

"Nachmias" - ANCIENT ROOTS IN SPAIN AND THE NEAR EAST

Jacob Nachmias, April 2006

I remember my father telling me that he thought the name Nachmias is a hellenized version of Nehemiah, the biblical prophet. Furthermore, he thought our family came originally from Toledo, Spain. My investigations have confirmed and expanded on both statements.

The historical figure Nehemiah is credited with organizing the restoration of the wall of the city of Jerusalem in the 5th century B.C. His own account of the surrounding events comprises part of the Book of Ezra (Esdras) in the Old Testament. According to the web:

This Book takes its name from the writer, who was cupbearer to Artaxerxes (surnamed Longimanus) king of Persia, and was sent by him with a commission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. It is also called the second book of Esdras, because it is a continuation of the history, begun by Esdras, of the state of the people of God after their return from captivity.

The name Nehemiah and its derivatives are all based on the 3-letter Hebrew root verb (נָהַם - N H M) which means "to comfort" and “אֱלֹהִים - Ya”, referring to God. The combination is a phrase, "God will comfort". (Nehama and its hellenized variant Nehamas are the noun - comfort. Nahema or Nahemas are linguistically incorrect variants of Nehama.) ¹

There are actually many different ways to spell our surname: in Hebrew נחמייאן, in Greek it is *Nαχμιας*, in Bulgarian - Нахмияс. In Roman letters, there are several variants, depending on how three issues are resolved.

i. The first is how the central *ה* is to be transliterated. Of the major European languages, only Spanish and German have an appropriate 'H' sound. In medieval Spain, *h* was used (see below). In modern Spanish, the sound is written as *j*, and thus In Hispanic countries in modern times some instances of *Najmias*.

In German, the 'H' sound is written *ch*. After peace had been established between the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires early in the 18th century, there was considerable commerce between those empires. Not surprisingly Sephardic Jews participated in this commerce, particularly those that lived near the Danube and those who lived in that part of Yugoslavia that was controlled by the Austrians, such as Bosnia. In fact, this commerce resulted in a flourishing Sephardic community in Vienna², which, as will be shown in the next chapter, included some of our direct ancestors. Very likely, they would have wanted their name written in such a way as to be correctly pronounced by speakers of German - hence *Nachmias*. There are also instances of *Nacmias*, which is probably a 'degenerate' form of *Nachmias*.

On the other hand, in other Balkan lands as well as in North Africa, where the language most often encountered in Roman script was French, *h* would have been used, "faute de mieux", to represent the central 'H' sound - hence *Nahmias*, *Bennahmias*, and since *h* is not voiced in modern French, it is not surprising that it is sometimes omitted altogether - hence *Namias*.

ii. The second issue is what internal vowels to use. Since vowels play a subordinate role in written Hebrew, one finds variations in the number and identity of the Roman letters used to represent the internal vowels. So in addition to the many one-vowel variants cited above there is also *Ne(c)hmias*. In addition, there exist several two-vowel variants: *Ne(c)hemias*, *Na(c)hamias*, *Nahemias*, *Ne(c)hamias*.

iii. The final issue concerns the terminal ‘s’. With few exceptions, (*Nachmia*, *Nacmia*, *Nahmiash*), all variants (which I will refer to as N*mias) have in common the terminal ‘s’, not present in the name from which they are presumably derived, *Nehemiah*. My father thought this was a Greek addition. Indeed, the prophet’s name is translated as *Nahemias* in the *Septuagint Bible*.¹

[*Septuaginta, fr. L septuaginta seventy*] : a copy or edition of the Greek translation of the Old Testament including the Apocrypha prepared in the 3d and 2d centuries B.C., constituting the first vernacular translation of the Bible, designed to meet the needs of Greek-speaking Jews of Egypt unable to read their Scriptures in Hebrew, and still used in the Eastern Orthodox Church

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The name *Septuagint* reflects the belief that the work was done by seventy Jewish scholars, in Alexandria. Other biblical names were similarly Hellenized at the time - e.g., *Mathias* and *Zacharias*. So the various N*mias names may have been around before the Diaspora, though I do not know of any direct evidence of their existence as surnames in Israel/Palestine before modern times.

The earliest reference to a N*mias in a compilation of documents pertaining to the Jews of Toledo⁴ dates back to the year 1083. It records the purchase of a vineyard:

Chamila, hija de Fárach, esposa de Beliusf el albañil, vende a rabi Buishac ben Nehemías el judío una viña llamada el Cochuelo en la alquería de Chalencas,...
[*Chamilla, daughter of Farench, wife of Beliusef the mason, sells to rabbi Buishac ben Nehemías the Jew a vineyard named ‘el Cochuelo’ in the farmstead of Chalencas.*]

This record was originally in Arabic, since only in May of that year were the Moors driven out of Toledo by the Christian armies of Alfonso VI, led by El Cid. Among the other N*mias records in the book are gravestones of two men who died of the black plague: Judah ben Moshe ben Nahmias in 1239, and R[abbi]. David, son of R[abbi]. Joseph ben Nahamias, in 1349.

Note the patronymic form of the name, sometimes written with ‘ben’ and sometimes with ‘ibn’ - the Hebrew or Arabic word for “son”, although it is possible that by that time ‘ben Nahamias’ and the like were actually surnames. Nevertheless it is apparent that at some earlier stage, N*mias was used as a given name. As pointed out earlier in this chapter, ‘Nehemiah’ means “God will comfort” or “God comforts”. According to the Nahum Goldman Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, *Nehemiah* and its derivatives were given as names to children in special need of God’s comfort, those whose siblings had died, or who were themselves sickly. Mathilde Tagger¹ disagrees, and says that those names were “...mostly given to male children who were born on Tisha Beav eve or day or during the week inside which occurred Tisha B’Av (9 of the month Av).”....”According to Jewish tradition, Sephardi as well as Ashkenazi, all the bad events that occurred to the Jewish people have occurred on *Tisha B’Av* or on dates

close to it, e.g. large pogroms or even the Expulsion from Spain." [Tisha Beav usually falls in August, and commemorates the destruction of both Temples in Jerusalem, the first by the Babylonians, the second by the Romans.]

So there seems to be no dispute about the use of Nehemia as a given name in ancient times, though the practice might have ended by the XIIth century in Spain. In consequence, many children in totally unrelated families might have received such names. When those patronymics were converted to fixed surnames, many unrelated N*mias family lines would have resulted.

The more illustrious members of the family(ies) N*mias are cited in *Encyclopedia Judaica* and *Jewish Encyclopedia* (see Appendix). Below is a translation of an article also listing many notable N*mias.⁵ The original was written in Judeo-Spanish and given to me by my father in 1956.

The family Nachmias (Nahmias)

In a Jewish newspaper, we find the following notes regarding the family Nachmias, or ben Nachmias. This family was highly regarded in the city of Toledo in Spain. It produced many distinguished scholars.

Joseph Nachmias was the nephew of Rabbi ben Saudos who lived in 1112. Abbu el Hatshash ben Isaac ben Nachmias was a worthy writer and the translator from the Arabic of a book on law in 1131. Joseph ben Joseph Nachmias di Toledo was the pupil of the celebrated Rabbi Ascher ben Jehiel and between 1335 and 1350 wrote the book NOR-OL-AOLAM in Arabic on astronomy. David ben Joseph Nachmias with his three sons died in an epidemic that took place in Toledo in 1346. Joseph ben Avram Nachmias translated into Hebrew a part of the CANON, a book which Shlomo ben Jaesch wrote in Arabic.

All of these members of the family Nachmias lived in the city of Toledo. In another city of Castile lived the scholar Avram ben Joseph ben Nachmias, who translated a commentary of Thomas Aquinas on the metaphysics of Aristotle. Avram Nachmias was a talmudist who was killed for his beliefs in 1529. He was a doctor in Lisbon, and wrote some books on medicine that were translated into Hebrew and Latin. Isaac Nachmias was burned alive in an auto-da-fe by the Inquisition in Ancona in 1556.

David Nachmias was apparently the head of the family Nachmias in Salonika. Rabbi Eliezar ben Ariel Nachmias was Grand Rabbi of Constantinople in 1573. Schlomo ben Moshe ben Nachmias was a judge in Monastir in Macedonia in 1643.

Curiously, the article fails to mention possibly the most important Nahmias to have lived in Constantinople - the ibn Nahmias family of Hebrew printers, who set up the first printing press in the Ottoman Empire:

NAHMIAS, IBN (15th - 16 centuries). Family of Hebrew printers from Spain. David ibn Nahmias, his brother Samuel, and David's son Samuel, left Spain in 1492 and made their way to Constantinople. There they published Jacob b. Asher's *Turim* in 1493 (5254). The correctness of this date, written out in words in the colophon, has been doubted by scholars such as M. Steinschneider (*Judische Typographie*, 1938, 17), who assume an error of ten years. More recently, the case for the 1493 has been strongly defended by A. K. Offenberg (in *Studie Rosenthaliana*, 2 (1969), 96-112...⁶

However, they are listed among 54 N*mias from Iberia, North Africa and Europe in a mammoth tome by Laredo⁷. In addition, he lists 24 people with the patronymic form of the name, including Abenahmias.

However, for the reasons stated earlier, there is no telling if my branch of the

family is descended from any of these illustrious folk.

Notes

¹ According to Mathilde Tagger of Jerusalem (tagger@actcom.co.il). She was formerly a scientific and technological information officer first at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem then at the Science Ministry. Now she is retired, and specializes in Sephardic genealogy.

² It was known as the “Turkish Israelitisch Community”

³ Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged, published in 1961, and subsequent updates.

⁴ León Tello, Pilar. *Judíos de Toledo*. Madrid : Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Instituto "B. Arias Montano", 1979.

⁵ Published in the newspaper *El Tiempo*, Constantinople, April 1929, Folio #169.

⁶ *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Jerusalem, 1972.

⁷ Laredo, Abraham, I. *Noms de Juifs de Maroc*. Madrid : Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Instituto "B. Arias Montano", 1978.

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