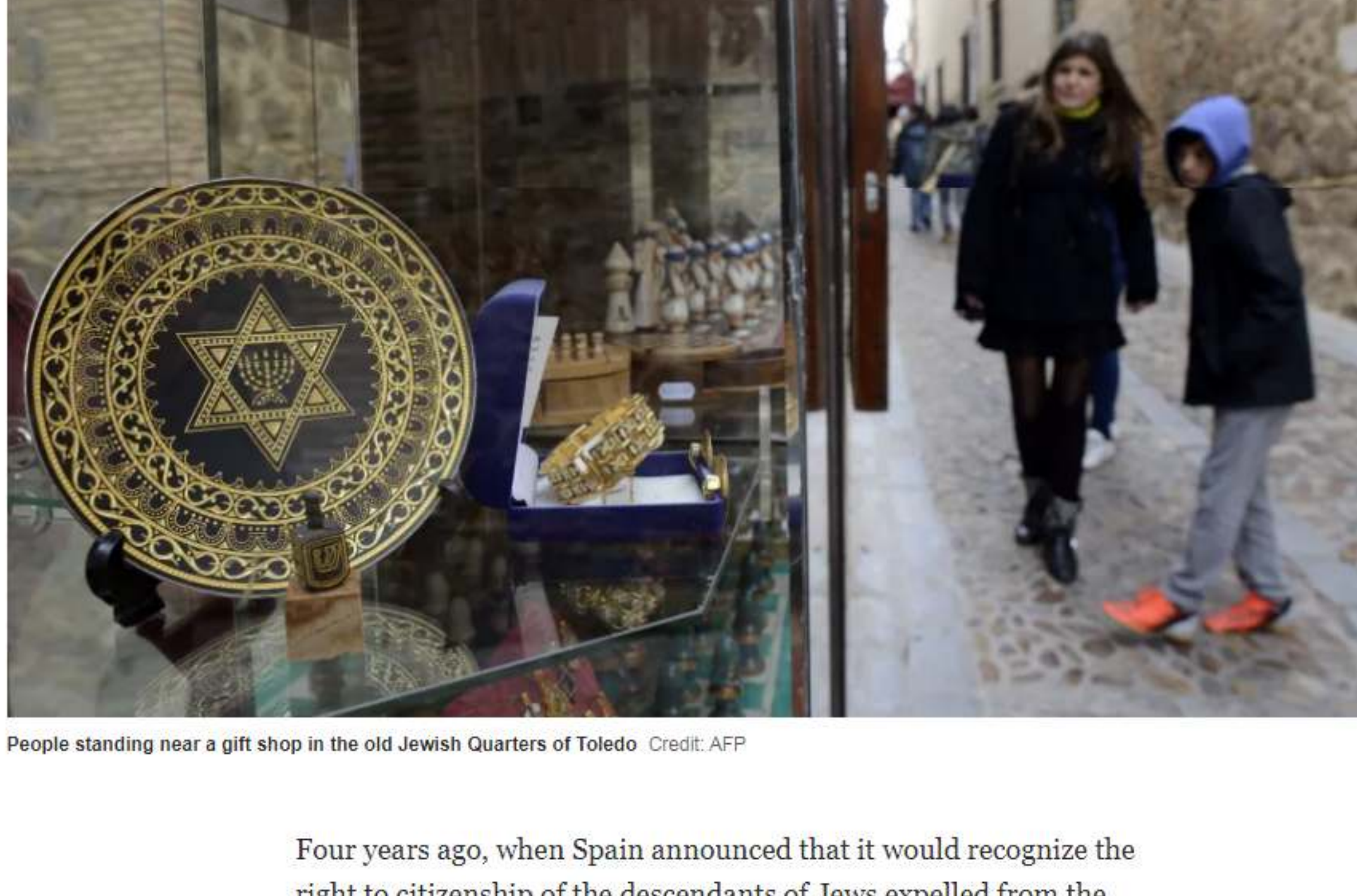


Ashkenazi Jews Find Spanish, Portuguese Roots After Passport Offer to Descendants of Expelled

It turns out quite a few Ashkenazi Jews, even those who thought they had 'pure' Polish blood, might be able to be recognized as descendants of those expelled from Spain

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Oct 25, 2019 9:41 AM



People standing near a gift shop in the old Jewish Quarters of Toledo. Credit: AFP

Four years ago, when Spain announced that it would recognize the right to citizenship of the descendants of Jews expelled from the country in the Middle Ages, a list of Spanish Jewish last names spread on social media. Those whose family names appeared on the list could well have the privilege of being eligible for a Spanish passport.

Oren Gruber from Rishon Letzion looked for his wife's last name on the list. Her family is from Morocco – one of the main countries where Spanish Jews immigrated to after the expulsion in 1492. During his search he was surprised to find his Ashkenazi grandmother's last name too: Efrati. "When I asked my father to explain, he said it was known that the family of my grandmother, who was born in Ukraine, has Spanish roots," Gruber told Haaretz.

When he dug deeper and did research, Gruber discovered that the name was mentioned in the 14th century in Spain, and he was able to prove he was a descendent of the Jews expelled from there – thanks to his Ashkenazi grandmother.

With the help of PassportoGo, a company that specializes in helping the descendants of the Spanish expulsion to receive passports, he recently received approval from the Portuguese Jewish community that Spanish blood flows in his veins.

Many Spanish Jews left for Portugal in 1492, before they were expelled from there too in 1497. This approval is the last station before receiving the passport issued by the Portuguese government. "It turns out that Sephardim are hiding in Ashkenazi lands, too," said Gruber this week with a smile.

Among genealogy researchers and historians this was an open secret, but many Ashkenazi Jews, like Gruber, didn't know at all that their origins were in families from Spain – and that they are entitled to a passport.

A month ago, at the end of the period the Spanish government allocated for submitting requests for Spanish citizenship from the descendants of those expelled in 1492, 130,000 requests were submitted, but it has not yet been announced how many of them were accepted.

Now, after the Spanish option has been closed, the descendants of those who did not succeed, or did not meet the deadline for a passport from Madrid, can take the Portuguese route. This channel is easier than the Spanish one, and does not require knowing the language or taking a proficiency exam.

The Sephardim from Zamosc

Along with families from North Africa, the natural candidates for receiving a foreign passport, it turns out quite a few Ashkenazi Jews – and even those who thought they had "pure" Polish blood, might be able to be recognized as descendants of those expelled from Spain and be eligible to receive Portuguese citizenship.

"The fact that you're Ashkenazi doesn't mean you have no chance of receiving a Spanish passport [as an] exile from Spain," attorney Moti Cohen, CEO of PassportoGo. According to Cohen, alongside names like Marciano and Buzaglo, which originated in Morocco, Tunis, Libya, Algeria, Turkey, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Greece, the list also has some surprising names. Among them is Mossinson (the name of the principal of Gymnasia Hertzliya, Benzion Mossinson, whose family originated in Crimea) and Harlap (an acronym in Hebrew for the title "Haya head of the exiles to Poland," named after the head of the family, Rabbi Haya the Pole).

Figures known as "pure Ashkenazi," could also be entitled to a Portuguese passport as descendants of exiles from Spain. One of these would have been the late Y.L. Peretz, one of the greatest Yiddish authors, who in his works described the life of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. What does Yitzhak Leibush Peretz, son of a leader in the town of Zamosc in the Lublin district in eastern Poland, have to do with Spanish Jewry?

Historian Haim Ghiuzeli, director of the Databases Department at Museum of the Jewish People at Beit Hatfutsot, explains in an article published on the museum's website that the first Jews to settle in Zamosc in 1588, shortly after it was founded, were Sephardic Jews from the Ottoman Empire and Venice. "They received equal rights and were allowed to establish their own community, which absorbed only Jews from Spain or Portugal," he wrote.

Peretz's city produced other famous figures, whose family names do not indicate their potential entitlement to a Spanish passport. The list includes the Communist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, the decorated military doctor Philip Lubelski, the founder of the first Hebrew-language weekly in Russia, Hamelitz, Alexander Zederbaum, and even the editor of the Yiddish Forward, Mordechai Strigler.

Peretz, who was also a lawyer, died in 1915. He could not have imagined that 100 years later his name would star in debates of lawyers in Israel as they attempt to prove the "Sephardicness" of their Ashkenazi clients, who are prepared to pay large sums to receive a European passport.

One of these is the lawyer Adam Yadid, of the law office of David Yadid, who is an expert in obtaining foreign citizenship. Along with his clients, he also arranged a Portuguese passport for himself and his children. "I am a descendent of Rabbi Shaul Wahl, who was made king of Poland for one day," he told Haaretz proudly, quoting from a famous legend about a 16th-century yeshiva head in Poland who rose to greatness.

Yadid is not the only Jew whose family tree leads to that king for a day. According to one genealogical research project on the subject, Karl Marx and Helena Rubenstein were also his descendants, so theoretically they would also be entitled to a Spanish or Portuguese passport today.

When asked to sketch the pathways that link his Polish family to the exile from Spain, Yadid tells of ancestors who found their way after the exile to the city of Horovice (now in the northern Czech Republic). "There, one of them was the finance minister of the king of Bohemia," Yadid says. When the family left there, they took the name of the city with them, and were called Horowitz. One of the members of this family was Rabbi Yeshayahu Halevi Horowitz, known as the Shelah, one of the great Ashkenazi rabbis of the 17th century.

Another path that reinforces Yadid's connection to the Spanish exiles is through the Rappaport family, a name that some say comes from a combination of the words "rabbi," and "Porto – the famous Portuguese port city. A famous "Ashkenazi" scion of this family is the author and playwright known by the pseudonym S. Ansky, who wrote "The Dybbuk" in Yiddish and Russian, and whose given name was Shloyme Zanvl Rappaport.

Another descendant of that family is Eli Brauner, a genealogist who has Polish citizenship and is now working to obtain Portuguese citizenship, and who says there were many Sephardic communities in Poland.

These two families – Horowitz and Rappaport – whose names today sound Ashkenazi in every way "are among the exiles in all the relevant literature," Yadid says.

Worn-out Sephardicness

Genealogist Gidi Peretz, who calls himself a "historical detective," says that sometimes the financial interests in the passport industry for descendants of Spanish exiles overcome the historical truth.

"After all, there are no birth, marriage or death certificates from Spanish exiles. There are lawyers who have found ways to 'persuade' the authorities that a person seeking a passport is a descendant of the exiles by means of historical documentation with nothing to back it up," he says.

According to Peretz, even if some of the historical information on which the genealogical research is based is correct, it isn't enough to necessarily prove a clear connection between the applicant and the Spanish exiles. He presents himself as an example: "My family name was originally Posner. So you can claim that my family came from Poznan in Poland, and say that in 1500, Spanish exiles came there and built a Sephardic synagogue, which still exists. And so I deserve a passport." But he has no real proof of a family connection to the Jewish exiles from Spain. "According to that logic, Catholics who lived in Cracow, for example, can apply for a passport as descendants of Spanish exiles. They can also say their ancestors were forced to convert," he says.

Attorneys specializing in the subject claim that Jews from the following places might be entitled to a Portuguese passport: Poland (particularly Krakow, Lublin, Przemysl, Lancut, Gdansk and Germany (Hamburg); Holland (Amsterdam, Rotterdam); Belgium (Antwerp), France (Bordeaux), Britain (London); as well as Denmark, Sweden, Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, Moldova, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

Many family names are mentioned in this context, among them Weizman, Segal, Wolfson, Weinberg, Gavison, Bernstein, Horowitz, Wolff, Abramovich, Yakobovich, Shkolnik, Uzielovich and Epstein. "Jews from Poland who have Sephardic family names, their Sephardicness has gotten worn out over the generations, and only a few know the significance of their family names," wrote Alexander Guterman in an article in a Hebrew-language article "Sephardic Jews in the Land of Poland," that appeared in 1984 in the Journal Peamim.

Be that as it may, the subject also brings back to life fascinating and forgotten historical figures like Haym Salomon, who immigrated from Poland to New York during the American Revolution in the 18th century, and financed the Continental Army during the American War of Independence. His forefathers were Sephardic, and so his descendants can also try to obtain a Portuguese passport.



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