

GLOBAL

Documents from Roman Abramovich's controversial Portuguese naturalization surface online

BY CNAAN LIPSHIZ APRIL 1, 2022



Roman Abramovich, former owner of Chelsea, smiles following the team's victory during the UEFA Champions League in Porto, Portugal, May 29, 2021. (Alexander Hassenstein - UEFA/UEFA via Getty Images)

(JTA) — The question of how Russian Jewish billionaire Roman Abramovich obtained Portuguese citizenship, and a European passport, has loomed large in the last month, especially after a rabbi responsible for certifying citizenship applications was arrested in early March.

Now, a trove of documents associated with Abramovich's Portuguese citizenship application have leaked online, with possible ramifications for tens of thousands of people who are waiting to hear whether their own applications will be approved.

The documents include testimonies from rabbis and others about Abramovich's Sephardic credentials, required under a 2013 law of naturalization for descendants of Sephardic Jews that Portugal enacted atone for their persecution during the Inquisition. Spain enacted a similar law, but its limited window has largely closed.

It is unclear how the documents, which include what appears to be an unredacted photocopy of Abramovich's Israeli passport, ended up online. It is also unclear whether the documents reflect the total associated with Abramovich's citizenship application.

But what is clear is that Abramovich's application did make the case that he has Sephardic roots despite his Ashkenazi-sounding last name — and that the leaked documents are unlikely to convince skeptics that those claims were scrutinized thoroughly.

Prominent rabbis submitted letters on behalf of the businessman, who has donated many millions to Jewish causes all over the world. But the documents leaked online do not include a family tree or other genealogical research submitted by many other citizenship applicants, including some who have had their applications rejected.

One of the rabbis whose letter is included in the dossier confirmed the authenticity of his statement to a Portuguese journalist working in collaboration with the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. JTA was not able to immediately confirm the authenticity of all the documents in the dossier.

Abramovich's naturalization has become a symbol for suspected abuse of the law that has allowed tens of thousands of people to become citizens of Portugal, a member of the European Union.

Portugal announced it would dramatically tighten the law amid news that Abramovich, whose citizenship was granted in April 2021, is the subject of international sanctions against oligarchs in connection with Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Abramovich made billions in the Russian oil industry but has denied that he was ever part of Russian President Vladimir Putin's inner circle.

The Portuguese justice ministry had launched a criminal investigation related to his application on suspicion of fraud in late 2021 and, earlier this month, arrested the rabbi who certified it. The rabbi, Daniel Litvak, has been barred from leaving the country while an investigation continues.

Litvak is the chief rabbi of Porto, one of two communities along with Lisbon entrusted by the government with the task of vetting all applications. The community has said it charged 250 euros, or roughly \$270, per application it handled.

Before the citizenship law, the Porto community said it did not have enough money to fix the moldy roof of its only synagogue. Now the same community boasts a new mikvah, a ritual bath, and a Holocaust museum. It employs a full-time rabbi and security guards and has produced a feature film about its own history.

After Litvak's arrest, the Porto community announced it would no longer certify applications because it is "no longer interested in cooperating with the state." The community has denied any wrongdoing while also ignoring calls to disclose documents relevant to the application.

The leaked dossier seems to have been put together as a defense, though it does not say who produced it. It contains pictures from the Porto Jewish Community and favorable news articles about Abramovich as well as an unsigned document stating that his application "was produced correctly in the light of the Jewish world and Portuguese law."

But unless the Porto community or others have additional documents, then the dossier does little to improve the prospect of the law remaining in its current form.

Unlike many other applications — including ones that had been rejected — the leaked dossier contains neither a family tree nor genetic tests nor any other solid, verifiable evidence that Abramovich can trace his roots to the Iberian Peninsula.

Instead, one of the central documents in the dossier is a 108-word statement by Alexander Boroda, the president of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, the main Chabad-Lubavitch organization in that country and by far the largest Jewish organization there.

Boroda “can certify that Roman Abramovich is a descendant of Sephardic Jews; preserved sentimental connection to Portugal; [is a] member of Sephardic community; is of Portuguese ancestry; is Sephardic Portuguese Jew,” read the statement.

Under the sub-headline “justification,” Boroda wrote only: “This certification is based on my acquaintance with Roman Abramovich testimonies and a personal interview that I conducted. I confirm that Roman Abramovich preserves Sephardic rituals, lifestyle, traditions and food customs.”

Boroda confirmed the authenticity of his statement to Ana Filipa Nunes, a Portuguese journalist who interviewed him about it for the SIC television channel while reporting about the dossier in collaboration with JTA.

The Sephardic Educational Center, a Jerusalem-based organization devoted to promoting Sephardic culture, submitted a much longer position paper whose main argument is that Abramovich is Sephardic because his last name means “son of Abraham.” Many Sephardic Jews also had that name, albeit in Hebrew, Ben Avraham, the paper explains.

Another statement came from Rabbi Yonah Leib Lebel, a follower of the Breslov Hasidic movement. Lebel states that Abramovich had ancestors who belonged to the Sephardic Jewish community of Hamburg. The last name of Abramovich’s paternal grandfather was

Leibovich, which means son of Leib, a Yiddish version of Leon. Leon is a common name on the Iberian Peninsula, the statement says.

Lebel's letter also states that unnamed descendants of Abramovich used to live in the Polish city of Poznan, where a founder of Chabad named Portugaler once lived. "Since then the family was linked with it," Lebel wrote, referring to Chabad.

The dossier, which contains multiple news articles supporting the notion that Abramovich has an attachment to Sephardic Judaism, also features a photocopy of an Israeli passport of Abramovich valid until 2023. Abramovich gained Israeli citizenship in 2018 under the country's Right of Return for Jews who want to live there.

In the unsigned cover letter of the dossier, its authors say that seeing Abramovich's application snowball into a scandal has been traumatic to Jews in Porto.

"This news originated a wave of immense attacks against the Jewish community and was felt like a new expulsion," they wrote, but did not specify what they meant by "attacks." It led the Jewish community of Portugal and that of Porto "to fear not only a 'Dreyfus case,'" they wrote, referencing an infamous antisemitic show trial in 1896 France, "but also an extreme right-wing terror attack, because it [the community] was 'selling the country.' This happened in Halle in Germany!" the authors wrote, referencing a neo-Nazi's deadly assault on a synagogue there in 2019.

The Jewish Community of Porto did not immediately reply to a query by JTA on the origins of the dossier and whether it had any comment on its content. No physical attacks against Jews have been reported in the city in recent weeks.