

## On the Rapaport Family Name <sup>1</sup>

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As the editor of the new section 'Tov Shem Tov' in "Et-Mol" - the bi-monthly periodical for the history of the Jewish people and Eretz-Yisrael - published by the Ben-Zvi Institute, I was asked by the general editor to begin this pleasant task by explaining the origins, history and folklore associated with this well-known family name.

This family is very highly regarded in Orthodox circles, as it is a name borne by Kohanim, the Jewish priestly caste that originated with Aaron the High Priest and his famous brother Moses our ancient teacher and leader. Those who carry this name are obviously called upon to bless the congregation by reciting the priestly benediction and are much in demand in order to fulfill the requirements of the ceremony of the redemption of the firstborn <sup>3</sup>.

### The History of the Name

A painting image of Rabbi Shlomo Yehudah Rappaport = Sh"IR (1790-1867), The Chief Rabbi of Prague, one of the forefathers of Chanan Rapaport.

*Prague was a major city and most important one of the Habsburg Kingdom, called the Holy Roman Empire. During the 16/7 Centuries, Prague also served as the capital of that empire.*



At various times and in keeping with the Zeitgeist – the mood of the times – various explanations were given as to the origin of the family name. From the middle of the sixteenth century, when the memory of the life of the Jews in Spain and Portugal was fading, until the nineteenth century, it was stylish among the Jews of Eastern and Western Europe to consider the Rapaport family among those who were exiled from Spain. With this attribution they had what could be considered the approval to be an ancient family along with the status that attached itself to such families.

During those centuries there were two folkloristic explanations as to the origin of the name Rapaport:

1. The first explanation described the marriage of two distinguished families of Spanish exiles – a son of the Rapa family married a daughter of the Porto (Portugal) family. The result of the marriage of the two was the creation of a new family name – Rapaport.

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<sup>1</sup>) It should be pointed out initially that the name would be spelled consistently throughout as **Rapaport**. Following are some, but not all, of the variations of spellings: Rappaport, Rappoport, Rapoport, Rapoportov, Rapiport, Rapeport, Rapperport, Rapart, Rappa, Rapovich, Rapert, Rapport, Rapir, Praport.

<sup>2</sup>) This article first appeared in the periodical Et-Mol, Vol. 31:2 (184), 2005 and in Sharsheret Hadorot Vol. 20.N. 2. It is reprinted here with permission through the generous courtesy of their editorial boards.

<sup>3</sup>) The redemption of the firstborn is commanded in the Torah where it is mentioned several times. There is a widespread story about the famous Gaon of Vilna, known by his acronym 'HaGRA,' who was the firstborn in his family. His father fulfilled this mitzvah as required when he was thirty days old but he repeated the mitzvah for himself in adulthood. When he met Rabbi Chayim haKohen Rapaport, the chief rabbi of Lvov, for the first time, he requested to redeem himself for a third time. He did this with the explanation that: "Now that he fulfilled the redemption through a distinguished Kohen, his mind was at ease that it was done exactly as required by Jewish law."

2. The second explanation claimed that the name Rapaport was the combination of the important 'Rav' [Rabbi] from the city of Oporto, a major city in Portugal. No one ever bothered, so it seems, to try to track down the identity of this important rabbi in the history of the Jews in Portugal but in spite of that this explanation received wide and prominent resonance<sup>4</sup>.

In the last century, a discussion developed in scientific journals and in various encyclopedias (*see the Bibliography*) as to the source of this name. There are those who are convinced that we are dealing with a single priestly family, of Ashkenazic origin whose name at first was RAPA after the plain in Bavaria north of the city Regensburg (Ratisbone) (49°01'N/12°07'E), from where this family emerged from general anonymity. The Jews were expelled from Regensburg in the years 1420-1422, after malicious incitement by the monk Giovanni Capistrano (1386-1456) and the family arrived in the city of Mainz.

With the second expulsion of Jews from Mainz<sup>5</sup> in 1462, we find some of the family in northern Italy in the fertile area of the Po River valley. One son of the Raffa family moved to Venice where he served as a rabbi. Another relocated to Porto, which today is identified with the city of Lenyago = Legnago (45°10'N/11°19'E) east of Mantua.

The second half of the name Rapaport is taken from the name of the city of Porto. When the son who lived in Porto moved to Venice, the Jews of Venice wanted to differentiate between him and the newly arrived rabbi. They called him 'the Rapa from Porto' while their rabbi was 'the Raffa from Venice.' Over time the name remained Raffa-Porto, hence **Rapaport**.

Others maintain that the name Rapaport derives from the German word for raven = Rabe or Rape. A raven appears on the family's Coat of Arms, found in the Museum of Shields of Nobility in the Prado Museum in Madrid, Spain. It is also found on the printer's mark on the title page of Minha B'lulah, the book by Rabbi Abraham Menahem, son of Jacob the Kohen, published in Verona in 1594.



The symbol is representative of the period of the Italian Renaissance with partially clothed women and plant leaves surrounding the medallion. Within it are the outstretched hands in the priestly benediction pose representing the Rappa priestly family and the raven symbolizing the Jew wandering around the world from place to place.

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<sup>4</sup>) The author of this article personally heard these two explanations from the noted professor of Jewish history Dr. Ben-Zion Dinur (Dinaburg) towards the end of the War of Independence, before he was appointed as the Minister of Education of Israel. Professor Dinaburg was convinced of the veracity of these explanations.

<sup>5</sup>) As is well known, Johannes Guttenberg of Mainz invented the first moveable type printing press, in Europe, and opened in Mainz, the first publishing house. We know that he kept his professional knowledge a secret and refused to teach Jews the printing profession, lest they spread heresy. Consequently, we do not know how Rabbi Meshullam Yekutiel-Kuzi Rappa, (earlier expelled from Regensburg ) and now in Mainz, learned to be a printer. However, after the second expulsion of Jews from Mainz, we find Rabbi Meshullam Yekutiel-Kuzi Rappa in northern Italy. He opened a printing house in the Piove di Sacco townlet (45°18'N/12°01'E), eighteen kilometers southeast of the city of Padua. He printed the first Hebrew book ever published in 1472, part one of the Arba'a Turim of Jacob Ben Asher. The publication of the Arba'a Turim was completed in 1475 and Rabbi Meshullam Yekutiel-Kuzi a son of the Raffa-Rapaport family became the world's first Hebrew printer.

We know that in 1520, some seventy-five years before the printing of the above mentioned medallion, one of the members of the family called himself 'The circumciser Yitzchak, son of Yechiel the Kohen of the Ravens' <sup>6</sup>. That is, 'Raven' = **Rape** – as the first part of the family name was well known for many years by family members.

In the opinion of the later researchers, the second half of the name of the family = **Porto** comes from the town of Portobuffole located some forty kilometers north of Venice. The Rappa family lived in this town before 1480, almost seventy years before we find them in Porto-Legnago <sup>7</sup>.

### The Extent of the Dispersion of the Family and its Contributions

As was already pointed out, in 1380 we find the family in Regensburg in southern Germany and afterwards in Mainz. Following the numerous expulsions they wandered about Italy. From there, this family of rabbis, physicians, scientists, holders of titles of nobility and bankers spread northward to Vienna, Bohemia and Moravia (today the Czech Republic), Poland, Galicia, Ukraine, Russia and Lithuania. They also moved eastward to Hungary, Besserabia and Romania.

From East and Central Europe, at the beginning of the 20th century, the family looked to the Anglo-Saxon world – United States, Canada, England, Australia and South Africa, as well as to Latin America, Mexico, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina.

In the wanderings throughout all the generations Eretz Yisrael was never ignored.

An analysis of the contributions of the Rapaport family in the last six hundred years to religious and secular literature, education, science, medicine, art, finance and commerce is beyond the scope of this short summary.

Relevant information can easily be found in every biography of a member of this distinguished family and, no less, in the biographies of those who married into it. In order to better study and appraise the history and contribution of the family, the **Center for the Study of the Rapaport Family** was established in 1990. An indispensable focus of the Center is our research on the 'Development of the Jewish Intellectual Class'.

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Eliakim Carmoli, who was the supervisor of the Hebrew Section of the Imperial Library in Paris, titled his historical research on the Rapaport and Young-Toivim families, 'The Ravens and the Doves', (published in 1861)

<sup>7</sup> A sad testimony from Portobuffole (Trevizo region) where the family lived before 1480, is the Blood Libel of 1480, which came in the wake of the infamous Trent Blood Libel of 1475. In the transcript of the trial, today located in the Biblioteca Marchana in Venice, the Jews of Portobuffole were on trial for the murder of Sebastiano Nobello, a Christian boy, for the ritual needs of Passover. This insidious Blood Libel led to the burning of three Portobuffole Jews in the San Marco central plaza of Venice.

In September 2005, more than five hundred years later, a delegation from the city along with its mayor and priest came to the Jewish community of Venice to seek forgiveness and pardon for this reprehensible act. By the way, representing the Jews of Israel and the generations of the Rapaport family at this interesting ceremony was the young Israeli conductor Mr. Dan Rapoport of Rechovot who lives, temporarily, in Venice.

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A short Biography – appeared as an addendum to the above article.

Born in 1928, Chanan Rapaport served as a commander both in the Haganah underground, before and during the War of Independence and subsequently in the IDF.

He studied, after the War of Independence, at the Hebrew University. He holds a doctorate in Clinical Psychology and completed post-doctoral studies in psycho-analysis, psychotherapy and research in the United States.

Between 1965-1982 he served as general and scientific director of the **Szold Institute – the National Institute for Research in the Behavioral Sciences.**

During those years he also served two Prime Ministers, Golda Meir and Yitzhak Rabin, as advisor for societal problems. He was also the psychological adviser and supervisor of all research conducted at the Ministry of Education and Culture.

Today he is the Director General of the **Rapaport Family Research Center**, founded in 1990.

Since the death of the famous genealogist, Dr. Paul Jacobi, he serves as the executor of his scientific estate.

He is the Deputy Chair of the The Board of Governors as well as the Chair of the Executive Board of the **International Institute for Jewish Genealogy and the Paul Jacobi Center** at the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem.

Additional information, may be found in the Hebrew Wikipedia.