

GLOBAL

Spain's Attempt to Atone for a 500-Year-Old Sin

The country is offering citizenship to Jews whose families it expelled in the 15th century.

KIKU ADATTO SEP 21, 2019



An undated engraving from the painting *A Deputation of Jews Before Ferdinand and Isabella* by Chappelin. (BETTMANN / GETTY)

The clock is ticking down on one of the world's most unusual immigration proposals—Spain's offer of citizenship to Jews whose families it expelled more than 500 years ago.

In 1492, the year Christopher Columbus set sail, Spain's Edict of Expulsion gave Jews a stark choice: Convert, depart, or die. At the time, Spain's Jewish community was one of the largest in the world, though their numbers had diminished due to a series of massacres and mass conversions 100 years earlier. Jews had lived on the Iberian Peninsula for more than 1,700 years, producing philosophers, poets, diplomats, physicians, scholars, translators, and merchants.

Historians still debate the number of Jews expelled; some estimate 40,000, others 100,000 or more. Those who fled sought exile in places that would have them—Italy, North Africa, the Netherlands, and eventually the Ottoman empire. Many continued to speak Ladino, a variant of 15th-century Spanish,

and treasure elements of Spanish culture. Tens of thousands stayed, but converted, and remained vulnerable to the perils of the Inquisition. How many Jews were killed remains unclear, but a widely accepted estimate is 2,000 people during the first two decades of the Inquisition, with thousands more tortured and killed throughout its full course.

In 2015, the Spanish Parliament sought to make amends. Without a dissenting vote, it enacted a law inviting the Sephardim—Jews who trace their roots to Spain—to return. (Sepharad is the Hebrew word for the Iberian Peninsula) The law declared that after “centuries of estrangement,” Spain now welcomed “Sephardic communities to reenounter their origins, opening forever the doors of their homeland of old.”

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Spain’s offer of citizenship to Sephardic Jews is a powerful gesture of atonement. The country today has one of the smallest Jewish populations in Europe: about 15,000 to 45,000 in a country of more than 46 million people. Yet, like so much of Spain’s complicated history with the Sephardim, the citizenship offer raises a host of questions. How many Sephardim would apply? What would be their reasons? And, if the law’s intent is to open “forever the doors of their homeland,” why does it have an expiration date? The offer ends this October.

For me, these questions are central to the story of my family. My father, Albert Adatto, descends from Sephardic Jews who trace their roots to Seville. After their expulsion, his ancestors lived for hundreds of years in what is now Turkey. He immigrated to the United States as a baby with his family. Growing up in the Sephardic community of Seattle, he did not speak English until he entered public school. Like other Sephardim, he spoke Ladino at home.

His mother, Anna Perahia Adatto, impressed on him the importance of keeping alive the memory of Spain. She kept as a prized possession the key to the family home in Seville. The key, once displayed with pride in a glassed-in bookcase, had been passed down from generation to generation. Yet it now appears to be lost, and I don’t know whether the house in Seville is still standing.

When my grandmother approached the end of her life, she moved to Jerusalem. She wanted to be buried on the Mount of Olives, to be poised in prime real estate for when the resurrection came. But she told my father to pursue a different dream: Take his children, and his children’s children, and

return to Spain.

And so he did. My father had made regular trips to Spain in the 1970s and '80s, but in the summer of 1992, the 500th anniversary of the expulsion, my parents gathered their children, along with their spouses and children, and returned to Spain. We based ourselves in Seville and visited the towns that figured prominently in our history—Toledo, Cordoba, and Granada.

My husband, an Ashkenazi Jew, regarded my father's celebration of 1492 with puzzlement. "What exactly are we celebrating?" he asked. "After all, they kicked you out." I gave him the answer I had heard so often as a child. "The expulsion was a mistake. Of course we should return."

Still, I saw my father's many trips to Spain as quixotic quests. He called them "peace and friendship missions." He wanted to remember the moments of *convivencia*—the times of mutual respect and cooperation among Christians, Muslims, and Jews—which, for my father, burned brightly. The violence, suffering, and terror receded from memory like ashes that had forgotten the fire.

My father died in 1996. When Spain offered citizenship to the Sephardim almost 20 years later, I, along with my two sons and other members of my family, decided to apply. As we embarked on the application process, no simple matter, I began to wonder what Spain's reencounter with the Sephardim would amount to.

When the 2015 law was approved, Spain's justice minister, Rafael Catalá, declared, "Today we have approved a law that reopens the door for all descendants of those who were unjustly expelled. This law says much about who we were in the past, who we are today, and what we want to be in the future: a Spain that is open, diverse, and tolerant."

Spain's democratic project, its aspirations to multiculturalism, and its support of Jewish cultural institutions provide favorable conditions that did not exist in the not-too-distant past. I could not imagine wanting to apply for citizenship during the rule of the dictator Francisco Franco. But I soon learned that the "reopened" door was not easy to walk through.

Hopes were high when the citizenship law was enacted. Members of the Spanish government and representatives of Jewish organizations in Spain predicted that 100,000 to 200,000 Sephardic Jews would apply. (Around the same time, Portugal enacted its own law welcoming the Sephardim to become

citizens.)

The actual number approved for citizenship by the Spanish Ministry of Justice under the 2015 law has been surprisingly small—only 5,937 as of this month, according to the ministry. The total is still climbing as thousands of applications, including ours, are in the pipeline. But even optimistic predictions suggest the approval figure is unlikely to exceed 20,000.

Why so few?

One reason is that Sephardic Jews around the world have recreated Sepharad in their own communities. A diverse and polyglot people united by a common heritage and religious liturgy, the Sephardim have made new homes during their hundreds of years of “exile.” More than guardians of precious aspects of 15th-century Spanish language and culture, the Sephardim have been involved in a long process of cultural creation and adaptation. Ladino has incorporated many languages, including Hebrew, Arabic, Turkish, French, and Greek. Following Arabic, for example, when something good happens, Sephardim say *mashallah* instead of *mazel tov*.

Today, there is a worldwide revival of Sephardic culture and studies. Ladino—so often declared a dead language—is being taught. Sephardim can visit Spain’s network of Jewish-heritage sites and connect to Spain’s Jewish communities without becoming Spanish citizens.

[*Read: Trump is driving some American Jews to reclaim citizenship in Europe*]

But there is also a more prosaic reason so few Sephardim have applied for citizenship. A yawning gap exists between the spirit of the Spanish citizenship law and its bureaucratic and civil administration.

The application process is daunting and difficult. The law does not require the Sephardim to give up their existing citizenship or reside in Spain. However, requirements include proof of Sephardic lineage (one need not be a practicing Jew); a rigorous, four-hour Spanish-language test; and a citizenship test. Every document—from birth certificates to criminal-background checks—must be translated, notarized, and certified with an apostille seal. Applicants are required to travel to Spain to sign with a Spanish notary, and many people, including our family, hire a Spanish lawyer to help navigate the citizenship process.

These hurdles did not go unnoticed when the citizenship law was being debated in the Spanish Parliament. Jordi Jané i Guasch, a representative from

Catalonia, observed that as a form of historical reparations, the law had “grave deficiencies” and was an “obstacle course” that discouraged people from applying. Jon Iñarritu García, a lawmaker from the Basque Country, noted, “This law does not right a wrong.” It is “more of a symbol, a first step.”

Despite the hurdles, Sephardim are applying. I have spoken with many, and what emerges is a mosaic of motives. In places like Venezuela and Turkey, Sephardim want to escape harsh economic or political conditions. Other countries with relatively high numbers of applicants include Israel, Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, and the United States. Many of these applicants, especially those in their 20s and 30s, like the idea of obtaining a European Union passport, which not only eases travel around the world, but offers the right to live and work across the bloc without requiring a visa.

For applicants young and old, Spanish citizenship is a symbolic bridge that connects past and present, a way to connect to their Sephardic roots. Marcelo Benveniste of Buenos Aires—who with his wife, Liliana, founded eSefarad, a network that reports on Sephardim throughout the world—told me, “I believe this a transcendent moment. It is about more than the citizenship law. It is a moment we have inherited from our grandparents. Now we are the generation to transmit it.”

Isaac Querub, the head of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Spain, told me the story of Annette Cabelli, a French woman in her early 90s who is one of the oldest Sephardim to be granted Spanish citizenship. As a girl, she was rounded up with her family from Thessaloniki and deported to Auschwitz. When they arrived, she clung to her mother’s hand. They were soon separated, and she never saw her mother again. Her mother had always spoken of wanting to return to Spain, and Annette became a Spanish citizen to honor her memory.

Spain’s centuries of “silence and oblivion,” in the stark phrase of the 2015 citizenship law, still haunt the present. Tourism at Jewish historical sites in Spain is booming, but the sites are magnificent relics of the past, not markers of a thriving Jewish community. In Toledo, for example, the famous El Tránsito synagogue, the last synagogue built in Spain before the expulsion, has been restored beautifully but stands empty. It has no active congregation. The surrounding streets are filled with stores selling Jewish religious objects—mezuzahs, menorahs, Stars of David—but these successful businesses, including several kosher restaurants, are owned by Christians and cater to tourists from abroad, such as Israel, the U.S., and China.

Two tourists walk in the courtyard of the Synagogue of El Tránsito.

The exterior of El Tránsito synagogue in Toledo, Spain. (Santiago Lyon / AP)

The restoration of Jewish historical sites, the revival of Jewish cultural and religious organizations in Spain, and the offer of citizenship to the Sephardim are taking place against the backdrop of Spain's history of anti-Semitism. When the Second World War broke out, Spain declared neutrality, but supported the Nazis in the early stages. In his Christmas message of 1939, Franco made a thinly veiled reference to the Jews as a "race" that was a "disturbance" and a "danger," noting that "we, by the grace of God and clear vision of the Catholic Kings, have for centuries been free of this heavy burden." Spain, however, did not deport Jews—indeed, thousands of Jews fleeing the Nazis crossed safely through Spain en route to other countries. In the post-War period, Franco attempted to rehabilitate his reputation and whitewash the anti-Semitism that was rife among his party and supporters.

The Spanish public still harbors many anti-Semitic stereotypes, more than other Western European countries according to surveys by [the Anti-Defamation League](#) and [the Pew Research Center](#).

[Read: [Spain's past is lost](#)]

Anti-Semitic beliefs in Spain have been especially widespread among the educated. A [report](#) produced by Spain's Observatory of Anti-Semitism found that 58 percent of the Spanish public believes that "the Jewish people are powerful because they control the economy and the mass media." Among university students, this number reaches 62 percent, and among respondents who are "interested in politics," 70 percent hold this view. Some Spanish anti-

Semitism reflects a tendency to conflate Jews with Israelis and to view both through the lens of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Spain did not recognize the state of Israel until 1986, when it did so as a condition of entering the European Union.

Querub, a longtime leader of Spain's Jewish community, told me he believes that "Spain is no longer an anti-Semitic country; however, anti-Semitic prejudices persist, fed by dark legends, lies, and ignorance." He added in an email, "There are still anti-Semitic expressions in the Spanish language which, unfortunately, are used quite frequently in the media, among the political classes, and of course, in the street—*perro judío* [Jewish dog], *judiada* [a dirty trick, cruel act, or extortion], and *judío* [associated with usurers]."

In the city of León, they drink a lemonade mixed with red wine called *matar judíos* ("kill Jews") during Holy Week. Instead of "cheers" or "bottoms up," the local drinking cheer is "We are going to kill the Jews." For hundreds of years, a village in northern Spain was named Castrillo Matajudios ("Castrillo Kill the Jews"). The residents finally voted to change the name—in 2014.

Despite this history, significant progress, particularly in the realm of education, has been made to root out anti-Semitism. In 2018, the Federation of Jewish Communities of Spain signed an agreement with the Spanish Ministry of Education for "the eradication of anti-Semitism in Spain." Spanish public schools now teach about the Holocaust. Jewish cultural institutions are thriving, many with government support. The current king, Felipe VI, like his father Juan Carlos I, is a strong, eloquent moral voice in support of the Jewish community.

As I reflect on my father's dream of Spain, I realize that cruelty is coiled within the quixotic quest. More than an exercise in nostalgia, the longing for Sepharad is a journey entangled in violence and blood, massacres and forced conversions, trauma and redemption.

The Greek root of *nostalgia*—*nostos*—means "return home." Homer's *Odyssey* and other Greek tales chronicled the hard-fought, often violent passage home from Troy of the Greek heroes. Home was not a simple haven, but a place fraught with conflicts of its own. So too is the *nostos* of the Sephardim.

Salvador Espriu, a Catholic and one of the great Catalonian poets and novelists of the 20th century, used the Hebrew word *Sepharad* as a metaphor for Spain. He came of age as an artist during the Spanish Civil War and the dictatorship of

Franco. For him, Sepharad stood for an ideal of justice that endured beyond the cruelty and intolerance that has plagued Spanish history. Espriu evoked the exile of the Jews and the yearning for a homecoming as a way of articulating his own voice as an “exile,” a critic of oppression in his own land.

In the 1960s, he wrote a poem titled *La Pell de Brau* (“The Bull-Hide”) that captures the radical hope of reconciliation that spurs me on my journey of return.

So, when someone
asks us
sometimes, in a harsh voice:
“Why have you stayed
here in this hard, dry land,
this land soaked in blood?
This is surely not the best of the lands you came upon
in the long
trial
of your Exile”—
with a small smile
that remembers our fathers
and our grandfathers, we only say:
“In our dreams, yes, it is.”

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