (Ray); Victor and Maurice Surmani; and Victor and Allan Yack (Ralph).

21. The fathers of the families are noted in parenthesis: Morris, Samuel, Leon and Joseph Benon (Aron), "Country Farms Markets;" Morris Cohen (Marco), "Morry's;" Jack and Edward Hasson (Joseph and Yakir), "A-1 Market;" Mike Levy (Victor) "Victor's;" Louis Notrica (Rahamin) "Klapp's;" and Morris Notrica (Joseph), "Morries."

The Sephardic Jews of Rhodes in Los Angeles



***SYNAGOGUE OF THE SEPHARDIC HEBREW CENTER
BUILT IN 1935***

Located at Fifty-fifth and Hoover Streets, Los Angeles, the structure now houses an African Methodist Episcopal church.

The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation

limited the number of family names. Besides the common Jewish names of Cohen, Levy and Israel, the most prevalent among Rhodeslis in Los Angeles are: Angel, Alhadeff, Benoun, Benveniste, Berro, Capelouto, Franco, Hasson, Huniu and Notrica. Distribution of this small number of family names among many people made it necessary for nicknames to be used. A common question asked by Sephardim for aid in identifying each other is: "Ijo (-a) de quien sos tu?" meaning, "Whose son (daughter) are you?" In this way a person is distinguished through their parents and family.

Another result of the seclusion of the Rhodeslis on the island was the retention of their cultural characteristics. They kept the same Latin language used by their ancestors in Spain, Ladino, as mentioned above. A number of Spanish "comidas" (foods) were also retained by these Sephardim, including biscochos, pastelicos, boyos, burekas, mazipan and pandericas. A wealth of Spanish folksongs or "cantos y romanzas" as they are called, were part of the cultural heritage of the Rhodeslis.

Ancient folk remedies were remembered and applied by the Sephardim, especially by the older women of the island community. These women were respected because of their knowledge of the folk remedies, and they were called "tias" or "hermanas." The Rhodeslis were superstitious and were strong believers in the "evil eye."

Living among the Turks and Greeks for 400 years enabled them to embrace the culture of their Levantine neighbors, supplementing their Spanish background. Foods such as yaprakes, kiftes, baklava, sootlach and other sweets and cheeses as well as Turkish coffee have been included in the favorite foods enjoyed by the Rhodeslis. In addition, the dances and the music of the Levant have been adopted.

This closely knit group of proud immigrant families successfully accomplished the task of transplanting their Sephardic community of Rhodes to Los Angeles, via New York, Seattle and Portland. The Rhodeslis brought to this country their colorful cultural background as well as the desire to retain their ancient customs and Jewish traditions. Today, this Rhodesli community in the Los Angeles area remains a distinct group due to their close family structures and their religious and social activities.