

Spain Approves Citizenship Path for Sephardic Jews

12/06/2015 17:00 by admin

MADRID (The New York Times) â€” Seeking to redress one of the darkest chapters of Spainâ€™s history, the Spanish Parliament on Thursday approved a long-awaited law devised to open the way for citizenship for thousands of Sephardic Jews whose ancestors were expelled in 1492.

â€œThis law says a lot about what we were in the past, what we are today and what we want to continue to be in the future â€” an open, diverse and tolerant Spain,â€• Rafael CatalÃ¡, the Spanish justice minister, told lawmakers on Thursday.

The law was first proposed by the Spanish government in 2012. Even before Thursdayâ€™s final ratification by Congress, the lower chamber of Parliament, the measure generated intense interest in countries like Argentina, Israel and Turkey, which have significant Sephardic communities.

The change in the law should be seen as â€œan act of historic reparation for a tragic and serious error,â€• Mario Eduardo Cohen, president of the Center for Research and Diffusion of Sephardic Culture, based in Buenos Aires, said recently in Madrid, on the sidelines of a meeting of representatives of Sephardic communities from around the world.

The law is set to come into force in October, and may help turn what has until now been a trickle of successful applications into a flood. But just how many Sephardic Jews will be able to get a Spanish passport is unclear.

â€œThere will no doubt be a large number of requests, but itâ€™s too early to say how many and what portion will actually meet the citizenship criteria,â€• said Rosa MarÃ­a Verger Sans, a lawyer in Barcelona who specializes in citizenship requests and has been focusing on Sephardic claims.

The Spanish government itself has not made any forecast. Between 2010 and 2013, about 121 Sephardic Jews were granted Spanish nationality, after meeting Spainâ€™s existing residency or naturalization rules, which is a small proportion of those who applied.

The Justice Ministry said on Thursday that it was already handling 4,454 applications from Sephardic Jews, filed under the current citizenship rules.

Citizenship applicants are likely to be driven by both sentimental and economic reasons, according to Sephardic representatives. In some cases, they may also seek to escape rising anti-Semitism in their own countries.

Ms. Verger Sans noted that many Sephardic Jews already owned property or had investments in Spain. A Spanish passport, she said, â€œwill make it easier for them not only within Spain, but also to travel across Europe and get their children into whatever school they want.â€•

Jorge Fuentes, director of the Israelite Circle of Santiago, estimated during his recent visit to Madrid that the new law would persuade about 2,500 Sephardic Jews in Chile to seek a Spanish passport.

Mr. Fuentes, who is an architect, said the citizenship law should â€œreally help multiply commercial linksâ€• between Spain and countries in Latin America that have significant Sephardic communities. But he also emphasized the purely sentimental value of being allowed to reconnect with Spain.

â€œSentiment for Jewish people is in itself something powerful,â€• Mr. Fuentes said. â€œThe golden Sephardic age took place in Spain, so this is really a return to our roots.â€•

The number of applicants from Argentina could be higher, according to Mr. Cohen, who noted that the country has the largest Jewish community in Latin America — numbering about 250,000, of whom 40,000 to 70,000 are Sephardic Jews.

The new law is intended to give Spanish citizenship to any person whose Sephardic origins can be certified. It also removes any obligation for applicants to renounce their current citizenship.

The Sephardic citizenship law, however, has also prompted some soul-searching about why similar rules should not be extended to the descendants of the Muslim Moors who were also expelled in the late 15th century.

Last month, during the debate over the law in the Spanish Senate, some opposition lawmakers also urged the government to apply similar citizenship rules for applicants from the Western Sahara, a former Spanish protectorate that was occupied by Morocco after Spain withdrew in 1975.

Granting Spanish nationality to Sephardic Jews but not to Muslims previously tied to Spain amounts to “unfairness,” said Jesús Enrique Iglesias, a senator from the United Left party, during last month’s debate.

Even as Sephardic Jews welcomed the end of a long legislative process in Spain, some warned that obtaining citizenship might still prove arduous and costly. For instance, Spain must still define the content of a Spanish culture exam that applicants will have to take, as part of the new law, before getting a passport. As part of the amendments made during the Senate’s review of the law, the governing Popular Party also introduced a fee of 100 euros, about \$112, for each citizenship application.

“Let’s see what actually happens when the law is in place,” said Karen Gerson Sarhon, the coordinator of the Ottoman-Turkish Sephardic Culture Research Center in Istanbul.

Six years ago, she said, she applied to become a Spanish citizen under the current naturalization rules “to no avail” while her husband got his Spanish passport within six months. Ms. Gerson Sarhon also sings in Ladino, a Spanish dialect spoken by Sephardic Jews, and taught it at the Cervantes Institute, a state agency designed to promote Spanish language and culture overseas.

“I brought them a suitcase full of documents to back my application, but that clearly wasn’t enough,” she said. “It seems my documents have just been allowed to sleep in the Spanish Justice Ministry.”