

# Sarina Chelibakova

Sarina Victor Chelibakova

Plovdiv

Bulgaria

Interviewer: Svetlana Avdala

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*Sarina is like the wind – with a distinct flair and presence, dynamic and sociable. Our meeting was arranged very fast. For me the life story of Sarina is an example of how nothing good can be born using force.*

*Sarina opposed the will of her parents; they disagreed over an exaggerated ambition, which they felt was out of touch with reality. Her parents wanted her to follow their will unquestionably. But Sarina is strong, and succeeds not only because of this, but also because she is able to create and preserve the world and life around her. She not only wins new friends and followers, but also continues Jewish traditions at a new level.*

My name is Sarina Victor Chelibakova, nee Molho. I was born in Plovdiv [1](#) on 1st February 1933 and I have been living here ever since. I have a secondary education. Between 1951 and 1958 I worked at a meat processing plant in Plovdiv after which I worked in the ‘Petar Chengelov’ shoe making plant for thirty years, where I retired as organizer of manufacturing. [The town of Plovdiv is famous for its large number of light industry factories. The shoe-making plant was very popular at the time and still exists today under the name ‘Flavia.’ The name was changed because Petar Chengelov was a communist activist at the time.]

I speak Bulgarian, a little Ladino and Ivrit.

I had a brother, whose name was Joseph Victor Molho [1936 - 1988].

I am married to a Bulgarian. His name is Todor Chelibakov and he is now a pensioner. He was an economist and worked as head of the supply department at the ‘Patni Stroezihi’ [Road Construction] company. [Editor’s note: The company was founded on 1st March 1950 to oversee road construction. At first it was a state unit at the Ministry of Construction and Roads.]

I have a daughter, Ema Todorova Mezan, nee Chelibakova. She’s a dentist and also lives in Plovdiv. Her husband is Jewish. His name is Isak Mezan and he is a chemist. They have two children, Victor and Robert.

I am a Sephardi Jew [2](#) both on my maternal and paternal side. My grandparents on both sides were moderately rich, but my mother’s family, Katalan, was better off. My maternal grandfather was Yako Katalan [? - 1937] and was born in Plovdiv. I don’t know what he graduated in and what education he had, but he was a bank director. I don’t know the name of the bank he was in charge of. His wife, Zelma Katalan, nee Natan, was also born in Plovdiv.

Their family was wealthy and they could afford to give their children a good education. They had four children – my uncles Isak and David Katalan, who graduated in law in Strasbourg, and their

two sisters: my mother Ernesta, who studied at the French College in Ruse [3](#), but didn't graduate, and Marga, who has a secondary education.

Their house was nice and large and it was also an example of their wealth. It was on Svetoslav Street and had a very nice garden. Later they sold a big part of it and the yard got very small. Yes, the house was large and the attic floor was also suitable for living in. When I was young, Uncle Isak, Uncle David and Aunt Marga were still single. Uncle Isak got married in 1942 to Vizurka from Dupnitsa and they moved to Sofia. In 1946 Uncle David married Veneziya Sarafova and Aunt Marga married Mordehay Natan.

The rooms in the house were lit by lamps with very beautiful chandeliers. They had two pianos. My aunt had a piano and the second one was bought as a dowry when my mother was about to get engaged, but no one played them. They also had a radio set. The floors were covered by linoleum covered with Persian rugs. I remember that they had wonderful dinner sets.

They also had a refrigerator with ice. At that time the first refrigerators didn't freeze water. There were people who sold blocks of ice, which were put into the refrigerator. They received ice every day.

They had a very good cellar on the ground floor with a wooden floor, which was also used as a dining room and living room during the summer, when the weather was very hot. We climbed down an interior staircase and had lunch there. The cellar wasn't furnished in the usual Bulgarian folk style, but with modern furniture. There were tables, chairs and a buffet.

Both the bathroom and the toilet were inside the house. There was a bath and a shower in the bathroom. Water was heated by a geyser with boiler tubes. The bathroom had a sink and the toilet was downstairs.

I remember the beautiful yard where my brother and I often played. A very nice staircase connected the house with the yard. I loved spending the evenings there. We used to wash our feet in front of the staircase before we went to bed.

In the winter they heated the rooms with stoves, built inside the walls with enormous grates covered with beautiful nets. In the evenings when the fire was going down, we would open the grate and the only thing lit would be the embers and the sparks. It was warm and cozy everywhere. They had big rubber plants in the rooms. The furniture was elegant. It was much cozier than in my other grandmother's house. The garden and the fireplaces made it very comfortable.

We also had maids. I particularly remember a woman named Ganka. She was a Bulgarian who worked there for many years. I remember her from my childhood. Then she got married. We became close and she became like a family member. Even when much later my mother came to visit us from Israel, Ganka would come to see her and invite us for dinner. We were very good friends.

Nowadays the house still exists, we sold it in parts. In the 1950s we sold one of the floors to one of the brothers and later the other floor. The lower floor was sold in the 1970s when my aunt died. She lived in the house until her very last day and when she died, they also sold the lower flat. The attic floor was sold ten years earlier.

My grandmother Zelma Katalan Natan [? - 1976/7] was a small woman who wore her hair in a bun. She was a very energetic and jolly woman, although she became a widow early on, as did my other grandmother. She would also give me cereals and sweets and she never told me what to do.

She was often sick; she had heart problems. When she had a heart attack, they would call for the family doctor, who was a cardiologist. They also had another family doctor, who specialized in internal diseases, Dr. Moskona. Unfortunately I don't remember his first name. I remember that he would put leeches on people to lower their blood pressure. My grandmother's heart pressure often increased. When I was a child, I didn't know that her blood pressure was the cause of her heart attacks.

I have very vague memories of my grandfathers, who both died young. My paternal grandfather's name was Yosif Molho [? - 1939]. I know that he was born in Pazardzhik. [Editor's note: A present-day municipality center located in the plains of Thrace, surrounded by Sredna Gora Mountain, the Rhodope and Rila Mountain. Since it is a big industrial center, there is a large Jewish community in the town with its own synagogue and school. After the Mass Aliyah of Bulgarian Jews in 1948, a small group of Jews remained, who governed the property of the Jewish community.] Later he moved to Plovdiv.

He had a secondary education and worked in the 'Phoenix' Insurance Company [4](#). He died when I was six years old. I remember his funeral, which followed all the Jewish rituals. I remember that the synagogue brought little black tables, at which we, the closest relatives, ate for seven days. [Editor's note: It is customary to openly mourn the death of a close relative for seven days, during which those who are 'sitting shiva' - 'shiva' is Hebrew for 'seven' - sit on low chairs and their family and friends take care of all their physical needs]. The rabbi cut our underwear with a pair of scissors. [Editor's note: At the funeral, an outer item of clothing, usually a shirt or cardigan, is torn as a sign of one's mourning.]

Our relatives prepared and brought us food. We ate only salty dishes. [Editor's note: on returning from the funeral to the home where they are sitting shiva, the mourners eat plain food consisting of an egg and a (round) bagel, to symbolize the cycle of life.]

I remember the horses, which carried the coffin away. They were dressed in black coats decorated with gold threads. I know from my relatives that at the cemetery there is a special room where the deceased is bathed and dressed in special clothing called 'mortaja,' a shirt and underwear, which the family had prepared.

When my grandmother Sarina died much later, I saw that she had also prepared for herself such clothing. Since she died in 1965, the rituals weren't observed, but we buried her in that clothing in the Jewish cemetery.

My grandmother Sarina Molho, nee Eshkenazi [? - 1965] was born in Vidin. My grandfather Yosif and Sarina had two children: my father Victor and his brother Shelomo. The three of them, my grandfather, my father and his brother Shelomo worked in the 'Phoenix' Insurance Company, which was owned by my grandfather. My uncle Shelomo was divorced, he didn't remarry and didn't have any children. He died in 1965 in Plovdiv.

I barely remember Grandfather Yosif, but I remember Grandmother Sarina very well. I am named after her. She was a big woman, like me. She had long gray hair, which she arranged in a braid and then into a bun.

My grandparents and uncle lived in the apartment where my husband and I later lived. My uncle was a very shy man and mostly talked to my grandmother. She told me tales in Bulgarian and spoke to me in Ladino [5](#), she sang songs to me and indulged me in every way. I learned Ladino from her, because my mother didn't allow us to speak Ladino at home. She thought it would

prevent us from learning Bulgarian pronunciation and spelling well.

I loved both of my grandmothers, but I loved visiting my maternal grandmother Zelma more, because my uncles also lived there. They weren't married yet and they also played with me. My parents and I lived separately in rented accommodation. My mother didn't want to live with her mother-in-law, because she thought it wasn't suitable. Working-class people lived there, not the classy aristocratic society she was striving for. That's why we paid rent.

I was born in a house just opposite the fire station, but I don't remember it. Then we rented a place on today's Petyofi Street, which was then called Bolyarska Street. I remember that house very well. It had two floors and a very nice yard. It was opposite the Bunardjik hill [Editor's note: One of Plovdiv's main attractions are the seven syenite hills also known as 'tepeteta,' over which the Plovdiv residential districts are built]. There was a very beautiful external staircase leading to an entrance hall, and a separate backdoor for the servants, which they used to bring wood and coal inside from the cellar where they were stored.

We had a living room, guest room, bedroom, kitchen and a bathroom and toilet combined. Then we went to live elsewhere on the same street, 13 Bolyarska Street. Afterwards, we moved into this house, in which we still live. We own it. My grandmother and my uncle lived in one of the apartments and we let out the other one. We lived in the one which we let out. We moved here because according to the Law for the Protection of the Nation [6](#) one couldn't let out his or her own apartment; the authorities took either the rent or the apartment. The people who lived in our apartment went to live in our former house on 13 Bolyarska Street.

My mother, Ernesta Yako Molho, nee Katalan [1912 - 2001] was a very ambitious woman. She was the decision-maker at home. It was her idea to live separately from our grandparents, who lived in a working-class neighborhood. One of the reasons was that she came from a more aristocratic neighborhood.

My uncles had graduated in Strasbourg, which meant a lot then. She herself studied in the French College in Ruse, which she didn't graduate from because of the high Catholic influence there. Her parents didn't want her to be swayed in that direction and she left college before graduation.

She married my father when she was 19 years old. Most probably the marriage was arranged by their parents. She never told me anything about her relationship with my father before they got married. My father's family was also fairly well-off. My father was eleven years older than my mother. It was a big wedding, much talked about in Plovdiv. It was conducted in line with all the Jewish rituals and preceded by a one-year engagement. They married on 16th August 1932. I have pictures of it.

My mother's ambition showed in everything she did. She was a perfect housewife, who kept the house tidy and clean; she knitted, sewed, made wonderful desserts and dishes. She also wanted us to rise in society. We were educated not to stand out from the crowd, rather to do the same as everyone else, but to do it better. That's why we didn't speak Ladino at home, only Bulgarian. She didn't allow us to go to the Jewish school, which she disapproved of. She enrolled us in the elite junior high school 'Kiril and Methodii' and then we graduated from the elite junior high school 'Carnegie', which my aunts and uncles had gone to.

I was always chosen as a model student at school. My high school literature teacher used to say, 'Look at Sarina, she's not Bulgarian, but she knows Bulgarian better than you: its pronunciation, its spelling and literature, and you, Bulgarians, are bad both in grammar and literature.'

We had a very large library at home. My mother subscribed to the fashionable magazines 'Zlatni Zarna' [Golden Seeds] and 'Mozayka' [Mosaic]. She also received the magazine 'Domakinya' [Housewife]. [Editor's note: all these magazines started coming out after the end of WWI. The last one was one of the best and included articles on culture, science, fashion and cooking.]

My mother was also an avid Zionist. She was a secretary for WIZO [7](#). They persuaded young girls to leave for the kibbutzim and for the specialized agricultural schools in Israel, especially those who were poor. They convinced them that they would have a better future there. They organized bazaars and took part in the WIZO congress meetings in Bulgaria. Along with the other members, my mother organized the WIZO balls and she also took part in the preparation of the Russian salads, which I still make at home. They look like the ones you can buy in a shop, but are much more delicious.

She was a very dedicated Zionist. She said she would never allow us to marry Bulgarians, although my brother had a Bulgarian girlfriend. Maybe that's why she wanted us to leave the country so badly. She and my father thought that if I married a Bulgarian, I would have five or six children and he would leave me, or be drunk all the time and so on.

My father, Victor Yosif Molho [1901 - 1966], was a gentle and compliant man, who was used to being silent and leaving the decision-making to my mother. He was a very serious man. When he had problems, he didn't talk to anybody. I would know that 'papa is angry' if I saw him silently climbing the staircase to our house, because he would usually whistle or sing. Although he wasn't authoritative, he insisted on the patriarchal way of life. We always sat together at lunch and at dinner.

He worked in the 'Phoenix' Insurance Company, although he had graduated from a teaching college. He didn't have fixed working hours. We would always wait for him to sit at the table. He liked to say, 'While I am head of this family, we will all dine together.' So I always had to be at the table at eight thirty in the evening. Dinner was always served on a white starched tablecloth with a piece of embroidery put over it.

Our family observed some Jewish traditions. My mother didn't allow pork to be brought home, but our food wasn't kosher. There was a tradition in her family that if you wanted to eat a sausage for example, you could buy it and eat it outside. My father's family also forbade pork. I was raised as a Jew although I went to a Bulgarian school. My brother had a brit on his eighth day in Dr. Araf's private Jewish hospital which was located on the central square in Plovdiv, where the post office is nowadays [Brit milah: Jewish ritual circumcision, which is done on the eighth day of a baby boy's life, as long as he is healthy enough].

We celebrated the traditional Jewish holidays at my paternal grandmother Sarina's house. The first evening we would always meet in this living-room we are sitting in now. The other days we visited the other relatives, my grandmother Zelma and so on. I remember that for every Purim my mother would knit a purse for the presents with a satin lining. The purses were different every year [it is customary on Purim to give gifts of food to one another]. People sold 'mavlacheta,' enormous letters in white and pink. They also made sweets: Burakitas del Alhashu, Tishpishti etc. We also had purses for Tu bi-Shevat, but they were larger.

We kept taanit [fasted] on Yom Kippur. We had an early dinner before the fast began [at sundown]. The adults fasted all day and we, the children, until noon. The adults gathered together reading books and talking. We played in the yard and showed our tongues to each other. If your tongue

was white, the others would say, 'You are lying, you have eaten something and your tongue is white.' 'No, no I haven't,' we would say.

Then we went to listen to the shofar in the synagogue and hurried to sit at the table. Dinner was started by breaking the taanit with a morello cherry syrup, followed by a light soup and gradually we started the main course. Slowly, slowly. For Pesach we were bought new clothes, patent leather shoes with a button, nice socks and new dresses.

I don't remember us lighting candles on Chanukkah. The only thing I remember is the halva [8](#), which wasn't made of semolina like now, but of butter, baked flour and syrup consisting of water and sugar. [Editor's note: It is customary on Chanukkah to eat foods cooked in oil.] First, you bake the flour with some oil, then you add the water until the mixture thickens. It was served cooled. We visited the synagogue on Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah and Sukkot. I don't have clear memories of it.

Since our family was well-off, we could afford to go on a holiday in Velingrad. [Editor's note: a town in Northwest Rhodope Mountains. It is a popular spa center, home to the biggest Karst spring, Kleptuza.] We didn't go to the seaside. Even these days I don't like going to the seaside. We would spend about a month and a half in Velingrad. There we would rent a house, but we carried with us a lot of our belongings. That is why the preparation for the holiday took a long time. We sewed pillows and bed linen. We put everything in big bundles together with kitchen utensils. We traveled using a narrow gauge railway.

We had a lot of fun in Velingrad. We were often visited by friends of my parents and their children. We played until late at night on the street in front of the houses and during the day the adults went to the baths. I still have a lot of fond memories of those times. My mother cooked outside and the food tasted much more delicious. My father would come at the end of every week or every two weeks, because he was working. The visits to Velingrad stopped during the Holocaust. 1946 was the last time my parents, my brother and I went to Velingrad. Later, I went to Velingrad again, but this time with my husband and daughter.

I have always had a very strong relationship with my brother Josef Victor Molho [1936 - 1998], not only during my childhood, but also later on when he was in Israel. We were together all the time, because my cousins were born much later. We played in our grandmother's yard. He would always come along when I went out with friends. I would even tell him he's like a tail of mine. He was the quieter of the two of us. I played jokes on him a lot, pretending I was dying and so on.

He graduated from the Mechanics Technical School in Plovdiv and in 1955 left with my parents for Israel. In 1967 he married a Bulgarian Jewish lady in Israel. Her name is Nora Perets. They have two daughters, Merav and Mehal.

My brother was a unique man, the Bohemian type. He got along very well with my mother. I, for example, couldn't overcome her unyielding character and strong ambition. Later, when they moved to Israel, he helped her financially, but in such a way that she didn't feel dependent on him. He looked after her in every way but didn't talk about it. He bought her an apartment, which was written in her name, so that she would feel it was her own. He also helped my family in the same way.

After his death in 1998, he died of leukemia, my sister-in-law continued helping us. Even now she calls me once a week and my daughter once a week. She wants to know everything about us and she even sent us money for furniture.



As I said, my mother was against my studying in a Jewish school. I was an excellent student in both junior high school and high school. My favorite subject was literature. I wanted to study Bulgarian Philology, but after 9th September 1944 [9](#) my parents fell into poverty and couldn't afford to support my studies in Sofia.

I was the only Jew in junior high school. In high school I was in one class with the Jewish girls Beka Benaroyo and Kleri Madjar. Being a Jew didn't make me feel different in either school. No one said anything insulting about my Jewish origins in my presence. They may have talked about it behind my back, but it never reached me. Moreover, I am not a mistrustful person and I quickly forget bad words.

When the war started in 1939 [10](#) I was six years old. We usually played on the streets in the neighborhood. Once we heard that the German army was coming. It must have been 1941 or 1942. [Editor's note: the passing of the German army through Bulgaria took place on 5th March 1941. On 1st March 1941 the Prime Minister of Bulgaria Bogdan Filov signed the protocol for the country's accession to the Axis.] The people in our old neighborhood took flowers to welcome the German tanks. My brother and I decided to go and welcome them too. We went home and asked my mother to give us some money. She simply said, 'But, children, they don't bring good times for us...' She let us go because we were very insistent. She also gave us money for flowers.

We went to Ruski Boulevard. Then they started settling the German officers in houses; one or two officers lived opposite our house. They had orderlies who cleaned their shoes. In the evening we, the children, went outside to play in a small dead-end street. One of the orderlies would also go out to get some fresh air in the evenings. One evening one of the children turned to him and said, 'They are Jews!' My brother and I got scared and stopped going out to play in the neighborhood. Danger was in the air. In fact, now I come to think of it, we received information about what was happening from many sources. We also discussed it at home. In the evenings we talked about the Law for the Protection of the Nation. We read it article by article and interpreted what we were allowed to do and what we were banned from doing. Because of that law we had to change our apartments. We didn't have any unused living space for them to confiscate, but we had to move to the other apartment. The apartment opposite my grandmother Zelma was ours. We rented it to a family. We had to move to live there and the tenants moved to the one we had lived in.

The men were put in labor camps [11](#). My father was mobilized to the labor camps in the villages of Mihalkovo [that labor camp corrected the bed of the Vacha River] and Devin. He would come back very exhausted and haggard. He wasn't cut out for manual labor, his usual work was very different and that was naturally reflected in his health. After the camps he had problems with his blood pressure and got diabetes. I don't remember if he told us any details about the camps because I was young then, only 13 years old.

Supporting the family was very hard; we had to sell our piano. We also sold our quilts, of which we had plenty and our crystal dinner sets. I remember that we used to knit socks from unraveled table cloths. We were very poor. My mother found it very hard. I remember that we were so poor and for a long time we were unable to buy even one new dress and we dressed very humbly.

We witnessed the events during fascism. We had an enormous map of Europe at home and every evening my father would open it and follow the information, which was passing from house to house. In 1941 the radio sets were sealed and later confiscated. My father would mark on the map the advances of the German and the Soviet armies. We knew everything that was happening

although we were only allowed to go out for two hours each day. Blockades were set up. Our street was regularly closed and our houses searched by policemen.

We knew very well what awaited us. Our neighbors were Bulgarians, the Yordanovi family, with whom my parents kept in touch. They lived behind us. He was a military pilot and she was a housewife. They offered to take me and my brother so that we wouldn't be deported with my parents, but my parents refused. Other neighbors were the Filipovi family. The man traded in tobacco. They took our carpets and crystal sets so that they wouldn't be confiscated and returned them to us after 9th September 1944.

There were also boys from today's Greek territories who were mobilized into Bulgarian labor camps and whose relatives were deported [12](#). My family decided to give shelter to such a boy. His first name was Ilialu, I can't remember his family name. He had a brother who went to live with another Jewish family. Ilialu lived with us from 1943 to 1946. He ate with us, my mother washed, ironed and sewed his clothes. He worked as a tailor, I don't remember where. He was already demobilized then. At first we spoke to him in Ladino, but he gradually learned Bulgarian.

Then my mother introduced him to a Jewish girl from Bulgaria, whose name I don't remember and they got married. The young family moved to live with the girl's parents. They lived there until 1948 and then moved to Israel. He died, but we kept in touch for a long time after their departure. People were talking about the concentration camps in Europe. When 10th March 1943 [Plan for deportation of Jews in Bulgaria] [13](#) came, we knew that we would be deported. On 9th March we were at my grandmother's; there was no bathroom in our apartment and we used to go and have a bath there. We always stayed there for a while before we went home. Isak Katalan, my uncle, was a member of the communist party. He came home in the evening and told us, 'Sit down and listen to me. Jews are about to be deported. There are lists made. Probably not everyone will be deported, but you never know. Now, when you go home, prepare a suitcase or a small bag for each one of you.' And really, on 10th March the deportation started.

Our family wasn't deported, but all my grandmother's family together with my uncles and aunt, who had already married and was seven months pregnant, were taken to the school. People were saying there was a second list, including the names of all the other Jews. A cousin of ours came and told my mother the news. My mother and I got dressed and at half past four in the morning, we left for my grandmother's. There were policemen in front of Grandmother Zelma's house. Of course, we weren't allowed inside and stood in front of the house.

Later I understood from my grandmother that she did everything she could to prevent them from taking her family out in the dark. She tried to slow things down. She went from policeman to policeman saying, 'Do whatever you want, but wait until the morning so that the Bulgarian citizens of Plovdiv will see what you're doing.' My grandmother was an intelligent woman, despite not having any formal education. Thanks to her the family was led out at seven thirty with much effort from the policemen. The houses belonging to all the Jews who were taken to the school were sealed.

I remember that my grandmother and my mother's relatives started walking up the street and we walked behind them. When we reached the Monument of Gratitude many people saw them and many lawyers ran to hug my uncles. They were saying, 'Where are they taking Katalan?' The policemen pushed them with the butt-stocks of their guns. The Jews were taken to the yard of the Jewish school. We waited in front of the yard and talked about what was happening, 'Now they are



making them do this, now they have to do that etc.’ We heard cries and shouting from inside. We wanted to pass some things to our relatives, but we weren’t allowed. It was very frightening, but they were released at four o’clock in the afternoon.

My aunt was taken to the school on 10th March and gave birth to my cousin Rozi on 16th March. The delivery was normal, but the baby was born prematurely. I don’t remember if she gave birth in a hospital or not.

From this apartment here I saw how Bishop Kiril [14](#) passed along this street, near this garden, with all his people. He went to the Jewish school to tell the people that they wouldn’t be deported. Yes, he went to them and said resolutely, ‘I will lie on the rails, I will not allow it.’ I don’t remember any Jews from Sofia being deported. They interned them [15](#) to smaller towns such as Yambol, Gorna Djumaya and Shumen.

All our family survived the Holocaust. No one was sent to jail, although my uncle Isak Katalan was a communist and before that a member of Maccabi [16](#) and the UYW [17](#). Our property was also preserved, because we lived in these two apartments and we had nothing to confiscate and nationalize. But life was very hard financially. We had to live very frugally.

The insurance company where my father worked was transformed into the State Insurance Institute after 9th September 1944. My father started working there, but his income was very different from the previous one, although he had an important position and received one of the highest salaries. Thanks to his connections to many people and since he earned a percentage of the profits, he managed to earn a reasonable amount.

My mother remained a housewife. So did my grandmother Sarina. She lived in the neighboring apartment together with my uncle Shelomo, who also worked in the State Insurance Institute like my father. My other grandmother Zelma and my aunt Marga with her husband Mordehay Natan left for Israel in 1948.

My uncle Isak Katalan married in 1942. He had two children, Zelma and Zhak, who now live in Poland. After 9th September 1944 my uncle Isak became a judge in the People’s Court [18](#) and then moved to live in Sofia. There he started work in the Legislation Commission [19](#). He was one of the creators of the Labor Code. He always occupied high-rank positions. He was the founder of the Football Association ‘Botev’ in Plovdiv and chairman of the Philatelist Association in Bulgaria. His wife knew German and worked in the German bookstore in Sofia.

My other uncle David Katalan remained in Plovdiv and worked as a lawyer. He was a member of ‘Zveno’ [20](#) and the Fatherland Front [21](#) in Plovdiv. He married in 1946. His family remained in Bulgaria; they have two daughters, Rashel and Zelma, who now live in Sofia. Both my uncle and his wife died in Bulgaria.

After 1944 my brother and I continued to study. In 1947 I became a member of the Jewish organization He-Halutz Hatzair. The organization was more right-wing than Hashomer Hatzair [22](#), which was a left-wing organization. We studied Ivrit there, discussed the Jewish way of life, learned important facts from Jewish history and its heroes, the biographies of distinguished Jewish people, the principles of Jewish social life and cooperation. We gathered in a club opposite the Shalom [23](#). We had lectures by people from Sofia about the traditions, rituals, the Jewish state and kibbutzim. I became a leader of the younger members of the organization. In all, its purpose was educational: to prepare young people for aliyah to Israel [24](#).

I made a lot of friends there, some of whom I still keep in touch with, for example, Kleri Madjar, Beka Benaroyo. Kleri and I were like sisters. We went to the cinema, to concerts and parties. We gathered on various occasions, but my mother didn't let me out often. As I said, she was a very ambitious woman, who was also very strict. Once the young men from He-Halutz Hatzair decided to organize a party for New Year's Eve. They came to ask my mother to let me go but she firmly refused. She didn't let me go on many of the school excursions. She always wanted me to be beside her.

There were probably other Jewish organizations at that time, but I wasn't interested. I know that there was WIZO then, who had their parties in the Jewish Home. Gradually the Shalom lost its Jewish identity and passed under the auspices of the Fatherland Front.

In 1948-49 all the members of the organization left for a kibbutz in Israel with the youth aliyah movement. Suddenly Plovdiv felt empty. I lost all my friends. In 1949-50 I graduated from high school and wanted to go and study in Sofia. But my parents couldn't support me there. Then I wanted to study in the Agro-economical Institute in Plovdiv, but my parents said, 'This isn't a suitable job for you.' I didn't enroll in the institute and I was forced to start work.

I started thinking about going to Israel, as did my parents. They even sold some of their furniture in line with my mother's wishes, because she was the one who wanted to leave and my father didn't. But, in the end, they gave it up.

At that time I was friends with a Jewish boy, who also wanted to make aliyah. His name was Marko Semov. We had a very strong relationship. He was studying engineering in Sofia and I met him in He-Halutz Hatzair. He had friends in the older groups and came to see us and that's how we met. My parents approved of his family. His father was a sarafin, a money dealer and lived in the neighborhood. At the time of the youth aliyah in 1948-49 he wasn't able to leave because he was still studying in Sofia. He took two terms simultaneously so that he would be able to graduate and leave, because he knew that I wanted to leave too.

Finally my parents decided to stay in Bulgaria. He left and I stayed. He continued his studies in Israel. He worked as a street cleaner and waiter so that he'd be able to graduate from university. He had graduated from the French College in Bulgaria. We wrote to each other all the time. Now that I read my letters, I get surprised at what plans I had: to start medical courses so that I would be able to work there and he would be able to finish his studies.

I very much wanted to leave for Israel but my parents didn't agree. His parents had also decided to leave with him. They came back home and told my parents that they wanted to take me back to Israel with them, but my parents refused. My father's words were, 'Out of sight, out of mind.' Not that they were against us, they approved of our relationship, but they weren't sure if our feelings after two years away from each other were still the same. They were afraid that I might find myself alone on the streets in an unknown country. So I remained here.

Since I wasn't able to study at university for one reason or another, I started working as a secretary in the meat processing plant. I am a very sociable person. Suddenly all my friends were gone and I felt the need to meet people, so I went to the Youth Union in our neighborhood. [Editor's note: After 1944 the UYW was renamed Democratic Union of the People's Youth. After 1947 it became Dimitrov's Communist Youth Union which existed up to 1992.]

That was where I met my future husband, the Bulgarian Todor Petrov Chelibakov. He was also a member of the Youth Union, and led the theater group. We met there and also saw each other at

parties and birthdays. He sang very well and was a very direct and sociable person, the Bohemian type.

He had had a very difficult childhood. His mother was a tobacco worker, who divorced her husband when Todor was one year and a half. After that she never saw his father again. He lived with his mother and his grandmother. Later, his father remarried and had other children, whom Todor didn't know about. Much later, my daughter met his step-brother and sisters and found out by accident that they and Todor had the same father.

My mother-in-law raised Todor by herself. It was very hard for her; she worked as a seamstress at home to earn some extra money. They lived very poorly, but he managed to graduate from high school. My husband has always worked in construction companies as a supplier. He retired in the 'Patni Stroezi' company as chief of the supply department.

My mother was strongly against our marriage. My parents talked negatively about him and about Bulgarians as a whole. Then they stopped talking to me for seven or eight months. I would come back from work and go straight to bed. If they wanted to tell me something, they put notes in my bag or sent someone else to tell me.

I insisted that this time I wouldn't listen to them, 'I obeyed you about not making aliyah with my friends in 1948. I obeyed you about not leaving you alone on graduating from high school. Marko's parents came and you didn't let me go. I wanted to study in the Agro-economical Institute and you didn't allow me once again. This time I'm doing what I want!' I think they wanted me to do only what they decided was good for me.

My family's resistance was very strong and lasted eight months. In 1952 I left home. I got married in 1952. We were married by a registrar in front of two witnesses only: my husband's boss Ivan Keremidchiyski and a colleague of mine, Dochka Arykova. Before that my father had met Todor a couple of times to persuade him to leave me, because I was a spoiled girl, we wouldn't have any children, I had a weak heart or they would leave for Israel and I would decide to join them sooner or later.

Todor always said, 'I haven't chained her to myself. If she decides, I am ready to do anything for her, but I can't keep her by force.' Todor is a very tolerant man. He reacted calmly to the attitude of my parents towards him and towards Bulgarians. You can rarely meet such a man. He didn't feel angry towards them. He would only say, 'They are your parents, this is what they think is right for you. We have no right to judge them.'

Even after we got married I told him that it wasn't accepted among Jews to call your parents-in-law grandmother and grandfather, and he should call them 'mama' and 'papa.' And he addressed them in this way. When welcoming my mother into our home, he literally bowed to her. He indulged her every wish and brought her everything she wanted.

I had a wonderful mother-in-law. From 1952 to 1965 we lived very poorly in the Kyuchuk Parizh quarter [the Small Paris in Turkish]. We came to live in this apartment when my father died. It was a small house with an external staircase, which was covered in ice in the winter and we had to sprinkle ash on it. We had no water at home, we had to bring it in in pitchers. The toilet was down in the yard and the water there also froze. We lived very poorly but we were happy. Upstairs in the kitchen we had a closet where we kept the wash-tub and the sink. We had a tin container, which we filled with water and used as a sink. I, who always had maids as a child, who had Persian rugs, accepted the new living conditions without complaint. I swear. We lived so happily.

We had some great friends. We met very often, sang songs. My mother-in-law was also very kind to us. She knew very well my conflict with my parents and tried to make my life as easy and comfortable as possible. She would always say, 'We will cook for you, whatever you decide. We, Bulgarians, are used to cooking both for lunch and dinner.' When I went to live with them, I told them that we were used to eating sandwiches at home: yellow cheese, cheese, olives, eggs etc. My mother-in-law said, 'If you like them, I will prepare the same here.'

My mother-in-law even studied Jewish cuisine so that she would be able to cook Jewish dishes such as agristada, apyu, anginara. She learned to make a wonderful Kebap de merandgena, baked unpeeled aubergines, which are placed still warm in salty water. Then they are peeled and returned to the water. Afterwards, they are minced. The meat is cooked in oil and the aubergines are added to them. The dish is then boiled at a moderate temperature.

So I established a new order and atmosphere in their house. I managed to arrange their apartment in a new way and change a lot of things. My husband and I had absolutely nothing when we started our family. They had some tin utensils, they were poor people. We gradually started buying stuff. We made a list of what we needed. The first thing we bought was a night lamp above the bed. We had a double bed from my mother-in-law. We also bought a wardrobe, forks, spoons, knives. There was an external staircase, reaching a landing, from which you entered a small room. We constructed a small entrance hall over the landing. In the next room we put a small glass case, a table, a refrigerator, the bed my mother-in-law had given us and the TV. Our first TV set was an Opera. We also had a kitchen where Tosho's [Tosho is diminutive for Todor] grandmother slept. We slept in the bedroom. It was also used as a guest room because there was a sofa and when we had guests, we always invited them there. We had a lot of friends, Bulgarians and Jews.

When I got married, I distanced myself from the Jewish community. I lived far from Kyuchuk Parizh and I didn't visit the Jewish Home. It was transferred under the aegis of the Fatherland Front and lost its Jewish identity.

My daughter, Ema, was born in 1953 and lived here while studying in junior high school. We lived together for 25 years. In the summer we went to the seaside, Primorsko, Nessebar, Pomorie and to the mountainous Velingrad. My daughter was raised to feel Jewish and we celebrated both the Jewish and the Bulgarian holidays at home.

She married a Jew, Isak Mezan, who was a chemist. My husband insisted on that, while I didn't. He had started feeling part of the Jewish community. He didn't have any relatives and my relatives became his. He went to Israel twice and liked to say, 'It will be nice if Emi married a Jew.' He wanted that and so did I, although I am happy with my marriage to a Bulgarian. Emi met Isak at a wedding and then married him.

They have two children: Victor, born in 1976 and Robert, born in 1980. Victor studies macroeconomics and Robert studies management. They are both very active in the Jewish community. Victor is already engaged to a Jewish girl, Eva Mashiyah.

My daughter graduated in dentistry and works as a dentist in Plovdiv. She is very active in the Shalom organization now. She is a member of the Consistory board. Ema ran the restored Sunday school for 16 years. We started with only six or seven children and their numbers increased over the years. We restored WIZO. We started celebrating the holidays. In 1988 we organized a celebration for Purim for the first time. Then we celebrated Rosh Hashanah, Chanukkah and Pesach. The community got so used to celebrating the holidays together that now we can't make

them celebrate them at their houses too.

For ten years my daughter Ema contributed to the activities of the Middle Generation in Plovdiv. She was a member of the executive board of the Consistory in Sofia and member of the board in Plovdiv. On 15th March 2002, she and her husband took part in a collective religious wedding organized by the Joint [25](#). Five more couples from Sofia and Plovdiv participated. They had already got married in a registry office but not in accordance with the traditional Jewish laws. The event took place in Pancharevo. Ema and her husband Isak were married by a registrar in 1975. Some of the other participants in the ritual were Yosif and Mati Madjar, Victoria and Mois Benbasat from Plovdiv, Reni and Robert Djerasi, Morits and Rozi Mashiyah and one more couple from Sofia, whose names I don't remember.

In the Plovdiv Shalom we made three kilos of marzipan, which we took to the wedding. We filled two buses with Plovdiv friends and set off for Sofia.

My grandchildren are very active in the Jewish community. Robert writes for the 'Evreiski Vesti' [Jewish News] newspaper and takes an active part in the camps in Kovachevtsi. I influenced my family to participate in Jewish communal activities. I'm not bragging, but in 1988 when I took over the leadership of the Jewish community in Plovdiv, I insisted on everybody taking part. And they all did quite willingly. My husband Tosho is very respected in our family. Everyone loves him. On holidays such as birthdays, Christmas and Easter all my grandchildren come and we celebrate them together at home. It has always been that way.

In 1955 my parents left for Israel. They were very afraid that my brother might marry a Bulgarian too and after he graduated from technical school, they prepared to leave. I didn't receive any help from them. They hadn't forgiven me for marrying a Bulgarian yet. They sold the apartment, but told me that they needed the money for the trip. They left me nothing.

My mother even took the books from the enormous library, put them in big boxes and loaded them on their ship. They didn't need these books at all. But that was her way of punishing me. The only book she left me was [Margaret Mitchell's] 'Gone with the Wind.' Later, when we visited them in Israel, we found the books still unpacked in the big boxes and we took out some of them to read. Later, she gave all the books to a library.

My parents weren't very happy in Israel because my father had to go to an ulpan [26](#) in Jerusalem. Not every town had an ulpan at that time. It was very hard and he had a stroke six months after their arrival. My mother looked after him for eleven years, which meant she couldn't work and achieve anything. She ironed clothes for richer people at home in order to earn some money. They brought shirts and bed sheets, which she ironed and folded.

After papa died in 1966, she started babysitting. It was very hard for her because she was no longer young but she never thought about returning to Bulgaria. She was a firm Zionist. She always believed that there was no better country than Israel. My brother managed to make a career in Israel. He took part in the Six-Day-War [27](#) and was wounded. I remember that my mother was visiting Bulgaria at the time and she received a telegram from her daughter-in-law that he was wounded and in hospital.

At first, my brother worked as a laborer at the airport and then he started working in a lathe factory. He became director of a plane construction company in Ashkelon. Through his work, he traveled around the world. He had a very high salary and was highly respected. His wife is director of Bank Discount. He supported my parents financially. Both my mother's and my brother's families

live in Rehovot.

We could also have left for Israel but my husband didn't want to, because he believed that although we had a lot of friends, they wouldn't be able to help us in the beginning. He was afraid that he would feel out of place, blind and dumb. I don't know how I would have felt, but as a woman I think I would have got used to the new environment more easily.

We didn't agree with the official policy of Bulgaria towards Israel. We had so many friends and relatives there. And I don't like Arabs in general. I always kept in touch with my friends and my relatives. We received letters regularly, maybe they were censored, I don't know. My mother was quite afraid, because my father often expressed his true beliefs in the letters and wrote jokes against the regime.

I have been to Israel ten times. Because of the official policy of Bulgaria to Israel, we traveled separately until 1989 [28](#). Our family wasn't allowed to travel together to Israel. In 1963 I went there with my daughter, then my husband went with our daughter and I stayed here. In 1972 I went alone.

Afterwards, when my daughter was a university student, we applied for a permit to go to Israel together but Tosho wasn't allowed, because he was in charge of confidential information at the company where he worked. He was chief of the supply department of 'Patni Stroezi' company. My husband was very angry, so he went to the director and said to him, 'Find someone else to do my job starting tomorrow!' He stopped doing the correspondence, but he was still not allowed to travel to Israel with us.

The first time we went to Israel together was in 2000. After that we traveled to Israel a lot. I learned Ivrit during my first visits to the country. I usually spent three months with my brother's children, who didn't know Bulgarian. I spoke to them using basic words in Ivrit and gradually learned to speak and write it.

There are things which I don't like about the mentality of the people there and their interests. There are very few people there who like reading, especially from my generation [Editor's note: This is obviously a sweeping generalization]. They seldom discuss more philosophical topics, they are interested more in the material side of things: furniture, excursions or Jewish issues. But when it comes to defending their country, they are ready for anything. Given this background my brother and my sister-in-law stand out because they're interested in everything except everyday issues. They have a library full of encyclopedias and reference books on scientific, political and geographical topics.

My father died in 1966. He was buried in Israel according to tradition. In 1998 my brother died of leukemia at 62 years of age. I went to Israel to attend his funeral and spent one month there. On 23rd August 2001 I received a telegram from my sister-in-law that my mother had suffered a stroke and they needed me. I left for Israel on 5th September and stayed there for sixty-five days to look after her in the hospital in Kaplan. Then we moved her to a private senior home and I continued visiting her and taking her out on walks. On 15th October I returned to Sofia. She died on 24th December of the same year.

We moved from Kyuchuk Parizh to this apartment in the center. When we came here in 1965, I started receiving messages from Shalom about their meetings. They invited us to their events but we didn't go there often.



My active participation in the Jewish community started on 1st February 1988. That year I retired and on 1st February 1989 they invited me to become a secretary of the Jewish community. I worked as a secretary and deputy chairperson of the organization for twelve years. I started on 1st March 1988 and occupied that position until March 2000.

As I said, my family and I restored and revived community life. Up to now, the Shalom in Plovdiv was only an educational organization at the community house [named after the distinguished Jewish writer Sholem Aleichem]. We also revived the celebration of the holidays in the community. All events were documented and stored in audio and video archives.

I was a member of the Bulgarian Communist Party [29](#) from 1966 until 1988. I had leftist beliefs but I would say that my way of life and education were more in line with right-wing ideas. Deep in my soul I knew that if I became a member of the party, my daughter would have some benefits in her studies. In the plant 'Petar Chenegelov' where I worked, I became chairman of the inspection commission of the party committee. I organized and taught courses on Stalin's biography or the interpretation of the decisions of the Central Committee of the BCP. [Editor's note: During communist rule it had the power of a Ministry Council, all decisions were made by the Central Committee and then voted and approved by the Ministry Council. That was formulated in article 1 of the old communist constitution (before 1991) about the leading role of the party.]

I have witnessed a lot of meaningless activities and I didn't agree with everything. For example, instead of training workers to keep the machines in order, they preferred to put up slogans, 'Look after the machines – they are ours.' How can they be ours? That wasn't true. That's one of the smallest things. When the party made a decision, we were summoned and told about it. At the same time my husband, who had right-wing beliefs, listened to Radio London, Radio Free Europe [30](#) and we saw how false everything was. The party documents contained much demagogy and false information. I also saw how the people feared the party secretary because he could fire them if he wanted to. During my work at the plant, I never sensed any anti-Semitic attitudes towards me. On the contrary, I was much respected and loved.

We looked forward to the events of 1989 [31](#). We listened to Express Radio at that time. My children and grandchildren were at the barricades. [Editor's note: In 1997 the country was governed by the government of the Bulgarian Socialist Party led by Zhan Videnov. In January 1997 it was overthrown by the massive protests of university students, transport workers and citizens.] They were angry at us for staying at home. This was a very hot topic for my daughter. She was very extreme, while her father was more moderate. He comes from such a family. His father was a colonel in the Ministry of the Interior and a member of the party. Besides, he was calmer and quieter. But then the disappointment came.

Ivan Kostov [Chairman of the Union of Democratic Forces, minister of finance in the government of Filip Dimitrov (1992), Prime Minister of Bulgaria (1997 – 2001) and presently leader of the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria party] was the only person who didn't disappoint us. My daughter is a big supporter of him, while I support the right-wing ideas and the Union of Democratic Forces [founded in 1989 and then led by Zhelyu Zhelev. Initially it was a coalition uniting the parties opposing the Bulgarian Socialist Party. After the complex democratic process the party is in crisis.] But I don't know who I will vote for in the elections.

We spend our days doing house-work and participating in the events at the Jewish organization. We are members of many clubs. My husband is also a member of the Shalom and Haverim [Friends]

Club. Every Friday Jewish men gather together to drink a rakia [32](#) before lunch. I am a member of the Health club. [The Health club in Plovdiv is 12 years old. Its members listen to health lectures, do exercises and go on excursions]. We are both members of the Golden Age club. [This is a cultural center for elderly people. They listen to lectures, concerts, meet cultural figures, musicians, poets, writers.] If it weren't for the Shalom, I don't know how I would bear my retirement. I am a very sociable person.

Glossary:

## **1 Plovdiv**

Town in Bulgaria situated in the Upper-Thracian Lowlands, along the two banks of the Maritsa River and on six unique syenite hills more commonly known as tepeta. On about three of those hills the Thracians founded the ancient Thracian settlement Evmolpias, later renamed to Poulpoudeva. In 342 BC the town was conquered by Philip II of Macedonia and renamed to Philipopol. During the Roman rule it turned into a major economic, cultural and political center of Thrace. The three hills around which the town was founded were called Trimontsium. After the downfall of the Roman Empire in the 6th century the town was conquered by the Slavs. Two centuries later it was included within the boundaries of Bulgaria and was called Puldin. In the 14th century it was conquered by the Turks and its name was changed again - to Phelibe. At the time of the Russian-Turkish Liberation War Plovdiv was the biggest town in Bulgaria. Following the decisions of the Berlin Congress and the separation of Bulgarian Principality and Eastern Rumelia, the town became the administrative center of Eastern Rumelia. The town is famous for the peaceful life of a mix of Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Bulgarians and Jews.[2](#) Sephardi Jewry: (Hebrew for 'Spanish') 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 French College**

An elite Catholic college teaching French language and culture and subsidized by the French Carmelites. It was closed in 1944.[4](#) 'Bulgarian Phoenix' Joint Stock Insurance Company: registered in Bulgaria in 1924 as a branch of Spanish Phoenix. Chairman of the board of directors was Dr. Yosif Fadenheht. Other members of the board of directors were the merchant Gavriel Arie, Eliya Arie. Chief Executive Officer of the company was L. Orient. Most of the insurance workers in the company and its clients were Sephardi Jews. The work of the company as that of all private insurance companies was regulated by the law named 'State Control over Private Insurance Companies' created in 1926. All insurance companies were nationalized after the Bank Nationalization Act adopted on December 30th 1947.

## **5 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 Solitreo. 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 didn't 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.

## **7 WIZO**

Women's International Zionist Organization, founded in London in 1920 with humanitarian purposes aiming at supporting Jewish women all over the world in the field of education, economics, science and culture. A network of health, social and educational institutions was created in Palestine between 1921 and 1933, along with numerous local groups worldwide. After WWII its office was moved to Tel Aviv. WIZO became an advisory organ to the UN after WWII (similar to UNICEF or ECOSOC). Today it operates on a voluntary basis, as a party-neutral, non-

profit organization, with about 250,000 members in 50 countries (2003).<sup>8</sup> Halva: A sweet confection of Turkish and Middle Eastern origin and largely enjoyed throughout the Balkans. It is made chiefly of ground sesame seeds and honey.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

## **10 German Invasion of Poland**

The German attack of Poland on 1st September 1939 is widely considered the date in the West for the start of World War II. After having gained both Austria and the Bohemian and Moravian parts of Czechoslovakia, Hitler was confident that he could acquire Poland without having to fight Britain and France. (To eliminate the possibility of the Soviet Union fighting if Poland were attacked, Hitler made a pact with the Soviet Union, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.) On the morning of 1st September 1939, German troops entered Poland. The German air attack hit so quickly that most of Poland's air force was destroyed while still on the ground. To hinder Polish mobilization, the Germans bombed bridges and roads. Groups of marching soldiers were machine-gunned from the air, and they also aimed at civilians. On 1st September, the beginning of the attack, Great Britain and France sent Hitler an ultimatum - withdraw German forces from Poland or Great Britain and France would go to war against Germany. On 3rd September, with Germany's forces penetrating deeper into Poland, Great Britain and France both declared war on Germany.<sup>11</sup> 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.

## **12 Deportation of Jews from Aegean Thrace and Macedonia**

On 22nd February 1943 in Sofia, late in the evening, at the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs an agreement was signed between Alexander Belev - a commissar for Jewish affairs and Theodor Dannecker - SS Hauptsturmführer (captain), an assistant to the military attaché at the German Legation in Sofia concerning the deportation of Jews to Poland. According to the agreement 20,000 of the newly-annexed in 1941 Aegean Thrace and Macedonia had to be deported to Poland. As their number amounted to 12,000 the others, who were supposed to make up for the needed numbers, were from the interior of the country - from the towns of Plovdiv, Kyustendil, Dupnitsa, Pazardzhik, Yambol, Varna - the more enlightened, the wealthier and more socially active, those who were known to be 'the leaders of Jewry' were preferred. The very act of deportation of the Jews from Aegean Thrace and Macedonia was accomplished from 1st to 8th March and those Jews were deported through Yugoslavia and Bulgaria to the concentration camp Treblinka in Poland. The deportation of Jews from the interior of the country didn't take place. Although it was planned as a secret mission due to the active interference of the citizens and society, the operation failed and not a single Jew was deported from the old territories of Bulgaria.<sup>13</sup> Plan for deportation of Jews in Bulgaria: In accordance with the agreement signed on 22nd February 1943 by the Commissar for Jewish Affairs Alexander Belev on the Bulgarian side and Teodor Daneker on the German side, it was decided to deport 20,000 Jews. Since the number of the Aegean and Macedonian Jews, or the Jews from the 'new lands,' annexed to Bulgaria in WWII, was around 12,000, the other 8,000 Jews

had to be selected from the so-called 'old borders,' i.e. Bulgaria. On 26th February Belev sent an order to the delegates of the Commissariat in all towns with a larger Jewish population to prepare lists of so-called 'unwanted or anti-state elements.' The 'richer, more distinguished and socially prominent' Jews had to be listed among the first. The deportation started in March 1943 with the transportation of the Aegean and Thrace Jews from the new lands. The total number of deportees was 11,342. In order to reach 20,000 the Jews from the so-called 'old borders' of Bulgaria had to be deported. However, that didn't happen thanks to the active intervention of the citizens of Kyustendil, Petar Mihalev, Asen Suichmezov, Vladimir Kurtev, Ivan Momchilov, the deputy chairman of the 25th National Assembly Dimitar Peshev and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Before the deportation was canceled, the Jews in Plovdiv, Pazardzhik, Kyustendil, Dupnitsa, Yambol and Sliven were shut in barracks, tobacco warehouses and schools in order to be ready for deportation to the eastern provinces of the Third Reich. Thanks to the intervention of the people, the deportation of the Jews from the old borders of Bulgaria didn't happen.

#### **14 Bishop Kiril (1901-1971)**

Metropolitan of Plovdiv during World War II. He vigorously opposed the anti-Jewish policies of the Bulgarian government after 1941 and took active steps against it. In March 1943 the deportation of the 1,500 Plovdiv Jews began and Kiril succeeded in stopping it by sending a protest to King Boris III, threatening the local police chief and also threatening to lay himself on the railway track to prevent the deportation. Since 1953 until his death he was the Patriarch of Bulgaria. In 2002 he was posthumously recognized as one of the Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem.<sup>15</sup>

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 weren't 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 the Aegean Thrace and from Macedonia, but in the end, the Jews from Bulgaria proper were spared.

#### **16 Maccabi World Union**

International Jewish sports organization whose origins go back to the end of the 19th century. A growing number of young Eastern European Jews involved in Zionism felt that one essential prerequisite of the establishment of a national home in Palestine was the improvement of the physical condition and training of ghetto youth. In order to achieve this, gymnastics clubs were founded in many Eastern and Central European countries, which later came to be called Maccabi. The movement soon spread to more countries in Europe and to Palestine. The World Maccabi Union was formed in 1921. In less than two decades its membership was estimated at 200,000 with branches located in most countries of Europe and in Palestine, Australia, South America, South Africa, etc.<sup>17</sup> 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.

## **18 People's Court**

After the government of the Fatherland Front took the power on 12th and 20th September 1944 the communist leadership issued two orders on the 'elimination of the fascist danger' and urged for physical retribution against the political enemies. Later, the decree of the People's Court was adopted in violation of the constitution. From October 1944 to 1st February 1945 68 juries – 4 supreme and 64 district ones ruled on 135 trials of 11,122 defendants and issued 9,155 sentences, of which 2,730 were death penalties. 3 regents, 67 Members of Parliament, 47 generals and colonels were sentenced to death.<sup>[19](#)</sup> Legislation Commission: It started work after the adoption of the Republic Constitution on 4th December 1947 and functioned until 1951. Since all the old legislation was annulled, the goal of the commission was to issue a decree on every concrete case that may arise. It included mostly legal experts.

## **20 19th May 1934 coup**

A coup d'etat, carried out with the participation of the political circle 'Zveno', a military circle. After the coup of 19th May, a government was formed, led by Kimon Georgiev. The internal policy of that government was formed by the idea of above-all-parties authority and rule of the elite. The Turnovo Constitution was repealed for that purpose, and the National Assembly was dismissed. In its foreign affairs policy the government was striving to have warmer relationships with Yugoslavia and France, the relations with the USSR were restored. The government of Kimon Georgiev was in office until 22nd January 1935.<sup>[21](#)</sup> Fatherland Front: A broad left wing umbrella organization, created in 1942, with the purpose to lead the Communist Party to power.

## **22 Hashomer Hatzair in Bulgaria**

'The Young Watchman'; Left-wing Zionist youth organization, which started in Poland in 1912 and managed to gather supporters from all over Europe. Their goal was to educate the youth in the Zionist mentality and to prepare them to immigrate to Palestine. To achieve this goal they paid special attention to the so-called shomer-movement (boy scout education) and supported the re-stratification of the Jewish society. They operated several agricultural and industrial training grounds (the so-called chalutz grounds) to train those who wanted to immigrate. In Transylvania the first Hashomer Hatzair groups were established in the 1920s. During World War II, members of the Hashomer Hatzair were leading active resistance against German forces, in ghettos and concentration camps. After the war, Hashomer Hatzair was active in 'illegal' immigration to Palestine.

<sup>[23](#)</sup> 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.

<sup>[24](#)</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee): The Joint was formed in 1914 with the fusion of three American Jewish committees of assistance, 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 cultural amenities and brought 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 Europe and from 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.

## **26 Ulpan**

Word in Hebrew that designates teaching, instruction and studio. It is a Hebrew-language course compulsory in Israel for newcomers, which rapidly teaches adults basic Hebrew skills, including speaking, reading, writing and comprehension, along with the fundamentals of Israeli culture, history, geography, and civics. In addition to teaching Hebrew, the ulpan aims to help newcomers integrate as easily as possible into Israel's social, cultural and economic life.<sup>27</sup> Six-Day-War: (Hebrew: Milhemet Sheshet Hayamim), also known as the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Six Days War, or June War, was fought between Israel and its Arab neighbors Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. It began when Israel launched a preemptive war on its Arab neighbors; by its end Israel controlled the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. The results of the war affect the geopolitics of the region to this day.

<sup>28</sup> 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 neighboring 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.

## **29 Bulgarian Communist Party [up to 1990]**

The ruling party of the People's Republic of Bulgaria from 1946 until 1990, when it ceased to be a Communist state. The Bulgarian Communist Party had dominated the Fatherland Front coalition that took power in 1944, late in World War II, after it led a coup against Bulgaria's fascist government in conjunction with the Red Army's crossing the border. The party's origins lay in the Social Democratic and Labor Party of Bulgaria, which was founded in 1903 after a split in the Social-Democratic Party. The party's founding leader was Dimitar Blagoev and its subsequent leaders included Georgi Dimitrov.

<sup>30</sup> Radio Free Europe: Radio station launched in 1949 at the instigation of the US government with headquarters in West Germany. The radio broadcast uncensored news and features, produced by Central and Eastern European émigrés, from Munich to countries of the Soviet block. The radio station was jammed behind the Iron Curtain, team members were constantly harassed and several

people were killed in terrorist attacks by the KGB. Radio Free Europe played a role in supporting dissident groups, inner resistance and will of freedom in the Eastern and Central European communist countries and thus it contributed to the downfall of the totalitarian regimes of the Soviet block. The headquarters of the radio have been in Prague since 1994.

### **31 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.<sup>[32](#)</sup> Rakia: Strong liquor, typical in the Balkan region. It is made from different kinds of fruit (grape, plum, apricot etc.) by distillation.