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KEEPING THE FAITH. Even under persecution, they continued to marry only among themselves, kept family purity and went to great lengths to maintain dietary laws, observe the festivals, and perform the rites of birth and marriage.

them is hoping to marry the son of the hosts she met that Seder night. He, being a Cohen, is prohibited from marrying a convert.

But for the majority, problems really begin when, as is happening in ever-increasing numbers, newly orientated Jews want to make aliya. The local rabbis who deal with the applications seem to have little or no knowledge of Marrano-Anusim customs or the fact that clandestine Jewish enclaves have been in existence for centuries in many parts of the world. And without the aid of modern-day communications, families made sure their children married only persons of the same religion.

While we at Casa Shalom have had a number of successful applications for Anusim to receive a Return Document from the Israeli Rabbinate, these highly valued certificates continue to be a rarity. In the past few months, more and more overseas applicants to attend Israeli conversion classes have been refused visas. Meanwhile, those already here and successfully passing exams, have not been granted the legal papers to enable them to seek employment, for as long as two years afterwards, not to mention the period of their studies when they also were not permitted to work.

After the rabbis give their OK, the papers are given to the Ministry of the Interior, which causes further unnecessary delays, before finally granting Israeli passports and work permits. Most of these Anusim are alone without family or Israeli contacts who can assist them with basic needs, such as accommodation, during this difficult period. We have members here who were given their Return Certificates in July 2007 and still have not received the vital documentation, plus no indication as to how much longer it will take.

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Waiting to enter the fold

Casa Shalom strives to help Marrano-Anusim obtain the certification they require to be accepted as Jews in Israel

• By GLORIA MOUND

The advent of the Internet has brought to awareness the fact that Jews went on living a Crypto-Jewish life in areas of persecution, plus the realization that customs believed for generations to be purely family traditions are coming to light as being rooted in the practices of Judaic ancestors. Sometimes such enlightenment brings initial trauma; but for others, a route appears to a new path of living and a chance to regain a lost heritage.

These situations frequently occur when, with today's fuller educational advantages, young people from isolated locations in the world are given the opportunity to travel and attend universities. In so doing, they make friendships that enable them to visit homes where they

observe or hear about Jewish traditions such as Shabbat, Festivals, not eating meat and dairy foods together, and they realize they have seen it all before within their own families.

Two years ago in London, two young Christian sisters from Brazil were invited to a Pessah Seder. Toward the end the repast, to the utter amazement of the hosts and guests, the girls lustily joined in the singing and, except for the odd word, continued almost verbatim with the others around the table! The sisters said that this knowledge came from their grandmother. Further investigations in Brazil produced clear evidence that the family were Jews, originally from Portugal, and that in both these countries a number of their ancestors had paid with their lives for their religious observances. Today we are seeking Return Certificates for the two sisters. One of

Difficulties are particularly prevalent in Sephardic families that are coming not only from Spain and Portugal, but the much larger numbers now "coming out of the closet" from South America and the Caribbean. All the while, they have continued to marry only among themselves, keep family purity and go to enormous lengths to try to maintain dietary laws, festivals, birth, marriage and funeral rituals, even maintaining their ethnic Spanish-Judeo music. Many stand before the Israeli Rabbinical courts stronger in abiding by the Jewish traditions than many a secular Israeli family.

With records of their ancestors killed by the Inquisition – which so many in the Ashkenazi Diaspora forget did not disappear until the mid-19th century – many of these Anusim deserve not only to our deepest admiration for their tenacity of faith, in the face of centuries of danger and persecution. Upon examination of documents held at Casa Shalom, many of them are already halachically Jewish. This situation is forcing more and more Marrano-Anusim to make overseas Reform conversions, which are acceptable to Israeli border control, subsequently taking Orthodox classes upon arrival. But all this involves yet more delays in each location.

Such callous behavior is yet another example of how we are ignoring the rabbinic directive to "welcome the convert." The time has come to aid those who wish to fully regain the Jewish way of living in their ancestral land. Something must be done now.

As we enter the 5769th year of our ancient heritage, may we pray that those in charge of these injustices do everything possible to become more knowledgeable and understanding about our brethren and help those who yearn for their long-awaited homecoming to Eretz Israel.

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