



Sidney Corcos at his Jerusalem home, standing in front of his family tree and family portraits. Credit: Olivier Fitoussi

The Israelis Going in Search of Their Spanish Roots

Since Spain's government announced plans to offer citizenship to descendants of Jews exiled by the Inquisition, genealogy has become increasingly popular in Israel.

By [Ofar Aderet](#) | Apr 10, 2015

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The home of Sidney Corcos in Jerusalem's Talpiot neighborhood, adjacent to the home of writer Shai Agnon, is a museum dedicated to the history of his widespread, distinguished family. His ancestors were evicted from Spain and reached Morocco in the 15th century, where Corcos was born in 1949. He immigrated to Israel at the age of 10.

Along the house walls are displayed many-branched family trees, the fruits of decades of work that document 15 generations and reach the most important and well-known families, such as the Montefiore and Abulafia lineages. Alongside them, family portraits from the 19th and early 20th centuries adorn the walls, including his parent's ketubah marriage contract. On it is written, black on white, "As is the custom of the exiles" – a reference to the Spanish Inquisition in 1492.

"From my perspective, there is no argument. My family's source is in Spain. The town of Corcos will testify to that, even though no remnants of Jews exist there," its namesake says.

By day, Corcos manages Jerusalem's Nature Museum and in the evenings documents his family's history. He was lucky: His family left behind written documents, meaning that a family tree could be drawn up with traces that lead as far as Spain.

"Very few people who left Morocco can say anything about their grandfather," he explains. "People left their homes in a hurry on their way to Israel, and left everything behind and didn't take any documentation with them. In Israel, their passports were taken from them. My parents somehow managed to take everything," he recounts with satisfaction, noting that his father even managed to bring his library to Israel.

Like many others, Corcos is currently planning to [apply for Spanish citizenship](#), which will allow the descendants of the exiles to receive a Spanish passport. "For me it will be the closing of a historic and spiritual circle," he says. "I feel the burning in my bones, in light of the opportunity to get back the citizenship that was stripped from my ancestors who were thrown out from there," he adds excitedly, but emphasizes that he has no intention of leaving Israel.

His father, David, began documenting the family, with the encouragement of then-President Yitzhak Ben-Zvi who researched the Jewish communities in Israel. Already in the 1960s, David began to write the history of the Moroccan-Jewish community and his family, and wrote entries on the subject for the Hebrew Encyclopedia and the Judaica Encyclopedia. He did not complete his life's work by the time of his untimely death in 1975.

At that time, Sidney Corcos was a student at the Pardes Hannah agricultural school with dreams of becoming a veterinarian. "I wasn't at all interested in researching the family's roots," he says. But the rich archives left him by his father left him no choice. "I took all his lists and assembled one big genealogy. It was the first thing I had done in the field," he recalls.

Since then, his family tree has expanded and now includes some 11,000 names. Some of them were renowned and important people, including advisers and financial managers to Moroccan royalty. One of them, Avraham Corcos, was a tradesman who bore the honorific title of the Consul of the United States in the Moroccan city of Mogador [now known as Essaouira]. "It is said that he even met the president of the United States, [Abraham] Lincoln," Corcos recounts proudly.

Greeted like a lost son

In Be'er Sheva lives another man who has been bitten by the genealogy bug and devotes all his spare time to searching for Spanish roots. Last summer, Aharon Ben Yosef went on a journey in search of his ancestors' roots in Spain. In the city of Tarazona, in the autonomous community of Aragon in northeast Spain, he was greeted like a lost son who had returned home after a journey of 522 years. City residents warmly surrounded him, and he was even interviewed by the local newspaper and television station.

"There are no Jews left there, but the Juderia (the Jewish quarter) is the center of the city, like it or not," Ben Yosef says with a smile. "The city knows how to respect its past – to turn it into an attraction for Japanese and German tourists who come to see our ghetto." Ben Yosef (originally Benadroit) revealed via his archival and genealogical research some fascinating things about his family, and the long road it followed over hundreds of years from Spain to Thessaloniki in Greece, and from there throughout the world.

Ben Yosef was born in London in 1937 to a Thessalonican family (on his father's side) that worked in the tobacco trade and later in repairing Persian carpets. In 1964, he made aliyah to Israel, where he was a lawyer and the Be'er Sheva court registrar. He turns 78 this year.

Last October, Ben Yosef and Corcos presented their family stories to a special convention organized by the Tel Aviv branch of the Israel Genealogical Society devoted to a current issue: proving the link of Jewish families of North African and Balkan extraction to those expelled from Spain.

Haaretz recently published details of the bill that will eventually allow Jews of Spanish descent to receive a European passport. They will have to prove that their surname appears on the list of those expelled from Spain; to demonstrate knowledge of the Spanish language and constitution; show a current link to Spain; and swear allegiance to the king. Ben Yosef meets all these criteria, yet, unlike Corcos, he is not interested in Spanish citizenship. His work to reveal his roots was carried out purely for personal interest.

"I am a first-generation Zionist who made aliyah in order to build up the nation after the Holocaust following 2,000 years of exile. I will die in Israel and cannot imagine anything else," he says. "I gave up my British citizenship in order to live here, so how could I now go and ask for Spanish citizenship? It's a little too early to go back 500 years, even before I have

been buried in my country. The words of [the Israeli national anthem] ‘Hatikva’ have a meaning for me that I cannot go back on. If my children or grandchildren want to do it – well, may they be healthy.”

‘The builder of Tiberias’

At the beginning of his family research, Ben Yosef came upon a man called Yosef Ben-Ardroit, who was among those expelled from Spain, moved to Thessaloniki in the middle of the 16th century and was sent to Tiberias to oversee the construction of the city’s wall. He was an emissary of Don Joseph Nasi, a Jewish diplomat from a family of conversos [Jews who publicly recanted their faith and adopted Christianity, under pressure from the Inquisition] who was called “the builder of Tiberias.”

“I immediately went to Tiberias to search for traces,” says Ben Yosef. “At the municipality and local museum, they laughed at me. I didn’t find anything. They hadn’t heard of Ben-Ardroit who built the wall, even though his name is mentioned in documents.”

In Thessaloniki he also found no information about his family. “In the Thessaloniki cemetery I found no Ben-Ardroit, and it’s good that it was so. Otherwise, it would have meant I’d also find information about them in Yad Vashem [the Holocaust memorial and research center in Jerusalem],” he said, referring to the wartime annihilation of Thessaloniki’s Jews.

In a book about Jewish doctors in the Middle Ages, though, he found references to the Benadroit family, who were doctors to the Aragonian royal family. His research, which took him through books, articles and information sources available on the Internet, eventually led him to the city of Tarazona that was in the kingdom’s territory and which today is proud of its Jewish roots.

The city rediscovered its Jewish roots in the year 2000, when its cathedral’s archivist found a document in Hebrew inside a book from the 14th century. Excited by the discovery, he checked the bindings of other books and found another 60 documents in Hebrew – forgotten testimony to Jewish life in the city.

Ben Yosef was impressed by the efforts made by the city to explore its roots, but on the wall of one of the city’s houses he noticed a Palestinian flag. On approaching, he saw an announcement of a demonstration against the war in Gaza planned for the following day in the city square. “I said to myself, ‘The Spaniards know how to maintain balance.’ Because of this balance they will ultimately have to pass a law that will also grant citizenship to Muslims who were expelled from Spain,” he adds.

In the city, he was shown lands that it was claimed belonged to a man called Ben-Ardroit in 1405. Ben Yosef photographed the tracts and uploaded the pictures to the family’s Facebook page, which brings together “Benadroits” from all over the world who have caught the bug and are also searching for their Spanish connection. The family’s page is dedicated to “all members of the family with the unspellable name.”

At this point, Ben Yosef offers an important tip for anyone wanting to investigate their Spanish roots. “You can go crazy when you try to follow people using historical documents, because the names changed and were later Hebraized back. In my case, there are many ways to spell the name,” he says, and offers up the names “Ben Adroit,” “Ibn Ardort,” “Evenadroit,” “Arditti” and “Ben Aderet” as examples used for the same man in different documents.

What’s in a name? Panic

When asked why he Hebraized his name despite his link to the exiles from Spain, Ben Yosef recalls an amusing anecdote. After he immigrated to Israel, Interior Ministry officials asked him if his surname was “Bernadotte,” like the Swedish diplomat [Folke Bernadotte] who was murdered by the Irgun pre-state militia in Jerusalem in 1948. “I was alarmed,” he admits, “and changed my name to Ben Yosef, in memory of my father.”

The genealogist [Gidi Poraz](#) advises Sephardi families wishing to investigate their roots in order to establish a link with Spain to begin with archival research here in Israel. “Much information about the Jews of Spain exists in Israel: books and research studies; family trees; marriage licenses and ketubbot that were sent for safeguarding; passports that were taken from immigrants; and historical documents,” he explains.

Poraz recommends commencing the search with a visit to the Central Zionist Archives, where lists of immigrants, passports and Jewish Agency files are stored. Addresses and original family trees, organized according to countries and communities, are stored at the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People. There are also hundreds of original manuscripts in the National Library. The State Archive includes Interior Ministry files. He adds that it could also be worthwhile visiting the Ben-Zvi Institute, which has extensive documentation of North African Jewry.



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