

David Elazarov

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Sofia

Bulgaria

Interviewer: Vassil Vidinsky

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[David used and is well-known under the family name Elazar, although in his official documents such as his passport and identity card the obligatory suffix -ov is added. The uniform ending of the names of all Bulgarian citizens was adopted in the 1960s. In all other publications he signs as David Elazar.]



David Solomonov Elazarov lives in the central part of Sofia. He is 83 years old. Although he looks very good, even physically strong, his memory is sometimes already fading away. Since his wife died, he has been living alone and his sons have been looking after him. When the weather is nice, he goes outside. Sometimes he visits his sister Dora. During the rest of the time he reads newspapers and books on politics, watches television. He is interested in contemporary politics and is well informed of the changes in the world.

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My family background

My ancestors came from Turkey. Not only because the Ottoman Empire ruled over the lands between Egypt and Hungary for many years, but also because my mother was born in Turkey at the end of the 19th century. If I go even further back in time, my ancestors came from Spain. This happened around 500 years ago. All those years they lived in the Ottoman Empire, preserving their language and traditions. They worked mainly as craftsmen and merchants, like most Jews.

I hardly remember my paternal grandparents. My grandfather's name was David Solomon Elazar. I know nothing else about him. It is unfortunate that he is not on any of the photos I have. My grandmother, Rozalia Elazar, died in 1932 in Sofia, shortly after the death of her son Solomon, my father. She was religious and always observed Sabbath. But I don't remember her much. I only remember one phenomenon about her - she lived until she was 90 years old and her hair remained black all the time! It was incredible - it is nice that we have photos showing that her hair is really black despite her age.

My father's name was Solomon David Elazar. He was born in 1880 in Kjustendil. He had secondary education. In the Balkan War [see First Balkan War] [1](#) and in the Inter-Allied War [see Second

Balkan War] [2](#) my father fought as a supply officer, because he was an educated man. I remember that he wore a beard and a fur cap. At that time all men wore fur caps and most of them had beards and moustaches. Moustaches were almost obligatory. In fact, on the oldest photo that I have of my father, which was taken during World War I, he also has a moustache.

My father worked as a distributor of paints and varnish produced by German companies. The goods arrived in large chests. There were even special tools for opening the chests. My father's business declined during the general economic recession [at the end of the 1920s] and following the advice of uncle Rufat he declared bankruptcy. All that affected my father deeply, because we had a very good reputation. After he died on 1st March 1932 we were in a very hard situation; it was a huge blow to us. He died at the age of 52 of cancer. Only men were present at the funeral, as the tradition allows. The procession was long and I was allowed to take part in it, walking in the middle. I don't have other memories from the procession and the funeral.

My father had two sisters, Matilda and Linda, and a brother, Bentsion. Matilda was married to Rufat and they had five children, four girls and one boy, Buko. All left for Israel except their daughter Ventura. My father's other sister lived alone with her three children after her husband died in World War I. Their family experienced a great tragedy. They tried to reach Israel in a small boat, which crashed and sank. They all drowned except my cousin Bitush. He managed to reach Israel, but he could never forget that tragedy. My uncle Bentsion had five children with his wife Ester. He worked as a cobbler. I don't remember anything else about him.

My father married twice. He had two daughters from his first marriage - my stepsisters Rozalia and Dora. His first wife, Matilda Baruh, died of tuberculosis. I know that she was very rich and brought a big dowry. There was one portrait of her in a black frame in black mounting - she was a very beautiful woman. But I cannot find this portrait anymore.

I am from my father's second marriage. My mother, Vergina Elazar, nee Bohor, wasn't rich. She worked in an atelier. This was her first marriage. Because of the wars, there was a big group of women who couldn't marry. My mother was among them. She married relatively late - when she was 30 years old. And it was very fortunate for her.

My mother was born in 1887 in Sofia. She worked in the textile industry, in a shop for fine women's underwear called 'Doverie' [Trust]. There was such a shop for fine textiles in the center of Sofia.

I remember something else about her: she experienced some kind of fits, maybe because of the climacteric age. Her fingers would stick together and her whole body would start shaking. I was very young; I couldn't help her and thus called the neighbors - they massaged her until she calmed down. My mother also had a sick heart and we looked after her so that she wouldn't tire too much.

During the Holocaust she was interned to Vratsa [see Internment of Jews in Bulgaria] [3](#). Jews were interned to the northern part of Bulgaria, because the authorities planned to annihilate them and it was easier to send them to the German concentration camps by the Danube. My mother didn't usually wear a kerchief, except during the years when they started to intern us. After the war my mother no longer worked, because she was of advanced age. So, she was a housewife. She died in Sofia on 12th March 1957.

My mother had a number of sisters; I know about one named Sultana, her elder sister, and Sarah, and my grandmother, who lived in Turkey. Sultana was married to Buhor Levi and had five children, among who were Venezia, Duda and Izak. Other relatives of mine lived there too and they visited us sometimes. They knew a number of languages, even Arabic. But at some point they were banished from Turkey, in the 1930s, and came to Bulgaria. However, due to various reasons, they couldn't adapt to the way of life here and left for Israel after World War II along with many other Jews. I haven't heard of them ever since. They were banished from Turkey, because they thought of themselves as Bulgarian Jews and at that time Turkey was pursuing a policy against Bulgaria.

Growing up

I was born on 30th April 1920 in Sofia. At that time my mother was 33 years old and my father was 40. My birth was a great joy for them, because only girls had been born in the family before me. They prepared a special canopy with silk curtains [for the cradle] and organized a big celebration.

My family wasn't religious. My parents weren't atheists, but they didn't bring us up in a religious way or to observe the Jewish laws. My mother tongue is Ladino, which is Spanish from the 15th century, from the time of Cervantes, which has been preserved up until today. After some time I started to forget it. But since I was in Cuba three or four times, and in Spain too, I restored my knowledge to such an extent that everyone was surprised. The two languages - Ladino and Spanish - turned out to be very close.

I remember that when we were children, we stood in front of the Military Club during the military parades. We were impressed by the orderly rows, the soldiers' gait. From the holidays I remember most vividly St. George's Day [4](#); we went outside, people brought food, roasted lamb and fresh water and we ate in the greenery.

I also remember the 'Women's Market' [the largest open market in Sofia, close to the city center]. They often sent me to buy something from there. It was very interesting - people offering, buying, and bargaining. It was very lively with lots of noise and shouting.

When I was a student, my family and I often went to a place outside Sofia, Korubaglar - it was some 10-12 kilometers from town. It was an uninhabited area eastwards towards the Iskar River Gorge. During the holidays we got on carts and went there. We had a dog named Sharo and took it with us. We also took blankets and food and stayed there in the fresh air. There were a lot of chimneys in Sofia at that time and the air was really polluted. There was no central heating and every chimney was spewing smoke either from the wood or from the coal. We also went to Vladaya, but I didn't go to Vitosha Mountain [the mountain of Sofia] as a child. It became my favorite place for walks much later.

I remember that sometimes the whole family went to a restaurant, Batenberg, to eat kebapcheta [Bulgarian national dish of grilled meatballs]. This was a luxury at that time - warm kebapcheta with French fries - and I loved it. We usually went on Saturdays or Sundays, while my father was still alive, that is, until 1932.

There were two Jewish schools in Sofia. I studied in the central one, and the other one was for the poorer part of Sofia, somewhere close to Iuchbunar [5](#). The poor Jewish people lived there, but since my father was still alive then, I studied in the central school until the 7th grade. We learned Ivrit

and Bulgarian. My school belonged to the Jewish community in Sofia. It was normal for Jewish children to study in Jewish schools. There were some exceptions and we made jokes about them. In fact, our school was no different from the other schools, except that we studied Ivrit and they insisted much on Bulgarian, because it was common for us, Jews, to mix up Bulgarian grammar rules.

The students in our school were often taken to Berkovitsa by bus. It was a very nice village, with a pool in which we swam and a small river. Berkovitsa was like a villa resort of Sofia. Unfortunately, I don't have photos from this period. But I remember that we were accommodated in a holiday home, where we played and read. We went there a couple of times. They didn't take us to other places.

After my father's death we were in a very bad financial state and the family council decided that it would be better if I continued my education in a technical school, so that I would have a profession when I graduated. I sat for the entry exams for the 3rd Men's [High School] and for the Technical School. I was a very good student and I was accepted in both, but it was decided that I should enroll in the Mechanical and Electrical Technical School so that I would get a job later. I studied there until 1939.

My sister Rozalia was twelve years older than me. She was born in 1908. My second sister, Dora, was seven years older, she was born in 1913. I remember going to Varna to accompany Rozalia: my father didn't let her go alone and I was sent as her 'guardian'.

In 1932 Rozalia left for Israel [Palestine before 1948] and she still lives there today - in Holon. She married and now she is called Shoshana Navon. She has two children, Emanuel [born in 1936] and Tslila [born in July 1940]. She worked as a children's teacher in Bulgaria; she graduated from the Pedagogy Institute in Shoumen as a children's teacher. She was very beautiful and a good teacher - children loved her a lot.

I remember that she read a lot and she taught me to read and be interested in more things than what they taught us at school. I started reading a lot and I was really addicted to ancient Greek culture and literature. When I was a high school student, there were scholarly groups in the neighborhood and I often gave lectures there. We discussed and argued various issues and since I was a good speaker many people visited our gatherings.

Dora worked in the trade field. She married Luka Vakarelov and had two children, Virginia [born in 1942] and Krastyo [born in 1946]. She lives in Sofia. During the Holocaust she and I were sent to a camp. She was in the 'St. Nikola' camp in the Rhodope Mountains, near the town of Asenovgrad, from May until November 1943. We both survived the war. After the war Rozalia came to Bulgaria a few times and the three of us met.

Before the war two thirds of the Jewish population lived in Sofia. There was hardly a purely Jewish neighborhood in Sofia, but I remember that many of the people living on Pirotka Street were Jews. There were also Bulgarians, Turks and Armenians in the neighborhood. As children we played football and hide-and-seek. We gathered with the other Jews and celebrated the high holidays. We gathered on Pesach, Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah was my favorite holiday, because there were still flowers, green trees, and fruits... We gathered, ate, drank and sang songs in Ladino.

We always helped each other. There was a feeling of community and desire to help the other Jews. Because even when there were no persecutions, Jews were regarded as different, alien. We also sensed that feeling.

I remember the Great Synagogue [6](#). It was a monument of culture and we didn't visit it often. But there was a midrash, where we regularly went. There was such a spot on Paisii Street. Sometimes they took me along on purpose so that there would be minyan, which means that we would be more than ten men. And I had to pass for a grown-up man, although I still hadn't had my bar mitzvah.

There was a shochet - every bird, which would be cooked, should be prepared by him. This is a very old tradition: not to eat food, which has blood. Even I took the bird to the shochet and then returned it home for my mother to cook it. The shochet prepared the birds, mainly hens. Favorite dishes of our family were hen with rice and the mirindgena [chicken with aubergine and some tomatoes].

When we were twelve years old, we had our bar mitzvah - we were taken to the Great Synagogue. I didn't understand everything they read to us and I don't remember clearly the ritual itself.

Our neighborhood was an average one - neither too poor nor too rich. Our house was on 64 Paisii Street. Jews inhabited almost the whole street. There were two buildings, stuck to one another in a T-shape. The building in which we lived, was a two-storied one and we lived on the ground floor. The other building had three floors.

We had two rooms, a kitchen and apart from that the house had an inner yard. I slept in the same room as my parents - this was one of the rooms. The second room was for guests and our whole family gathered there. We had nice Vienna furniture covered in green plush in that room. During the war the Jews sold their belongings so that they could leave and so did we. When I think of this furniture, I get very sad. Probably it's in someone else's home now...

During the winter we heated the rooms with wood: we had a stove, warming the two rooms. At that time there was already electricity in Sofia, but my parents didn't know how to use it; they were afraid of it, so we used wood.

We weren't rich and even in our best years, when my father's business was doing well; we didn't have an assistant or a maid. My mother took care of the house and my father helped with what he could.

A number of Jewish families lived in that house and we were close with our neighbors. Sometimes I even went to the second floor to have some rice or something else. We helped each other. The owners of the house lived on the second floor of the house.

Because of our financial state, my parents' political inclinations were directed to the center and a little bit to the left. But more to the center, I think. I don't think they had clear political views. They weren't members of any party or organization. We didn't talk about politics at home, except when the military fascist coup took place in 1923 [7](#), but I was too young at that time and I don't remember much about it. I only remember them talking about it later. Yet, there were three or four political events that I will never forget.

I remember the terrorist act, which took place in 1925 [the bombing of the Sveta Nedelia Church] [8](#). I remember it very well, because I was upstairs on the third floor playing with the other children and suddenly we heard the loud blast in the cathedral. And we went to the dormer-windows of our house and saw the smoke billowing from the church.

I also remember 1934 and Kimon Georgiev [After a coup d'etat on 19th May 1934 a government was formed by representatives of the Military Union and the 'Zveno' (literally 'a team': a former Bulgarian middle-class party) circle, led by Kimon Georgiev [9](#). The ruling circles rejected both liberalism and bourgeois democracy, as well as the Marxist doctrine. As a result all political parties in Bulgaria were banned, which led to the monarchy of King Boris III. The economic policy was dominated by the state.]. There was panic. Everybody commented Hitler's coming to power. As if we understood what would happen to us. We suspected that the Jewish people would be killed, that 'the Jewish question will be solved once and for all', as Hitler said. We sensed that a new world war was coming and we knew that Bulgaria as a small country would be involved in it, taking into account that fascism already had roots here.

I remember how Major Thompson was shot down during the war in violation with all international laws. He was a prisoner of war, but the Bulgarian authorities shot him and provoked an international scandal. [Editor's note: Major Frank Edward Thompson, head of a military committee, was sent by the British Intelligence Service with a secret mission to Bulgaria in 1944 in order to contact and support the Bulgarian partisans. In June 1944 he was caught by the police, court-martialed and executed in the village of Litakovo, at the age of only 23. Although he was a British army officer, he was treated not as a POW but as a terrorist. Later a street in Sofia, a railway station and a kindergarten were named after him.]

I remember when the decision was taken that there should be no Jews in Sofia [1942]. They started to intern us. At that time Bulgaria was related to Germany and followed its orders. I must say that the Germans wanted to have us right away, but the authorities here said, 'We need them as a labor force'. There were people, who understood that at some point they would have to pay for all this violence and killings and insisted on having the Jews remain in Bulgaria as a labor force. This saved us; otherwise we would have been taken away like the Polish and the Hungarian Jews.

From 1935 until 1941 I was a member of the UYW [10](#) and from 1938 until 1941 I was secretary of the District committee and took an active part in the biggest street clash between the Legionaries [see Bulgarian Legions] [11](#) and the UYW members around Vazrazhdane Square. The Legionaries had decided to attack Jewish sites in Sofia and we had to stop them. My work in the UYW was on the expansion of the political culture - lectures, reports, analyses of the international situation and the state of the political class and relations in Bulgaria. We also organized the struggle against Bulgaria joining a military union with Germany. All our activities were directed towards the struggle for peace.

During the war

I don't remember any anti-Semitic or negative attitudes towards us when I was a child. It wasn't important for me whether my friends were Jews or not. I even think that most of my friends were Bulgarians. My job acquainted me with many different people. But during the Holocaust following that racist anti-Jewish law [see Law for the Protection of the Nation] [12](#) the authorities started gathering us in Jewish labor groups. And they forced us to work extremely hard. I had just

recovered from a serious illness, pleurisy, and I was very weak. From 1941 to 1942 I was in a labor camp in the village of Tserovo [see forced labor camps in Bulgaria] [13](#). There was a man who forced me to dig four cubic meters of soil every day. The pathetic thing was that after 1944 the same man came to cringe before me, because he found out that I was working in the police.

In these camps they made us work beyond our abilities - I was really at the end of my strength. This was a physical assault on the Jewish population. I realized that I wouldn't survive life in the camp and ran away. The labor camps were not like the concentration camps. In them the Jews had to do hard physical labor. Escape from such a camp was possible, but you could be sued. I was sentenced later by default. For my partisan activities I was also sentenced to death, again by default.

Shortly after that, in March 1942, I was caught and sent to the 'Enikiyoy' [Thrace, present-day Greece, near Ksanti] concentration camp where I was until November 1942. During that time my sister Dora was also in a camp, although she was married to a Bulgarian [Jews married to Bulgarians had some protection - they were not forced to wear the distinctive yellow star.] All the Jews who weren't in camps were interned - they were banished from Sofia and forced to live in misery.

But I was in such a poor state that I even lay in hospital in Gyumyurdzhina [a small town in Thrace, present-day Greece, now called Komotini]. I was sick, I was suffering and nobody gave me any medication. A nurse came every morning, opened the door to check if I was still alive... and no help, they only put a blanket over me. Elena [Kirilova Elazarova, nee Kehayova], my wife, even sent an appeal to the minister, but this didn't help. In fact, this was financially not acceptable for the police, because four people guarded me 24 hours a day. All the time I tried to explain to them that war was disastrous, that there would be grave consequences for the state. And little by little they started to trust me. They started taking me to the police station where they listened to BBC Radio - the news from the war front and how things were going. So my words were of some use after all.

The people from the village also realized that I wasn't a criminal and started bringing me food and fruit. So, I gradually recovered. Every other day I received a basket of fruit and that way I regained my strength. But that wasn't the main thing, what was important was that I became a partisan. I remember the date - 2nd June 1943 and the squad - 'Chavdar'. I was leader of one unit until 9th September 1944 [14](#).

At first we made big dugouts to store our food there. But when snow fell, we were blocked, because our every step could be seen. Snow made all our efforts pointless. So, we decided to disperse in smaller groups. We formed groups of three, four and five men. And we hid in the village houses, because the villagers turned out to be our best allies. They suffered a lot from the repression measures aiming to supply Germany with everything necessary. So, they helped us a lot.

I myself didn't experience the Holocaust directly, because I was outside the law: for the most part I was a partisan, so I never wore even a yellow star. But I was worried most for my mother, who was interned to Vratsa [north-west Bulgaria]. From time to time I went secretly to see her. She lived with a Jewish family who had sheltered her. We received aid from the English for the resistance and I could help her.

What was interesting was that while I was a partisan and when we made ambushes for the police, the people in the villages welcomed us as winners, as saviors.

Post-war

After the war we returned to our homes. Many of the houses were burned down. Sofia looked like a ravaged city. Everything had to be rebuilt, new buildings had to be erected. The housing estates appeared at that time and the city changed. People built apartments with united efforts, because it was very difficult to build a house by yourself. The whole country was in a very bad economic state.

Our home was not directly affected. When we returned, our neighbors welcomed us well - there were no people regretting that we had survived. Well, maybe there were such people somewhere, but they said nothing then.

The old relations were severed and this gave even more impetus to the campaign for moving to Israel. There were 50,000 Jews in Bulgaria and most of them left. I was against that, because I thought that founding Palestine wouldn't solve the Jewish problem. [Editors' note: establishing Israel, the Jewish state in the British mandate of Palestine.] As if I could foresee what is happening now. But many people left, mainly those with mixed marriages remained here. From the 50,000 people, only 1,500 - 1,600 people remained [see Mass Aliyah] [15](#).

I married Elena Kirilova Kehayova before the war. She was Bulgarian, born on 25th October 1920 in Plovdiv. She was a journalist. She often published articles under the name Elena Davidova. She died a year ago, on 17th August 2002. She was a good journalist. Even in Russia they published a collection of her best articles.

She had three brothers and one sister - Vassil, Dimitar, Petko and Maria. Only Maria was younger than her. Unfortunately, no one of them is still alive.

After the war, in 1949, I graduated from the Higher Party School. Then, from 1957 to 1959, I was in the Military Academy 'G.S. Rakovski' where I also graduated with very good marks. General Kirov was my examiner and I became good friends with him. I worked in the army, but I realized that I had no future there. I was deputy head of the chief political office of the Bulgarian army until 1962. All the time I was colonel and I remained colonel, although I was also appointed to general positions. In fact, this was due to my Jewish origin - they just didn't allow me to become general.

In the 1960s I became head of the department 'Propaganda and Campaigns' in the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party [BCP]. I was also awarded the title 'Honored Citizen of Sofia'. From 1970 to 1989 I was director of the Institute on History of the BCP. In the institute I was a contributing author to a number of international scholarly works - 'The Reichstag Fire Trial and Georgi Dimitrov' [16](#), 'The Biography of Georgi Dimitrov' and the six volumes of the big Bulgarian Encyclopedia. [Editor's note: after 1989 the publishing of the encyclopedia encountered difficulties and it is still not finished.] I was also an editor-in-chief of the almanac of the institute. All that time, during the 1970s and the 1980s, I was five times deputy in the National Assembly, first a candidate member and then a member of the Central Committee of the BCP.

After the 1950s things in Bulgaria changed: the economic opportunities of the country increased, its stability and development became much better. But I don't think it is right to speak of dictatorship during those times. Under the influence of the Soviet Union the government wasn't

democratic, but there was no dictatorship.

But there was a change: after the war we didn't celebrate the Jewish holidays so often, we didn't go to the synagogue, except for events related to the Holocaust, although there was not a special day for the Holocaust then. We preserved the Jewish cuisine, although it is not solely Jewish, for example the Turks also prepare mirindgena. And we never celebrated Easter or Christmas. Besides the official holidays [9th September, 24th May, 1st May etc.] we also celebrated New Year's Eve and birthdays.

All the time we kept in touch with our relatives in Israel. Since I held a very responsible position, I didn't have major problems for having relatives in Israel. Yet, I felt a more special attitude - I was very eager to study in the USSR, but I wasn't able to. Even in the middle of the 1950s, at the beginning of the Cold War, my sister Dora had to give explanations to the bodies of the Ministry of Internal Affairs about her relatives in Israel and what kind of contacts she kept with them. Our contacts were never too regular, but we never stopped them, even when the diplomatic relations with Israel were severed. For me the wars in 1967 [see Six-Day-War] [17](#) and 1973 [see Yom Kippur War] [18](#) in Israel are in fact the clash of two civilizations. This clash still continues in the efforts for Palestine to be recognized. And these efforts are right, because this issue should be finally resolved. Otherwise, it will remain an open wound forever.

After the 1950s my sister Rozalia came to visit us a couple of times, but I didn't go to Israel until 1989 although she had invited both Dora and me. We didn't go to Israel, because we knew there was a special attitude towards people going there, especially if they had a responsible state job.

I must confess, although it is not nice to tell such things, that I suffered a lot for being a Jew. I wasn't allowed many things. But thanks to my persistence I achieved, in my opinion, incredible things. I was the only Jew from Bulgaria who chaired an international meeting in Moscow. Some of my problems ended when I received the title 'Hero of the Socialist Labor', which went together with the 'Georgi Dimitrov' order. [This is an honorable title, which was the highest order for labor activities in the People's Republic of Bulgaria until 1989. It was accompanied by a Gold Star and the highest order 'Georgi Dimitrov' which is an order for special merit]. And I wore this Gold Star only in the Soviet Union. Anti-Semitism is a very unpleasant thing.

When I went to Mexico, I also had an unpleasant accident. You know the story about Trotsky [19](#) who was given the opportunity to be treated in Turkey. When he went there he realized that he would be eliminated sooner or later so he escaped to Mexico. He was killed there. When I was in Mexico, they wanted to show me his grave, but this was a provocation. They wanted to take a photo of me and then say: 'Elazar went to search for Trotsky's heritage'. I declined to go there.

Now I don't remember the details, but once I headed a delegation to the USSR. Our last meeting was with a Soviet marshal. They came to me and said, 'Comrade Elazar, we arranged the group for the meeting with the marshal in such a way, that you don't have to come. It will not be interesting. It is not necessary for you to come'. It was clear to me right away that I was excluded, because I was the head of the delegation. I said, 'Okay, if you have decided so... Do what you wish!' When my colleagues found out about that, they decided to boycott the meeting as a protest. I convinced them not to - they might have thought that I had organized that. We let the incident pass with contempt and silence.

My wife and I lived only in Bulgaria, although I visited many countries. I traveled almost everywhere around the world, except in Africa and Australia. All the trips were business ones - official delegations, conferences and meetings by special invitation.

Elena and I raised two boys, Simeon and Emil. Simeon was born in Sofia on 31st July 1943, and Emil on 29th September 1947. Both have university education. Simeon graduated from the Higher Economic Institute and Emil graduated from the Higher Architecture and Construction Institute as an architect. We brought them up in a liberal way. They always knew that they had Jewish origins, but we didn't educate them especially in this respect. I have two grandsons and one granddaughter from them: Emil, 35 years old, Georgi, 30 years old and Elena, 31 years old.

From a political point of view I consider the changes after 1989 differently. For me they were not something out of the blue, but more of a logical continuation of the policy Bulgaria led in the 1980s as a socialist country. The political changes gradually led to the democratization of the state. During that time perestroika [20](#) started in the USSR, which however was essentially wrong and confused: it led to destruction and not to democratization of socialism.

The changes also had an economic aspect. For example 'Decree 56' [21](#) functioned from 1989 until 1997. The changes started even earlier in 1983 when 'Decree 56' was in the initial stages of development.

On 10th November 1989 [22](#), at the plenary session during which Todor Zhivkov [23](#) was replaced, I made a statement, in which I appealed to the delegates not to rush with their evaluations before making a thorough analysis - at least because he was the statesman who had been in power for the longest time since the Liberation. I think that time will best show the advantages and disadvantages of the real socialism.

Since 1989 I think we can witness a gradual process of reversal. All mistakes of the capitalist state before 1944 have come up again and all disadvantages are being reproduced.

As for the Jewish community, we started receiving aid. For example, the Joint [24](#) organization gave us clothes and supported us, especially the Jews who were the object of violence and assault. I retired at 70 years of age in 1989. In recent years I've often gone to the Jewish center and I follow the political life in the country and abroad.

Glossary

[1](#) First Balkan War (1912-1913)

Started by an alliance made up of Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, and Montenegro against the Ottoman Empire. It was a response to the Turkish nationalistic policy maintained by the Young Turks in Istanbul. The Balkan League aimed at the liberation of the rest of the Balkans still under Ottoman rule. In October, 1912 the allies declared war on the Ottoman Empire and were soon successful: the Ottomans retreated to defend Istanbul and Albania, Epirus, Macedonia and Thrace fell into the hands of the allies. The war ended on the 30th May 1913 with the Treaty of London, which gave most of European Turkey to the allies and also created the Albanian state.

2 Second Balkan War (1913)

The victorious countries of the First Balkan War (Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia) were unable to settle their territorial claims over the newly acquired Macedonia by peaceful means. Serbia and Greece formed an alliance against Bulgaria and the war began on 29th June 1913 with a Bulgarian attack on Serbian and Greek troops in Macedonia. Bulgaria's northern neighbor, Romania, also joined the allies and Bulgaria was defeated. The Treaty of Bucharest was signed on 10th August 1913. As a result, most of Macedonia was divided up between Greece and Serbia, leaving only a small part to Bulgaria (Pirin Macedonia). Romania also acquired the previously Bulgarian region of southern Dobrudzha.

3 Internment of Jews in Bulgaria

Although Jews living in Bulgaria were not deported to concentration camps abroad or to death camps, many were interned to different locations within Bulgaria. In accordance with the Law for the Protection of the Nation, the comprehensive anti-Jewish legislation initiated after the outbreak of WWII, males were sent to forced labor battalions in different locations of the country, and had to engage in hard work. There were plans to deport Bulgarian Jews to Nazi Death Camps, but these plans were not realized. Preparations had been made at certain points along the Danube, such as at Somovit and Lom. In fact, in 1943 the port at Lom was used to deport Jews from Aegean Thrace and from Macedonia, but in the end, the Jews from Bulgaria proper were spared.

4 St

George Day: The 6th of May, the day of the Orthodox saint St. George the Victorious, a public holiday in Bulgaria. According to Bulgarian tradition the old cattle-breeding year finishes and the new one starts on St. George's Day. This is the greatest spring holiday and it is also the official holiday of the Bulgarian Army. In all Bulgarian towns with military garrisons, a parade is organized and a blessing is bestowed on the army.

5 Iuchbunar

The poorest residential district in Sofia; the word is of Turkish origin and means 'the three wells'.

6 Great Synagogue

Located in the center of Sofia, it is the third largest synagogue in Europe after the ones in Budapest and Amsterdam; it can house more than 1,300 people. It was designed by Austrian architect Grunander in the Moor style. It was opened on 9th September 1909 in the presence of King Ferdinand and Queen Eleonora.

7 Events of 1923

By a coup d'état on 9th June 1923 the government of Alexander Stamboliiski, leader of the Bulgarian Agrarian Union, was overthrown and power was assumed by the right-leaning Alexander Tsankov. This provoked riots that were quickly suppressed. The events of 1923 culminated in an uprising initiated by the communists in September 1923, which was also suppressed.

8 Bombing of Sveta Nedelia Church

In 1925 the military wing of the Bulgarian Communist Party launched a terrorist attack by blowing up the dome of the church. It was carried out during the funeral ceremony of one of the generals of King Boris III. There were dozens of dead and wounded, however, the King himself was late for the ceremony and was not hurt.

9 Georgiev, Kimon (1882 -1969)

Prime Minister of the first Fatherland Front government after 9th September 1944, lasting until November 1946.

10 UYW

The Union of Young Workers (also called Revolutionary Youth Union). A communist youth organization, which was legally established in 1928 as a sub-organization of the Bulgarian Communist Youth Union (BCYU). After the coup d'etat in 1934, when parties in Bulgaria were banned, it went underground and became the strongest wing of the BCYU. Some 70% of the partisans in Bulgaria were members of it. In 1947 it was renamed Dimitrov's Communist Youth Union, after Georgi Dimitrov, the leader of the Bulgarian Communist Party at the time.

11 Bulgarian Legions

Union of the Bulgarian National Legions. Bulgarian fascist movement, established in 1930. Following the Italian model it aimed at building a corporate totalitarian state on the basis of military centralism. It was dismissed in 1944 after the communist take-over.

12 Law for the Protection of the Nation

A comprehensive anti-Jewish legislation in Bulgaria was introduced after the outbreak of World War II. The 'Law for the Protection of the Nation' was officially promulgated in January 1941. According to this law, Jews did not have the right to own shops and factories. Jews had to wear the distinctive yellow star; Jewish houses had to display a special sign identifying it as being Jewish; Jews were dismissed from all posts in schools and universities. The internment of Jews in certain designated towns was legalized and all Jews were expelled from Sofia in 1943. Jews were only allowed to go out into the streets for one or two hours a day. They were prohibited from using the main streets, from entering certain business establishments, and from attending places of entertainment. Their radios, automobiles, bicycles and other valuables were confiscated. From 1941 on Jewish males were sent to forced labor battalions and ordered to do extremely hard work in mountains, forests and road construction. In the Bulgarian-occupied Yugoslav (Macedonia) and Greek (Aegean Thrace) territories the Bulgarian army and administration introduced extreme measures. The Jews from these areas were deported to concentration camps, while the plans for the deportation of Jews from Bulgaria proper were halted by a protest movement launched by the vice-chairman of the Bulgarian Parliament. [13](#) Forced labor camps in Bulgaria: Established under the Council of Ministers' Act in 1941. All Jewish men between the ages of 18-50, eligible for military service, were called up. In these labor groups Jewish men were forced to work 7-8 months a year on different

road constructions under very hard living and working conditions.

14 9th September 1944

The day of the communist takeover in Bulgaria. In September 1944 the Soviet Union unexpectedly declared war on Bulgaria. On 9th September 1944 the Fatherland Front, a broad left-wing coalition, deposed the government. Although the communists were in the minority in the Fatherland Front, they were the driving force in forming the coalition, and their position was strengthened by the presence of the Red Army in Bulgaria.

15 Mass Aliyah

Between September 1944 and October 1948, 7,000 Bulgarian Jews left for Palestine. The exodus was due to deep-rooted Zionist sentiments, relative alienation from Bulgarian intellectual and political life, and depressed economic conditions. Bulgarian policies toward national minorities were also a factor that motivated emigration. In the late 1940s Bulgaria was anxious to rid itself of national minority groups, such as Armenians and Turks, and thus make its population more homogeneous. More people were allowed to depart in the winter of 1948 and the spring of 1949. The mass exodus continued between 1949 and 1951: 44,267 Jews immigrated to Israel until only a few thousand Jews remained in the country.

16 Dimitrov, Georgi (1882-1949)

A Bulgarian revolutionary, who was the head of the Comintern from 1936 through its dissolution in 1943, secretary general of the Bulgarian Communist Party from 1945 to 1949, and prime minister of Bulgaria from 1946 to 1949. He rose to international fame as the principal defendant in the Leipzig Fire Trial in 1933. Dimitrov put up such a consummate defense that the judicial authorities had to release him.

17 Six-Day-War

The first strikes of the Six-Day-War happened on 5th June 1967 by the Israeli Air Force. The entire war only lasted 132 hours and 30 minutes. The fighting on the Egyptian side only lasted four days, while fighting on the Jordanian side lasted three. Despite the short length of the war, this was one of the most dramatic and devastating wars ever fought between Israel and all of the Arab nations. This war resulted in a depression that lasted for many years after it ended. The Six-Day-War increased tension between the Arab nations and the Western World because of the change in mentalities and political orientations of the Arab nations.

18 Yom Kippur War

The Arab-Israeli War of 1973, also known as the Yom Kippur War or the Ramadan War, was a war between Israel on one side and Egypt and Syria on the other side. It was the fourth major military confrontation between Israel and the Arab states. The war lasted for three weeks: it started on 6th October 1973 and ended on 22nd October on the Syrian front and on 26th October on the Egyptian front.

19 Trotsky, Lev Davidovich (born Bronshtein) (1879-1940)

Russian revolutionary, one of the leaders of the October Revolution of 1917, an outstanding figure of the communist movement and a theorist of Marxism. Trotsky participated in the social-democratic movement from 1894 and supported the idea of the unification of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks from 1906. In 1905 he developed the idea of the 'permanent revolution'. He was one of the leaders of the October Revolution and a founder of the Red Army. He widely applied repressive measures to support the discipline and 'bring everything into revolutionary order' at the front and the home front. The intense struggle with Stalin for the leadership ended with Trotsky's defeat. In 1924 his views were declared petty-bourgeois deviation. In 1927 he was expelled from the Communist Party, and exiled to Kazakhstan, and in 1929 abroad. He lived in Turkey, Norway and then Mexico. He excoriated Stalin's regime as a bureaucratic degeneration of the proletarian power. He was murdered in Mexico by an agent of Soviet special services on Stalin's order.

20 Perestroika (Russian for restructuring)

Soviet economic and social policy of the late 1980s, associated with the name of Soviet politician Mikhail Gorbachev. The term designated the attempts to transform the stagnant, inefficient command economy of the Soviet Union into a decentralized, market-oriented economy. Industrial managers and local government and party officials were granted greater autonomy, and open elections were introduced in an attempt to democratize the Communist Party organization. By 1991, perestroika was declining and was soon eclipsed by the dissolution of the USSR.

21 Decree 56

Promulgated on 13th January 1989, this decree led to radical changes in the economy of Bulgaria. Property officially fell into three categories: state, municipal and private. As a result the opportunity for private initiatives in Bulgaria increased.

22 10th November 1989

After 35 years of rule, Communist Party leader Todor Zhivkov was replaced by the hitherto Prime Minister Peter Mladenov who changed the Bulgarian Communist Party's name to Socialist Party. On 17th November 1989 Mladenov became head of state, as successor of Zhivkov. Massive opposition demonstrations in Sofia with hundreds of thousands of participants calling for democratic reforms followed from 18th November to December 1989. On 7th December the 'Union of Democratic Forces' (SDS) was formed consisting of different political organizations and groups.

23 Zhivkov, Todor (1911-1998)

First Secretary of the Central Committee of the ruling Bulgarian Communist Party (1954-1989) and the leader of Bulgaria (1971-1989). His 35 years as Bulgaria's ruler made him the longest-serving leader in any of the Soviet-block nations of Eastern Europe. When communist governments across Eastern Europe began to collapse in 1989, the aged Zhivkov resigned from all his posts. He was placed under arrest in January 1990. Zhivkov was convicted of embezzlement in 1992 and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. He was allowed to serve his sentence under house arrest.

24 Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee)

The Joint was formed in 1914 with the fusion of three American Jewish aid committees, which were alarmed by the suffering of Jews during World War I. In late 1944, the Joint entered Europe's liberated areas and organized a massive relief operation. It provided food for Jewish survivors all over Europe, it supplied clothing, books and school supplies for children. It supported the establishment of cultural meeting places, including libraries, theaters and gardens. It also provided religious supplies for the Jewish communities. The Joint also operated DP camps, in which it organized retraining programs to help people learn trades that would enable them to earn a living, while its cultural and religious activities helped re-establish Jewish life. The Joint was also closely involved in helping Jews to emigrate from European and Muslim countries. The Joint was expelled from East Central Europe for decades during the Cold War and it has only come back to many of these countries after the fall of communism. Today the Joint provides social welfare programs for elderly Holocaust survivors and encourages Jewish renewal and communal development.

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