

Spain Rights the Wrong of Jewish Exile? By Allyson Zacharoff

“He took me to a brand new parking lot that was built. As they were digging down, they found the remains of coffins made out of stone with Hebrew inscriptions,” David Edery, a Moroccan Jew living in Virginia, describes about a recent visit he made to Spain. In a nation that expelled its once-fairly sizable Jewish population in 1492, finding hidden examples of Spanish Jewry is not completely out of the norm. What has changed, though, is the government’s most recent reaction to its Jewish legacy.

Spain finally decided to right a 521-year-old wrong when the government announced in November that it would grant automatic citizenship to individuals of Sephardic Jewish descent. This change in official Spanish policy could mean that thousands of people around the world become citizens of Spain very quickly. But will American Jews decide to jump through the bureaucratic hoops necessary to go after it? Now, three months after the initial announcement, individuals may be realizing that this “peace offering” is more complicated than they initially thought.

Dina Siegel Vann, director of the Latino and Latin American Institute at the American Jewish Committee, says the development does not come as a surprise. “The Sephardic community worldwide has been pushing for this to happen, particularly since the establishment of relations between Spain and Israel [approximately] twenty years ago,” she said.

Siegel Vann says that the official Jewish community in Spain will be the channel through which requests for citizenship will be processed. “I think this is a great development,” she says. “It puts Spain in a different category of country,” in terms of their willingness to remedy historical problems with their Jewish community.

Daniel Altaras, a Sephardic Jew attending Yeshiva University in Manhattan, holds a more cynical view of the whole situation. “It’s probably not going to actually matter,” he says. “I don’t know what the advantage would be.”

Altaras, a member of the Modern Orthodox Jewish movement in the United States, lives daily the differences between his Sephardic rituals and those of Ashkenazi Jews, who are the descendants of Eastern European Jews and make up the majority of Jews in the United States.

“It’s a very different cultural experience... My Sephardic heritage means a different set of customs... Our *halakhah* is different,” he says, using the Hebrew word for Jewish law. For example, Altaras eats rice on Passover, a deviation from the strict prohibition of leavening most American Jews observe during this week-long holiday. Altaras also emphasizes a sense of pride that many other Jews in the United States share, which he said further discourages him from seeking out Spanish citizenship. “I’m American; I’m born in New York.”

Eric de Picciotto, a voice actor living in Brooklyn, explains that he never actually felt particularly unique during his childhood.

“I never felt a difference between being Sephardic and Ashkenazi [growing up in New Jersey],” de Picciotto says. “I just thought the stuff we did was different because we were from the Middle East.” De Picciotto’s family left Spain centuries ago, but has since lived throughout various parts of the Middle East and Europe, including among them Italy, Syria, and Egypt. This long distance from Spain led to a disconnect with their ancient Spanish past. As a result, de Picciotto does not feel any deep longing to return to Spain.

“I’m not really interested in what’s going on over there [in Europe],” he explains. “Unless there was some kind of career or tax benefit or something... I’m hoping to keep working

[and living] here.” Like many other Sephardic Jews living in America, de Picciotto asks, “What would be another reason to do it?”

Other Sephardic Jews in the U.S. today emphasize the real value of the cultural traditions of Sephardic Jewry. Rachel Mayo, 20, specifically recalls Sephardic reunions throughout her childhood that were filled with Sephardic music, and how her grandmother would speak Ladino with her friends in a Sephardic nursing home in New York. But she continues that while that is the case, “It really doesn’t affect how I practice [religiously], in terms of prayers.”

Mayo’s family left Spain not long after the 1492 Edict of Expulsion, an official announcement by the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella that ordered all Jews to convert to the majority religion of Catholicism, or to leave Spain forever. The Inquisition attempted to preserve Catholic Spain by involving covert informers, who would sometimes turn in those Jewish friends and neighbors that had had feigned conversion to Catholicism in order to remain in the country. If found out, these families could be subject to a public burning, a spectacle known as an “auto-da-fé,” or “act of faith.” Mayo’s family instead chose to leave Spain in the 15th century, during the time of the infamous Spanish Inquisition, and headed to Turkey and Greece.

According to sources closely involved in the change, the new citizenship law attempts to make amends for the official expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. “I think it’s the Spanish government coming to terms and confronting a historical mistake,” said Siegel Vann, of AJC. But Mayo remains unmoved.

“I don’t know what the benefit would be,” Mayo says. “I looked into it—I don’t know if I’d ever actually go through with it.” Her family has only talked about the possibility in jest, such as when she forwarded an advertisement e-mail for an electronic Spanish course to her father as a joke.

Another group to consider is that which includes those Sephardic descendants whose families converted to Catholicism back during the Inquisition era. One gentleman who seems to exemplify this history is Richard Chacon, 47.

Chacon was born and raised in El Paso, Texas, right on the border with Mexico, to a devout Roman Catholic family. He and his brother attended Catholic schools. But even then, he had friends of different faiths. “A lot of my best friends growing up were Jewish. Growing up I’d always had a curiosity about Judaism.”

When he moved to Boston for college, he became what he describes as a “collapsed Catholic.” With his wife and children, Chacon now attend an Episcopal church. It was early in 2004, though, when Chacon was working as a journalist for *The Boston Globe*, that he began to realize his religious heritage might not be what he imagined.

Chacon was asked to serve on a delegation of journalists headed to Turkey. As part of the trip, the journalists met with the chief rabbi in Istanbul. When Chacon gave the rabbi his business card after the meeting, the Rabbi looked up at him and said, “Did you know your last name is Sephardic? There is a very large, and a very old, Sephardic family in Istanbul with your name.”

That simple question had an immediate impact on Chacon.

“I was floored. It was the last thing I expected to hear,” he said. Chacon had been in touch with various Spanish relatives, but none had alluded to a Jewish past. After doing some more research on his last name, Chacon decided to have a DNA test done to check for genes that typically indicate Jewish heritage. Though the test proved inconclusive, Chacon still wants to research his family more, but does not think he would be willing to convert to Judaism in order

to obtain Spanish citizenship. “I think the older I get, the less important a religious tradition or affiliation becomes to me...[More important is] spiritual growth.”

Unlike the Chacon family, which seems to have all but forgotten its Jewish history, other Catholic converts from the Inquisition period maintained their Jewish practice in secret. Sometimes even these families eventually forgot their Jewish heritage. Janet Jacobs, author of the 2002 book *Hidden Heritage: The Legacy of the Crypto-Jews*, spoke with many such individuals during her research.

“A portion of them had been told they had Jewish ancestry as children,” Jacobs says, though that was not true of them all. Many of them, though, “felt they wanted to know more about their heritage...They were curious.” A critical issue for some of those who felt a very strong connection to their heritage was how to deal with their Jewish past.

“Some people who have this heritage believe they shouldn’t have to convert” and just start practicing. Very few of her interviewees went through the lengthy Jewish conversion process, which usually involves months of Torah and cultural study, before the ritual bathing in the symbolically purifying *mikveh* bath. Instead, some rabbis in the Reform Jewish tradition have offered instead a type of “transfer” ceremony to bring these individuals back to Judaism.

“It’s passing the Torah back down to that family,” Jacobs explains. “Quite a few of [the Crypto-Jews] went to Spain, and they tried to find their ancestral homes.” But will it be enough to convince the Spanish authorities to grant these people citizenship, should they elect to apply for it?

While very few details have been released, various news sources have reported that individuals who want to take advantage of the new rules will need to actually be Jews currently to apply—not just prove an ancient family legacy. That means that individuals whose families were forced to convert to Catholicism centuries ago may now be slyly coerced to convert back to Judaism if they want to become Spanish citizens. In response to a direct question regarding religious requirements of applicants, Maria Royo, a representative of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Spain (FCJE), said in an e-mail, “It is assumed that it is [practicing] Jews who are going to choose citizenship in this way.”

A two-page document provided by the Spanish Consulate in New York City details the process that Sephardic Jews would need to go through, and though there is no specific mention of religious requirements, applicants will need to be approved by the FCJE. Although this new method for obtaining citizenship is meant to be faster than the measures already in place, Royo said that the FCJE is wait[ing] for guidelines from the Spanish Ministry of Justice.

The explanatory document also states that applicants from many countries, including the United States, would be forced to renounce their current citizenship in order to take advantage of this offer (a stipulation also currently under review). According to Royo, “This [stipulation] depends on the rules of each country...Spain grants its citizenship without influencing that which the applicant already has. It’s for the people that have emotional links with Spain and can demonstrate that their familial origin is in the Expulsion of 1492, they can recuperate this stolen right. In the majority of the cases that we are seeing, no one requests [citizenship] to come live in Spain, instead [they request it] for emotional reasons.” The Spanish Consulate in New York City and the Spanish Embassy in Washington, D.C. did not respond to repeated requests for comment on this situation.

Even those who do manage to navigate the Spanish government’s fuzzy regulations for gaining citizenship might soon regret their decision. The situation for Jews in Spain today may not be what many people think.

“Spain...[in the last few years] has become quite an antisemitic country,” Moisés Hassan, a Spanish Jew and historian from Seville, says bluntly. For many reasons, there are a lot of people who would agree.

Today’s Spain is home to “an antisemitism without Jews,” explains Alejandro Baer, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Minnesota and the leading authority on anti-Semitism in modern Spain. “Jews are a phantom.”

The number of Jews in Spain is certainly very low, somewhere around 1 in every 1100 people, though some claim it is even smaller. These low numbers mean that few Spaniards know Jewish people firsthand. Unlike in the United States, where Jewish characters pervade mainstream television shows and many public elementary schools teach about Hanukkah, the lack of education about this ancient people renders many Spaniards ignorant of actual Jews and their practices.

“How many Spanish people have met a Jew?” Hassan asks rhetorically. “Still [today] many, many people do not know what to be a Jew means...Many times they mistake [Jews] for being Muslim.” Hassan explains that similarities in ritual between the two faiths, for example a traditional religious abstention from pork, have sometimes furthered this ignorance. But Spain’s situation of antisemitism differs markedly from many nearby nations.

“In Western Europe, there are two types of antisemitic problems, one is antisemitic prejudice, and the other is antisemitic violence,” explains Xavier Torrens, a professor of political science at the University of Barcelona. Today in Spain, usually prejudice is the prevailing display of antisemitism. “I’m going to give you an example,” Torrens continues, describing a presenter on public television who bluntly said, ‘We know the truth, that Jews control Wall Street.’ “For me, the principal challenge in Spain is how to be visible in the public opinion, how to be visible in the civil society, a positive image of the Jewish culture,” Torrens says.

Baer concurs. “In Spain, it’s no big deal—you can say Jews are money,” he says. “There’s no social pressure not to say such a[n antisemitic] thing.”

Hassan emphasizes that with all these prejudiced words, though, there are fortunately not very many violent attacks against Jews. “This is not France,” Hassan briefly says, referring to a country that has seen numerous violent antisemitic acts over the past few years, most infamously the brutal murder of a rabbi and several Jewish schoolchildren in 2012.

Many people, including Hassan, have gone even further than Europe and point to the tense conflict in the Middle East as source for this contemporary animosity in Spain. “Today, in 2013, the perception toward the Jews is impregnated by the politics in the Middle East...I’d say over 90 percent of people...would take the Israeli as the bad and the Palestinians as the good...the media in Spain is very, very anti-Israel.” Hassan emphasizes that, even as a Jew, he himself does not blindly support Israel but instead tries to make an educated decision. This issue goes far beyond simple politics. When thinking about particularly antisemitic media sources, Hassan mentioned one of Spain’s most popular newspapers, *El País*, as a prime example. This newspaper finds wide readership even outside of Spain.

But the main problem lies in the association of all Jews with Israel. “The boundary between anti-Zionism and antisemitism is not very clear. It’s not just black and white, it’s much more complicated.” In a country where many people have never even met a Jewish person, sometimes emotions against Israel unfairly translate to anger against the Jewish people in general, though as Hassan explains, there are many non-Israeli Jews in Spain and many non-Jews in Israel.

David Edery, who lived for 18 years of his young life in Madrid, says he nonetheless takes precautions when in Spain not to attract attention as a Jew. “I don’t wear my *kippah* when I go in Spain,” he says of his choice to leave off the traditional Jewish male head covering when he visits the place where he lived for so long. “I wear a hat or a cap or something, because of the fear that someone’s going to come and say, ‘Oh look, there’s a Jew, let’s [jump] him.’”

Describing the difficult situation in further detail, Ingrid Edery, a professor of Spanish at Christopher Newport University in Virginia and an American Jew married to David, says that Jewish life in Spain is conducted out of view. New synagogues, she said, “are small; they’re like in small apartments. And they’re discreet. You can’t tell they’re a synagogue, there’s nothing on the outside and that’s because of antisemitism.” She recalled searching through small towns for rumored kosher stores, eventually finding them hidden at the back of ham shops, away from those who might wish harm upon their owners.

The safety measures put in place around Jewish synagogues throughout Europe has ramped up in recent years, something that David Edery has noticed during the weekly Jewish holiday of Shabbat. “When I was growing up, we had two policemen at the door. Then we had policemen at the door and security guards. Now we have policemen, security guards, a car, and dogs. It’s like, what else, what’s next?”

Despite having lived in Spain for so long, David Edery himself never elected to gain citizenship for this and other reasons, though he would have qualified even under the older residency laws, and his opinion has not changed during his long tenure in the U.S. “Tell me why I would drop my citizenship from the United States...I would call myself 100 times a U.S. citizen before a Spanish citizen, even though I lived my young life there...I have no desire to move back to Spain.”

Ancient Jewish stereotypes even creep into the discussions of this new development, especially regarding the idea that all Jewish people are financially well-off. Echoing the cynical sentiments voiced by many American Jews, Hassan implies that this governmental action may only be a ploy to bring wealthy Jews—and their money—into a country that is facing dire straits financially. He mentions a meeting with two individuals interested in generating Jewish tourism to Seville that had this same tone, and the upswing in the development of Jewish tourist sites throughout Spain over the past decade supports this theory. “It has a little bit of...I don’t want to say propaganda...we need to see how this happens actually,” including how many applications are accepted or not, Hassan says.

In the end, American Jews may just feel that the benefits of gaining Spanish citizenship are too few to make the hazy process worth it. The undercurrent of antisemitism and stereotyping, the unfortunate link for many Spaniards between all Jews and Israel, and the ignorance of Jewish religious practice could be overwhelming for Jews coming from other parts of the world.

David Edery agrees. “I don’t think anybody will take advantage of it...To be quite honest, I don’t think Spain right now is really doing any good for the Jews.”