

## Are Iberia's Pseudo Passovers All about the Afiko-Money?

By Cnaan Liphshiz

(JTA) - In the center of the medieval Portuguese town of Medelim, two newlyweds in Sephardic wedding clothes are serenaded by a musical ensemble performing Ladino music.

Nearby, several members of the knights Templar march in white capes and chain mail while a harlequin on stilts prances around carrying a pole topped with a Star of David.

The scene may have been familiar to someone living in Medelim 500 years ago, when the town had a large population of Sephardic Jews. But today there are no Jews in Medelim, their memory evoked solely by actors hired to play period roles during the municipally organized "Jewish and Christian Passover," an annual cultural event held for the second time last month.

Occurring just months after both Portugal and Spain introduced legislation to naturalize Sephardic Jews, the festival is part of a growing embrace of Iberian Jewish heritage. Both countries have seen a surge in festivals celebrating Jewish culture, often timed to Jewish holidays such as Passover and Sukkot.

"In Portugal, there is much ignorance on how important Jews have been to our cultural roots, so events that familiarize people with Jewish traditions are welcome," said Jose Antonio Oliveira, a geography lecturer at the Lusophone University of Humanities and Technologies in Lisbon who participated in a panel discussion at the Medelim event.

But there is also a financial aspect to the embrace of Jewish heritage. Local officials hope the events will raise the town's profile and attract tourists.

Medelim's tourism department hired Mor Karbasi, an Israel-born rising star on the world music scene, to perform in Ladino. Kosher wine, cheese and matzah were on sale in several stalls of the medieval-themed market set up around the festival compound. A boutique hotel called Sefarad had its grand opening.

"This Jewish holiday and the popularity of restaurants and artisans are ideal for distinguishing Medelim in the region, which will generate economic value for our populations," Albano Pires Marques, the president of Medelim's local council, told Portuguese media at the event.

Medelim's Passover event was one of several Jewish-themed celebrations held recently in Iberian towns with no Jewish populations.

In October, the towns of San Juan and Rio Jerte in northwestern Spain held their first Sukkot festivals featuring Jewish foods, a crafts market and a fake Jewish wedding.

Last year, the Spanish town of Ribadavia hosted its first kosher Passover Seder in centuries. Led by a Jewish historian, the dinner was attended by a mostly non-Jewish crowd and organized by local tourism officials who charged guests \$40 a plate.

In February, lawmakers from

the Spanish ruling party submitted a bill to the parliament of the Andalusia region that would encourage Jewish weddings at the 14th-century Cordoba Synagogue. The bill said the goal was to boost local tourism.

But not everyone is happy with the embrace of Jewish heritage.

Rabbi Daniel Litvak of the northern Portuguese city of Porto said the Medelim event was born of a "desire to spread the idea that Portuguese people retain Jewish customs," while in reality the festival "has nothing to do with Pesach and nothing to do with Jews."

Abigail Cohen, an Israel-born bakery owner from the northern Spanish town of Hervas, said organizers of Jewish-themed events are more cash-hungry than interested in Jewish heritage.

"Recently, there has been a serious boost in interest by municipalities and other groups in Jewish-themed festivals, particularly during Jewish holidays," said Cohen, who has lived in Spain for 30 years. "Simply put, it's because it pays off and brings in the crowds."

Her town was among Spain's pioneer municipalities in the field. Each summer since 1996, Hervas has hosted The Feast of the Con-

from Jews."

Jose Carp, the president of Lisbon's Jewish community, noted that about 20% of the Portuguese population in the 16th century was made up of Jews who, for the most part, converted and stayed in Portugal.

"The Jewish genetic memory," Carp said, "is the main reason Jewish festivities are celebrated throughout the year by Portuguese non-Jews."

But Medelim also has a potential tourist windfall in mind. The town is seeking membership in Rede de Judiarias de Portugal, a network of 19 Portuguese municipalities established in 2011 to help promote Jewish heritage tourism in the country.

A similar effort, Red de Judiarias de Espana, is underway among 24 Spanish municipalities. Spain attracted 105,000 Israeli tourists in 2013 who spent an estimated \$235 million.

To be accepted, mayors must invest in their Jewish patrimony and tourism infrastructure. As a member, they can expect national and European grants along with free publicity from the tourism ministry.

Last year, the Portuguese network clinched nearly \$7 million in special funding from European



A band performing Ladino music at the Jewish and Christian Passover celebration in Medelim, Portugal, March 2014. (Beira Baixa TV)

verted, a four-day event celebrating the cultural contributions of Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity during the Spanish Inquisition.

"The town turns into a medieval Jewish village for four whole days," Cohen said.

And while fun activities with a Jewish flavor are welcome, she said, organizers were not open to her offers to provide more in-depth explanations about Jewish holidays and customs during the festival.

"They were not interested," Cohen said. "The only part that they find important is the touristic element."

Oliveira, the Portuguese university lecturer, said the Jewish festivals are a result of several factors beyond the economic one, including the gradual lifting of cultural taboos in place during decades of dictatorial rule. Oliveira also pointed to a growing realization that millions of Iberians are "in some form descended

countries, a welcome addition to the budgets of municipalities hit hard by the financial crisis gripping Iberia. The network's bosses estimate it has the potential to attract 300,000 tourists a year, yielding an income of \$83 million.

But despite these obvious financial incentives, not everyone was quick to write off the efforts.

Michael Freund, the chairman of the Israeli nongovernmental organization Shavei Israel, runs a Jewish heritage center in the Portuguese city of Trancoso as part of his outreach efforts to descendants of Jews.

"Even if there is some economic motivation involved, I don't think we should dismiss it," Freund said. "For the most part, what Spain did to our people has been swept under the rug there. So when there's a new effort to better understand the Jews who contributed so much to Iberia's cultures, we should encourage and facilitate it." ☆

## In Eastern Ukraine, a Unique Matzah Factory Puts Food on Jewish Tables

By Cnaan Liphshiz

Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine (JTA) — With one eye on a digital countdown timer, Binyamin Vestrikov jumps up and down while slamming a heavy rolling pin into a piece of dough.

Aware of his comical appearance to the journalist watching, he exaggerates his movements to draw laughs from a dozen colleagues at the kneading station of Tiferet Hamatzot — a factory believed to be Europe's only permanently open bakery for handmade matzah, or shmurah matzah.

But Vestrikov's urgency is not just for entertainment.

Rather it is designed to meet the production standards that have allowed this unique bakery in eastern Ukraine to provide the Jewish world with a specialty product at affordable prices. The factory here also offers job security to about 50 Jews living in a war-ravaged region with a weakened economy and high unemployment.

Each time Vestrikov and his coworkers receive a new chunk of dough, the timers over their work stations give them only minutes to turn it into a two-pound package of fully baked matzah — a constraint meant to satisfy even the strictest religious requirements for the unleavened crackers that Jews consume on Passover to commemorate their ancestors' hurried flight out of Egypt.

"The faster the process, the more certain we are that no extra water came into contact with the dough and that it did not have any chance of leavening," says Rabbi Shmuel Liberman, one of two kosher supervisors who ensure that the factory's monthly production of approximately eight tons complies with kosher standards for shmurah matzah.

The time limitation means the entire production line has only 18 minutes to transform flour and water into fully baked and packaged matzah.

Still, the workers are not complaining. They are happy to have a steady, dollar-adjusted income in a country whose currency is now worth a third of its February 2014 value — the result of a civil war between government troops and pro-Russian separatists that has paralyzed Ukraine's industrial heart and flooded the job market with hundreds of thousands of refugees from the battle zones.

"It's hard work, sure, but I am very happy to be doing it," Vestrikov says. "I don't need to worry about how to feed my family. There is very little hiring going on, and every job has dozens of takers because all the refugees from the east are here."

Rolling up a sleeve over a throbbing bicep, he adds, "Besides, this way I don't need to go to the gym."

Despite working under pressure in a hectic and overheated environment — the ovens at Tiferet Hamatzot remain heated for days,

preventing the building from ever cooling off even at the height of the harsh Ukrainian winter — the factory's workers form a tight community whose social currency is made up of jokes and lively banter, mostly on cigarette breaks.

Workers like Vestrikov say they receive good wages, but production costs and taxes in Ukraine are so low that the factory can still afford to charge customers significantly less than its competitors in the West, said Stella Umanskaya, a member of the Dnepropetrovsk Jewish community and the factory's administrative manager.

A two-pound box of Tiferet Hamatzot costs approximately \$10 locally and \$15 abroad compared to more than double that price for shmurah matzah produced in bakeries in Western Europe, such as the Neymann matzah bakery in France, or those operating in Israel and the United States.

Shmura matzah, Hebrew for "guarded matzah," is more expensive than regular matzah because it requires manual labor by people whose task is to guard that it does not become leavened bread — a concept derived from a verse in the book of Exodus that states "You shall guard the matzot." Some consider it a mitzvah to consume shmura matzah because it upholds that commandment of devoting special attention or effort to guarding the matzah.

For this reason, traditional Jewish law requires that the handling of matzah and its ingredients be done by Jews only. But the factory also employs more than a dozen non-Jews who perform other tasks, including distribution.

To Rabbi Meir Stambler, the owner of Tiferet Hamatzot, this means the bakery "not only puts matzah shmura on Jewish tables, but also helps build bridges and do mitzvot with non-Jews."

Stambler, an Israeli Chabad rabbi who lives in Dnepropetrovsk and opened the factory 12 years ago, said his father used to bake shmura matzah in secrecy in Tashkent, when the Uzbek capital was still part of the Soviet Union and subject to its anti-religious policies.

"Back then, matzah used to be smuggled from Israel into the Soviet Union before its collapse in 1990," he said. "It's just unbelievable that now, some years later, we bake matzah in Ukraine and send it all over the whole world." ☆

