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# Modern Sephardic Identity and Repatriation: Locating the 2015 Law of Repatriation in the Context of Spanish Jewish History and Relations

Eric Freeman  
efreema2@conncoll.edu

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**Modern Sephardic Identity and Repatriation:**

Locating the 2015 Law of Repatriation in the Context of Spanish Jewish

History and Relations

Eric Freeman

Toor Cummings Center for International Studies and the Liberal Arts

History Department Senior Integrative Project

Professor Leo Garofalo

May 14, 2022

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the Spanish government passed a law that allows people of Sephardic descent who could prove that their ancestors lost their citizenship during the Spanish Inquisition to regain Spanish citizenship. This law created a myriad of questions for Sephardic Jews around the world, spanning from logistical questions about eligibility to personal questions about identity. The intentions of this law are relatively clear, to in some way heal the centuries-long rift between Spain and Sephardic Jews, and show a reduction in antisemitism and intolerance in modern Spain. For Sephardic Jews however, these questions about personal identity and family history are complicated by the legal process necessary for repatriation created by this law, as well as their relationship to the history of Spain and the perceptions and desires of the Spanish government and populace. In order to analyze where this law is located in the history of Spain, I will first examine the history of the relationship between Sephardic Jews and Spain, after which I will analyze both the Spanish perspective and the Sephardic perspective — focusing on a community of people with Sephardic heritage in New Mexico. Through this, I will investigate how this repatriation law has affected Sephardic identity and the relationship between Spain and Jewry.

I first encountered the law of repatriation reading the news in the fall of 2019 as the program was coming to a close. The concept of repatriating the descendants of a specific group of people from over five centuries ago, the Sephardim who were expelled from Spain, seemed logistically and historically fascinating. Over the next few years, while I progressed through the Toor Cummings Center for International Studies and the Liberal Arts, my interest in studying

this law stayed while the context of what I would be studying changed. This project is the culmination of several years worth of passive interest and several months' worth of active research on how this law fits into the histories of both Spain and Sephardic Jews.

This paper is split into three main sections, first the history of the relationship between Sephardim and the Spanish Government through the conflicting concepts of philosephardism and antisemitism, second a brief overview of the history of Sephardic Jews post-expulsion, and finally a section that looks at the implications of the repatriation law on the Sephardim to whom it applies. In the first section, I have mainly used history books as sources, most simply investigating the antisemitism or philosephardism at different moments of time, although some look at how antisemitism and philosephardism appear in literature or in modern Spanish society. The second section is less in-depth than the first and third sections, and I used one text on the history of Sephardim in the Americas, as well as basic writing on Sephardim outside of Spanish territories. The third and final section of the paper investigates the 2015 repatriation law and its effects on the Sephardim around the world who qualify and don't qualify for repatriation. This section looks at how Sephardim and the descendants of Sephardim decide to participate in the relationship between themselves and Spain, as well as how the Spanish government's rollout of the law has changed and affected this relationship. For this section, I used a combination of historical literature, primary source accounts of various Sephardim who in some way were involved in this relationship, as well as a series of phone interviews with Sara Koplik, a woman who has been closely connected to this law on several levels. With this structure, I will first show the relationship and history between antisemitism and philosephardism in Spain, then after providing context on the history of the Sephardic people, show how the 2015 law of repatriation fits into this history while simultaneously breaking its continuity.

## THE HISTORY OF PHILOSEPHARDISM AND ANTISEMITISM IN SPAIN

The history of Spain and Sephardic Jews post-expulsion came into focus in the nineteenth century during what was called the “rediscovery” of Sephardic Jews. Examining this time period and the historical ideas that have proliferated from it allow a fuller understanding of the Spanish perspective on their history with Sephardic Jews.

Michal Friedman, a professor of Jewish Studies at Carnegie Mellon University wrote, in her article about a pioneering Spanish scholar from the nineteenth century named Amador de Rios, about the evolution of Spanish scholarly attitude toward Jews. Friedman writes that Amador de los Rios argued that Jews “were indispensable to Spain; too busy fighting the Moors, the Christians left the work of generating commerce and culture to the Jews” (97). This is an important recognition of medieval Jewish contribution to Spanish society and can be seen as a rehabilitation of the image of the medieval Spanish Jew in a more modern Spanish society. This movement, which began after this contact with Sephardic Jews in Morocco, is known as philosephardism, and it is predicated on the growth of connections between Jews and Spain (Rohr, 376). De los Rios’ text can also be seen as an example of Spanish society using the historical Sephardic community as a tool to heighten the grandeur of Catholic Spain. This Sephardic community in Morocco would have lived under both Muslim and Catholic rule in Spain before being expelled hundreds of years prior to the interaction that de los Rios describes, but he points out that they were not pining for their roots in a Muslim Spain, but a Christian one, reifying the superiority of the Catholic state over its Muslim predecessors. This use of the Sephardic community as a tool in mediating the contentious historical relationship between

Christian Spain and Muslim Spain, continued both prior to and after Spain officially separated church and state in 1978.

Before the separation of church and state in the constitution of 1978, during Franco's reign as a dictator, Spanish Jewish history was repressed. Franco based his regime on the superiority of the Catholic religion and Catholic Spanish culture, and as such, minimized the contributions of any other group to the development of Spain. Pérez Melgosa and Flesher in *Memory work of Jewish Spain* highlight the town of Hervás in Extremadura as an example of the reintegration of Jewish history into Spanish society post-Franco in one of the chapters of the book. Hervás, since the end of the dictatorship, has come to advertise and highlight its Jewish quarter as a historical neighborhood in its town center (Pérez Melgosa, 248). The government of Extremadura has even denoted the Jewish quarter in Hervás as an official cultural place of interest. Pérez Melgosa and Flesher note, however, that there is no proof of a dedicated Jewish quarter in the town of Hervás (Perez Melgosa, 249). The town instead has used circumstantial evidence, such as Jewish-sounding street names and extant medieval architecture to argue that a twelve-block section of the town was a segregated Jewish Quarter. Evidence suggests, to the contrary, that the Jewish population of Hervás in the medieval period, which did exist, lived mixed in with the rest of the population of the town rather than in a dedicated part of the city (Perez Melgosa, 250). Myths of a strong independent Jewish community in Hervás are traced back to the late 19th century when much of the romanticization of Spain's Jewish past began. The idea of a Jewish Hervás coincides with the attempt to modernize Spanish society in the latter half of the twentieth century. There is now in Hervás a festival that celebrates the (dubious) Jewish past of the town, which glosses over the history of the town as a place where invented histories made for the purpose of cleaning history exist.



The Hervás case shows how philosephardism has endured since the nineteenth century, despite the suppression of Spanish-Jewish history during the Franco regime; it also connects to the relationship between philosephardism and the use of positive Jewish stereotypes. In Hervás as well as much of Spain, the medieval Jew has been idealized and presented as a member of a romantic past. It is true that anti-semitic stereotypes and stories have been related to Hervás as well, one of the first works that popularized the idea of the Jewish community in Hervás was a poem written in the 1950s that contained both positive and negative stereotypes of Jews. In it, the Jews founded the town through hard work and industriousness, though became hostile to the Christian population that later moved in, in the poem, this is because the Jews maintain the guilt they feel from murdering Jesus (Perez Melgosa, 254). Philosephardism as a concept was largely driven in its inception by positive stereotypes of Sephardic Jews.

One of the biggest supporters of efforts to reconcile with the Jewish community in nineteenth-century Spain was a senator named Pulido who argued in favor of the Sephardic “race” as a way to bolster Spain’s status in the context of its imperial decline in the nineteenth century. Pulido wrote that the Sephardim were the most beautiful of the Spanish races, and that “The expulsion of the Jews has caused a bloody amputation and a long and painful hemorrhage to the body of Spain” (Rohr, 378). Pulido’s focus on the rehabilitation of the Sephardim was based in his preconceptions of the Sephardim based on stereotypes. He argued that “Spain’s economic decline and racial decay was caused by the expulsion. Loss of Jews laboriousness and financial acumen” (Rohr, 378). The idea that the expulsion of Jews caused the decline of the Spanish empire is a theory embraced by Spaniards who favor closer relationships with Sephardic and wider Jewish communities today, partially, perhaps, because it infers that the fall of the Spanish Empire and Spain’s status as a lesser European power is a penance for the sin of the

inquisition. In this sense, embracing a theory of this sort allows for a realization in the Spanish conscience that the expulsion of the Jews was not only bad for the Jews but also bad for Spaniards. This viewpoint, however, comes with its own significant problems. First of which, it separates the Sephardim from true Spaniards, and instead of viewing the Sephardim as a part of the Spanish society, otherizes them. Secondly, it infers that the only way for the Spanish citizen to understand why the Inquisition was wrong is through looking at how it might have negatively affected them, rather than seeing what the expulsion did to the Sephardic people and empathizing through that. This line of thinking not only creates barriers between the Sephardim and the rest of the Spanish community but also minimizes the Spanish people's capacity for empathy and historical understanding.

Philoseshardism was also employed as a justification for colonial activity in Morocco. The texts of the "rediscovery" were used to connect the Sephardic communities in Morocco that were reportedly celebrating the arrival of the Spanish military to the barbarism of Islam. The fact that these Jews, removed from Spain for centuries were still speaking a Spanish-adjacent language, and were happy to see the downfall of Islamic rule in Morocco was proof not only of the greatness of the Spanish empire, such that the Jews that were expelled from it still missed it and carried on traditions from Iberia, but also that the Muslims in Morocco were deserving of losing their control of territory. Philosephardites hoped that the Sephardic Jews in Morocco would aid in Spain's colonial expansion, and act as intermediaries between Spain and Morocco after Spain's victory in the war in 1860. After that war, many believed that the Sephardic Jews in Morocco owed a debt to Spain due to "delivering them from the shackles of Muslim fanaticism" (Rohr, 384). There were initiatives put in place in Morocco to facilitate relationships between Spain and the Moroccan Sephardic population, tuition-free Jewish schools were opened and in

1920 an antisemitic consul was removed from office. These efforts were all singularly aimed at expanding Spanish political and economic control over Morocco. This was a very blunt application of the Sephardic population for Spanish political purposes and the beginning of a continuity of similar political action. Additionally, the situation in Morocco reflected the dynamic that would follow the philosephardism movement throughout its existence. At the same time, some people wanted to improve the lives of the Jews in Morocco, mainly the politicians, while many military leaders held to antisemitic beliefs and were hostile to the Moroccan Jews (Rohr, 386). The antisemitic streak in the military leaders in Morocco was not isolated, at the same time many people in Spain were attempting to rehabilitate the image of the Spanish Jew in the public sphere, others held on to the antisemitic beliefs that had motivated the expulsion and inquisition centuries prior. The conservative Catholic population in Spain maintained the belief that the Jews were connected to liberals and Freemasons, as well as being responsible for the death of Christ (Rohr, 387). The intellectuals who took this side of the debate included Juan Vazquez de Mella and Marcelino Melendez Pelayo, both of whom argued that the expulsion of the Jews did not precipitate the downfall of the Spanish empire, but rather its rise and height (Rohr, 388). Vazquez de Mella made speeches about the nefarious influence of the Rothschilds and Jewish bankers on the Spanish state, and a Carlist named Urbino founded an organization named *Liga Nacional Antimasónica y antisemita para la protección de los intereses Catolicos* (National antimasonic and antisemitic league for the protection of Catholic interests), institutionalizing his antisemitism and attempting to get Jewish money out of Spain (Rohr, 388). To some of these antisemitic thinkers, Sephardim spoke Ladino not out of affection for or connection to Spain, but rather to use it as a secret language only they could understand, and philosephardism was the work of freemasons who wanted to destroy Catholicism (Rohr, 390).

Antisemitism in Spain has been a historical constant for centuries. Prejudices that motivated the scholars in the early twentieth and late nineteenth centuries had stayed a part of Spanish culture through the centuries since the expulsion regardless of the lack of Jews in Spain for the prejudices to be targeted towards. Antisemitism survived in Spain through Spanish literature, language, and popular traditions (Baer, 74). This base antisemitism that existed in Spain for centuries rose in the 1930s in conjunction with the rise of fascism. This antisemitism, which maintained heavily Catholic roots, rose within anti-republicans and fascists in Spain who connected to the messaging of the Nazis of an international cabal of Jews controlling the world (Baer, 75). In Spain, the history of conversos was a focal point of antisemitic beliefs. The myth of the hidden Jew was pasted on to the history of conversos in Spain who many believed still followed Judaism and worked behind the scenes to control the nation. Conspiracy theories regarding an enemy Jewish agent were valuable to the fascist leadership in unifying and motivating their base, as Baer writes, “Antisemitism acted as a cohesive agent for the Nationalist camp, with its multifaceted internal splits. Conspiracy theories involving Jews permitted various right-wing factions to draw attention to an imaginary group of enemies. The real enemies ... were presented as subordinates or allies of this imaginary Jewish enemy group” (Baer, 75). As the Civil War progressed in the latter half of the 1930s, antisemitic iconography made its way into Spain. ABC, one of the largest newspapers in Franco’s Spain published an editorial titled “El judaismo: aliado de la anti-España” (Judaism: ally of the anti-Spain) in which the author connected Jews, internationalism, and the International Brigades fighting for the Republicans (Baer, 78). The idea of Jewish shadow organizations controlling global politics is a common and widespread canard that is best exemplified in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a widespread antisemitic fabricated text that “showed” Jews operating behind the scenes of global politics.

Texts like the protocols and associated conspiracies were tools of the Nazi regime and propagated around right-wing movements across Europe. These antisemitic fabrications acted as justifications for antisemitic violence because killing and oppressing Jews became acts of ethnonational patriotism. Acts of antisemitic violence, such as *Kristallnacht*, resonated across Europe and into Spain. In ABC, an article was written about how Germany was reacting to Jewish provocations, and that no unprovoked acts of violence or looting actually occurred (Baer, 79). In right-wing spaces in Spain, the violence was either denied, justified, or both.

While these antisemitic sentiments existed and spread through fascist Spain, there was no systematic wave of antisemitic violence that followed. Instead, antisemitism simply lived on during Franco's reign, with the government allowing the rhetoric that had helped to unify their base to exist within the country. After the war, in order to improve Spain's international standing in Europe and with the United States, Franco toned down the antisemitic propaganda. Antisemitism still persisted, though less through government propaganda, and more through its traditional sources in Spain, Catholicism, and cultural practices. A new complicating factor in Spain's relationship with the Jews came in the form of the Holocaust, or more specifically the fact that Jews had fled over the Pyrenees from Nazi-controlled France into Spain. This was a source of national pride, something which complicated the existing widespread feelings toward Jews. As Baer writes in *Resurgent Antisemitism* "Under Franco's regime it was possible to maintain this *castizo* [traditionalist] version of antisemitism, ignore the destruction of European Jewry, and at the same time boast about having saved thousands or even millions of Jews during the Holocaust" (Baer, 101). Additionally, during Franco's regime as a reflection of the changing world in and around Spain, some Jews began returning to Spain and practicing Judaism (Baer, 101).

The other important dynamic that changed Spanish policy toward Jews and Judaism was the creation of Israel. In the early years of Israeli existence, Spanish rhetoric toward the country was colored with the same antisemitism that had existed in the fascist propaganda during the civil war. Israel was described as having desecrated Christian sites, and fostering a Hebrew-Bolshevik friendship, along with accusing Israel of barbarity toward Arabs (Baer, 102). Israel continued to be viewed negatively in Spain for decades, where anti-semitic feelings of some mixed with anti-imperialist feelings of others. In 1986, almost forty years after the war for Israeli independence, and nine years after the death of Franco, Spain established diplomatic relations with Israel. According to Baer, this didn't substantially change the way Israel was viewed by the general public, even though the country was no longer fascist. Israel instead continued to be viewed negatively in Spain into current times, where many Spaniards have conflated their dislike of Israel to dislike of Jews in general. Modern Spanish Antisemitism is common and, as Baer describes it, casual and mundane. Antisemitism is not isolated to the uneducated or extreme ideologues either, Baer includes an anecdote in his chapter in which an American Jew describes an experience he had socializing with a group of young university-educated Spaniards in Málaga. In the anecdote, the narrator describes one of the members of the group casually mentioning the Rockefellers and Morgans as evidence that Jews would do anything for money, including "sell their own mothers for money", despite the fact that neither Rockefeller nor Morgan was Jewish (Baer, 113). The narrator also noted how comfortable and relaxed the Spaniard was in talking about their opinions about Jews, even after he mentioned that he was Jewish. The Anti-Defamation League conducted a series of surveys in 2005, 2007, and 2009 on the levels of antisemitism in five countries in Europe in which they tested a number of stereotypes and the connections that antisemitism had to Israel. Spain had a

higher rate in accordance with the stereotypes than the four other countries tested, which were France, Germany, Poland, and Italy (Baer, 106). The following are tested stereotypes and the percentage of Spaniards surveyed who agreed with them: “Jews have too much power in international financial markets (74 percent) ... 58 percent of Spaniards believe “Jews are very powerful because they control the economy and the media”. The statement “Jews use the memory of the Holocaust to their benefit” is viewed positively by 54.9 percent” (Baer, 106). These results show that while antisemitism is not an inherent part of Spanish culture, it is a widespread and accepted part of Spanish society.

The antisemitism expressed in Spain is not more virulent than the antisemitism that exists in other countries, nor is it necessarily more present, but it does prove that there is no social taboo regarding the expression of antisemitic beliefs. Modern antisemitism in Spain is also significantly connected to Spanish perceptions of Israel. *El Mundo*, a Spanish newspaper, published in reference to the study’s publication “One-third of Spaniards are anti-semitic because of Israeli policy” (Baer, 108). One of the reasons that Israel and consequently Jews are viewed negatively is the fact that many Spaniards identify at some level with Muslims due to Spain’s Muslim history. In the anecdote relayed by the American Jew to Baer, he recounts how the Spaniard who believed the Jews would sell their own mothers said she does identify with the Muslim history of Spain, but not the Jewish history. Another major reason that Palestine is viewed more sympathetically than Israel in Spain is due to its perception as an underdog. One phrase used to describe the reasoning behind their support for Palestine used by an elderly conservative group was “we need to support the weak side. It’s not a left-wing thing. It’s just human” (Baer, 110).

The Spanish government in recent years has taken efforts to curb the antisemitism in the country. The problems the government faces, however, are long-established and have deep historical roots. Spanish antisemitism has been present for centuries, and in current times “Hostility and negative opinions about Jews exist on a plane of normalcy and discursive first principles” (Baer, 110). This casual antisemitism mixed with government intention to improve relations with Jews is the context in which the 2015 law takes place, but it has also been the situation regarding Jews in Spain since the onset of philosephardism in the nineteenth century. Efforts on behalf of the Spanish government when it has tried to improve relationships with Jews have not significantly changed the cultural landscape, in no small part due to the fact that these efforts have often had ulterior primary motives, whether it was neocolonialism around the turn of the century or improving foreign relations with Western powers.

#### SEPHARDIC HISTORY POST-EXPULSION

Jewish history in the Americas goes back to the beginning of the Spanish empire in the late fifteenth century. While some Ashkenazi Jews were present, the vast majority of the Jews who immigrated to the Americas in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth-century were Sephardim. The presence of Jews in the American Spanish colonies was common and arguably reached its height during what was called the “Portuguese Penetration” from 1600 to 1650 (Liebman, 145). During this time, due to the large number of Portuguese Jewish immigrants “Portuguese and Jew were synonymous in the minds of most Spaniards” (Liebman, 145). The Sephardic Jews living in the Americas during this period were completely surrounded by Catholicism, but as Liebman says in his article on Sephardic ethnicity in Spanish New World



colonies, fiercely held on to their religion and culture in the face of assimilation over time. Liebman writes that there were five main reasons that the Sephardim were able to maintain their identity up until the nineteenth century: adherence to messianism, belief in the biblical covenant and status as the chosen people, the role of the Jewish woman, *Farda*, and indigenous influences, and the continued oppression and stubbornness (Liebman, 146). Sephardic Jews were spread across the New World colonies but lived mostly in secret in urban areas. Confirmed communities existed in Lima, Cartagena, Mexico City, Puebla, and more (Liebman, 144). Jews held a variety of different occupations and were fully integrated into colonial Spanish society save for their religion and cultural customs. By 1700, the population of ethnically Sephardic people was in steep decline, Liebman outlines four major reasons for the population decline: a series of *autos da fe* that began with mass arrests in the 1630s before rising in intensity in 1639 and 1649, the decrease of persecution in Europe and a coinciding decrease in Jewish immigration, a reduction in the anti-Jewish persecution in the Americas, and disillusionment caused by a series of pseudo-messiahs. The most significant of these two lists is the appearance in both lists of anti-Jewish persecution as a major cause for the retention of Jewish values. Liebman writes that the “death-knell” of the Jewish communities in the Spanish New World colonies was a combination of a lack of new Jewish immigrants and a decreasing motivation and religiosity from the community — something which is often created through persecution and maintained as a rejection of oppression. In Europe, persecution toward Jews has been a historical constant, notably reaching its most recent climax during the Holocaust, Liebman argues that the persecution and necessity for Jews to fight to maintain their cultural and religious identity has been what kept the community alive.

Early modern Sephardic history in the Americas does not relate directly to the rise of philosephardism and the continued appearance of antisemitism in modern Spanish politics, but it does provide meaningful context to the Sephardic experience post-expulsion and shows how these communities evolved. We see a community is shaped and adapted by its new environment — as an example, some Sephardim in the Americas adopted some indigenous practices relating to death rituals, such as placing a coin or a piece of grain in the mouth of the deceased (Liebman, 157). The experience of Sephardim in the new world also shows how community identity is lost, the forced diaspora created by the expulsion of Jews from Spain put many Sephardic Jews in situations that eventually eroded their identities. As Liebman puts it “The Jews lost the incentive to affirm or reaffirm their faith. Their practices fell into desuetude. There was an erosion in the number of the members of the ethnic group, especially through exogamy, and those who remained lost interest in the maintenance of the group” (Liebman, 161).

The majority of Sephardic Jews after their expulsion from Spain and Portugal spread across the Mediterranean and later Atlantic port cities, not crossing the Atlantic to the American colonies. Many of these Jews congregated in the Ottoman Empire and began to build communities in places such as Thessaloniki in modern-day Greece, Istanbul, and other locations where they could find places to put down roots. Importantly, these Jews did not leave Iberia as a cohesive group, Lehmann notes that “it was only the experience of exile, migration, and resettlement that contributed over time to the emergence of a Sephardi ... diaspora” (Lehmann, 3). While the Sephardic identity was created by the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian peninsula, instead of Toledan, Castillian, Aragonese, or other Jewish identities, the diasporic nature of the expulsion meant that a variety of different identities began to mix with Sephardim. As an example, over the centuries following the exile, people became not only Sephardic Jews, but also

Egyptian Sephardim, or Moroccan Sephardim — constructing similar but unique identities across wherever they settled. This is the context within which we find the modern Sephardim and the context of the repatriation law that promised to repatriate the members of these communities back to Spain.

## THE SEPHARDIC PERSPECTIVE

The Spanish government's treatment of Jews from the start of the "rediscovery" in the nineteenth century, to current times, hinges on the fact that prior to the passage of the repatriation law in 2015, the participation of Sephardim themselves was significantly limited due to the lack of Jews in Spain. Spanish policies such as promoting antisemitic conspiracies or Spain's hesitancy to diplomatically recognize Israel only affected a minimal number of Jews, in stark contrast to the repatriation law. For the first time since the "rediscovery" Spain had a policy that affected Jews widely. Sephardic Jews were given the opportunity to evaluate their connections with Spain and have an amount of control over how the Spanish government was using their identity. The response from Sephardim across the world was largely enthusiastic. There had been existing pathways for Sephardic Jews to gain Spanish citizenship, but this law allowed, for the first time, people to retain their original nationality in addition to their new Spanish citizenship. Previously, applicants would be required to move to Spain as well, this law allowed people to gain Spanish citizenship without ever having to move to Spain. There was a limited application window for potential applicants, which was extended due to the Covid-19 pandemic before it was closed in 2021 after six years of being open. The law was directed at people who could prove that they had genealogical connections back to Sephardic ancestors who were expelled

from Spain, regardless of whether or not the applicant is a Sephardic Jew themselves. The law presented itself as an opportunity for Spain to express its desire to reconnect to the Sephardi community and as an opportunity for Sephardic Jews to connect with their Iberian heritage.

Sara Koplik, the director of community outreach with the Jewish Federation of New Mexico, ran a program through the Federation to aid people with their applications. She also applied for citizenship herself, along with her son. Describing her reasoning for applying for Spanish citizenship, Koplik cited the healthcare and education of a country in the European Union as major draws, along with the political unrest of the Trump era in the United States as a potential push factor to leave her home country. She also saw the law passage in 2015 as an honest attempt on behalf of the Spanish government to make some atonement for the sins of the Inquisition. Her experience going through the application process and aiding other people attempting to gain their own citizenship shines a light on the faults of the repatriation process. Koplik recounted her experiences over the past few years with the law over the phone.

The intentions of the law were very clearly in part to attempt to reconnect Spain and Sephardic Jews and attempt to atone for Spain's historical wrongdoing, Koplik, and other people on the receiving end of the law experienced separate consequences. These included the discovery of Sephardic ancestry, changes in levels of antisemitism, as well as the intended rethinking of the relationship of these people to Spain. Koplik and her son submitted their applications before the original deadline of 2019. Both of them were raised as Ashkenazi Jews, though Koplik had long thought due to certain family practices that she might have Sephardic heritage. One of her family traditions stood out above the rest: the men in her family were all named after living relatives, a Sephardic tradition that contrasts with the Ashkenazi tradition of naming children after deceased relatives. Prior to the passage of the repatriation law, this was an interesting family tradition and

nothing more, but after hearing about the law Koplik decided to investigate her heritage more to see if she had a chance of qualifying. The law prompting Koplik to look into her familial history is far from an isolated occurrence. Koplik described many other people in her community, both Jewish and gentile, as looking into their pasts to see if they might qualify for Spanish citizenship. Many, especially those in the Hispanic community in New Mexico, discovered that they in fact did have Sephardic roots that were previously unknown. For Koplik, the discovery of her Sephardic ancestry not only meant that she would be potentially able to gain Spanish citizenship but also filled in gaps in her family history that had previously only been filled with guesses and theories. The law prompted her, and thousands of others to find out about their history and reexamine their relationship with Spain and more importantly with Jews and Judaism. Koplik noted that in her community in New Mexico there was a significant decrease in the amount of antisemitism she encountered. She said that the majority of the reduction she witnessed was due to people in the Hispanic community discovering their own history.

In 2021, both Koplik and her son had their applications rejected by the Spanish government. They joined thousands of others who have applied and been rejected due to procedure, including a significant number of people who Koplik and the Jewish Federation of New Mexico helped apply. The applications were rejected because of a change in regulations that required applicants to acquire a higher standard of certification than originally advertised, a change that happened after applications had already been sent in, and a change that applied retroactively to all applications that had not yet been processed. The specific change in the parameters of the law was that the number of organizations and bodies that are able to verify whether or not a person actually has Sephardic ancestry was reduced, and the people who had used organizations that no longer had the ability to verify cases had their applications rejected.

Before 2021, and the enacted change in the rules for applications, only one application had been rejected (Casey). Since the change in the rules, thousands of applicants have been rejected, and the number will continue to rise as the backlog of applications continues to be processed.

For Sara Koplik, the rejection of her and her son came as a betrayal on behalf of the Spanish government. Koplik stated that she had felt real hope when she found out about the law originally and was optimistic that the Spanish government honestly wanted to make amends with the Sephardic, and to a larger extent Jewish communities. Koplik decided after getting rejected to sue the Spanish government for wrongly denying her application. The case is pending and will likely not have an impact on the fate of the majority of applicants, but Koplik felt she could not accept her rejection sitting down. Describing her feelings after the rejection, Koplik said that more than anything she felt betrayed. Her sentiments were and are shared with many others across the country. Congresswoman Teresa Leger Fernandez, who represents New Mexico's second district, has been championing the cases of the people who have had their applications denied. Among her efforts to fight for the Spanish government to reconsider their denials, Leger Fernandez has given speeches at protests and written an official letter to the Prime Minister of Spain urging he rescind the rejections. The letter, which was signed by two senators and six representatives in addition to Leger Fernandez, referred to the rejections being the fault of "arbitrary bureaucratic barriers that have made it nearly impossible for Sephardic Jews to be approved after spending countless hours and thousands of euros" (Leger Fernandez). The phrase nearly impossible is key in demonstrating the restrictions on applications that Spain has put in place had at this point made the number of still unresolved applications that would be rejected rise. It was already known that Spain did not want an unlimited number of people with Sephardic ancestry gaining citizenship — the law included from the start an end-date to the application

window, something that has been questioned and criticized in its own right. The change in rules, due to the high number of resulting rejections, presents as if the Spanish government wanted to restrict the total number of accepted citizenship applications, acting almost as an additional barrier to the limited application window. This is one of Koplik's theories on why the parameters of the law were changed, that the Spanish government did not want as many Jews to gain citizenship as applied. Importantly, there is no evidence to suggest that there was a cap on the number of Jews Spain was willing to admit, nor is there evidence that the number of applications received by the time the application window closed — which was over one-hundred thousand — caused the Spanish government to balk and restrict the number of applicants they would approve. What is evident though, is that the fact that these thoughts exist within the community that Spain was trying to improve relations with shows a significant failure of the law to achieve its goals.

The onset of application rejections did not affect all applicants the same. Koplik highlighted Venezuelans who applied for Spanish citizenship as people who have been hurt the most by the policy changes. Marco Tulio Cabrera, the founder of Spanish-Venezuelans of Sephardic origins, was quoted in the New York Times after four of his family members had their applications denied. Cabrera said the potential for Spanish citizenship, and that he had spent roughly \$53,000 on the application processes for himself and his family (NYT). The lifeline was a potential exit from the economic turmoil in present-day Venezuela, but rather than families being given new chances in a more stable economy, many instead have lost thousands of dollars of savings. Koplik stated that her involvement with the Jewish Federation of New Mexico, with which she encouraged to apply and aided people with their applications left her with a significant feeling of guilt, because of the number of people who spent their life savings only to get rejected.

Koplik stated, “yet again Spain has betrayed the Jews, and I helped them”. Leger Fernandez has been quoted as saying that with the spate of rejections, it would have been better had Spain not promised repatriation at all.

Koplik’s observations in New Mexico are supported by accounts from other people with Sephardic ancestry who went through the application process in different areas. Rina Benmayor and Dalia Kandiyoti conducted a series of oral histories with people going through similar processes to Koplik for both the Portuguese and Spanish laws of repatriation. Through these interviews, we can see that the repatriation law strained relations between some Sephardic Jews and Spain beyond just the rejections. One of the key facets of the law was the idea that Spain was championing which is that after centuries outside of the Iberian peninsula, Sephardic Jews maintained a significant connection to their ancestral home. For many in reality, this was not the case. Liz Levine, a woman from Seattle who learned Spanish and applied for Spanish citizenship did so not out of a personal connection she had with Spain, but rather to connect with her Ladino-speaking Grandmother (Benmayor). Levine stated, in an interview, “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” (Benmayor). Others have experiences similar to Sara Koplik’s, in which they have been raised and lived with Ashkenazi Jewish traditions, and only upon finding their Sephardic heritage have they started to create a connection with Spain. Benmayor and Kandiyoti note that this experience is especially common among people born after the middle of the twentieth century, and for people who are born into marriages with mixed Sephardi heritage. The Americas in particular have a Jewish culture that is dominated by Jews from Eastern Europe, where it is common for American-Sephardi traditions to be eroded over time. Benmayor and Kandiyoti observed that this loss of Sephardi connections



has caused some people familiar with their heritage to “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” (Benmayor). In all, the amount members of the Sephardic diaspora associate themselves with their Sephardic identities and connections to Spain varies, contrary to messaging of the Spanish government. Upon the passage of the law in 2015, King Felipe VI gave a speech in which he addressed the Sephardi people, saying “Thank you for having kept like a precious treasure your language and your customs. They are ours too” (World Jewish Congress).

Some Sephardic Jews did not qualify for the law regardless of personal identification, due to the requirement for there to be proof of a genealogical tie back to an ancestor who was expelled from Spain. The emphasis on tangible proof of genealogical evidence, or “blood” ties comes with the assumption that one’s Sephardi identity is tied directly to one’s bloodline, additionally arguing that the Sephardic people were a part of the Spanish nation’s biology. This emphasis on “blood” ties acted as inclusive and exclusive. For many people, their familial history qualified them for citizenship despite them not previously knowing about their Sephardic history before hearing about the law. For others, they might know that they are Sephardic, but without the ability to prove genealogical connections they did not qualify for citizenship. One of the main problems with this system is that the centuries-long gap after expulsion and the continued movement of Sephardic Jews over those centuries have often made it difficult for potential applicants to trace their families history. Some forms of proof that are accepted are the following:

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; genealogical studies by experts or recognized academic entities; a Sephardi surname report written by a recognized expert; 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. (Benmayor)

The difficulty is not only found in lack of or missing documentation either, Benmayor and Kandiyoti point out that in places such as Turkey, which has populations of Iranian, Georgian, Ashkenazi, and other Jews in addition to Sephardic Jews, Sephardic and Jewish are used interchangeably, meaning many Sephardim referred to themselves as Jewish rather than Sephardic (Benmayor). For the descendants of these people, genealogical evidence of Sephardic identity may be impossible to come by, and instead, they will have to rely on other forms of evidence, such as a family knowledge of a Sephardic language.

Others have taken issue with the emphasis on “blood” ties for reasons tied to the history of antisemitic persecution of Spain. Judy Berck, an American Sephardi Jew who received her Portuguese citizenship commented on the irony of the focus on blood relations:

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. (Benmayor)

Bloodline historically had been used as a way to justify continued persecution against conversos from both Judaism and Islam after the start of the inquisition, this heavy emphasis on the importance of blood to determine Jewishness (in this case) therefore has led many people to feel uncomfortable, even though bloodline is being used now for inclusion in Spanish society rather than exclusion.

The 2015 law of repatriation was written with the intention to break out of the cycle of Spanish laws and policies that objectify Jews as political tools and genuinely repair the relationship between Spain and Sephardic Jews worldwide. For many, those who applied and had their applications accepted, this law has brought them closer to Spain and their Sephardic identities than perhaps ever before; for others, the rejected applications due to perceived antisemitism have caused the law to have the opposite effect to its intention. For these people, who were rejected, all of the positive ramifications of the law, such as the discovery or reaffirmation of their Sephardic identity are overshadowed by the feelings of betrayal caused by their rejection. The application process for descendants of Sephardim expelled from Spain during the Inquisition was time-consuming, expensive, and often logistically difficult. The fact that some applicants and potential applicants were left feeling more alienated than ever by this law represents a failure on the part of the Spanish government to achieve their goal of healing the rift between Spain and Jews.

## CONCLUSION

Notably, while the conflict between philosephardism and antisemitism in Spain has resulted in policies and laws such as the 2015 repatriation law, there has not been an analogous drive to repatriate or repair relationships with Muslims who were expelled from Spain during the inquisition. The relationship between Catholic Spain and Muslims is fundamentally different from the relationship between Catholic Spain and Jews, and in many ways has characterized the history of Spain since the arrival of Islam to the Iberian peninsula in 711. Jews have often been caught in the middle of the conflict between Catholic Spain and Muslims. Recounting the interactions between Sephardic Jews in Morocco and Spanish soldiers Michal Friedman writes that “These Jews, according to Spanish accounts in newspaper articles, memoirs, and literary texts, greeted the Spaniards as liberators and rallied around the Spanish troops. In these accounts, the Jew is generally cast as an intermediary between Spaniard and Muslim who dwells on the fringes of the patria, vying to affirm his membership in it” (Friedman, 107). This depiction of the Sephardic Jew in the middle of the Islamic and Catholic conflict has defined Spanish history resonates today, where the modern Spanish government has created laws to allow for Sephardic repatriation, but not for the descendants of the Muslims who were expelled during the Inquisition. The modern relationship between Spain and Islam warrants its own analysis, but it is worth noting that the similarities in the historical treatment of Jews and Muslims during the Inquisition would suggest that the lack of a modern repatriation movement is at least in part the result of modern politics.

For the first time on a global scale, Sephardic Jews were given the ability to participate in their relationship with Spain and the competing forces of philosephardism and antisemitism

within said relationship. This conflict then quickly excluded many of the applying Jews and people with Sephardic ancestry, undoing much of the Spanish Government's attempts to foster goodwill with the Jewish people and resolidifying the feelings of betrayal and disappointment among the rejected applicants. The 2015 repatriation law managed to accomplish and self-sabotage itself on several levels. It drew many Sephardic communities closer to Spain than they had been for centuries through accepted applications, while simultaneously souring the feelings of many applicants who applied and were rejected, especially those who were rejected due to the change in application parameters that were applied after the application deadline had passed. From the perspective of these applicants, the seeming restriction on the number of successful applicants reeked of the antisemitism that is still widespread and present in Spanish society. The Repatriation Law was an attempt to fully embrace philosephardism and leave Spain's antisemitic character in the past. Its failure to do so turned the law instead into an example of how the conflict that has existed since the creation of the philosephardi movement in the 1800s has continued into contemporary Spanish society. The law and its effects on Sephardim have redefined for many what it means to have Sephardi ancestry, even as it drove many people further from Spain. This law and its implementation are the latest battlegrounds in the ideological conflict between philosephardism and antisemitism, though it is the first time the conflict has allowed Sephardim to participate in the conflict, and the first time the conflict had a widespread impact on Sephardim around the world.

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