Ancestry, Genealogy, and Restorative Citizenship: Oral Histories of Sephardi Descendants Reclaiming Spanish and Portuguese Nationality

by *Rina Benmayor and Dalia Kandiyoti*

Abstract

The 2015 Spanish and Portuguese nationality laws for descendants of Sephardi Jews are unusual in their motivation to redress wrongs committed more than half a millennium ago. Both have enabled descendants of those Sephardi Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492, or forced to convert to Christianity, to claim citizenship status through naturalization. The laws have elicited ancestral and contemporary stories that speak to the personal and social meanings applicants give to these citizenships. Through extensive oral histories with fifty-five applicants across four continents, we examine our narrators' views on the laws' deep roots in a genealogical concept of belonging, based on familial and biological heritage and the persistent criterion of the bloodline. We argue that the responses of Sephardi applicants complicate traditional notions of genealogical inclusion, unveiling instead a multiplicity of meanings attached to identity, belonging, and contemporary citizenship. While Spain and Portugal's offer of what we call "restorative citizenship" requires the demonstration of biological and genealogical certainties, we argue that those seeking Spanish or Portuguese nationality complicate, expand, and sometimes subvert state constructions of citizenship as well as transform their own identities and belonging. More than recuperating a lost Spanish or Portuguese identity, many Sephardi descendants are discovering or deepening their ties to ancestral history and culture. Sephardi genealogy is also being mobilized in a contemporary global and European context in which citizenship and belonging are no longer defined exclusively by nation state territoriality, but rather through claims to new hybrid, multiple, and flexible identities.

Introduction

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Introduction

Since the rise of discourses about historical injustices, remote ancestors have had new ways of occupying our imaginative spaces in the present. Their sufferings might reach us through the experiences and narratives of their descendants and, more rarely, they are acknowledged through state actions and policies. In 2015, Portugal and Spain enacted two historic nationality laws granting the right of full citizenship to descendants of Sephardi Jews. Unusual in their motivation to redress wrongs committed more than half a millennium ago, each one positions the special dispensation in a somewhat different way. The Portuguese law highlights the "right of return" to descendants of Portuguese Sephardi Jews[1]

We are very grateful to our narrators for sharing their experiences and views, providing us with the basis of this study. We also appreciate the referrals to additional applicants offered by our narrators and others involved in the process. We thank Defne Özözer of Boğaziçi University for her skillful translation and transcription of an interview in Turkish, and Daniela Flesler, Michal Rose Friedman, and Asher Salah for editing this special issue. Early versions of this study were presented at the Genealogies of Sepharad Research Group's symposia (organized by Stacy Beckwith, Michal Rose Friedman, Tabea Linhard, and Asher Salah), the Association of Jewish Studies, the Oral History Association, and the UCLadino conference at UCLA (organized by Max Modiano Daniel).

[1] *Regulamento da Nacionalidade Portuguesa* (Decree Law) No.30-A/2015, Feb 27, revises the country's 2006 Nationality law to include Sephardi descendants. It reads, in part: "O presente diploma vem permitir o exercício do direito ao retorno dos descendentes judeus sefarditas de origem portuguesa que o desejem, mediante a aquisição da nacionalidade portuguesa por naturalização, e sua integração na comunidade nacional, com os inerentes direitos e obrigações."

while the Spanish law states the desire for "historical reconciliation" with the Sephardi community.[2] Both have enabled descendants of those Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492 or forced to convert to Christianity to claim citizenship status through naturalization. Importantly, the granting of citizenship (*nacionalidad/e*) is based on the genealogical proof of Iberian Sephardi ancestry, even if applicants are not Jews.

The response from Sephardi Jews worldwide has been notable and mixed. Many embrace the laws and their intentions, even if they cannot meet all the application criteria; others question and criticize the elaborate requirements (particularly of the Spanish law); and some ask why one would want to become a citizen of countries that persecuted and expelled their ancestors. Nonetheless, applicant numbers have been considerable and continue to climb. By July 2019, Portugal had reportedly approved 10,000 of some 33,000 applications in an ever-growing stream.[3] On October 2, 2019, one day after the application deadline, the international press announced that the Spanish Ministry of Justice had received 132,226 applications. Of these, some 60,000 were received as of August 31 and almost 72,000 in the final month of September alone.[4] The sum of applicants to both countries is remarkable. As of October 2, approximately 5,800 individuals

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"Decreto Lei n.30-A/2015," *Diário da República Electrónica*, September 28, 2019, https://dre.pt/pesquisa/-/search/66619927/details/maximized, accessed November 8, 2020.

[2] The Spanish law was restricted to a period of three years (2015-2018) and later extended for one year. "Ley 12/2015, de 24 de junio," *Boletín Oficial del Estado* 151, Sec. 1: 52557, https://www.boe.es/eli/es/l/2015/06/24/12/dof/spa/pdf, accessed November 8, 2020. It reads, in part: "Se antoja justo que semejante reconocimiento se nutra de los oportunos recursos jurídicos para facilitar la condición de españoles a quienes se resistieron, celosa y prodigiosamente, a dejar de serlo a pesar de las persecuciones y padecimientos que inicuamente sufrieron sus antepasados hasta su expulsión en 1492 de Castilla y Aragón y, poco tiempo después, en 1498, del reino de Navarra. La España de hoy, con la presente Ley, quiere dar un paso firme para lograr el reencuentro de la definitiva reconciliación con las comunidades sefardíes."

[3] Cnaan Liphshiz, "Portugal Approves 10,000 Citizenship Requests from Descendants of Expelled Jews," *Forward.com*, July 17, 2019, https://forward.com/fast-forward/427782/portugal-approves-10-000-requests-citizenship-sephardic-jews/, accessed November 8, 2020.

[4] Miguel González, "'Los sefardíes ya no son españoles sin patria', proclama el presidente de la comunidad judía," *El País*, October 2, 2019, https://elpais.com/politica/2019/10/02/actualidad/1570019211_938436.html, accessed November 8, 2020.

had received Spanish nationality with no rejections reported.[5] Given the volume, it may take several years to know the final number of citizenships granted.[6] Nonetheless we have found that the laws have already elicited ancestral and contemporary stories that speak to the personal and social meanings applicants give to these citizenships.

Through extensive oral histories with fifty-five applicants across four continents, we have gathered individual experiences and reflections on the historical and ideological underpinnings of the laws. Specifically, in this paper we examine our narrators' views on the laws' deep roots in a genealogical concept of the belonging, based on familial and biological heritage and the persistent criterion of the bloodline. We argue that the responses of Sephardi applicants complicate traditional notions of genealogical inclusion, unveiling instead a multiplicity of meanings attached to identity, belonging, and contemporary citizenship. More than recuperating a lost Spanish or Portuguese identity, many "normative" Sephardi descendants as well as those whose ancestors abandoned Judaism centuries ago, are discovering or deepening their ties to Sephardi history and culture.[7] Other narrators emphasize the practical rather than the symbolic or cultural reasons for their application, though often there is a mixture of motivations. What is more, Sephardi descendants are mobilizing genealogy in a contemporary global and European context in which citizenship and belonging are no longer defined exclusively by nation state territoriality. People seek security amidst economic and political crises and claim new hybrid, multiple, and flexible

[5] Sal Emergui, "Casi 6.000 judíos sefardíes obtienen la nacionalidad española," *El Mundo*, October 1, 2019, https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2019/10/01/5d926a3bfdddff23568b45c3.html, accessed November 8, 2020.

[6] Based on the volume of applications to Spain, an emendation was issued shortly before the October 1, 2019 deadline, applicable only to those who had initiated an application prior to the deadline. The emendation extended the timeframe for completing application paperwork to December 2020. See, Ministerio de Justicia, "Circular de la dirección general de los registros y del notariado sobre el plazo para presentar la solicitud para la concesión de la nacionalidad española a los sefardíes originarios de España," September 6, 2019, https://www.mjusticia.gob.es/cs/Satellite/Portal/es/ciudadanos/nacionalidad/concesion-nacionalidad/circular-direccion-general, accessed November 8, 2020.

[7] We use the term "normative" to indicate a common understanding of Sephardi Jews primarily as those with historically continuous Sephardi Jewish identification and practice, a definition presumed in the preambles of both laws.

identities. While Spain and Portugal's offer of what we call "restorative citizenship" requires the demonstration of genealogical certainties, we argue that those seeking Spanish or Portuguese nationality complicate, expand, and sometimes subvert state constructions of citizenship. Moreover, applicants often transform their own identities and belonging.

A Transnational Oral History Project

Our purpose in turning to oral history has been to explore how state claims for "reconciliation" and "right of return" size up against the perceptions and motivations offered by the applicants themselves.[8] Our research questions included:

1) What motivates the desire to seek these citizenships?
2) How has applying for or receiving citizenship affected identity and belonging among Sephardi applicants? What, if any, new identities has the application process produced?
3) And, does state-sanctioned memory overlap with or differ from the collective memory of descendants?

Our work draws on a global applicant pool. From January 2017 to October 2019, we interviewed 55 individuals from twelve countries who applied for or had received their citizenships, comprising 33 women and 22 men, ranging in age from their early 20s to mid 80s. Our narrators[9] come from Turkey, the United States, Latin American countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela, as well as from South Africa, Israel, the United Kingdom, and

[8] For perspectives on state claims see Maite Ojeda-Mata, *Modern Spain and the Sephardim: Legitimizing Identities* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2017); and Davide Aliberti, *Sefarad: Una comunidad imaginada (1924-2015)* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2018). Detailed analyses of the processes that led Spain and Portugal to enact these laws and how these laws are perceived among politicians in Spain and Portugal are addressed in a volume of collected articles and essays on reparative citizenship that we are currently co-editing.

[9] Oral history prefers the term "narrator," recognizing agency and the constructed nature of narratives, rather than "interviewees," "human subjects," or "informants."

Switzerland.[10] More than half of our interviewees (31) were from Ottoman (Eastern Sephardi) communities; three of Moroccan origin; six from Western Sephardi communities; and fifteen self-identified as descendants of *conversos* (forced converts to Christianity during the medieval and early modern periods). Forty-two of our narrators applied for Spanish citizenship and thirteen for Portuguese, including four who for various personal reasons are pursuing nationality in both countries.

We began by seeking out applicants among family and friends and "snowballed" from there. This method, coupled with our use of remote interviewing, significantly widened our reach.[11] We conducted most of the interviews via Zoom, a remote conferencing platform that allows for direct recording in audio and video. This medium enabled us to "travel" to our narrators, but it also produced some unexpected surprises. We discovered that face-to-face screen conversations, while remote and virtual, could also be very intimate. In fact, despite physical

[10] Among these were nine who had applied to Spain under a 1924 Royal Decree granting special dispensation to Sephardis. See Cnaan Liphshiz, "Spain and Portugal Naturalize Nearly 5,000 Sephardic Jews," *Forward.com*, November 26, 2017, https://forward.com/fast-forward/351900/spain-and-portugal-naturalize-nearly-5-000-sephardic-jews/, accessed November 8, 2020.

[11] Along with personal referrals, we contacted lawyers, Jewish community organizations and scholars involved with these laws in order to expand our list of potential narrators, nationally and internationally. In effect, we gained a wide geographical range, as the list of countries cited above confirms. Our sample also displays a healthy variety of generational responses. Overall, approximately 80% of the people contacted responded positively to our invitation. Others either did not respond or decided, upon further thought, not to participate. Our sample does not reflect the volume of applicants from any particular country, as these numbers were not available to us at the time; however, we made efforts to include the most likely applicant pools, geographically speaking. Economic class and older age also limited our sample. The financial implications of the laws' requirements has been limiting; consequently our sample reflects a range of middle and upper middle-class individuals with financial means. The cost of applying, which for Spain included travel to Cervantes Institute hubs to take tests and travel to Spain to sign the application in person, excluded many potential applicants. In addition, many elderly who were attracted to acquiring citizenship for symbolic cultural reasons, were excluded, if not by the tests (which were waived for this demographic), by the requirement of physical travel. Finally, our reliance on remote interviewing to obtain a geographically rich body of material meant that narrators needed to have computer access; the Zoom platform did not require more than a simple operation of clicking on a link to be connected. In a few cases where the bandwidth was insufficient, interviews were recorded over the phone.

distancing and the differentials of position and power that affect all conversations, narrators seemed generally cordial and forthcoming in sharing stories about their backgrounds, motivations, and experiences as seekers of dual or multiple citizenship. Our inquiry was also shaped by a crossing of traditional boundaries between researcher and subject. We are Sephardi Jews of Ottoman and Turkish background, and Benmayor was both a principal investigator and narrator, having received Spanish citizenship in 2018 under the new law. This afforded us a degree of "insider" insight into the application process and contributed, through shared experience, to positive rapport-building with many previously unknown individuals. Of course, all conversations are shaped by the narrators' decisions of what to share and what to reserve and how they perceive the intent of the inquiry. In response to the purposefully open-ended quality of our questions, many narrators used the interview as an opportunity to share their understanding of and research into historical sources and consider their feelings and motivations for pursuing citizenship, conveying a level of candor and self-reflection.

Remote interviewing has also enabled a transnational scope that expresses the diasporic spread and complexities of Sephardi ethnic and cultural identities. In keeping with best practices in the field of oral history, our interviews were open-ended, averaging 60 to 90 minutes and conducted in English, Spanish, Portuguese or Turkish, languages in which one or both of us are fluent.[12] Our "conversations" were organized around the themes of family history, Sephardi identity and cultural practices, motives for seeking citizenship, and the significance of acquiring multiple citizenships. Our interest was to explore the panorama of meanings narrators attached to these historic gestures by the Spanish and Portuguese states, understanding that oral history narratives are always subjective, selective, and a product of the interaction and collaboration between the

[12] Narrators were able to choose whichever of these languages they felt most comfortable using. Most of our interviews were in either English or Spanish, with a handful in Turkish and a couple in Portuguese. While we are both conversant in Judeo-Spanish and French, we did not encounter a preference for either among our narrators. Those of an older generation who might still speak Ladino or Haketía were linguistically dominant in either English or modern Spanish. Three narrators, whose native tongues are Hebrew and Turkish, were interviewed in English because they are bilingual, having received extensive education in English.

interlocutors.[13] In this paper we analyze one key issue illuminated by our findings, namely the uses of and ideas about genealogy and descent by the states and our narrators.

Heritage Citizenship

The Portuguese and Spanish nationality laws for Sephardi descendants emerge at a time when meanings of citizenship are expanding beyond the once exclusive tie to a singular nation state. Dual and multiple citizenship have come to be recognized by a growing number of countries in Europe and worldwide. As one scholar notes, there is "a globally more relaxed attitude toward dual citizenship... without a prior residence requirement."[14] Contemporary migrations, wars, border dissolutions (the break-up of the Soviet Union), extra-territorial ethnic populations, and transnational migration networks all have contributed to a rethinking of national belonging and "heritage" citizenship.[15] "External citizenship" based on ethnicity, both within and outside national borders,[16] and even "investor citizenship" complicate and expand the meaning of national

[13] Regarding the interpretive value and uses of oral history, see Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2006), 32-42; Alistair Thomson, "Memory and Remembering in Oral History," in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Donald A. Ritchie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 77-95.

[14] Christian Joppke, "The Instrumental Turn of Citizenship," in "Strategic Citizenship: Negotiating Membership in the Age of Dual Nationality," special issue, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45, no. 6 (2019): 869.

[15] Yossi Harpaz, "Ancestry into Opportunity: How Global Inequality Drives Demand for Long-distance European Union Citizenship," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41, no. 13 (2015): 2081-2104. Accessed November 8, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2015.1037258; Yossi Harpaz and Pablo Mateos, "Strategic Citizenship: Negotiating Citizenship in the Age of Dual Nationality," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45, no. 6 (2018): 843-857, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1440482; Szabolcs Pogonyi, "The Passport as Means of Identity Management: Making and Unmaking Ethnic Boundaries through Citizenship," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45, no. 6 (2019): 975-993. Accessed November 8, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1440493.

[16] Edith Oltay, "Concepts of Citizenship in Eastern and Western Europe," *Acta Univ. Sapientiae, European and Regional Studies* 11 (2017): 43-62. Accessed November 8, 2020. https://www.degruyter.com/downloadpdf/j/auseur.2017.11.issue-1/auseur-2017-0003/auseur-2017-0003.pdf.

belonging.[17] In the post-World War II years as well as in this more recent context however, few countries have attempted to re-incorporate into the nation the descendants of the victims of historical trauma with the goal of reconciliation or reparation. Germany's constitution made the reinstatement of citizenship possible in 1949 for those who were deprived of it during the Nazi regime and for their descendants. Other countries, among them Israel, Ghana, and Greece, also offer a "return" to places of remote origin, though this opportunity is positioned primarily as a reinstatement of a lost belonging rather than also being a reconciliatory one as in the cases of Spain and Portugal. The dispensation in Israel allows worldwide Jews to settle there; the citizenship and residence opportunity in Ghana (which declared 2019 as the "year of return") is extended to those whose African ancestors were enslaved several hundreds of years ago. Spain's Historical Memory Law (2007) restores nationality to the descendants of exiles from the Spanish Civil War. And, in 2017, Greece offered to reinstate nationality to the descendants of Greek Jews who were victims of the Holocaust. Spain and Portugal's invitation to citizenship via naturalization for descendants of expelled and forcibly converted Iberian Jews takes place in the context of these developments in Iberia, Europe and elsewhere, though they are discursively different in their emphasis on reconciliation in redressing a "wronged" population.[18]

The 2015 Spanish law, however, is not entirely the product of contemporary forces, as it has historical antecedents. As early as the late eighteenth century and

[17] Jelena Dzankic, "The Pros and Cons of Ius Pecuniae: Investor Citizenship in Comparative Perspective," European University Institute Working Paper, RSCAS (2012-2014), EUDO Citizenship Laboratory, accessed July 27, 2019. https://www.academia.edu/2231487/The_Pros_and_Cons_of_Ius_Pecuniae_Investor_citizenship_in_comparative_perspective.

[18] Despite their uniqueness, the Spanish and Portuguese laws invite comparisons with these and other cases. Although such a comparison is not within the purview of this essay, legal, political, and other approaches that take into account overlaps and differences among various laws merit further study. For other relevant comparisons on multiple citizenship, see e.g. Harpaz and Mateos, "Strategic Citizenship" and Pogonyi, "The Passport," which also analyze the new forms of incorporation by various states of non-territorial individuals with presumed ancestral and other historical links. The implications for nationalism and the imagined citizenship community would also benefit from extensive examination.

extending throughout the nineteenth, Spanish and Portuguese consulates in the Ottoman Empire and Morocco were known to give Spanish passports and patents of protection, granting special "protected" status but not full citizenship rights to select Sephardi Jews, usually businessmen and community leaders.[19] These special protections became expressions of a philosephardism that emerged in the 1890s among Spanish diplomats, politicians and intellectuals like Angel Pulido, Ramón Menéndez Pidal, Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo, José Amador de los Ríos and others, in response to Spain's imperial decline in the Americas, the Philippines, and colonialism in Morocco.[20] In Portugal too there were attempts to adopt Iberian Jewish descendants as a part of colonial and trade projects in Africa and the Mediterranean.[21] Sephardi communities came to be seen as potential energizers and partners in new economic, colonial, and diplomatic endeavors.

Spanish scholars and politicians became fascinated with Sephardi Jews' maintenance of ancestral language, folklore, and cultural traditions for centuries in diaspora. This attraction kindled new interest, research, and efforts to reintegrate this group back into the national narrative, regardless of how Jews of Spanish origin might perceive their connection to Spain after four centuries of separation. Philosephardi efforts to reincorporate Spanish Jews into the nation eventually led to a Royal Decree, issued in December 1924, extending full citizenship through naturalization to "individuals of Spanish origin that have been

[19] Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Extraterritorial Dreams: European Citizenship, Sephardi Jews, and the Ottoman Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), Chapters 1 and 2. Also see: Ojeda-Mata, *Modern Spain*; Pablo Martín Asuero, "The Spanish Consulate in Istanbul and the Protection of the Sephardim (1804-1913)," *Quaderns de la Mediterrània=Cuadernos del Mediterráneo* 88 (2007): 169-178; 169; Id., "La imagen española de los judíos otomanos (1790-1907)," *Miscelánea de estudios árabes y hebráicos* 45 (1996): 135-47; 138.

[20] See Aliberti, *Sefarad*; Daniela Flesler and Adrián Pérez Melgosa, *The Memory Work of Jewish Spain* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 2020); Daniela Flesler, Tabea Alexa Linhard, and Adrián Pérez Melgosa, eds., *Revisiting Jewish Spain in the Modern Era* (London-New York: Routledge, 2015); Michal Rose Friedman, "Reconstructing Jewish Spain: The Politics and Institutionalization of Jewish History in Spain, 1845-1940," *Hamsa: Journal of Judaic and Islamic Studies* 1 (2014): 55-67; Tabea Linhard, *Jewish Spain: A Mediterranean Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 123-152; and Ojeda-Mata, *Modern Spain.*

[21] Stein, *Extraterritorial Dreams*, 30-32.

protected as Spaniards…".[22] Although that Decree expired in December 1930, the Spanish state continued to grant special dispensations to a limited number of applicants, until the 2015 law. The 4,535 pending applications under previous dispensations (many of which had been under review for ten years or more), were expedited and the first to be considered and approved under the new law.[23] The 2015 Spanish law, then, continues and extends this often deeply ambivalent and markedly Catholic, national, philosephardi narrative.[24] With florid and emotional language, the Preamble asserts a continuous Sephardi collective memory and nostalgia for Spain:

> The children of Sepharad maintained an abundance of nostalgia immune to the transformation of languages and generations. They preserved Ladino or Haketia, old Spanish enriched by borrowings from the languages where they settled. In the language of their ancestors, they preserved prayers and recipes, games and ballads. They maintained the customs, respected the names that were molded by their origins, and accepted without rancor the silence of a Spain slumbering in oblivion… Pulsating through time is a love for a Spain that is at last aware of the historical and emotional load the Sephardim have carried.[25]

The language of the Portuguese law, though more moderate, also expresses a desire to reweave the exiled "Portuguese Jews," similarly positioned as loyal to their origins, back into the nation:

> Despite the persecutions and exile from their national territory, many Sephardi Jews of Portuguese origin and their descendants maintained not

[22] "Leyes y normas históricas," http://bauldelasleyes.blogspot.com/2014/04/real-decreto-de-20-de-diciembre-de-1924.html, accessed November 8, 2020.

[23] Liphshiz, "Spain and Portugal."

[24] For a fuller discussion of this deep ambivalence regarding the Jewish absence and presence in Spain, see Michal Rose Friedman "Jewish History as 'Historia Patria': Amador de los Ríos and the History of the Jews of Spain," *Jewish Social Studies* 18, no. 1 (2011): 88-126; Ojeda-Mata, *Modern Spain*.

[25] "Ley 12/2015, de 24 de junio," *Boletín Oficial del Estado.* All English translations are ours, unless otherwise noted.

> only the Portuguese language, but also the old traditional Jewish customs practiced in Portugal, preserving for generations their family surnames, objects and documents attesting to their Portuguese origins, along with a strong memory that led them to call themselves "Portuguese Jews" or "Jews of the Portuguese nation."[26]

From the perspective of Sephardi communities that have lived for centuries outside of the Iberian Peninsula, an "abundance of nostalgia" and the faithful transmission of cultural practices presumed by the laws fail to take into account transculturation, syncretism, and post-Iberian integration in other societies. Clinging to the notion of a strong Spanish or Portuguese identity among the exiles, the preambles emphasize the reincorporation of Sephardi Jews into the nation through nationalistic, linguistic, cultural, and emotional markers. Framed through philosephardism, Jewish loyalty to an Iberian identity enables state recognition and reconciliation and permits re-entry into the national bodies from which they were expelled.[27] In complex and problematic ways, this historical and cultural tie is also given a biological twist through the requirement of genealogical and genetic evidence of ancestry. In the remainder of this essay, we address the ways in which genealogy, culture, and identity as produced by state discourses are refracted by the Sephardi descendants we interviewed.

The Genealogical Conundrum: "It's Still All About the Blood"

The 2015 nationality laws are firmly rooted in biological and genealogical concepts of belonging. They establish specific criteria for documenting proof of ancestry, which generates a complex and fascinating foray into history, culture, and identity.[28] Both laws stipulate that Jewish entities (authorized rabbis or Jewish

[26] "Decreto-Lei 30-A/2015," *Diário da República.*

[27] For an analysis of the politics behind the Spanish and Portuguese states' decision to introduce these laws see, Ojeda-Mata, *Modern Spain*.

[28] Additionally, the Spanish law requires two tests: a history and culture test (CCSE) and for those not born in a Spanish-speaking country, a Spanish proficiency test (DELE A2). Applicants are also to give evidence of a "special connection" to Spain, which can be fulfilled by a history of travel, educational interest, property ownership, contribution to Spanish institutions, or other evidence.

communities) will certify an individual's Sephardi origins based on a range of evidence. Recognizing the limitations of genealogical tracing over five centuries, the laws allow applicants to submit evidence that is both genealogical and cultural. In the case of Spain, genealogical evidence comprises documents that establish a Spanish Jewish bloodline,[29] such as vital records (birth, marriage, death, naturalization documents, and in the case of *converso* descendants, baptismal records). Cultural evidence may include a *ketuba* (Jewish marriage certificate) in the Castilian tradition;[30] genealogical studies by experts or recognized academic entities; a Sephardi surname report written by a recognized expert;[31] an accreditation of the use of Ladino or Haketia (the two Spanish languages of the Sephardi diaspora); passports, Jewish burial records; or any other document that can help prove Spanish Sephardi ancestry.

The Portuguese requirements are similar and include: a certificate from a Jewish community with collective religious person status… that certifies the tradition of belonging to a Sephardic community of Portuguese origin, materialized, namely, in the family name of the applicant, native language, ancestry, and family memory.[32] In the absence of such a certificate, applicants may submit proof to "demonstrate direct ancestry or family relationship":

> A certified document, issued by the Jewish community that the applicant belongs to, proving their usage of Portuguese expressions in Jewish rites or as a language spoken by them in the heart of that community, Ladino and

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And finally, applications must be submitted in person *before* a notary in Spain. The Portuguese law has none of these extra requirements, but does ask applicants to prove their genealogical connection to Portuguese Jewry by submitting extensive family trees, which many can do given the endurance of extensive archives of the Sephardi communities that settled in Amsterdam, London, and the Americas.

[29] Descendants of converts to Christianity are asked to provide documentation of the converted Sephardi ancestor and thereafter for each generation in the bloodline.

[30] Federación de Comunidades Judías de España, "Documentación" accessed September 20, 2019, https://www.fcje.org/documentacion/.

[31] Both laws note that a Sephardi surname is an important marker of identity, but is by itself insufficient as the sole or primary evidence of Sephardi origins.

[32] From an unofficial translation of the Portuguese requirements. See "About the Portuguese Sephardic Jews [*sic*] Law/Conditions," accessed 21 September 2019, http://www.sephardicjewsportugal.com/info/.

> certified records, such as registers from synagogues and Jewish cemeteries, as well as residence permits, property titles, deeds of will, and other pieces of evidence of family connection from the applicant through direct ancestry or family relationship in a collateral line of a common parent from the Sephardic community of Portuguese origin.[33]

As we can see from these specific requirements, the presented evidence can include a mixture of more recent cultural and ritual documents (such as Jewish marriage certificates or burial records) and proof of remote lineage. Cultural evidence helps establish the continuity of lineage. However, it is ancestry that determines eligibility. Citizenship cannot be awarded to those without the "right" ancestors; for example, those acculturated into Sephardi communities but who are not of exilic Iberian Jewish descent are technically not eligible.

Some descendants of Portuguese Sephardi origin have the genealogical advantage of being able to document their ancestry back to the seventeenth century, and in some cases as far back as sixteenth-century Spain. Faced with their own Inquisition, a majority of Portuguese Jews eventually converted to Catholicism. Fleeing later persecution as *conversos*, many took refuge in Amsterdam, London, Livorno or the Americas and some "re-converted" to Judaism. A number of their descendants are able to create quite extensive family trees thanks to detailed archives that have survived the ravages of wars and natural disasters in those cities and countries. Indeed, applicants to Portugal are encouraged to include as extensive family trees as possible, along with other documents, as evidence of their Sephardi ancestry. Judith Summers, a writer and researcher from the United Kingdom, was able to reconstruct her Portuguese line in one afternoon through the Dutch and British online archives. She explained:

> My grandmother's family were all called "da Costa," and through her father I can trace back all the da Costas, all the way back to the seventeenth century in Braganza.[34]

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[33] Ibid.

[34] Interview with Judith Summers by Rina Benmayor, January 17, 2018, via Zoom.

However, for the majority of Sephardi Jews whose ancestors sought refuge in the Ottoman Empire or North Africa, there is a huge gap between the fifteenth century and the very spotty late nineteenth-century records extant in these regions. Most of our Eastern Sephardi narrators can only trace their family trees back to grandparents or great grandparents. Herein lies the tension. The very states that historically sought to cleanse themselves of their Sephardi populations and their archives and memories now ask for documentary proof of ancestry. Despite the historical amputations, such descendants of Spanish Jews are asked to present themselves to the state as genealogical subjects, rather than as primarily cultural Sephardi individuals, even when their more immediate identification is based on familial history, culture, language, culinary traditions, rites, and rituals.

While cultural belonging and evidence thereof is important to the processes of approval, cultural practices alone do not "prove" blood and are not sufficient by themselves to meet the qualifications of the laws. Despite the variability of documentation, the laws are fundamentally based on Sephardi descent rather than current religious or cultural belonging in Sephardi or other Jewish communities. As such Spain and Portugal can recognize as a Sephardi descendant a New Mexican or Venezuelan Catholic with a single New Christian ancestor who had converted from Judaism in the Middle Ages, as well as a Turkish or Argentine Jew whose ancestors remained Jewish across centuries, at least to the best of their knowledge. Despite the contents of the preambles that seemingly assume current, normative Sephardi identity, the intent of the laws seems to be the inclusion of *converso* descendants as a way of recognizing not only expulsion but also forced conversion. This means that non-Jews can and have been given citizenship, on the basis of their Sephardi ancestry rather than current identification.

Hence, lineage is the key determinant of belonging, and thereby, of citizenship.[35] Why is it important to underline that the citizenship dispensation is undergirded

[35] Applications are processed and legitimated by the Spanish or Portuguese Ministry of Justice. Prior certification of ancestry is required and obtained through Jewish community organizations: the Federation of Jewish Communities of Spain and authorized entities in other countries; in Portugal, the separate Lisbon and Porto communities. Spain and the Lisbon communities accept non-Jewish descendants while the Porto community stipulates current Jewish affiliation. See "Portuguese Nationality for Sephardic Descendants: Preliminary Notes (March 1, 2018)," *Com*

by ancestry or "blood," and what are the symbolic and practical implications and consequences of this policy? Judy Berck, one of the first American Sephardi Jews to receive her Portuguese passport, did not fail to note the historical irony:

> It's a little disturbing how much, how important the bloodline is. And the Portuguese consul spoke about that too. The whole reason that Jews were, you know, hounded and the *conversos* and *Nuevo Cristos* [*sic*] were hounded was because of their impure blood and that hasn't changed. I mean now I've got the right blood, but it's still all about the blood line. They like the blood now. And I can bring it back.[36]

Berck's comment signals the dark history that surrounds the notions of descent, lineage, and heritage in Iberia. As of the fifteenth century, forced or voluntary conversion to Christianity by Muslims and Jews was perceived with suspicion and as insufficient for assimilation into the "old" Christian majority. The bloodline became a tool for distinguishing and oppressing those Christians of Muslim and Jewish origin.[37] Hence, ancestry as a proof of Sephardi belonging, the persistence

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Unidade Israelita Porto Portuguese National Sephardic Descendants English Pdfs Resources, accessed January 17, 2019, http://www.comunidade-israelitaporto.org/resources/pdfs/Portuguese_Nationality_for_Sephardic_Descendants_English.pdf.

[36] Interview with Judy Berck by Rina Benmayor, November 8, 2017, via Zoom.

[37] On "limpieza de sangre" (purity of blood) and its codification see Alberto Sicroff, *Los estatutos de limpieza de sangre: Controversias entre los siglos XV y XVII* (Madrid: Taurus, 1985). For a collection that broadly examines the concept see the essays in María Elena Martínez, David Nirenberg, and Max Sebastián Hering Torres, eds., *Race and Blood in the Iberian World* (Zurich-Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2012). See also David Nirenberg, "Was There Race Before Modernity? The Example of 'Jewish' Blood in Late Medieval Spain," in *The Origins of Racism in the West*, eds. Miriam Eliav-Feldon, Benjamin Isaac and Joseph Ziegler (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 232-264. For a wide-ranging study of blood, including in Iberia, see Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). Discourses of blood and racialism endure, albeit in different forms, beyond the medieval period: On the racialist aspects of philosephardism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries see Joshua Goode, *Impurity of Blood: Defining Race in Spain* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009) and Michal Rose Friedman, "Re-conquering Sepharad: Hispanism and Proto-Fascism in Giménez Caballero's Sephardist Crusade," *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 11, no. 1 (2011): 35-60. Accessed November 8, 2020. https://doi.org/ 10.1080/14636204.2011.556876; Daniela Flesler, Tabea Alexa Linhard, Adrián Pérez Melgosa, eds., *Revisiting Jewish Spain in the Modern Era* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2013).

of "blood" as a marker of identity, and the way community members, experts, and officials in Spain and Portugal pore over documents to verify authentic Jewish descent (albeit now for inclusion rather than exclusion) can still be sensitive for Berck and others.

Moreover, the issue of evidence, missing due to historical erasures, bespeaks an inherent problem with the genealogical quest. In her critique of genealogical practices and ideas, Julia Watson argued that genealogy is the purview of the privileged, of those whose ancestral past has not been suppressed by compromising historical factors such as slavery, displacement, poverty, or adoption. Watson also suggests that the quest for "pedigree" and "who begat whom, where, and in what line is knowledge that secures a patriarchal mooring in an increasingly destabilized world."[38] While there is more to genealogical practice than the exercise of privilege, it is certainly challenged by the trajectories of multiple compulsory displacements, minoritization, and political transformations, such as those in the history of Sephardi Jews. Spain and Portugal's insistence on lineage is not unique among most modern states' citizenship regimes, in which the bloodline, usually through parents or grandparents (*jus sanguinis*) plays a role in the transmission of the benefit. These "reconciliation" laws require ancestry not of one or two generations, but dating back hundreds of years.

If genealogy constitutes the state-designated path to recognition and citizenship, how then does one construct the connection to the past, given the gaps in historical memory and the absence of concrete documents? Mexican Sephardi author Myriam Moscona, born to a Bulgarian Sephardi family, explains the genealogical challenge that most Eastern Sephardi Jews face:

> It's very difficult for a family to know exactly what happened 500 five hundred and fifty years ago… at the time of the Expulsion in 1492, when that diaspora took place. Why did some end up in Greece, others in

[38] Julia Watson, "Ordering the Family: Genealogy as Autobiographical Pedigree," in *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography,* eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 307.

> Turkey, others in Bulgaria? Surely, it was a gradual process. What I do know is that several generations of my family lived in Bulgaria… of that I have no doubt. But how did the process take place and from what town in Spain did my ancestors leave, I have no idea and I'm sure my mother would not have known either.[39]

Similarly, Marcelo Benveniste, Argentine cofounder with his wife Liliana of the electronic weekly magazine *ESefarad*, began tracing his genealogy at the age of thirteen. However, he maintained that although he cannot trace his family back very far, knowledge of his family's historical trajectory and their strong Sephardi culture are proof enough for him of his ancestry:

> I come from a clearly Sephardi family. Sephardi from childhood, in the home, in the day to day, a family that has its origins on the island of Rhodes. My four grandparents were born on the island of Rhodes. To be honest, when I started to work for the Jewish community I had to abandon my own genealogy search so I could help others. So I never was able to trace our tree very far back. But I know that my ancestors came from the Jewish community of Rhodes. And with my surnames and my family roots, my surnames are Benveniste, Alhadeff, Berro, Israel, names that existed in Spain before the Inquisition, and if we add the sentimental, the emotive dimensions, okay, so I can't trace the line scientifically… but the origins are in Spain, without a doubt.[40]

Benveniste is more profoundly interested and invested in Sephardism than some, but what he imparts about the normative Sephardi's genealogical consciousness is rather common. It is based not on documented ancestry but on a deep sense of cultural belonging based on historical knowledge, geographical location, as well as family and community customs and practices that are passed down through oral tradition from generation to generation.

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[39] Interview with Myriam Moscona by Dalia Kandiyoti, March 15, 2017, via Skype.

[40] Interview with Marcelo Benveniste by Rina Benmayor, November 2, 2017, via Zoom.

The Burden of Authenticity and New Sephardisms

While the Spanish and Portuguese laws allow descent to be isolated from culture as the primary category of belonging (given that those who do not profess Jewish or crypto-Jewish cultures or religions can receive citizenship), Myriam Moscona, Marcelo Benveniste, and other narrators have profound affinities and knowledge of their Sephardi heritage and view "blood" and ancestry as integrated into and inseparable from an important *cultural* continuum. But there is no monolithic "Sephardi-descendant perspective": applicants have varying degrees of awareness of their familial and cultural roots. Many applicants, especially young ones, had not previously considered their Sephardi origins or practices in a deliberate or probing manner but found themselves asserting these because of the citizenship opportunity. Even for the narrators who came from Sephardi-identified families and straightforward, almost exclusively Sephardi lineage as far as the limited records can show, this was sometimes an identification not central to their self-definition. In Turkey, where Sephardi Jews constitute the majority of the Jewish population (which also includes Karaite, Ashkenazi, Georgian, and Iranian Jews), Jewish and Sephardi are often viewed as equivalent. Hence, many Turkish narrators referred to themselves more frequently as "Jewish" rather than as "Sephardi." Furthermore, tracing genealogy played less of a role in the legal process for many applicants, such as those from Turkey, primarily because extensive genealogies are not possible, and other "evidence" (including Castilian *ketubot*, knowledge of Sephardi languages, belonging to an historical Sephardi community), was presented in lieu of proof of lineage that reaches back centuries.[41]

Although the requirement of remote ancestry or even proving contemporary Sephardi belonging can seem off-putting or simply difficult for some narrators, Liliana Tchukrán Benveniste, noted Argentinian Ladino teacher and singer, pointed out how the search for documentary evidence and the process of applying

[41] For a comprehensive analytical study of Turkish Jews who have applied for Portuguese citizenship, see Gabriela Anouck Côrte-Real Pinto and Isabel David, "Choosing Second Citizenship in Troubled Times: the Jewish Minority in Turkey," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 5 (2019): 781-796.

for citizenship itself can lead to historical restoration and a stronger sense of historical and genealogical belonging:

> We have friends of our generation who call themselves Sephardi because they have a surname or because they learned a few things in the home but they are very removed from Sephardi culture. Rather, assimilated into Ashkenazi culture and to Ashkenazi traditions because of marriage, or where they live. And I think that [the citizenship law] has encouraged people to go rummaging in their grandparents or parents attics, to look in the homes, speak to those still alive in the family and ask about their Sephardi Jewish culture, about the customs about documents that may have survived. This has led many people who had no spiritual or family reason to come closer to Sephardi culture. And so I think this is a lovely consequence for us Jews, a kind of rescue of contemporary Sephardi culture.[42]

This is especially true for those born after 1950, and for the children of mixed Sephardi/Ashkenazi or Sephardi/gentile marriages. In the Americas, where Jewish communities are Eastern European-dominant, Sephardi identity can often figure as a vague piece of family background. As younger generations seek to fill the gaps in their ancestral knowledge, they rescue pieces of their past and in the process sometimes acquire a stronger Sephardi identity as a result of newly found information. For example, "Sarah Carmona,"[43] an American whose father is Sephardi and mother is Swedish, confessed that what little she knows about her Sephardi great grandmother comes from the transcript of an oral history interview recorded years ago:

> Yeah, so I learned a lot more about it [my ancestry] through this process of going through the citizenship process and we were able to trace back to great-great grandparents, names anyway; I don't know very much about them. All four of my great-grandparents on my dad's side were

[42] Interview with Lilliana Tchukran Benveniste by Rina Benmayor, November 8, 2017, via Zoom.
[43] Quotation marks around narrator names indicates a pseudonym chosen by the narrator.

> immigrants to the US. They came from, on my dad's mom's side they are from Turkey and my great-grandmother was born in Istanbul I think, and she grew up in Turkey… She's the one that I know the most about because I have a transcript of an audio interview with her for some other Sephardic project that was really interesting to read. She spoke Ladino and she was alive for a little while when I was younger.[44]

While some younger applicants have tenuous connections with their Sephardi pasts, others attributed their motivation in seeking citizenship to close grandparental bonds. Liz Levine, from Seattle, attributes her pursuit of a Master's in Spanish linguistics to her relationship with her Ladino-speaking grandmother. She explained her interest in acquiring Spanish citizenship as a way to honor her *nona*:

> The Spanish one [citizenship] is closer to me, you know, it's closer to my heart because I learned a whole other language for my grandmother. She and I always had that special connection because I was the only one of her six grandchildren that actually bothered to learn Spanish so that I can communicate with her in Spanish. When I spoke at her funeral, I gave my eulogy in Spanish… All of her other Sephardic relatives there really appreciated that one of the grandchildren was able to give her that tribute and I really felt strongly that it had to be done that way… For me… studying Spanish language and culture for so many years and having that special bond with my grandmother, I said, I have to get the Spanish citizenship. I kept saying, "I'm gonna do this to honor you," and I only wish she had lived to see the end of it. She was so alive when I started the application. I kept telling her "I'm gonna make this right. I'm gonna get back what your family deserved. I'm gonna take back what's ours," and so I'm working on it.[45]

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[44] Interview with "Sara Carmona" by Dalia Kandiyoti, June 11, 2017, via Zoom.

[45] Interview with Liz Levine by Rina Benmayor, January 31, 2018, via Zoom.

While Levine is emotionally invested in her heritage through her family, in other young applicants a complex and more ambivalent set of feelings and ideas regarding Spanishness, Portugueseness or Sephardism can also emerge. Among Turkish narrators a self-questioning sometimes took place regarding authenticity. Often applying with their families and not always taking charge of the process themselves, those in their 20s and early 30s wondered about what exactly was "in evidence" about their Sephardiness. Many of our narrators are quite conscious of the gaps in their knowledge, given the lack of information about ancestry and the routes of exile from Spain in addition to the weakened ties of the more recent-born to Sephardi practices and languages due to assimilation. "Aylin," who grew up in Izmir, was exposed, like many in her age group (early-to-mid-30s), to Sephardi culture predominantly through the language and music of her grandparents:

> Because of the language, being around since my childhood, I can say that my strongest connection to being Sephardic is the Spanish that was used in the house, in my grandparents' house... And also my grandmother who lives in Israel and who came to Turkey every summer, liked to sing and she was singing Ladino songs, which I really enjoyed.[46]

But her Sephardi identification was otherwise circumscribed, and she has long disconnected from the Jewish community. Faced with the requirement to construct themselves as complete and authentic Sephardi Jews when applying for citizenship, some narrators perceived their identities as in fact unstable or partial. "C.E.", a 32-year-old man born in Izmir and resident of Istanbul, was able to trace his origins to the early nineteenth century, with the arrival of his great-great-grandfather, Ishak, to the town of Urla, near Izmir. According to family sources, he was fleeing the plague in Bayonne, France, which had a settlement of Portuguese *conversos* as of the sixteenth century. But C.E. explained that there is no documented evidence of this either in Bayonne or Portugal. He does have an exceptional link to the past because his great-great-grandfather lives in the collective memory of Urla through the neighborhood that bears his name, Hadji Ishak. However, under the requirements of both Spain and Portugal, this familial

[46] Interview with "Aylin" by Dalia Kandiyoti, April 14, 2017, via Zoom.

and local story by itself would be an insufficient piece of evidence of Sephardi identity. Additionally, C.E. himself has feelings about the lack of extensive documentation that the process of becoming Spanish again, as it were, has provoked, which other narrators share. We might call this a "historical anxiety" about genealogy and cultural transmission. C.E discussed this nagging sense of lack:

> It comes from my historical ignorance... I've been studying and researching my past for many years. I understand in theory why I have these rights [to citizenship]: that it is a reparation, an apology, and because this was denied to previous generations. But in my case, that historical consciousness is not yet resolved.[47]

The citizenship process, then, compels an investigation into the genealogical and historic past that can accentuate and bolster existing Sephardi identity, as in the example of "Sara Carmona," but the demands for documented authenticity can also produce an insecurity and anxiety, as with "C.E." of Istanbul, given the archival abyss most people face.

Sometimes, the search for the genealogical past can produce more uncertainties than concrete facts. In these cases, the void may become filled with suppositions, conjectures, and imagination about the migratory trajectories and identities based on conventional notions of ethnicity, religion, or inherited belonging. A somewhat different identity connection to Iberia emerges among those who have discovered Sephardi descent recently and/or descendants of *conversos* and crypto-Jews. The search and discovery of Sephardi heritage among our Christian narrators who are Latinx/Hispanics from the U.S.A. or are from Latin America is often prompted by the 2015 laws, though they may also be preceded by familial rumors about possible past Jewish ancestry. The burden of authenticity falls differently on these applicants, who may lack a public identity as Sephardi or legitimation by a Jewish community, especially if they are not Jewish-identified at the present. Information about the laws often reaches Latin Americans and U.S.

47 Interview with "C.E." by Dalia Kandiyoti, November 22, 2017, via Zoom.

Latinx/Hispanics in a context: whether through lawyers and mediators advertising the opportunity or word of mouth or social media, narrators find out not only about the legal dispensation for Sephardi Jews but also about the prevalence of hidden Jewish roots in the Americas of which they may not have been previously aware. Ironically, thanks to Catholic parishes' baptismal and other vital records, many of these individuals, whether from Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Brazil, or New Mexico, may be able to find more documented "proof" and information about their remote ancestors than, for example the "normative" Eastern Sephardi Jews from the former Ottoman and North African regions can hope to have.

Our narrators of *converso* descent speak about their connection to a distant Sephardi past in a rather different way than others. Upon unearthing evidence of *converso* ancestors, some assume the original identities of those men and women as part of their own and declare themselves to be Sephardi. Some narrators spoke emotionally of how the genealogical findings revealed "who they really are." Ana Maria Gallegos of New Mexico, a region strongly associated with a crypto-Jewish past, felt that genealogy and these new citizenship opportunities provided her with a new identity and answers to old questions about herself and her origins:

> I'm so happy to know who I am... I've always felt, I don't know... I wouldn't say "different" but I'm very happy to know who I am. I never really knew who I was, even... I never knew where my ancestors came from and it always was really interesting to me and I never knew where to start... A lot of people in northern New Mexico knew that they were part of the conquistadores that came. I never knew that. And so now I know our whole history and stories and stories and stories. I'm just very happy to identify as Sephardic.[48]

[48] Interview with Ana Maria Gallegos by Dalia Kandiyoti, March 23, 2018, via Zoom. There has been, particularly but not only in the past few decades, widespread oral culture about the crypto-/Jewish origins of many Hispanos/Latinx in the Southwest of the U.S. and particularly in northern New Mexico. For arguments affirming a continuity of crypto-Jewish existence in New Mexico, see Stanley Hordes, *To the End of the Earth: A History of the Crypto-Jews of New Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) and Seth Kunin, *Juggling Identities: Identity and Authenticity Among the Crypto-Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). For an

The discovery of previously unknown roots can be so powerful that it becomes the focal point in reframing a more holistic self-identity. Often, the discovery eclipses attention to other genealogical origins, such as the indigenous ancestries of many New Mexican *converso* descendants. As Eviatar Zerubavel points out in *Ancestors and Relatives,* the genealogical quest is always selective, dependent on our choosing some branches that we are interested in or need, leaving aside the others.[49]

We were struck in our interviews by the power and depth of meaning that other subjects, not only *converso* descendants but those newly discovering their ancestry, can attach to their discoveries and invest in Sephardism through research or identification. For example, Glayci Errúas, from Brazil, discovered through conversations with her mother and aunt that her great grandfather was actually Jewish and Sephardi, buried in the Jewish cemetery of Manaus, in the Amazon basin. Because of intermarriage, his descendants became Christian. Motivated in part by the desire to give her children future global options, Errúas and her minor children applied for and have received Spanish citizenship, but also intend to apply to Portugal (a process which takes longer for children). She reflected on the significance of her ancestral discovery, expressing the degree to which these findings become internalized and shape the consciousness of identity:

> For me, personally, it's as if something were missing. When I began to discover more about my ancestors, about my roots, it was as if I were discovering myself at the same time. So, I dare say that it is the discovery of deeper knowledge. You learn more about your personality, understand more about your reactions, something you were born with despite all the influences of your upbringing. It's something that involves your soul; it's something more internal, more intimate. I discovered my ancestry and at

overview of dissenting perspectives on the contemporary survival of crypto-Judaism in the region, see e.g. Michael P. Carroll, "The Not-So-Crypto Crypto-Jews of New Mexico: Update on a Decades-Old Debate," *Religion* 48, no. 2 (2018): 236-251. For an analysis of the meanings of discoveries of converso ancestry, see Dalia Kandiyoti, *The Converso's Return: Conversion and Sephardi History in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

[49] Eviatar Zerubavel, *Ancestors and Relatives: Genealogy, Identity, and Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

> the same time I learned more about the history of the Inquisition, as if something had been torn from me, that belonged to me. At some moment, the connection was severed. Wiped out. And it's as if you feel the need to retake hold of your roots, of where you come from, your appearance, your culture. So bringing that into the present, and particularly with the concept of citizenship, I mean, of retaking that, or the place that was in some ways yours, where you participated, where you managed to build through your heritage, it's truly fascinating.[50]

Given that Errúas's sentiments as a recent discoverer of Sephardism are based on her newly found ancestor and a quest spurred by the 2015 laws, we might ask: what does being Sephardi mean if its source is primarily genealogical and biological? On the one hand, the isolation of ancestry and the "right" blood is historically and currently problematic for reasons we have signaled. At the same time, however, descendants enable Spain and Portugal to achieve reconciliation and return rights, a measure of compensation for past wrongs involving forcible conversions, whether or not the descendants have been previously unaware of such wrongs committed against their own ancestors. Our narrators' stories corroborate Zerubavel's observation in that the citizenship laws have indeed brought selective attention toward this part of their biological inheritance, meshing documentation with a genealogical imagination.

Malleable Identities

While the legitimation of nationality relies on the archives of dominant and repressive institutions to re/produce ancestral certainties, we are aware that the laws are mobilized in the context of the contemporary quest for flexible and multiple identities and nationalities. Indeed, the preamble of the Spanish law states that "Sephardi communities" have "envisioned a pragmatic and *global identity* for the emerging generations" [emphasis added]. Paradoxically, on the one hand, the genealogical imperative of the state is to identify a single source of

[50] Interview with Glayci Errúas by Rina Benmayor, February 7, 2019, via Zoom.

ancestral belonging in Iberia, which implies fixed identities, possibly reinforcing traditional notions of family, ancestry, and nation. On the other hand however, many states are also poised to produce further multiplicities, as we see in the Spanish positioning of "pragmatic and global" Sephardi Jews as well as in the recent investment of European states in promoting heritage-based citizenship to those outside of their national borders.[51]

For our narrators, the test of Sephardi and Iberian authenticity can ironically unleash or suppress a multiplicity of belongings rather than an entrenchment in the "restored" recovered nationality. While dual or multiple citizenship expands the space for more complex constructions of belonging, none of our narrators speak about becoming Spanish or Portuguese. Few of those we interviewed, including those who applied out of political and economic security concerns, have declared an intention to move permanently to Spain or Portugal. Most spoke of frequent visits, perhaps establishing a pied-à-terre, or spending some time in their ancestral places. Applicants also asserted that they will always identify primarily with their home countries. However, even then, national identity is complicated by positionality for many Sephardi individuals. "Raşel," a woman from Istanbul in her 70s, articulated this in a statement that is typical of her generation, including in its multilinguality mixing Turkish with French, which expressed the exclusions that national/ist identity can produce:

> I did not learn to say "I am a Turk". What I knew was that I was a Jew and we said this at home. Turks, were outside, they were present in public life, in *l'espace publique*, if you will. We were in the *espace privée*. There was no such thing as being a Turk in the *espace privée*. We could be called "Turks;" we could speak the Turkish language, but we were not Turks as *identité:* we were Jews.[52]

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[51] For references on extraterritorial citizenship, see footnotes 12-15 above.

[52] Interview with "Raşel" by Dalia Kandiyoti, January 15, 2018, via Skype. On the history of the term "Turk" and on Turkishness, see Aron Rodrigue "Reflections on Millets and Minorities: Ottoman Legacies," in *Turkey Between Nationalism and Globalization,* ed. Riva Kastoryano (New York: Routledge, 2013), 36-46; Lerna Ekmekçioğlu, "Republic of Paradox: The League of Nations Minority Protection Regime and the New Turkey's Step-Citizens," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46 (2014): 657-679.

Such complexity of diasporic and national identities is often directly linked to the quest for a new citizenship.

Naturalization as Spanish or Portuguese can occasion what Sarah Abrevaya Stein has termed "extraterritorial dreams." But these dreams are much less about being "nationals" or "citizens" of Spain or Portugal and more about *further* multiplying identities, as well as making the ancestral past more proximate. Many of our narrators speak about an open, cosmopolitan citizenship or multiple identities, not only Spanish or Portuguese but also Mediterranean or European and even seeing themselves to be "citizens of the world," as Miriam Farhi Rodrigue, an Israeli from Istanbul asserts.[53] Jack Gilles, whose Sephardi grandfather fought in the Greek Resistance during the Second World War, adopts a predominantly European and Mediterranean identity, along with the Greek, American, and to a minor degree Sephardi Jewish:

> I have such a strong connection to Europe, such a strong connection to that side of my family... For me it comes down to not so much Spain but a European identity... I already identify as very European... I'm very, very comfortable in Spain like I'm very very comfortable in Greece. It's a very similar culture. It's a Mediterranean culture. I don't think having documents will make me feel... I already feel very connected to that culture.[54]

While some narrators told us about solidifying their Sephardi identity through the quest for citizenship, including those newly discovering or invested in Sephardiness, their experience did not necessarily narrow their ideas about belonging. Ethan Russo, an American of Monastirli descent on his father's side, suggested: "It shouldn't be a divisive thing. Not a repudiation of being American. Just recognition that we all come from somewhere. A lot of us are more related in ways we hadn't thought about before."[55] Similarly, Luz, a Venezuelan sociology professor, drew the connection between the medieval historical ideals of

[53] Interview with Miriam Farhi Rodrigue by Dalia Kandiyoti, August 16, 2017, via Zoom.
[54] Interview with Jack Gilles by Rina Benmayor, January 3, 2017, audiorecording.
[55] Interview with Ethan Russo by Rina Benmayor, January 10, 2018, via Zoom.

convivencia and tolerance (myths in themselves, perhaps) that she sees as critical in today's global society:

> That's why I believe that this initiative taken by the Spanish government is very positive from the standpoint that for today's world it is a testament to the importance of coexistence and tolerance among peoples who may have dissimilar cultures and interests but who can live together in community.[56]

In addition to a cosmopolitan sense of self and world, pragmatism, adventure, and opportunity also drive the applicants, especially those in their twenties and thirties. Many of those under the age of fifty show little interest in a new nationality as a way of attending to the ancestral past. Rather, they have more practical reasons, though it must be noted that many of those acting on strong affective and symbolic ties *also* had such motivations. They include the desire for a European Union passport for travel, study, work, health care, or re-settlement, and what we are calling a "reserve citizenship" to be used on the occasion of a future need, especially in light of unpredictable political circumstances in their countries of residence. Multiple citizenship as an insurance policy against political and economic insecurity is a motivation for many, including the citizens of Venezuela, Brazil, Turkey and the U.S., owing to ongoing instability, violence, and/or exclusion and discrimination. This impulse became news in the United States when *The New York Times* published an article on election day in November 2018 about Latinx/Hispanics in the U.S. seeking Spanish citizenship as Sephardi *converso* descendants.[57] The article emphasized this quest for Spanish nationality as due in part to the most recent wave of racism against Latinx in the country.

As we have noted, scholars refer to "instrumental citizenship," to describe the acquisition of citizenship that is decoupled from identity and/or from residence

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[56] Interview with "Luz" by Rina Benmayor, April 12, 2017, via Zoom.

[57] Simon Romero, "Some Hispanics with Jewish Roots Pursue an Exit Strategy: Emigrate to Spain," *The New York Times*, November 6, 2018. Accessed November 6, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/06/us/jews-sephardic-hispanic-spain-new-mexico.html.

in the territory.[58] The instrumentalization of Spanish or Portuguese citizenship is apparent in many of our narrators' lack of attachment to current Iberian nation-states or identities. However, emotion and symbolism can still be triggered, unlike in some other instrumental citizenships,[59] or passports acquired only for the ease of travel or education. As we have seen in the examples of Ana María Gallegos and Glayci Errúas, even when newly discovered, an emotional attachment to Sephardi heritage can form, along with practical motivations and other identities, local or cosmopolitan. Such complex identifications and instrumentalizations lie outside of the purview of the official rhetoric of the Spanish and Portuguese citizenship laws.

Conclusions

While the "Sephardi laws" of 2015 in Portugal and Spain are uncommon enough to be startling to many, they are also part of increasingly prevalent patterns in European citizenship, before and despite Brexit. The state-led expansion of diasporic and globalized identities is embedded in the granting of "external citizenship," as we mentioned earlier. At the same time, however, the rhetoric of the Spanish and Portuguese laws seeks to incorporate Sephardi Jews through nationalist markers in terms of linguistic, cultural, and emotional loyalty and perdurability. For two reasons, this is not unexpected: as scholars of Jewish Spain have explained in various contexts, there is a longstanding, officialized recuperation of Sephardi history by the Spanish state.[60] In our estimation, the spirit, rhetoric, and language of the Spanish and Portuguese preambles are a continuation of ideas about the steadfast Iberianness of the exiles and their descendants. Moreover, "external citizenship" is offered frequently to those considered "fellow nationals," even if they have never been to the territory of the granting state. As scholars have discussed, non-territorial birthright citizenship,

[58] Joppke, "The Instrumental Turn of Citizenship."

[59] See, for example, the study of Turkish elites who acquire U.S. citizenship to build prestige: Evren Balta and Özlem Altan Olcay, "Strategic Citizens of America: Transnational Inequalities and Transformation of Citizenship," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no. 6 (2016): 939-957.

[60] See footnotes 20 and 21, above.

which is practiced widely in Europe and other areas, reinforces ancestry-based nationalism and also can disenfranchise or exclude those residing within the state's boundaries. This is a growing rather than diminishing practice, as dual nationality becomes more liberalized.[61] The flexibility of citizenship coexists with forms of increased nationalization. Therefore, the nation-based framing of Sephardi inclusion is not surprising, despite the expansions that accompany it.

Genealogy and ancestry-based legal identities, then, can be both inclusionary and ethnonationalistic. More rarely, they can also be part of a restorative gesture toward some targeted populations, such as in the case of the citizenship laws for Sephardi Jews.[62] In the spirit and/or the application of the law, ironies and paradoxes emerge: even though the states acknowledge "pragmatic and global" identities, as we indicated above, and individual applicants embrace a potential flexibility and multiplicity of nationalities, the primacy of ancestral credentials seems to fix belonging by locating it in biological inheritance, even though officials recognize the impossibility of tracing an uninterrupted bloodline back to Iberia. Moreover, the Spanish law's motivating claim, that Jews of Spanish origin maintain an uninterrupted feeling of nostalgia for the "homeland" from which they were expelled and to which they now can return, is grounded in the idea of a fixed national identity. This ignores the complexity of how Spain and Portugal have figured in the diasporic Sephardi imagination.[63]

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[61] For references, see footnotes 15-18, above.

[62] Descendants of Muslims and Moriscos, who were forcibly converted and/or expelled from Iberia, are not included in the Spanish or Portuguese laws of return or reconciliation. For a critique, see Janan Bastaki, "Reading History into Law: Who Is Worthy of Reparations? Observations on Spain and Portugal's Return Laws and the Implications for Reparations," *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 4, no. 1 (2017): 115-128.

[63] Sephardi Jews' post-exile relationship to Spain and Portugal underwent an evolution too long and complicated to summarize here. After a couple of centuries, a long period of isolation from Iberia as well as memories of persecution characterized much of the Sephardi experience. As noted earlier, the maintenance of language and custom was not fixed but evolved as well. There was some Jewish response to Iberian philosephardism emerging more than a century ago, including in Spanish colonial contexts, but nationalisms, competing colonialisms, genocide, and multiple migrations rather than an Iberian orientation shaped the outlook and fate of Sephardi Jewry in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For some Jewish attitudes toward Spain, see Paloma Díaz-Mas, *Sephardim: The Jews from Spain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 173-175. For *converso* or crypto-Jewish descendants, an Iberian Jewish past was by and large suppressed, despite some continuities, rather than preserved in the ways official discourses suggest.

Our oral history project has shown that "restorative citizenship," as we call this recuperation of an ancient belonging, can also have unexpected outcomes that go beyond the search for genealogical certainties and nostalgic returns: rather than a recovery of Iberianness, we find that for our narrators the quest for Spanish or Portuguese nationality can actually contribute to a more extensive awareness of transhistorical and transnational Sephardi culture and history, whether or not the identification was significant, weak, or even non-existent prior to the citizenship process. Thus, the invitation to "become Iberians again," might more aptly be described as a path to complex identities, which include new forms of Sephardism and European and cosmopolitan citizenship. If there is any nostalgia, it is instead for lost Sephardi communities, languages, customs, and social relations that have disappeared or transformed over the course of the centuries. The Sephardi descendants' perspectives compel us to refine and question, rather than take for granted, the differences and overlaps between descent, identity, nationality, and citizenship.

Rina Benmayor is Professor Emerita of oral history and literature at California State University Monterey Bay. She has published on Sephardic balladry, identity and citizenship, oral history and community memory, and digital storytelling. She is the author of *Romances judeo-españoles de Oriente* (Gredos, 1979); and co-author of *Latino Cultural Citizenship* (Beacon Press, 1997), and *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Duke University Press, 2001). She co-edited *Memory, Subjectivities, and Representation: Approaches to Oral History in Latin America, Portugal, and Spain* (Palgrave, 2016), recipient of the 2016 Oral History Association Book Award. She has conducted, with Dr. Dalia Kandiyoti, extensive oral histories of Sephardi descendants seeking Spanish or Portuguese citizenship, and received a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Faculty Award to write on this research. She is also co-editing with Kandiyoti a multidisciplinary volume of essays on the subject entitled "Reparative Citizenship: Identity, Belonging, and Spanish and Portuguese Nationality for Sephardi Descendants."

Dalia Kandiyoti is Professor of English at the College of Staten Island (CUNY) and the author of *The Converso's Return: Conversion and Sephardi History in Contemporary Literature* (Stanford University Press, 2020) and *Migrant Sites: America, Place, and Diaspora Literature* (Dartmouth College/University Press of New England, 2009). She has published articles in peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes, including on diaspora studies, Sephardi writing, and Latinx literature, and co-edited a special journal issue on Jewish-Muslim crossings in the Americas. She has conducted an extensive oral history project on descendants of Sephardi Jews seeking citizenship in Spain or Portugal, with Dr. Rina Benmayor, and received a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Faculty Award in support of her work on this research. She is also co-editing with Benmayor a multidisciplinary volume of essays on the subject entitled "Reparative Citizenship: Identity, Belonging, and Spanish and Portuguese Nationality for Sephardi Descendants."

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