

WELCOME

Spain and Portugal re-invite the Jews

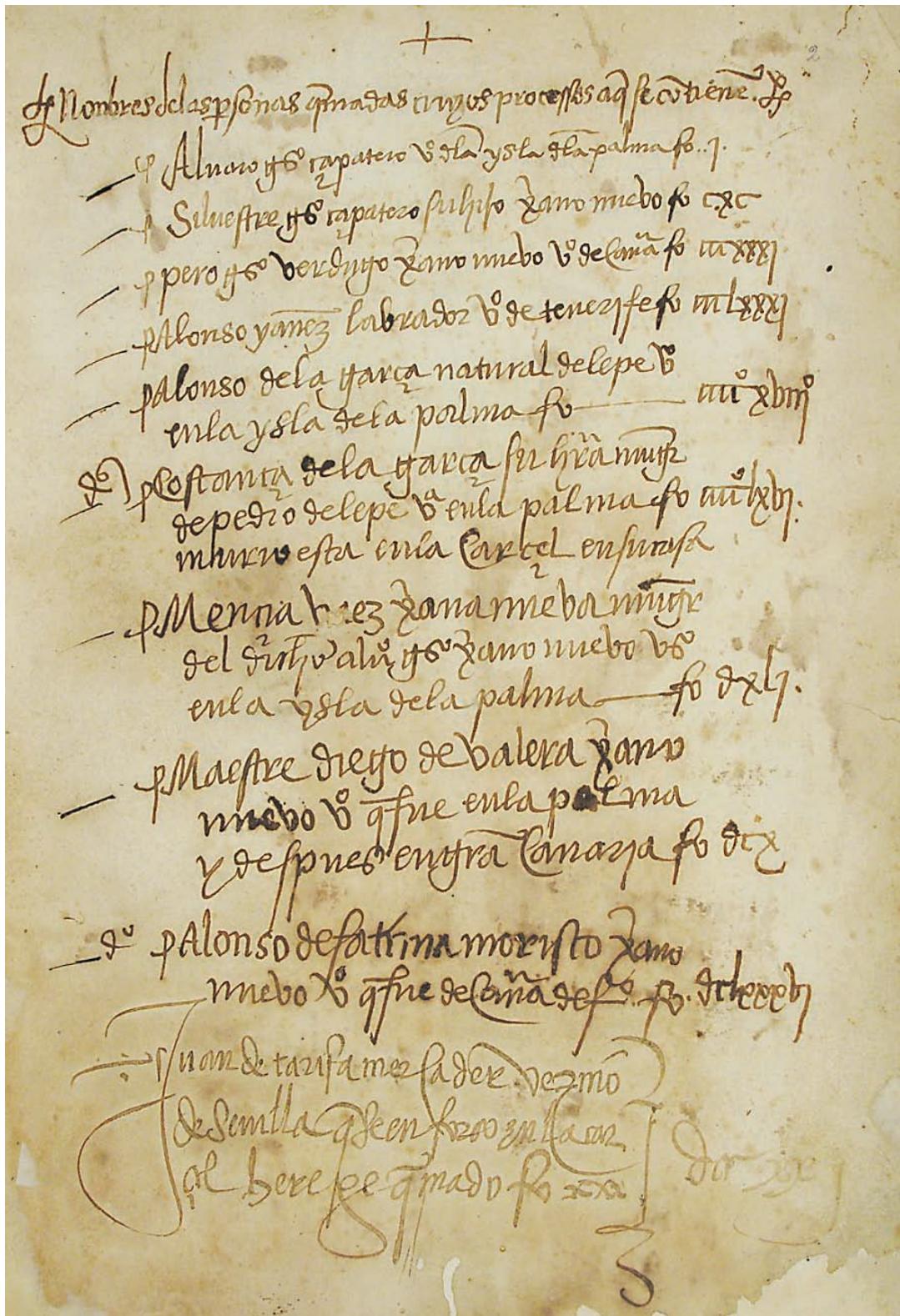


Jews were expelled from Spain at the end of the 15th century as a result of the Decree of the Alhambra, also known as the Edict of Granada. This decree was issued March 31, 1492 by the Catholic monarchs of Spain, Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand II of Aragon, under the pressure of the Inquisition.

Fototeca Gilardi/Getty Images

BACK

By
Chris
Leppek



This document from the Canary Islands lists the name of nine people burned at the stake in Las Palmas during the Spanish Inquisition in 1526. Among those executed were "New Christians" (Jews who were forcibly converted, or their descendants) Alonso and Constanza de la Garza. According to Sarah Koplik of the Jewish Federation of New Mexico, the Garzas' children fled to Monterrey, Mexico and their descendants "established hidden Jewish communities throughout the Rio Grande basin," in Mexico, New Mexico, Texas, Arizona and Colorado. "Hundreds of thousands of individuals in the US are descended from this family," she says.

Asociación de Archiveros de Canarias

Reclaiming A 500-YEAR-OLD HERITAGE

Half a millennium ago, give or take a century or two, the monarchies of Spain and Portugal visited upon their Jewish citizens one of the most massive and egregious acts of collective anti-Semitism in history.

Fueled by Catholic fanaticism and paranoia, the various Inquisitions that swept through the Iberian peninsula forcibly converted, expelled, tortured or horribly executed untold thousands of Jews, Muslims, Protestants and assorted other “heretics.”

Even today, many generations later, the scars of those terrors have not entirely healed, nor have all the reverberations grown still.

In 2015, both Spain and Portugal inaugurated programs by which descendants of the Jews who had suffered during the Inquisition could, under certain conditions, obtain full citizenship in their nations.

Following apologies for the crimes of their forebears, the citizenship offers from Spain and Portugal were framed as a means of righting historical wrongs and at least partially compensating Jews for the victimization of their ancestors.

Throughout the world, many Jews received the news in just those terms — as a heartfelt gesture of atonement and a genuine welcome to return — while others, rather more cynical, perceived it as a convenient means of drawing Jewish investment and expertise to struggling economies falling behind their European neighbors.

In any case, the response has been striking.

As of last autumn, when the Spanish offer expired, nearly 6,000 citizenship applications had been approved, but many thousands more were still in the review process. Ultimately, some 20,000 applications might be approved in all, according to a recent article in *The Atlantic*.

As of late 2017, meanwhile, Portugal had received more than 8,000 citizenship applications and more were coming in at the rate of 400-500 per month,

according to the JC website. While figures for more recent applications have proven hard to come by, the fact that the Portuguese offer has no expiration date raises the possibility that many thousands might eventually receive citizenship, perhaps even more than Spain.

Applicants have come from across the entire globe, including a substantial number from Colorado and New Mexico, the *Intermountain Jewish News* has learned.

The Southwestern US, in fact, has become a hot spot for citizenship applications, due to the Jews or Jewish descendants living in a region where many *conversos* (those who were forcibly converted during the Inquisition) and crypto-Jews (those who continued to practice Judaism secretly) are believed to have settled after leaving Spain, Portugal or New Spain (Mexico), which launched its own Inquisition in the 16th century.

In conversations with such applicants and those who have helped them with the process, the *IJN* has learned about the challenges and expenses associated with the application process, the motivations of 21st century Jews in seeking citizenship in the countries of their ancestors, and a few fascinating details about the lives of those ancestors.

Three such accounts follow.

Sarah Koplik's relationship with the citizenship process stems both from personal and professional motivations.

The director of community outreach for the Jewish Federation of New Mexico based in Albuquerque, she has spent much of the last four or so years piloting the Sephardic Heritage Certificate Program, which, under the federation's umbrella, has assisted thousands of people hoping to obtain Spanish or Portuguese citizenship.

As a Jew of Sephardic lineage whose ancestors were linked to Inquisition-era Spain — and as a schol-

What
motivates
people to
seek a
second
citizenship
?



Sarah Koplik, 'hopeful'

ar and author long fascinated by the history of *converso*s and crypto-Jews across the world — she is an applicant for Spanish citizenship herself.

Like many applicants, Koplik is still waiting for a final decision on her bid. In her case, the process has been going on for about two years. She is “hopeful” that she will eventually prevail, she told the IJN recently.

She can trace her family tree back some six generations, she says, and has no information about the ancestor or ancestors who were personally affected by the Inquisition.

“I don’t feel a personal connection,” she says, “but some people really do. They feel that very strongly, particularly people of *converso* heritage.”

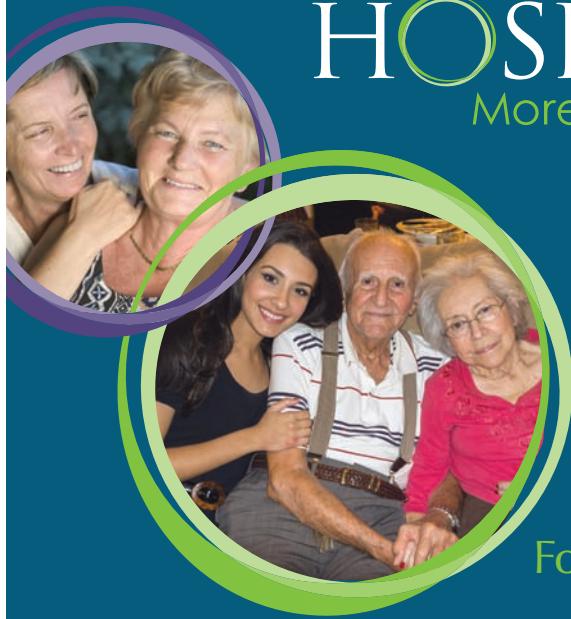
Koplik’s professional connection to the process began a few weeks after Spain activated its program in late 2015 when the Albuquerque federation was visited by a representative of the Spanish government looking for US Sephardic congregations that could help certify applicants.

He was referred to Congregation Nahalat Shalom which, although it has a Sephardic program, concluded that the program was too big for it to handle and

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ended up kicking it back to the federation, which worked in tandem with the Jewish Federation of Spain.

"It seemed like a normal evolution," Koplik says of the Spanish process, "so we started to issue certificates, very slowly at first. We became the first entity, I believe in the world, that would issue certificates for

southern Colorado, but what we found out is that actually these practices extend around the world. There are families and communities around the world who maintained crypto-Jewish practices, certainly well into the 20th century."

So far, the program has assisted with the applications of about 15,000 people, Koplik says, virtually all of them for citizenship with Spain, whose program

Applicants from Colorado, New Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Peru

people who aren't currently Jewish but who had *converso* backgrounds, meaning that we were following Spanish law but we weren't following Halachah."

Early on, she was amazed at the geographical range of those who applied. She was surprised that the majority were residents of Latin American locales — Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Puerto Rico — and that a few even came from nations in western Africa.

"We thought at the beginning of this process that being *converso* and having these unusual Jewish family practices was really limited to New Mexico and

recently ended. The program has only started working with those desiring Portuguese citizenship.

The applicants so far have been "overwhelmingly from Latin America and overwhelmingly of *converso* heritage" — 80-90% of the applicants are from Latin America, with those from the American Southwest coming in at about 10%. The remainder are from the rest of the US and various international locations.

It's hard to graph the acceptance rate at this point, since most applications are still in the pipeline, she says, theorizing that Spain's current governmental limbo may be playing a role in the slow pace.

"Everything is still in process, that's the problem. There are some Latin Americans who have received passports and a handful of US nationals who have received passports, but most people are still waiting. They haven't been rejected, *per se*, but they're just waiting and the process is very slow, which is extremely frustrating for people."

Koplik says the motivations of applicants vary widely.

Some view citizenship with Spain or Portugal as something of "an insurance policy," she says.

Mexicans are fearful of "*narcos trafficantes*," violent drug cartels, and the political corruption in their country; Venezuelans are wary of official oppression and corruption there; Colombians have similar concerns.

Even some American applicants feel this way, she says. Since many US applicants, whether practicing Jews or not, consider themselves to be Hispanic, they feel themselves targeted by what they view as the current administration's racist immigration policies.

"What we noticed for US applicants is that after the election of Donald Trump our applications just went through the roof," Koplik says.

DENVER HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE EVENT

April 26, 2020 from 2-4 pm at Babi Yar Memorial Park

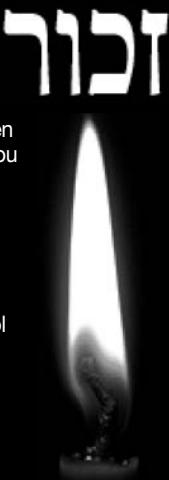
Featured Speakers

Sarah Moses, Holocaust survivor and speaker, will tell her riveting story of how she survived the terrors of Nazi persecution, including her time in the notorious Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Her message will inspire you to stand against injustice, prejudice and hatred.

Karen Z. Brass, a professional Holocaust Educator, Author and Speaker will be shedding light on the BDS movement. She is a second generation Holocaust survivor and author of "Trauma Filters Through." Bring your high school students to prepare them for life on the college campus.

A performance by the Colorado Youth Choir will also be featured.

You are invited to join us for this important, inter-faith event. Come before or stay after the event to explore the park. You can find more information about the park at www.mizelmuseum.org/exhibit/babi-yar-living-holocaust-memorial



FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION WE MUST REMEMBER AND RESPOND!

"It went from a handful of applications to hundreds upon hundreds. I think there's a great deal of fear after the election."

The motivations of others transcend such immediate concerns.

Particularly for those who believe themselves to be descendants of *conversos* or crypto-Jews, there is a desire to reconnect with their Jewish ancestors and heritage by reestablishing links to their countries of origins.

"That's very important," says Koplik, noting that an applicant with whom she works recently traveled to Malaga to sign her documents after her application was ultimately approved.

"She said it was extremely emotional," she says. "There were a lot of tears, a lot of deep, deep feeling among the individuals, even including the lawyers and the notaries, of righting a historical wrong in their ancestors' heritage."

In addition to being emotional, the application process can also be arduous, Koplik says, although in different ways for Spain and Portugal.

Unlike Spain, those applying for Portuguese citizenship needn't learn the language, pass various tests, get a Sephardic rabbi to sign on or actually travel to the country, she points out.

But the Portuguese are more stringent when it comes to genealogical documentation and applicants' present-day Jewishness.

The Spanish are also more lenient when weighing the importance of an applicant's surname.

"For Spain, you had to have a genealogy or a letter from a rabbi which says that you have Sephardic heritage," Koplik says. "Or you could present a genealogy, which can sometimes be 20 generations, going back to a known Sephardic ancestor."

Very few applicants were able to provide such a comprehensive genealogy, of course, but there was a fallback option.

"There was a thing called a name report which is that the person's last name was the same as persons who were persecuted during the Inquisition," Koplik says. "That was the most fluid part of the law and that's where most applicants were able to get through the process."

For both Spanish and Portuguese applicants, a variety of other documentation could prove valuable.



Carlos Zarur, '1490s'

Such evidence as ship manifests, correspondence, immigration and census documents, naturalization papers and *ketubahs* — Jewish wedding certificates — can provide solid evidence.

"For a modern person whose family maintains Sephardic Judaism," Koplik says, "it wouldn't be so hard to have things like this."

Testimony of crypto-Jewish traditions or rituals in a family's history is something that both Spanish and Portuguese officials tend to examine very carefully, she says, adding that the frequent lack of official documentation in such cases fuels a level of official skepticism.

"You could submit that as well," she says of such information, "but it wouldn't be enough."

Koplik advised most applicants for Spanish citizenship to hire an attorney to help them through the often complicated process, and will continue to do so for Portuguese applicants.

In many cases, she also advises that a professional genealogist be consulted.

In addition to helping fill gaps in a family tree, "a genealogist will go back and look for settlement in known Sephardic towns in Eastern Europe, or known Sephardic neighborhoods, and that way they can fulfill the requirements of the law."

Those who applied for Spanish citizenship were also advised what to expect in terms of expense.

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Among the family heirlooms in the custody of Denver scholar Carlos Zarur is this key, which, according to his family tradition, once opened the door of the synagogue in Zamora, Spain that his ancestor, Shelomo Kassin, belonged to. The Inquisition shut down the shul and expelled Kassin from Spain in the 1490s.

Carlos Zarur

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Hiring an attorney, consulting a genealogist and traveling to Spain cost the average applicant about \$6,000, she estimates.

"You have to be serious about this," she says. "It's a rigorous process."

In her own case, Koplik says, the costs and the hassles of the application have been well worth it, even if she hasn't received her actual citizenship yet.

She is personally gratified to be part of what she considers a sincere process of reconciliation, while acknowledging that Spain and Portugal also hope to stimulate their economies in the process.

"This came about truly as an apology, an atonement for the Inquisition," she says, "and it's interesting that in this day of nationalism, of closed borders and people rolling up the welcome mat, of retreating back into themselves, here we have Iberia as a completely different model. They are welcoming Jewish people and those with Jewish heritage from around the world."

As a historian fascinated by how the Inquisition scattered Jews and the seeds of Jewish custom and

practice to the four winds, Koplik is also impressed by how these 21st century programs have increased the historical knowledge of that dispersion.

"Through the promulgation of these laws, people around the world have started to talk openly about their crypto-Jewish heritage and practices — in places like the Philippines, West Africa, Zimbabwe, Libya.

"We have started to learn about these towns that are known to have been Jewish towns, these little centers where people might have had different attire from the surrounding population, where they had different customs, such as practicing endogamy, where they kept away from pork, where their men and women sat separately at social gatherings, where people would see a rainbow or lightning and say a blessing, where they had different death customs, such as covering mirrors.

"Every story is different. What you see is a constellation of interesting practices which seem to have a Jewish base. That's been really extraordinary, very powerful and deeply meaningful."

Carlos Zarur is a Denver author, anthropologist and educator who has taught a wide variety of Jewish topics in local venues, including synagogues, for years. Born in Mexico and raised in Brazil and the US, he is of Sephardic ancestry, with family roots stretching back to both Inquisition-era Spain and Portugal.

Last month, after a process that took about two-and-a-half years, he officially became a citizen of Portugal.

His mother and sisters, meanwhile, chose to become citizens of Spain.

Zarur opted for Portugal, he told the IJN, primarily because of the comparative costs associated with the citizenship application process. His mother and siblings paid between 7,000 euros and 11,000 euros (roughly \$7,500 to \$12,000 at current exchange rates) in the course of their efforts, he says, while he paid some 1,800 euros for his.

"The Spanish way is more expensive because of the need to travel to Spain, at least twice, and the need to have an attorney."

Unlike his relatives, Zarur was not required to travel to Portugal, did not have to pass any kind of tests, did not have to prove fluency in Portuguese (even though, due to his Brazilian childhood, he is fluent in the language) and he was able to wade through the documentation without an attorney.

"You don't have to go to Portugal for anything. You don't have to pay an attorney. You don't have to do any kind of crazy test. You only have to have three certifications from the Sephardic community where you were born and then certification that you have Portuguese ancestry from either the Sephardic community in Lisbon or in Porto. That's it."

"I did everything by myself," he says.

That included demonstrating his family's Sephardic lineage by preparing a family tree.

The genealogy did not have to be complete for the past five centuries, he explains, nor did it need official documentation, but the several generations that Zarur was able to trace were sufficient to verify the Sephardic origin of his surname.

He also provided documentation of geographical details that established a familial link with Portugal.

"Nobody can provide a complete family tree going that far back," he says, "and, by the way, they don't ask for that, neither Spain nor Portugal."

A downside of his Portuguese choice was the long

delay in getting through the process, "since everything takes longer in Portugal," he says. "So I knew it was going to be slower."

An important difference between Spain and Portugal, Zarur emphasizes, is that Spanish applicants need only demonstrate Spanish Jewish heritage, not modern day status as Jews. Spain is willing to grant citizenship to descendants of *conversos* — who might be, for example, practicing Roman Catholics today — while Portugal requires that applicants be considered Jewish by recognized rabbinic definitions.

Despite Spain's more liberal standards, however, Zarur says that applicants who believe they have *converso* or crypto-Jewish heritage require considerably more documentation to have their applications accepted, and in these populations such documentation is often difficult or impossible to obtain.

As a scholar educated in anthropology, Zarur approaches his family history methodically and enthusiastically, with the result that he knows considerably more about his Inquisition-related heritage than most modern day applicants.

While he cannot positively identify the direct Portuguese ancestor who was expelled from that nation, Zarur has a pretty good idea who he was.

"We are not 100% sure, however we have some information that may indicate who that person was."

In Portugal, he was known as Edoardo Peixoto. In Italy, to which he fled in the early 1600s, he was known as Armand Picciotto.

As far as Zarur knows, Peixoto left Portugal before he was forcibly converted. His descendants settled throughout the Italian peninsula. Some family members were very successful in trade, became wealthy, and were eventually known as the "Rothschilds of the East," Zarur says.

Peixoto's great-great grandson ultimately moved to Aleppo, Syria, following the path of many other Jews scattered by the Inquisition. Other members of the family went to Germany, Austria and Lebanon.

On his paternal side, Zarur has also been able to trace direct lineage to a man named Shelomo Kassin who lived in Zamora, Spain. He was expelled from Spain in the 1490s and also ended up in Aleppo.

Kassin was an active leader of one of Zamora's five synagogues, which were ultimately shut down by

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A seal once owned by Shelomo Kassin, an Inquisition-era Jew, was used to certify documents associated with the Spanish synagogue of which he was a member. It is now in the possession of his descendant Carlos Zarur. Carlos Zarur

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Inquisition authorities. Among the artifacts he took with him were the key to the synagogue, a seal that he used for official documents and a letter written in his hand. These and other artifacts from the era have been passed down to Zarur by generations of his family.

Zarur places great value on these artifacts as they reflect the importance he places on his own family's troubled history. He is obviously grateful to have regained the Portuguese citizenship that was taken away from his ancestor, and doesn't rule out the possibility that he might one day actually reside there. He has visited Portugal several times and is very fond of the country.

None of that means that there can be any modern mitigation for the crimes of the Inquisition, he says.

"Not at all," he says. "Even though I'm happy that they're doing this, you cannot undo what they did. It's impossible. It's like you cannot undo the Holocaust."

"They cut out two-thirds of the Jewish people of that time . . . You cannot repair or give back all those millions of souls that were lost to Judaism. You cannot repair the experience of being expelled from your country where you had been for 1,500 years."

Seth Benezra, a Denverite "off and on" for some four decades, recently received his Spanish citizenship after waiting nearly three years for the process to be completed.

An employment attorney, the Bay Area native told the IJN earlier this month that his desire to become a Spanish citizen was "mostly personal as opposed to professional."

He loves Spain, for one thing, has visited the country repeatedly over the years and plans to continue going there as a tourist.

But Benezra elaborates that his new status as a dual US-Spanish citizen is also a logical result of his membership in a family with deep Sephardic and Spanish roots. His father was a fluent Spanish speaker; his grandparents spoke both Spanish and the disappearing dialect of Ladino, the primary tongue of Inquisition-era Jews in the Iberian region.

According to family tradition, their Spanish ancestor or ancestors in the time of the Inquisition were expelled from Spain and ended up in Turkey.

Benezra, whose genealogy can only be documented three or four generations back, says he has very little specific knowledge of those antecedents.

"I know only that they were Jews who were forced to leave Spain and nothing more than that," he says. "Even that is something of an assumption because it's based on the use of the Spanish language and my family's location in Turkey."

In applying for citizenship, Benezra — who hired an attorney from Barcelona to facilitate his application — put forward his Sephardic surname, documentation of his family's presence in Turkey and evidence of his forebears' use of Ladino as evidence.

"One of the principal elements of this, in my case, was being able to show use of Ladino in my family of origin," he says. "I had, for example, a letter from my great-great grandparents, in Gallipoli [Turkey] written to my grandparents in the very early 1900s, and it's in Ladino. The fact that there is that language is considered very strong evidence of a Sephardic connection."

While "that was a big part of it," he says, ultimate acceptance required even more.

"It is a long process. There are a lot of components to it."

He also had to demonstrate a level of fluency in Spanish, pass several tests, provide historical evidence of his family's connection to Spain and receive



Seth Benezra

I
feel
blessed
I was
able to do
this
!

physically go to Spain."

There were a lot of hurdles to jump, Benezra acknowledges, but he's very glad he did it.

There are Jewish reasons for that, he says.

"I had a Bar Mitzvah and was confirmed and went through many years of Jewish education," he says, "although I don't go to temple as often as I should now.

"But I think it is a good thing that Spain is doing this. It reflects some recognition of what they did and how horrible it was. When you can do something, even

a rabbi's approval.

He had to pay for it, as well, although Benezra doesn't provide a precise figure.

"It was a process that definitely cost some money," he says. "There are some expenses. One of them is that you have to travel to Spain to have a notary review all the documentation that you're submitting in connection with your application. It's not something you can do via Skype. You have to phys-

ically go to Spain."

if it's not something huge, that's of value." He has also learned a great deal in the process, Benezra says, including significant information of his family history that he can now pass on to future generations. His use of Ancestry.com provided any number of interesting insights.

"It's pretty remarkable stuff that you can find. I was able to find the manifest of the boat that my grandfather took from Gallipoli to Ellis Island. I found the application to become a naturalized citizen of my grandmother in New York in the 1930s.

"That was really valuable, and also, as part of the process, you have to acquire a certain level of competency in Spanish. Although I speak some Spanish, I didn't speak it at the level that I would have needed to pass a test. So I had to develop my Spanish and take a cultural examination. It was all very interesting and educational for me."

The whole experience has definitely been "a cool thing," Benezra says.

"I feel blessed that I was in a situation where I was able to pursue this and do it. It's been very personally satisfying."

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