

Sephardic Jews eager for Spanish citizenship

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After the Spanish government recently announced it would grant citizenship to the descendants of Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain five centuries ago, Amit Winder of Tel Aviv began dreaming of a bright future on the Costa del Sol.

Winder, a 36-year-old Israeli who runs his own video company, said the high cost of living in Israel and the seemingly never-ending conflict with Palestinians have given him second thoughts.

“I could take all my money to Spain, buy a house and start my business [there],” he said. “That would cost me the same amount as buying a one-bedroom apartment in Tel Aviv.”

Spanish Minister of Justice Alberto Ruiz-Gallardón announced on February 7 a bill that would allow Sephardic Jews dual citizenship, calling it one laden with “deep historic meaning” that would compensate for shameful events in the country’s past.

Spanish Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492 by an edict of the Catholic monarchs, Isabella and Ferdinand, during the height of the Spanish Inquisition, an effort intended to maintain Catholic orthodoxy in the kingdom.

Some of the estimated 100,000 to 200,000 Jews living in Spain at the time —historians disagree on the true number—converted to Catholicism and stayed, but the majority migrated to North Africa, the Balkans, and what was then the Ottoman Empire, bringing the Spanish language and culture with them.

Sephardic organizations estimate that as many as 3.5 million Jews could potentially apply for a Spanish passport (out of 14 million Jews in the world). The reaction from the Sephardic community has been huge, partly triggered by an unofficial list of

potentially qualifying last names of Spanish origin published by Israeli newspapers.

“The measure is an act of historical justice,” said Sebastián de la Oba, director of Casa de Sefarad, a Córdoba museum and cultural center devoted to Spanish Jewry in the south of the country.

Spanish embassies and Sephardic associations around the world are being inundated with calls and e-mails. The Federation of Jewish Communities in Spain, which according to the draft would be in charge of expediting “Sephardic certificates,” received more than 600 e-mails and untold phone calls in one week, federation officials said.

Sephardic Jews were already able to apply for Spanish citizenship, but the process was long and arduous and forced petitioners to give up their current passports. Observers say the new provision, which would allow applicants to hold dual nationalities, is what has sparked unprecedented interest.

But they warn that the bill still needs to be approved by the Spanish parliament, which could take up to a year.

For the moment, the bill fast-tracks the citizenship process and provides six different ways to prove Sephardic origins, such as “having a Sephardic last name,” “evidence of belonging to the Sephardic community,” or speaking Ladino—a form of medieval Spanish spoken by Sephardic Jews. Once the bill is passed, the Sephardim will have a window of two years to obtain Spanish nationality.

Jews of Spanish heritage have ended up all over the world, and it’s difficult to trace a family tree without ending up with a broken branch. Continuous expulsions, wars, and the Holocaust have made it difficult for families to document their origins.

That’s Winder’s worry. His grandmother’s last name originated from the southern Spanish city of Córdoba, but he cannot trace his maternal ancestors further back than the 17th century. “They all came from Syria,” he explained, guessing that some of his ancestors arrived there after being expelled from Spain in the 15th century.

Part of the bill’s appeal to some is that it would offer applicants an opening to Europe.

“The high expectations created by the government’s announcement are fed by emotions but also by the benefits of getting a European Union passport,” said de la

Obra. —RNS

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