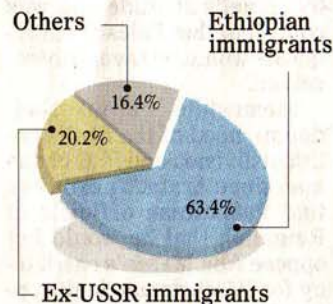


Interior Ministry deems foreign converts not 'Jewish enough' to be Israeli citizens

By Relly Sa'ar

The High Court of Justice will rule in a few weeks on whether the state must recognize conversions performed by Reform or Conservative rabbis for the purpose of granting civic standing, such as citizenship or new immigrant status, under the Law of Return. Currently, the only recognized conversions are those performed by the Orthodox rabbinical courts in Israel or abroad. However, *Haaretz* has learned that even individuals deemed "Jewish enough" for the Orthodox establishment in Israel are not seen that way by clerks at the Interior Ministry. Further-

Converts in Israel



Source: Rabbinical Conversion Courts

more, the ministry's policy regarding converts does not follow any logic or written regulations.

The Chief Rabbinate has a list of some 200 conversion courts operating in established Jewish communities in Europe and the United States, and every conversion performed overseas by Orthodox rabbis who have been authorized by Israel's Chief Rabbinate is immediately approved.

Logic would seem to dictate that anyone who wishes to link his fate with that of the Jewish people, adopts a religious lifestyle during the years he must devote to his conversion studies (according to strict standards of Orthodox Judaism), assumes the burden of observing religious duties, immerses himself in the ritual

bath, and receives the approval of the three Orthodox rabbis who convert him - would be considered a Jew under the Law of Return in the eyes of Interior Ministry.

An inquiry by *Haaretz* reveals, however, that this is not the case. Converts recognized by the Orthodox establishment, and those who are even entitled to marry in a religious ceremony in Israel, are being refused local citizenship and immigrant status by the bureaucrats.

At issue are not people who immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union or Ethiopia and decided to convert

See JEWISH, Page 2

JEWISH

Continued from page 1

to Judaism in Israel. The applicants are foreign passport-holders who decided of their own accord to become Jews, and now the Interior Ministry is denying them their rights under the Law of Return.

The Shinui party, which determined that Avraham Poraz would serve as interior minister over 18 months ago, made its chief campaign the battle against the religious establishment, which it saw as undermining civil life in Israel. Yet despite Poraz's lengthy tenure, nothing has changed in the conduct of Population Registry officials under him, and it is not the Orthodox establishment but rather they who make matters difficult for people who have chosen to become Jews and want to live in Israel.

Rabbi Shaul Farber, chairman of the Itim Institute in Jerusalem, which helps people who approach them to "find their place in the Jewish circle of life," says that according to conversion court figures, 8,149 Israeli citizens underwent conversion in the country between 2002-2003 - most of them immigrants from Ethiopia (68 percent) and the former Soviet Union (22 percent). Another 424 foreign nationals were converted in Israel in authorized

procedures. They are the ones, Farber says, are being denied citizenship by the Interior Ministry, along with another 350 converts who converted overseas.

Farber accuses the ministry of "taking a hostile stand against every convert," adding that he understands the clerks' concerns about fictitious conversions, "but this is not the way of traditional Judaism, which forbids us to mistreat converts."

One case in point: Deborah Miklis, 50, now a Jerusalemite, who underwent a strict Orthodox conversion in Switzerland 14 months ago. Miklis, an attorney with a doctorate in philosophy, was born in Germany as Ursula, and decided to become a Jew nine years ago, when she began Jewish studies in Hamburg. "Orthodox conversion is not possible in Germany," Miklis says, "so, after my long years of Jewish studies, I underwent conversion by the head of the conversion court in Switzerland."

Upon arrival in Israel last September, Miklis went to the Population Registry in Jerusalem to register as an Israeli citizen and an immigrant. Rabbi Farber terms Miklis' treatment at the hands of Interior Ministry clerks "a nightmare." As proof of her Jewishness, Miklis submitted a certificate of conversion from

the head of the Swiss conversion court, Rabbi David Goldberg, who confirmed she had undergone the conversion ceremony in September 2003 in the presence of three rabbis, as required by Orthodox law. Additionally, she presented confirmation from Rabbi Yitzhak Rablag, Jerusalem's authorized rabbi in matters concerning marriage and a member of the Chief Rabbinate, who sent a letter last March to the Population Registry, declaring that Miklis "underwent conversion by authorized rabbis" and "her conversion certificate was approved by the Chief Rabbinate, and there is no *halakhic* [Jewish legal] ban on granting her new immigrant status and issuing her an identity card."

When the Interior Ministry persisted in its refusal to recognize Miklis' Jewishness, the chief rabbi's assistant, Rabbi Yitzhak Ohana, also informed the clerks that the rabbis who converted Miklis "are recognized Orthodox rabbis."

None of this impressed the clerks. Last September, a senior ministry official, Aviva Rosen, informed Miklis: "The conversion submitted is not recognized, and we cannot approve your request for status in Israel."

Efforts by *Haaretz* to ascertain the source of the problem got nowhere. A Population Registry spokeswoman said that

"Miklis cannot be registered as Jewish based on the documents she submitted."

The opacity of the policy on registering converts apparently stems from the fact that Interior Ministry clerks do not follow the written procedures for handling applications. The rules state that immigrant status is to be conferred once an applicant has presented conversion papers. The clerk must verify that the conversion took place "in a recognized community and by a recognized rabbi," and must further be convinced "of the sincerity of the convert's intentions."

Haaretz has found, however, that an unwritten regulation has been added, to which the clerks adhere. According to this rule, conversion papers are approved only if the convert lived for a year following the ceremony in the same Jewish community in which the conversion took place. The spokeswoman explained that "the procedure was formulated, in consultation with former attorney general Elyakim Rubinstein, before Minister Poraz entered his post, to prevent conversion from being used for unwelcome emigration to Israel." She did not explain why this supposedly binding requirement does not appear in the published record.