

Gitli Alhalel

Gitli David Alhalel (nee Levi)

Vidin

Bulgaria

Interviewer: Patricia Nikolova

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Gitli Alhalel (nee Levi) is a delicate and cultivated woman. Her home is in Kale, the old Jewish neighborhood in Vidin, very close to the Danube River. The modest flat of the hospitable Alhalel family is cozy and tidy. Although Gitli may look to be a bit overshadowed by her husband, the distinguished Mayer Alhalel, she is clearly the backbone of the family. Her calm and peaceful behavior balances the energy of her untiring husband, enlivens their home and lights it up with her smile.



Most of the Bulgarian Jews came from Spain and so did my ancestors. [1](#) Far back in the 15th century Jews were persecuted from Spain in 1492 by the royals Fernando and Isabella, because they refused to adopt Christianity. Some of the Jews sailed across the Mediterranean Sea in the direction of North Africa, others passed through Italy and France. A significant part of them settled on the Balkan Peninsula. They were all from the Sephardi group. [2](#) That's why all Jews in Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Macedonia and former Yugoslavia speak Ladino [3](#) and not Yiddish, for example [the language of the Ashkenazi Jews, who live in Russia, Romania, Germany, Poland and the USA] The nice thing is that all Jews on the Balkan Peninsula can communicate with each other in Ladino. That language is a kind of medieval Spanish, the so-called 'language of Miguel de Cervantes' [4](#) which does not resemble modern-day Spanish.

My parents have different origin. My father David Avram Levi (1898 – 1969) is a Sephardi Jew born in Vidin [port city on the right bank of the Danube in Bulgaria, 220 km. away from Sofia]. My mother Rashel Avram Levi (nee Benjosef, 1899 – 1975) was also born here, but she is half Ashkenazi Jew. That is, her mother, my grandmother Ester, whose family name I do not know, moved from Germany to Bulgaria due to reasons unknown to me. My father was a middleman and my mother – a housewife. I have a sister – Ester David Fintsi (nee Levi), who is five years older than me. She was born in 1925 in Vidin. She lives in Sofia now and she worked as a clerk. She has two daughters: Madlena and Sheli Fintsi, who also live in Sofia.

At home we always spoke in Bulgarian and in Ladino. We spoke both languages at the same time very rarely (maybe when I was a child) - for example, my father or my mother would say something in Ladino, and I would answer in Bulgarian or vice versa. Of course, before I started school I spoke to my peers in Ladino, since we lived in the Jewish neighborhood, Kale. The truth is that the times

were different then. I mean, there were not so many mixed marriages between Jews and Bulgarians. Nowadays, the first language children learn is the Bulgarian. At those times my parents and the parents of all children I knew were Sephardi. So, our mother tongue was Ladino. We spoke it at home and outside, we also used it in the Jewish school, because we were all Jewish children from Sephardi families and it was the language closest to us.

I was born in one of the most beautiful Bulgarian towns on the Danube River, which was the capital of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom [5](#). My hometown is Vidin, or Bdin, as they called it in the past. Every Jew born in Vidin remains in love with this town and the country. As a child I loved going for long walks along the river. If you stop at the bend of the river, you can see Kalafat straight in front of you. Here, in Vidin, people like saying metaphorically that the lights of Kalafat are like the lights of life, because at first they are broad, then the river waters shrink them more and more until they dissolve in one single ray.

Our house had two entrances. I remember that we had to pay it in installments because our family was not rich. That is why our landlords lived with us at the beginning. My family lived in one room and every month my father would pay part of the sum for the whole house. Unfortunately, we did not have a garden. But we had a yard with cobblestones – they were very clean, because we washed them every day. We also had electricity. There has been electricity in Vidin since the first half of the 20th century. At first we had some additional sheds – the hen-house, the outside toilet, the ‘shupron’ [a shed for coal and wood: the word comes from French and means ‘to enter’. In Bulgaria it has another dialect meaning – a shelter covered in a hurry.] We were very close to the street where the children played all day. As a child I did not know any special games, nor did I have many toys. I remember that at first the girls and the boys played separately. We, the girls, used to jump over a rope and laugh all day long. Later, we played ball together with the boys. There were no other interesting games.

At the end of the previous century Vidin was quite a modest and small town. About 19,000 people lived there. The Jews were around 8,000 (significantly more than they are today). [According to the first census of the population, lands and cattle in the newly-liberated from Turkish rule Bulgaria – a census done by the temporary Russian authority over the Bulgarian lands (1878-1879) the overall number of Jews living in Vidin region was 2202 (1114 men and 1088 women). They lived predominantly in the cities and were 0.94% of the local population, among whom there were also Turks, gypsies and Wallachians. In 1900, 1905 and 1910 only in Vidin the Jewish population was respectively 1,784, 1,873 and 1,727 people. The overall number of citizens in the town was respectively 15,791, 16,387 and 16,450, among whom the Bulgarians were the most (followed by the Turks, the Jews, the gypsies and Wallachians) (the data was taken from the State Archive of the town of Vidin)]. I remember that the chairman of the Jewish organization at that time was Rozanov (I do not remember his first name). I also remember that the Jewish school was only up to the 4th form (equivalent to the present 4th grade). Adon [meaning ‘mister’ in Ivrit] Haim Levi, also from Vidin, taught us Ivrit from the Torah, and before that we read fairy tales in Ivrit. But we studied the letters for a whole year. After that adon Niko (Nissim) Sabetay taught us Ivrit and I also liked him as a teacher. Of course, at first I made mistakes all the time, it was very hard to learn Ivrit, because no one at home knew it. But I gradually got used to it and I even started to like it. I still remember one of the teachers (but I do not remember his name). I only remember that in the first grade we had a special teacher, who was also a headmaster. He taught us in gymnastics. We had classes

outside near the Danube, that's why I loved them. There was also a chamber mandoline orchestra in the school and my father came to conduct us. At that time I learned to play the accordion (that instrument was very popular at the start of the previous century).

From the school subjects I also loved literature, because I loved reading. As a child I read mostly the classics, such as Hugo, Balzac, Stendhal, Mayne Reid, Jack London, Jules Verne, [Maxim] Gorky [6](#). Later I started reading the so-called progressive [i.e. left-wing] literature written after 9th September 1944 [7](#) – Lenin, Stalin, Marxist literature. I read many such books, probably because my father had them at home even before Bulgaria turned from monarchy into a republic [1946]. At that turning point in history there were three popular newspapers: 'Utro' [Morning] [8](#), 'Zaria' [Fireworks] and 'Zora' [Dawn] [9](#). What was typical about them was their different political orientation. For example, 'Zaria' was a progressive newspaper. It was, in a way, the forum of the new times. In other words, it was a leftist newspaper, popularizing the socialist ideas. 'Zora' was a fascist publication and was not bought by the common people – only by Branniks [10](#), Legionaries [Bulgarian Legions] [11](#), 'Otets Paisii' [12](#) members and chauvinists of the kind. 'Utro' was more social newspaper. You could see Jews reading 'Utro' or 'Zaria' in the streets, the barber's and coffee shops.

When I finished the Jewish school, I had to continue my education in the local Bulgarian high school, which was also close to Kale. I was glad, because I liked learning. We also had many teachers and new subjects, which I found interesting. I had good marks. All the Jews in the school had good marks and no one had better marks than us. I loved our maths teacher, Miss Vasileva. Most of the girls loved her, because she was nice to us. There were obligatory classes in religion at that time, but all Jewish children were forbidden to take part in them. (the ban was imposed by the board of the school in which I studied. Everyone, including us, Jews, considered the ban normal for the times). We felt very hurt, especially in the winter, when we had nowhere to go during that time and we had to wander around along the river.

As a child I was very proud of the fact that our synagogue in Vidin was the most beautiful synagogue in Bulgaria. It was built in the end of the 19th century [the Vidin Synagogue, built in 1894 in neo-Gothic style was the second largest synagogue in Bulgaria. Now it stands as a ruin, but its restoration as concert hall is planned by the Bulgarian national Jewish organization]. Its exterior architecture was very beautiful and the acoustics inside was also strong. I went there mostly with my mother and went to the balcony, as all Jewish women did. To be honest, my mother went to the synagogue more often than my father, because he was an atheist and adamant communist even before 9th September [1944]. I loved going to the synagogue on Erev Sabbath, or as they say in Ladino, Sabbatua Nochi.

I loved it not only for the Pesach chocolates liked by all children, which we received from chazzan Meshulam. By the way, our shochet was the father of my friend Mimi Pizanti's uncle. We had a number of rabbis, but I remember only the name of our last rabbi Avram Behar, who moved to Israel with the Mass Aliyah [13](#) in 1948. He distinguished himself with his bravery when he saved a lot of people, most of them children, during the floods in 1939. But after he left for Israel, nobody received any news from him. Most probably, he continued to be a rabbi there. Now the Vidin synagogue is in ruins and it will hardly ever be renovated. My heart breaks, when I look at it now.

Every Friday night my mother and I cooked in the kitchen, afterwards we washed ourselves, changed our clothes and prepared the chicken for Sabbath. We had bought it from the market before that, and on Thursday I had to take it to the shochet in the synagogue to slaughter it. I would bring it quickly back home and give it to my mother. She did not scald it with water, because it was forbidden, she plucked it and singed it and then she cooked it. When the Saturday ceremony ended, there was always food left. As for Saturday itself, as I said, we cooked on Friday and on Saturday we prepared sweets only. The word most often used by the Jews in Kale [the Jewish quarter] was 'mitzvah' [meaning charity in Hebrew]. The neighbors gave each other sweets and crackers, exchanged recipes, news, argued and laughed. For Purim my mother prepared sweet ring-shaped buns with 'alkashul' (biscuit dough with honey and walnuts). According to the tradition the sweets had to be preserved for Pesach, that is, they were eaten a month later. But I liked more the sweets sold by the grandfather of my future husband Mayer Alhalel. His grandfather was Naftali Alhalel and his grandmother who made the sweets was Mazal. All the children in Kale really believed that she brought us good luck [her name means 'luck' in Hebrew].

On [Yom] Kippur, the day of absolution, we had to fast all day [Editor's note: children under age of 9 don't fast, then they start fasting little by little. Boys start to fast as long as adults do by the age of 13, girls from 12.] But in the evening a hen was slaughtered, after which all Jewish families gathered in the synagogue. On Sukkot, the holiday celebrating the gathering of the harvest, we made tents in the synagogue. [The Ivrit word 'shalash' is identical with the Ivrit word 'sukkah' and is much older. The following example from the Torah illustrates that: 'Live in shalash for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in shalash so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt.' (Leviticus, 23:42:43) The shalash is a temporary dwelling of Jews in the desert. The sukkah is the same but it is lighter (like a tent) while the shalash had three or four walls and instead of roof, they put branches of wood, bamboo sticks, stones etc. During the seven days of the holiday Sukkot the Jews slept, fed and celebrated there, that is why, it was a tradition to decorate the shalash (the sukkah) from the inside. The information was taken from the Israeli book 'Liyot Jeudi' (the title means 'To be a Jew' translated from Ivrit) written by Menashe-Gad Rashovski and published in Ramat Gan. Its editor was Miriam Mishal, 1991.] That nice holiday originated from a miracle, which took place during the escape of the Jewish people from Egypt in the distant past. While they were crossing the desert on their way to Israel, their God surrounded them with miraculous clouds. During the day they protected the people from the scorching sun and during the night – from the unbearable cold. On Purim we organized very beautiful masking balls. We also decorated ring-shaped buns with red paint in the form of flowers. On Chanukkah we still light candles. When I was in my 2nd grade, we celebrated Chanukkah in the cinema hall in the neighborhood. We had prepared a scene to act. I was playing the second candle and my mother had bought for me a black velvet dress with a white collar. I was followed on stage by the third candle; we were seven candles altogether.

On the day before Pesach the Jewish house had to be cleaned so well that you would not be able to find a crumb of bread anywhere [mitzvah of biur chametz]. We cleaned thoroughly all furniture, rugs, curtains, we even painted the walls. We boiled the dishes in a mixture of water, ash, salt and soap. We were allowed to eat unleavened bread only, the so-called matzah. We, the Jews in Vidin, prepared the matzah by ourselves so we made it in separate flat loaves. We kneaded the loaves without yeast, and they were as hard as stone. On Pesach we always put a white blanket and special dishes, which my mother took out only for the holiday, the so-called 'lalos' in Ladino. The

legend of Pesach has to be read by the father [the oldest man] in the family, but my father was not religious, so our family skipped that. I have been present at that ceremony in other families, where the father or the grandfather read the legend (Haggadah) about Pesach and before he started the youngest girl in the family would give him a jug of water to wash his hands. That was the ritual purging from the sins gathered during the year. And the father or grandfather would start reading the prayer, washing his hands from time to time. The text read by the head of the family was about the misfortunes God inflicted on the Egyptians: 'snakes, lizards and natural disasters'. Another tradition was observed in my home as well. My mother would hide a piece of matzah [afikoman] and I had to find it. It was believed that the child, who finds it, would be very happy all year long. What I also loved about the holiday, was that it went on for eight days. We didn't work on the first and the last day only. Then my parents and I always went to the synagogue. And there the rabbi would chant in Hebrew. The Haggadah (or the legend about Pesach) says, 'What has happened this evening, different from all other evenings - every other evening we are different, but this evening we are all gathered at the same table.' Then follows a praise to God, 'You are the king, you are the Master, you are all to us...' Then the rabbi would read in Hebrew and tell the story of Moses.

Every Friday was a market day in Vidin. The market was in the center of the town. It was very colorful, and yet a typical village market. The women usually sat on the ground surrounded by lots of baskets, there were no stalls at that time. So, the vendors were all villagers from the nearby villages. Apart from animals, fruit and vegetables, they also brought charcoal to Vidin. All villagers around Vidin were Wallachians [In this case these are immigrants from central Romania, or more precisely the Wallachian region, from which their name comes. Their immigration into Bulgaria, northern Greece and Macedonia took place after the disintegration of the feudal system. The Wallachians were mostly nomads, cattle breeders, and in particular, sheep breeders.] There was no Bulgarian village around Vidin without Wallachians. I was very happy when my mother went to the market. Like all Jewish women at that time, she would walk around the market at least three times, in order to buy nice and cheap products. On Fridays I usually accompanied her to the big market in Vidin. It had three areas: a cattle area, next to it an area for wood and grain and one for fruit and vegetables. I preferred the last one. There was a large scale in the center of the market where people went to measure the products they had chosen. Of course there were a lot of small shops around the market owned by retailers, who were mostly Jewish. Most of them were retail workers, they usually sold manufactured goods in their little shops. Very few of them traded in wool or flour. There were almost no tinsmiths, farmers or fruit growers. There were a couple of booksellers but I do not remember my parents ever taking me there.

The Baba Vida Fortress [14](#) is in the center of Vidin. The town itself has a number of zones circling the fortress. The first zone surrounds the fortress and was a ditch in the past. The second zone surrounds the back part of the fortress. And the third zone is the so-called 'reduti' [the word comes from French and means a trench for one-man defense]. In fact, the Jewish neighborhood Kale took the most part of the second zone. It was the most favorable neighborhood, because it was the highest neighborhood in Vidin. During the great flood in Vidin in 1942 (when the Danube River flooded our town) the people from the whole town came to Kale. It was the only neighborhood, which was not affected so seriously.

I remember that scary flood very well, because I was 12 years old then. I got really afraid. The Danube River flooded the town because ice had obstructed its path. The river is usually not a

pretty sight in winter. That particular winter it had frozen, but a big wave came and broke the ice. The waters of the river got obstructed by the ice and entered the town. For two days the whole town, except parts of Kale, was flooded by the water. Fortunately, there were no victims, apart from an old lady who died from natural causes at that time. I remember how mobilized all the people were then. All students from the upper classes of the men's high school spread in groups around the neighborhoods to save as many people as possible. They went around the town in military boats and ordinary fishing boats, in which they transported the people from the low one-storey buildings. All of those people had left their belongings behind and fled towards Kale. Of course, most of the buildings were destroyed. On some of the preserved old houses you can still see the sign placed in 1942 showing the level the water reached then. There are also houses where the level was higher than a man's height. That disaster could be compared in part to the recent tsunami floods in the southern part of the world.

Kale was and still is the oldest Jewish neighborhood in Vidin. It was founded when the Jews came to Vidin two centuries ago [the presence of Jews in the vicinity of Vidin dates from Justinian (527-565)]. It is between the Bath and the Baba Vida Fortress. In fact that relatively small area included the whole town at the beginning; that is, the original town was quite small. Now, the residential district 'Benkovski' is located there. In the past there were a lot of little streets such as Kaloyan St, Samuil St etc. And in the middle of the neighborhood was Kanlu Dere St (these are Turkish words, 'dere' means a river, but I do not know what 'kanlu' means). It was the border between the Jewish and the Turkish neighborhood, which was larger and more populated than ours. They even had another Turkish neighborhood called Ag Djamia [Mosque]. The new part of the town was established in the 1920s and the Bulgarians lived there. The Jews and the Turks remained in the old part. That is why there were very few Bulgarian families in Kale (between 40 and 50 families) especially during the Holocaust [the Jewish community of Vidin did not suffer severely during World War II. The decree of expulsion in 1943 was not carried out.].

We have always had good relations with them. At those times the Jews were mostly craftsmen. There were also tinsmiths, the streets were full of barber's shops, bakeries, workshops of carpenters and glaziers, in which mostly Jews worked. They all lived in Kale and had workshops in various places in town.

Usually there was a fair on the 28th August in Vidin. All students and children, including me, loved going there so that our parents would buy us confetti and sweets. But unfortunately, I remember the bad events more clearly. For example, when the Law for Protection of the Nation [15](#) came out in 1942 a disgusting man appeared in the Jewish neighborhood, Ivan Zviara [meaning 'the Beast']. I witnessed how he banished our neighbors, the Pizanti family, from their own house. They were five of them and they had to sleep in the hen-house. They slept on the floor, without being able to enter their home or use their belongings. People said that the same fascist and evil Bulgarian, Ivan Zviara, went to the Aegean Sea when the Germans led the Aegean Jews [16](#) sacrificed by King Boris III [17](#) to the ships, which transported them to the Maydanek concentration camp [18](#). People also said that returning from there Ivan Zviara brought back so many unnecessary clothes and things that his wife did not know what to do with them or what they were used for.

Mimi Pizanti, the youngest of the three daughters in our neighbors' family escaped from home later on and fought together with the Bulgarians at the front. All my friends in Vidin were brave Bulgarians and Jews (there were also many Armenians and Turkish people in our town too). My first

experience of the Law for Protection of the Nation is also related to Mimi Pizanti, who is older than me. It happened in the Bulgarian high school where all the Jews studied after the 4th grade in the Jewish school. In March 1941 all students of Jewish origin were ordered to wear the disgraceful yellow stars [19](#). In that freezing March morning the high school headmaster Mr Cholakov ordered all students to go out and form columns in the schoolyard. Then he said: 'Gitli Alhalel, Veneta Illel, Beka Pinkas, Stela Paparo, Mimi Pizanti, Beka Arie, Fifi Kohen (there were also others but I do not remember them) – two steps forward!' We did that and heard him say: 'From now on you are not welcome in our school!' I felt as if I had just been punched in the stomach.

I remember how Mimi Buko Pizanti was humiliated once at school. Some of our classmates had anti-Semitic attitudes towards us. When the Law for Protection of the Nation came into force, we put on the yellow stars and wore them at school. [Jewish children did go to school for a short while wearing the disgraceful yellow stars. After that they were really banished from the classroom because of their Jewish origin. The reason was that the anti-Semitic Law for Protection of the Nation was adopted on 23rd January, 1941. As for the children of the Bulgarian Jews, there was really a paradox because they had to go to school for a couple of months, wearing the yellow stars and studying side by side to the children of the Legionaries. They were banned to go to school in March 1942 when the Law for Protection of the Nation was in full swing.] Once the daughter of the police chief in the neighborhood (who was also the class chairman) shouted in the schoolyard after Mimi: 'Take off your badge, or I will fine you!' Mimi said: 'I can't take it off, because your father will lock me in...' It was a very ugly scene.

Before that incident happened Mimi and I were in the same UYW group [20](#). The person in charge of the group was the future professor Avram Pinkas, a distinguished surgeon. The group also included Marsel Varsano, Leon Pinkas, Beka Aladgem. I was also a member of 'Hashomer Hatzair' [21](#). When we were in the last grade in junior high school we all received a leaflet propagating the establishment of a Jewish state. A committee was formed and we went to its meetings. One of the requirements for the foundation of Israel was that the Jews should immigrate there. We were divided into groups. There were people two years older than me, in high school, and two years younger than me, still in primary school. We sang songs and had fun. But most of the time we listened to lectures on various topics – from political to religious (on the essence of religion) and emancipation ones. Some members spent days discussing the fate of the character Nora in 'Puppets' House' by playwright Henrik Ibsen [22](#). No matter how meaningless such discussions may seem through the lens of time, they helped us mature. In that way, we developed our individualities and learned to be independent and work in a team.

When the Law for Protection of the Nation was adopted in 1942 we were not allowed to leave Kale, nor go to school or leave home very often. At that time the advantage was that we could easily enter the neighbor's yard through doors in the fences. So, all of us, the children, passed from house to house all the time, without going out on the street and spent all the time together. In fact, that helped us much to go through that period. Thanks to those small doors between the yards, we even saved people who were sought to be arrested. For example, the famous anti-fascist Asen Balkanski [The only thing the interviewee knows is that his origin is Bulgarian. He was born in the village of Chuplene, Belogradchik region and around World War II he escaped to Yugoslavia. There is no further information about him.] - commander of a Yugoslav partisan squad hid in the basement of my friend and neighbor Mimi Pizanti for a long time. In the end, a phaeton was

arranged for him to leave the town, but he was caught at the border with Yugoslavia and shot as a political prisoner.

After the end of the Law for Protection of the Nation the situation in the whole country improved. In other words, you could breathe more freely. And yet, the new times after the changes in September 1944 could not obliterate my memories from the recent past. When the Law for Protection of the Nation came into force in 1942, we had to wear yellow six-beam stars made of plastic. They placed a notice with a yellow star on the door of every Jewish home. We were all registered in the municipality as special Bulgarian citizens of Jewish origin. Of course the clerks were not very nice to us. There was also a commissariat on the 'Jewish problem' in Vidin and in all Bulgarian towns [Commissariat for Jewish Affairs] [23](#). We were afraid to pass near it and were also afraid of the Branniks and Legionaries who beat us and humiliated us. There were some streets where we did not go to at all, because there was a special order that Jews should not go out after 9 pm. Our food was rationed, it was very little and one and the same. That was definitely the hardest period of my life, a real nightmare.

The people in Vidin also discussed a lot the demonstration on 24th May 1943 [24](#) in Sofia against the internment of the Sofia Jews and the deportation of the Bulgarian Jews [25](#). That demonstration started from the Jewish school in Iuchbunar [26](#), the present-day 134th Dimcho Debelyanov High School and continued to Klementina Sq, where the Jewish Home stands today. [Bet Am] [27](#) People said that the police caught up with the demonstrators there, dispersed them and arrested many people. Many other were pushed in lorries and transported to labor camps [28](#). That demonstration was led by rabbi Daniel [29](#), who later hid at Bishop Stephan's place [Exarch Stephan] [30](#). The Sofia bishop definitely supported the Jews at that time.

There were also some Jews who changed their religion in order to save their lives. Then the authorities ordered that the baptized Jews should not be separated from the rest. That is, the disgraceful Law for Protection of the Nation affected them too. In my opinion, and in the opinion of many other people there was not anti-Semitism in Bulgaria. The anti-Semitism was imported here. Or maybe it was based purely on spite and envy, which is something else, neither patriotism, nor chauvinism, nor pride, nor anti-Semitism.

The Soviet army entered Bulgaria not as a conqueror, but as a liberator and the people welcomed it warmly. All authorities have their positive and negative sides. Fascism was good for its supporters, gave them rights and privileges. But the more progressive people wanted to resist that policy, which helped the Germans oppose Russia. A partisan movement developed in Bulgaria, which resisted the support of the Bulgarian government to the Germans. The government, in turn, killed the partisans, set their homes on fire. The terror in that period, especially between 1943-1944 was great. Many young people died, so did many Jews, especially in Plovdiv [a Bulgarian city in Southern Bulgaria, 200 km away from Sofia] and Sofia. There was a concentration camp in Kailuka [31](#) in Pleven where relatives or brothers of partisans were imprisoned. One summer day in 1944 some fascist organizations set the camp on fire and killed about ten Jews. They were old people, who could not escape from the flames in time.

My husband [Mayer Rafael Alhalel] told me that the people in his first and second labor camp were about 300-400 people. They were divided into groups: a Vidin one, a Vratsa one and a more general one including workers from Jewish origin born in Northwest Bulgaria. The Vidin group had a

'seemed-to-be' vicious and cruel supervisor: that is he cursed the Jews and made them do the hardest work in front of his superiors, but as soon as those superiors went away, he started playing belote with the Jewish men. It was only after 9th September that my husband learned that their strict supervisor was also a UYW member. But he became a supervisor in a Jewish labor camp, because he was very poor and he needed money.

My husband and I married in 1948. Our wedding was on 9th July 1948 in Cherven Briag [a town in Northern Bulgaria, 150 km away from Sofia]. Before that we lived together for one year in Cherven Briag. We married before the registrar on a weekday. I did not have a wedding gown, nor did he have a wedding suit, because we could not afford them. After the wedding we went back to Vidin where we looked after our parents. To be honest, there was a moment when we thought about leaving to Israel. But our parents - his and mine - did not want to, because the four of them already felt old. And yet, many Jews older than them left their life in Bulgaria and emigrated. When we lived in Cherven Briag, we lived comfortably. My husband was involved in many party [Bulgarian Communist Party] activities. I worked as an accountant in the meat processing plant and the construction company in Vidin. I retired at those two positions.

My husband was also born in Vidin in 1923. He has secondary high school education. He is a polygraphist (a printer). I remember clearly the relatives of my husband, because we were neighbors. His grandfather was a confectioner and the Jewish children loved him very much. He owned a small confectionery in Kale and sold ice cream and Jewish sweets made by my husband's grandmother Mazal. For Pesach she made biskuchicos con lokum [Ladino: pastries with Turkish delight], roskitas [Ladino: ring-shaped buns], petikas de almendra [Ladino: almond sweets], which we, the children, loved a lot. His grandmother Mazal was famous as one of the most beautiful women in Vidin. His mother [Bulisa Rafael Alhalel] was a seamstress, she sewed ladies' underwear and men's shirts.

He has a sister, with whom I have always got on very well. Her name is Lea Yosef Halfon (nee Alhalel). She was also born in Vidin in 1915. She has always been a housewife and she lives in Beit-Avot (Israel) with her family. Her husband's name is Yosef Halfon. Their son is Simanto Yosef Halfon.

My husband and I have two children - Streya Mayer Puncheva (nee Alhalel) and Sheli Mayer Vladeva (nee Alhalel). The elder one, Streya, was born in 1949. She graduated from the chemical technical school in Vidin. She has been working as a chemist in the local meat processing plant for some years. My younger daughter Sheli was born in 1954 and is a construction engineer. Unfortunately, she does not have children. I have grandchildren from Streya, who also worked in the municipality in Vidin. My granddaughter Yanita lives in a kibbutz now. She has a family in northern Israel (I do not know the name of the kibbutz). My grandson Lyubomir, who is director of Bulbank in Sofia, also has children. Their names are Konstantin and Mihaela.

After 9th September 1944 my family continued to celebrate the high Jewish holidays such as Rosh Hashanah, Tu bi-Shevat (called mostly Frutas in Ladino), [Yom] Kippur, Pesach, Sukkot etc. After 9th September 1944 the general approach of the party was against all religions. The Communist Party forbade people of Jewish origin to gather on their holidays. Yet, we found ways to celebrate. Most often, we visited other families. We did not always go to the synagogue, because my husband and I were active party members, so our activities were observed and at that time visits to the

synagogue were not approved.

All Jews in Bulgaria were watched closely before 1989. The Jewish community could not gather on any occasion, even on our high holidays – in the Jewish home or in the synagogue. In other words, we had to ask for permission some of the structures of the Communist Party. Our properties were also nationalized [that is, the properties of the Organization of Jews in Bulgaria ‘Shalom’ [32](#)]. After 10th November 1989 [33](#) the situation improved. Then the contradictory restitution law was adopted. It was unfair to the individual citizens but helped our organization. Let me be more specific. Some of our fellow citizens living in Sofia did not own any properties, except the flat owned by the municipality, which they rented. When the law came into force, those people were thrown out on the street by policemen, who threw out their belongings without waiting for the municipality to give them another place to stay. Those flats were returned to their previous owners, who already had a number of flats. That is why I said that the law was unfair. On the other hand, it is not a bad law because it returned the properties of the Organization of Jews, which were nationalized after 9th September 1944. Let’s also not forget that after 10th November 1989 ‘Joint’ [34](#) and the respective foundation from Switzerland sent us aid during the economic crisis and high inflation. Of course, I see the benefit from the changes and approve of them.

I am saddened by the fact that the small number of Jews in Vidin (only 26, the others have died or immigrated to Israel) do not have a comfortable life after the fall of the communist regime. The paradox is that now when we have the freedom to gather any time we want, there are too few of us left here. Now the Jewish community is well organized only in Sofia. Here the organization exists in misery and its chairman Zhak Moshe finds it very hard to raise money. The Jewish community in Vidin has had a sad fate since 10th November. We are mostly elder Jews. We gather once or twice a month to celebrate a holiday, for example Pesach, Rosh Hashanah, Purim, Chanukkah, Yom Hashoah [Holocaust Remembrance Day], Yom Atsmaut [the day of independence of Israel, introduced as a national holiday in 1948]. Unfortunately, we are not as active as the Jews in Sofia. Unlike us, they gather often at specific days during the week and at weekends. They have a number of clubs, for example ‘Golden Age’ club [of the elderly people], ‘Health’ club, and the club of the disabled people. They listen to lectures on political, social and economic topics, go to the cinema or to the theater, on excursions, dance and do gymnastics, do everything a pensioner needs to do in order to feel part of society and of the Jewish community. We, in Vidin, do not do most of these activities. We also have problems with our properties. That is what I mean by saying that our organization is in misery.

Present-day relations between Bulgaria and Israel are much different than the ones before 10th November 1989. At that time Bulgaria kept friendly relations with some of the Arab countries, which did not approve of the existence of Israel. Iraq was such a country, the country where now the Bulgarian army tries to restore peace, advocating the US policy. Politics is strange. During totalitarianism we did not speak much about the saving of the Bulgarian Jews, although there were some films and books on the topic. Yet, today, this fact is emphasized by each of the democratic Bulgarian governments. On the other hand, at the end of January 2005 when the world celebrated the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the people from the Auschwitz concentration camp (only 2000 people survived thanks to the Russian army) we were the only European country that did not send its Prime Minister to the commemoration ceremonies there. Another curious detail is that the present Prime Minister [i.e. Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, Prime Minister of Bulgaria between 2001-

2005] in Bulgaria is son of a monarch: King Boris III, called by Hitler 'The Fox'. That same king was in good relations with the national socialists and Hitler. It was King Boris III who introduced the degrading Law for Protection of the Nation and sent those unfortunate 11 343 Jews from Aegean Thrace and Macedonia to certain death in the gas chambers of Auschwitz and Treblinka. But, as people say, politics is complex. That is why I think that the changes here after 1989 have contradictory character.

My family and I followed emotionally the development of Israel, the positive and negative changes. We are worried about the constant war there. I remember well how the UN decided to decree the foundation of the Jewish State in 1948. At that time all Arab states denounced that, saying that such a country could not exist. The following precedent was created: the Palestine state was seized by Egypt and Jordan. Naturally, most of the Arabs were banished from Israel, in fact their lands were no longer theirs (in 1948 when the Israeli state was founded the Jews all over the world were allowed to buy land in Palestine). So, the kibbutzim appeared, which are the most liberal form of communism. They are cooperative form of farming, in which everyone works as hard as the others and owns as much as the others. The Jews in Bulgaria worried a lot about the events in Israel after 1950. I remember that in the 1950s Zionism was declared a form of fascism. Then people in Bulgaria discussed secretly whether citizens of Jewish origin could be appointed to leadership positions in the communist party. Because at the time of the Warsaw Pact, for example, Bulgaria was forced to renounce diplomatic relations with Israel. The other countries from the former Soviet bloc did the same. [35](#) Yet, despite the weak relations and the distance, we were able to follow the events in Israel and discussed them among each other.

I went to Israel twice with my husband before 10th November 1989. The first was in 1964 and the second in 1973. The third time was in 1993. I see the remarkable difference between the early and late Israel, in a positive sense, of course. What is important is that we liked Bulgaria more. That is why I stayed here. And we do not regret that at all, neither my husband nor I.

Glossary

1 Expulsion of the Jews from Spain

The Sephardi population of the Balkans originates from the Jews who were expelled from the Iberian peninsula, as a result of the 'Reconquista' in the late 15th century (Spain 1492, and Portugal 1495). The majority of the Sephardim subsequently settled in the territory of the Ottoman Empire, mainly in maritime cities (Salonika, Istanbul, Smyrna, etc.) and also in the ones situated on significant overland trading routes to Central Europe (Bitola, Skopje, and Sarajevo) and to the Danube (Adrianople, Philipopolis, Sofia, and Vidin).

2 Sephardi Jewry

Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin. Their ancestors settled down in North Africa, the Ottoman Empire, South America, Italy and the Netherlands after they had been driven out from the Iberian peninsula at the end of the 15th century. About 250,000 Jews left Spain and Portugal on this occasion. A distant group among Sephardi refugees were the Crypto-Jews (Marranos), who converted to Christianity under the pressure of the Inquisition but at the first occasion reassumed their Jewish identity. Sephardi preserved their community identity; they speak Ladino language in

their communities up until today. The Jewish nation is formed by two main groups: the Ashkenazi and the Sephardi group which differ in habits, liturgy their relation toward Kabala, pronunciation as well in their philosophy.

3 Ladino

also known as Judeo-Spanish, it is the spoken and written Hispanic language of Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin. Ladino did not become a specifically Jewish language until after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 (and Portugal in 1495) - it was merely the language of their province. It is also known as Judezmo, Dzhudezmo, or Spaniolit. When the Jews were expelled from Spain and Portugal they were cut off from the further development of the language, but they continued to speak it in the communities and countries to which they emigrated. Ladino therefore reflects the grammar and vocabulary of 15th century Spanish. In Amsterdam, England and Italy, those Jews who continued to speak 'Ladino' were in constant contact with Spain and therefore they basically continued to speak the Castilian Spanish of the time. Ladino was nowhere near as diverse as the various forms of Yiddish, but there were still two different dialects, which corresponded to the different origins of the speakers: 'Oriental' Ladino was spoken in Turkey and Rhodes and reflected Castilian Spanish, whereas 'Western' Ladino was spoken in Greece, Macedonia, Bosnia, Serbia and Romania, and preserved the characteristics of northern Spanish and Portuguese. The vocabulary of Ladino includes hundreds of archaic Spanish words, and also includes many words from different languages: mainly from Hebrew, Arabic, Turkish, Greek, French, and to a lesser extent from Italian. In the Ladino spoken in Israel, several words have been borrowed from Yiddish. For most of its lifetime, Ladino was written in the Hebrew alphabet, in Rashi script, or in Solitro. It was only in the late 19th century that Ladino was ever written using the Latin alphabet. At various times Ladino has been spoken in North Africa, Egypt, Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, France, Israel, and, to a lesser extent, in the United States and Latin America.

4 Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de (29

11.1547-23.04.1616): Spanish novelist, playwright, and poet, the creator of Don Quixote, the most famous figure in Spanish literature. Born in at Alcalá de Henares, in Castilia. Due to poverty, although he was an aristocrat, he became a doctor. He enrolled in the army and took part in the Turkish-Spanish war and in the sea battle at Lepanto (1571) where he was shot through the left hand. On his way back to Spain he was captured by pirates and taken to Algeria. He was bought back in 1580 and returned to Madrid. Despite his heroism, the king treated him harshly. Personal enemies of his slandered him and he was imprisoned. Cervantes published his major works after he returned from captivity in Algeria. His first larger work is the novel 'Galatea' (unfinished, 1585), a pastoral romance. He also showed great artistic maturity in his intermedia and dramas, especially in 'La Numancia' ('The Destruction of Numacia', 1582) with a plot from the times of the Roman conquests and in 'Novelas Ejemplares' (Exemplary Tales, 1610) which described various social strata. His most famous work is the novel 'El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha' ('The Ingenious Knight Don Quixote of La Mancha', the first part was published in 1605 and the second - in 1615). He describes the adventures of his character Don Quixote, who wants to realize the knights' ideals in a world, where those ideals are long gone and inapplicable. Cervantes paints with humor and bitter irony his contemporary Spanish society with its social contradictions. The novel is vivid and interesting, its characters representative for the times, its language - rich and colorful. It is one of the best achievements of European Renaissance literature and an important stage in the

development of the novel of realism.

5 The second Bulgarian kingdom

After the establishment of the Bulgarian state there are a number of significant historical periods in its development: the period of the First Bulgarian State from 681 until 1118. That was the period from the establishment of the Bulgarian state until its fall under Byzantium rule. The period of the Second Bulgarian State starts with the restoration of the king's institution as a form of state government in 1185. That was the year of the rebellion of the brothers Asen and Petar in Tarnovo. The period ends in 1352 when the Osman Turks enter the Balkan Peninsula. During that period the Asen dynasty achieved progress, but only for a century. In the 13th century the Second Bulgarian State was greatly divided, subject to Tatar raids and village riots. In 13th - 14th century it was completely divided. Ivan Alexander divided the country in three parts – the parts along the Danube and the Black Sea were ruled by Boyar Balik, the Tarnovo Kingdom was ruled by Ivan Shishman and the Vidin Kingdom – by Ivan Sratsimir. The feudal division of the Balkan states was one of the reasons for their fall under Turkish rule.

6 Gorky, Maxim (born Alexei Peshkov) (1868-1936)

Russian writer, publicist and revolutionary.

7 9th September 1944

The day of the communist takeover in Bulgaria. In September 1944 the Soviet Union 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.

8 Utro

Meaning Morning, it was a Bulgarian bourgeois daily, issued between 1911 and 1914. It was founded by St. Damyanov and the first editor-in-chief was St. Tanev. Utro published sensational both local and international news, supporting the policy of the Government, especially during the World War II, as well as Bulgaria's pro-German orientation. Its circulation amounted to 160,000 copies.

9 Zora

Meaning Dawn, it was a Bulgarian daily published between 1919 and 1944. It was owned by 'Balgarski Pechat' (Bulgarian Printing) publishing house and its editor-in-chief was Danail Krapchev. Zora was primarily affiliated to the rightist Bulgarian Democratic Party, but later it took a more neutral position and fought for national union. It defended the interests of the occupied Bulgarians from Thrace, Macedonia, Dobrudzha and the Western Outlying Districts. It published political, economic, and cultural information. After 9th September 1944, it stopped being published. Its editor-in-chief was convicted and executed.

10 Brannik

Pro-fascist youth organization. It started functioning after the Law for the Protection of the Nation was passed in 1941 and the Bulgarian government forged its pro-German policy. The Branniks regularly maltreated Jews.

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 Otets Paisii All-Bulgarian Union

bearing the name of Otets (Father) Paisii Hilendarski, one of the leaders of the Bulgarian National Revival, the union was established in 1927 in Sofia and existed until 9th September 1944, the communist takeover in Bulgaria. A pro-fascist organization, it advocated the return to national values in a revenge-seeking and chauvinistic way.

13 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.

14 Baba Vida fortress

The only medieval Bulgarian castle entirely preserved to this day. Its construction began in the second half of the 10th century on the foundation of a former Roman fortress. Most of it was built between the end of the 12th century and the late 14th century. Today, the Baba Vida fortress is a national cultural memorial.

15 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.

16 Annexation of Aegean Thrace to Bulgaria in WWII

The Treaty of Neuilly, imposed by the Entente on Bulgaria after WWI, deprived the country alongside with its WWI gains (Macedonia) also of its outlet to the Aegean Sea (Aegean Thrace) that had been a part of the country since the Balkan Wars (1912/13). King Boris III (1918-43) joined the Axis in 1941 with the hope to be able to regain the lost territories. Bulgarian troops marched into the neighboring Yugoslav Macedonia and Greek Thrace. Although the territorial gains were initially very popular in Bulgaria, complications soon arose in the occupied territories. The oppressive Bulgarian administration resulted in uprisings in both occupied lands. Jews were persecuted, their property was confiscated and they had to do forced labor. Although the Jews in Bulgaria proper were saved they were exterminated in the newly gained territories. Over 11.000 Jews from the Bulgarian administered northern Greek lands (Thrace and Macedonia), mainly from Drama, Seres, Dedeagach (Alexandroupolis), Gyumyurdjina (Komotini), Kavala and Xanthi were deported and murdered in death camps in Poland. About 2.200 Jews survived.

17 King Boris III

The Third Bulgarian Kingdom was a constitutional monarchy with democratic constitution. Although pro-German, Bulgaria did not take part in World War II with its armed forces. King Boris III (who reigned from 1918-1943) joined the Axis to prevent an imminent German invasion in Bulgaria, but he refused to send Bulgarian troops to German aid on the Eastern front. He died suddenly after a meeting with Hitler and there have been speculations that he was actually poisoned by the Nazi dictator who wanted a more obedient Bulgaria. Many Bulgarian Jews saved from the Holocaust (over 50,000 people) regard King Boris III as their savior.

18 Maydanek concentration camp

fascist concentration camp established in Maydan Tatarski, 4 km southeast of Lublin, Poland in 1940. From 1942 to 1944 1,38 million people, mostly Jews, were killed there. It was destroyed by the Red Army in July, 1944.

19 Yellow star in Bulgaria

According to a governmental decree all Bulgarian Jews were forced to wear distinctive yellow stars after 24th September 1942. Contrary to the German-occupied countries the stars in Bulgaria were made of yellow plastic or textile and were also smaller. Volunteers in previous wars, the war-disabled, orphans and widows of victims of wars, and those awarded the military cross were given the privilege to wear the star in the form of a button. Jews who converted to Christianity and their families were totally exempt. The discriminatory measures and persecutions ended with the

cancellation of the Law for the Protection of the Nation on 17th August 1944.

20 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'état 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.

21 Hashomer Hatzair in Bulgaria

'The Young Watchman'; A Zionist-socialist pioneering movement established in Bulgaria in 1932, Hashomer Hatzair trained youth for kibbutz life and set up kibbutzim in Palestine. During World War II, members were sent to Nazi-occupied areas and became leaders in Jewish resistance groups. After the war, Hashomer Hatzair was active in 'illegal' immigration to Palestine.

22 Ibsen, Henrik (20

03.1828-23.05.1906): A Norwegian writer and playwright. His first artistic period is influenced by romanticism and is related to the national liberation war of the Norwegian people against Swedish rule. From the sixties onwards Ibsen wrote realistic social dramas, which harshly criticized society and its typical characteristics – bargaining, selfishness, pettiness, hypocrisy and the false morality of marriage: 'Brand', 'Peer Gynt', 'Pillars of Society', 'Nora or a doll's house', 'Ghosts', 'When We Dead Awaken' etc. (1866 – 1900). In his last artistic period Ibsen was influenced by symbolism ('The Wild Duck') and mysticism ('The Master Builder').

23 Commissariat for Jewish Affairs

An institution set up in September 1942 at the Ministry of Interior and People's Health that was in charge of the execution of the Law for the Protection of the Nation. It was headed by Alexander Belev, a German-trained anti-Semite.

24 24th May 1943

Protest by a group of members of parliament led by the deputy chairman of the National Assembly, Dimitar Peshev, as well as a large section of Bulgarian society. They protested against the deportation of the Jews, which culminated in a great demonstration on 24th May 1943. Thousands of people led by members of parliament, the Eastern Orthodox Church and political parties stood up against the deportation of Bulgarian Jews. Although there was no official law preventing deportation, Bulgarian Jews were saved, unlike those from Bulgarian occupied Aegean Thrace and Macedonia.

25 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.

26 Iuchbunar

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

27 Bet Am

The Jewish center in Sofia today, housing all Jewish organizations.

28 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.

29 Daniel Zion

Rabbi in the Sofia synagogue and President of the Israeli Spiritual Council, participant in procession on 24th May 1943.

30 Exarch Stefan (1878-1957)

Exarch of Bulgaria (Head of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, subordinated nominally only to the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople) and Metropolitan of Sofia. He played an important role in saving the Bulgarian Jews from deportation to death camps. In 2002 his efforts were recognized by Yad Vashem and he was awarded the title 'Righteous among the Nations'.

31 Kailuka camp

Following protests against the deportation of Bulgarian Jews in Kiustendil (8th March 1943) and Sofia (24th May 1943), Jewish activists, who had taken part in the demonstrations, and their families, several hundred people, were sent to the Somovit camp. The camp had been established on the banks of the Danube, and they were deported there in preparation for their further deportation to the Nazi death camps. About 110 of them, mostly politically active people with predominantly Zionist and left-wing convictions and their relatives, were later redirected to the Kailuka camp. The camp burned down on 10th July 1944 and 10 people died in the fire. It never became clear whether it was an accident or a deliberate sabotage.

32 Shalom Organization

Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria. It is an umbrella organization uniting 8,000 Jews in Bulgaria and has 19 regional branches. Shalom supports all forms of Jewish activities in the country and

organizes various programs.

33 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.

34 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.

35 Severing the diplomatic ties between the Eastern Block and Israel

After the 1967 Six-Day War the Soviet Union cut all diplomatic ties with Israel, under the pretext of Israel being the aggressor and the neighbouring Arab states the victims of Israeli imperialism. The Soviet-occupied Eastern European countries (Eastern Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria) conformed to the verdict of the Kremlin and followed the Soviet example. Diplomatic relations between Israel and the ex-Communist countries resumed after the fall of communism.