

Returning to Sefarad through de back door

The Statement of Motives of Law 12/2015, with regulates the possibility of obtaining the Spanish nationality for Judeo-Spanish people, seeks reparation, reconciliation and historical justice with which I fully agree.

The first time I heard about Sephardic Jews was through my mother, when I was a kid. She used to tell, and keeps telling, a recurring story about the surprise she experienced during her last year trip (to Italy, Greece and Turkey in 1967) when she heard several people speaking in a language very similar to Spanish, completely intelligible to her and her friends, Spanish citizens from the twentieth century, with a particular accent and peculiar sweetness. It was at a district of Thessaloniki, in Greece.

Over time I have come to understand that those people who my mother met did not speak "something similar to Spanish". Their language, *ladino*, is, with some particularities, the legitimate and true language of Spain during the fifteenth century, preserved thanks to something so beautiful, strange and painful as having chosen, generation after generation, for five centuries, never to abandon it.

The people my mother heard in Greece were Sephardic or Judeo-Spanish: the community, scattered throughout the world, formed by direct descendants of the Spaniards of Jewish religion who, for this reason, were expelled from the Kingdoms of Castile and Aragon after the Edict of Granada in 1492. And they have had the courage, the nostalgia, and the social and identity strength to wish to continue having a connection with what was the land of their ancestors, Sefarad (which is the Hebrew phrase that identifies the Iberian Peninsula).

The Statement of Motives of Law 12/2015, which articulates the possibility of obtaining Spanish nationality to Judeo-Spanish people who demonstrate their origin, makes an approach to reparation, reconciliation and historical justice with which I fully agree, and that culminates with this paragraph:

"Ultimately, this Law intends to be the meeting point between Spaniards at present and the descendants of those who were unjustly expelled after 1492, and it is justified by the common determination to build together, against the intolerance of past times, a new space for coexistence and harmony, that reopens forever the doors of their old country to the communities expelled from Spain. "

The problem, a serious one, is that the legal tool used in response to such purposes has proved to be rather ineffective for its finality, which is none other than to provide citizenship to those who, despite the injustice suffered by their lineage, have never wanted to stop being culturally Spanish.

One of the requirements of the mentioned Law is to prove knowledge of Spanish language, by showing an A2-level knowledge certificate, certainly not a very high level, but which seems unnecessary when demonstrating what is essential: belonging to the Sephardic

community of the country of origin, whose most important identifying feature is the use of *Ladino*, the Spanish language of the fifteenth century.

For example, it is inexplicable that a Sephardic Jew from Canada, who knows *Ladino* due to being the language used at a domestic level by his parents and grandparents, who spends his daily life speaking in and listening to English or French, is required a legal knowledge certificate of Spanish language, when what we supposedly want is to open the door to these people, who will pass from being "culturally Spanish" to Spanish citizens with full rights, and with a language transmitted from generation to generation for so long.

Not to mention the test of socio-cultural knowledge, which is not very complex, but does not seem to make much sense either, since the Jewish culture of which the Sephardim are proud, being a sign of their identity, is legitimately Spanish; and I want to believe that the return to Sefarad must entail not only the repair of a historical injustice, but a cultural enrichment for our current society.

In short, figures speak for themselves: it is estimated that all different Sephardic communities in the world add up to almost two million people.

But the fact is that in front of something so beneficial a priori as obtaining our nationality, and, therefore, the membership to the European Union, scarcely six thousand people have ended up obtaining the Spanish passport, after a long, complex and not very clear administrative procedure, and, what is worse, full of obstacles. Thus, according to the most optimistic sources since the truth is that, from a technical point of view, they seem to be quite less, and we do not count with too reliable data.

If we add to the above the costs and the time it takes to resolve the procedure, we can affirm that Law 12/2015 has not really been useful.

The Law contemplated a one-year extension of the short term granted, which was done by decision of the Council of Ministers, being the deadline October 1st, 2019. The issue is that most of the operators involved, except logically government, consider this procedure as a waste of a historical opportunity. The most critical ones even see it as a simple act facing the gallery, without true practical virtuality: this is not true either.

Having to bring forward a large volume of documentation, together with pertinent legalizations and sworn translations, to take a couple of exams, to address yourself to a Notary and, at the end, wait and wait is not the ideal procedure obviously. But given the practically null expectations that the application of the Law is extended again, and not existing any announcements of a better instrument, it is the only one that the descendants of the Jews unfairly expelled from their country (Spain) in 1492 have to recover, at least, their nationality.

As a Sephardi says, it is not a grace, nor a gift, nor a mercy. It is, at least, a right.

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