

EXPERTISE

SEPHARDIC JEWS

Following the first waves of persecution and mass expulsions, the Sephardim (from the Hebrew term for 'Spain') fled to North Africa and other parts of the Ottoman Empire, before settling in European countries like the Netherlands, Britain, Italy, France and the Balkans. Salonika and Amsterdam, in particular, became major sites of Sephardic settlement. These communities largely retained their native Judeo-Spanish language (Ladino), literature, and customs. The Sephardim differ notably from the Ashkenazi Jews in preserving Babylonian rather than Palestinian Jewish ritual traditions. Of the estimated 1.5 million Sephardic Jews worldwide (far fewer than the Ashkenazim), many now reside in Israel.

**BLAISE BAQUICHE** explains how he has been able to regain EU citizenship via some very deep family roots



After two years, £1,000 and zero lawyers I have officially become a Portuguese citizen. As a Remainer, previously jealous of my counterparts I was leaving behind in the rest of the EU after Brexit, I couldn't be happier.

My route back to EU citizenship was via laws passed in Spain and Portugal in 2013 aimed at encouraging the return of descendants of those countries' original Jewish community - known as Sephardic Jews - who had fled more than 500 years before. In 2015, the legislation was updated to decree that anybody with any Sephardic Jewish heritage, including non-Jews, could take up the offer of applying for a passport and citizenship.

The history of Jews on the Iberian peninsula goes back to Biblical times and before the Spanish Inquisition, it was home to around 300,000 Jews, forming one of the largest communities in the world. But persecution saw their numbers fall and there are now only an estimated 40,000 to 50,000.

However, the Inquisition introduced a long period of persecution in Spain, beginning with the Alhambra Decree, in 1492, which expelled them from the country. Although no Monty Python sketches were written about the Portuguese, in 1515 they kicked off their own Inquisition to rival that of Spain. Portugal's King, Manuel I, sought the hand in marriage of Spain's Maria of Aragon and in proving his love for her in the only way she'd understand, set about persecuting religious minorities.

Until relatively recently, these were not chapters of history in which I was particularly well versed. Indeed, until I discovered the recent legislation, I had never really identified as a Sephardic Jew.

My Jewish father's family was from Egypt, but he had been caught up in the Suez Crisis in 1957 which resulted in Egypt's president Nasser expelling all non-Arabs from the country. Britain offered a sanctuary to refugees escaping the fall-out, so this was where I was born.

My Catholic mother had sent me to an Anglican school, giving me a laissez-faire approach to religion, and, indeed to nationality. Whenever I thought much about, I suppose I felt British. But, as I grew older, I felt European too.

My passion for politics took me to the European Parliament, where I ended up advising Conservative MEPs. In the heady days of pre-Brexit Brussels, I felt comfortable advising Tories who were prepared to engage with the EU institutions, improve our relationship with Europe and actually do some work.

After the country voted for Brexit, and as the party degenerated into tub-thumping nationalism, I was inspired by the Tory MEP Charles Tannock, who called himself "ashamed to be British" and announced that he was claiming an Irish passport. With no Irish grandmother to hand, I trawled through my own heritage to find a way to retain my rights as an EU citizen - hence my late onset



# MY PERSONAL JOURNEY BACK TO AN EU PASSPORT

interest in my father's family history.

As Spain and Portugal were both offering citizenship for Sephardic Jews, I plumped for the easier route: Portugal. Spain had introduced two additional hurdles to the process, including a language requirement and proof that applicants have taken steps to integrate into Spanish society.

To satisfy the Portuguese requirements, all I had to do was prove that I was the descendant of someone who kept up with Sephardic customs. I managed this using the *Ketuba* of my grandparents, a marriage certificate that was adorned in the traditional Sephardic style used by the Jewish community in Cairo in the 1940s.

I first had to show this evidence to an official body representing the Jewish community in Porto to get approval. Then, it was up to the Portuguese civil service to decide my fate.

Two years, one civil service strike and a national election later, I was finally given the all clear.

**BACK IN EUROPE:** Blaise Baquiche campaigning at an anti-Brexit march

Photo: Contributed

I felt a bit odd, claiming citizenship of a country to which I have no cultural or emotional connection. But it has also allowed me to retain all my rights as an EU citizen - and that is obviously something I already had a strong attachment to.

Prior to the referendum I felt perfectly at ease describing myself as English, British and European. For me, getting this passport is about more than just keeping my legal rights, it's about keeping that identity.

Its deep mauve cover emblazoned with the words "União Europeia" in gold feels like my own form of rebellion and a swipe at Brexiteers longing for a return to blue passports.

I may have no deserved ties to Portugal through being born or building a life there, but my long ancestral journey from that part of the world to London, via Bulgaria, Greece and Egypt, feels like my status was earned.

Having my legal freedoms removed

matters to me in a way that is deeply entangled with my Jewish heritage. The Leavers who voted to remove them say they care about a sense of belonging in their own community. But I feel just the same about my sense of belonging in my own community, regardless of whether that makes me a rootless cosmopolitan or the metropolitan elite.

But in choosing to be an EU citizen again, I am also wary of my new compatriots. The rise of Spain's far right Vox party, coming in third place in November with 15% of the vote doesn't sound too comforting, and the election of Portugal's first far-right MP since the end of the Salazar dictatorship in 1974 could be the start of something ugly, of which Jews are all too familiar.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that this 'Law of Return', of which I am a beneficiary, was passed in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, amidst a 5.3% fall in Portugal's GDP. For the next eight years, an average of 97,000 Portuguese per year left the country, with as many as 150,000 leaving in 2011.

For a population of around 10 million, this must have felt palpable, especially as the PM actively encouraged the young unemployed to find jobs abroad.

It begs the question as to whether the law was an act of genuine remorse for the Inquisition, or rather, a hard-headed financial calculation to reboot Portugal's economy. It makes sense that Portugal would try to fill the void left by this mass emigrant wave, by any means necessary. The state has even gone so far as to offer an exemption on half of all income tax to émigrés who return to Portugal.

And in brushing up on Iberian history, law-makers may have stumbled across a famous (mis)quote of the Ottoman Sultan, Bayazid II, that the expulsion of Jews "impoverished Spain, and enriched Turkey", to where most Sephardim had relocated after they were told to convert to Christianity or get out.

In any case, I'm not complaining. As a Brit, I'm determined to keep my freedom to work, study, live and love in all 27 EU member states.

Of course, the very concept of freedom of movement feels like a particularly sick joke at this time of lockdown and closed borders. But this period will end, and those freedoms - at least for some of us - will return.