

# Haim Molhov

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Bulgaria

Sofia

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My ancestors came from Spain more than five hundred years ago, when the Jews were persecuted in Spain [see Expulsion of the Jews from Spain] [1](#). Some were executed during the Inquisition, others adopted Christianity, but most left and settled on the Balkan Peninsula. My ancestors originate from the Sephardi Jews. The family name of my paternal grandparents is Molho, but my name is Molhov in accordance with the Bulgarian standards for family name endings.

My father Mevorah Molho's kin is from the town of Pazardjik. His father, Haim Molho, was born there in 1815. I have seen him only on a portrait with a long white beard, standing in front of the house, along with my grandmother Vizanka Molho, who was his third wife. I don't know her maiden name. My father told me that it must have been fate that my grandfather's first wife died, then he married again, but his second wife also died and he married for the third time. My father was born to my grandfather's third wife. But his third wife also died and he married again. I only remember his fourth wife when she was quite old. When my grandfather died, she moved to live in Plovdiv with her two children, Uncle Mois Molho and Aunt Bucha.

My family kept closely in touch with my grandmother and treated her like a real relative. I kept in touch with Uncle Mois and Aunt Bucha, who were very close to my father. My grandfather lived up to the age of 98. According to my father, one day my grandfather was sitting in a café in Pazardjik. There was one Jew in town who was crazy. This Jew decided to play a joke on my grandfather and told him that his son, Mevorah, my father, had been killed at the front, where he was fighting in the Bulgarian army during the Balkan War in 1912-13 [see First Balkan War and Second Balkan War] [2](#). My grandfather got so frightened that he had a stroke and died.

Since my paternal grandfather was married four times, his wives brought their own children to live with them. I have only met a few of my father's siblings from the other marriages. My father's eldest brother from my grandfather's first marriage was Josif Molho. He was a teacher and later the director of an insurance company. He was comparatively well off; he had a two-storied house in Plovdiv. His wife Sarah was born in Vidin. They had two sons, Viktor and Shlomo.

I also knew one of my father's sisters from my grandfather's second marriage, Aunt Oro, who was married to a Jew from Chepino [present-day Velingrad]. She had two sons - Sami, who was a distinguished tobacco expert and chief expert of a big tobacco company, and Jojo.

Uncle Mois was my father's brother from the last, fourth marriage of my grandfather. Uncle Mois was a smart and good man, who worked as a traveling salesman. He married Sophie Meshulan from Plovdiv in Northern Bulgaria. They had two sons and a daughter - Viktor, Misho and Sarah. Viktor and Sarah settled in Israel in 1948 and Misho left for America. Viktor was advisor to Sharon, when he was Minister of Agriculture. [Editor's note: Ariel Sharon served as the Minister of

Agriculture from 1977-1981.]

My maternal grandfather was Israel Geron and my maternal grandmother Reyna Geron. I don't remember her maiden name. My maternal grandfather died young of some infection. About him I only know that he was a big man, but I don't know what kind of job he had. My grandmother became a widow and her children started to look after themselves. My grandmother was a very good housewife. She lived in her old house until she passed away and she was supported by her sons, who were accountants. In fact, I was born in her house. Six of us lived there - my grandmother Reyna, my parents, my brother, my sister and I. My grandmother was a religious woman and strictly observed Pesach and the other Jewish holidays. Most of the household chores were done by my mother and my grandmother helped her.

From my mother's family I managed to meet my grandmother and my mother's brothers and sisters- Bohora, Albert, Nissim, Vitali and Roza. My mother had one more brother, David, who died in the Balkan War in 1913, and whose loss the family often mentioned. I got to know well Aunt Bohora and Uncle Nissim, who lived in Sofia, whereas Uncle Albert, Uncle Vitali and Aunt Roza Asher Birma, nee Israel Geron, lived in Plovdiv. Uncle Albert was an accountant; he had learned the profession from his brothers Vitali and Nissim. They hadn't gone to special accountant schools, but had taught themselves. They also knew French very well. Uncle Albert was well off and had built a three-storied house for his family in Plovdiv. Aunt Roza lived in a two-storied house and there was a haberdashery on the first floor.

My father, Mevorah Haim Molhov, was born in Pazardjik in 1882, and my mother Rebecca Molho, nee Israel Geron, was born in Plovdiv in 1887. My father moved to Plovdiv at the beginning of the 1910s. He fought in the Balkan War in 1912. My parents met in Plovdiv, when my father moved to live there. I think that my parents had a religious wedding in 1913. In the first years of their marriage, my family rented the house of my maternal grandmother.

My father worked as a cobbler after his military service. He didn't make shoes, only repaired them. He worked in a small shed near our house. As far as I remember its owner was a Bulgarian, from whom my father had rented it for next to nothing.

My mother was a very kind woman, always eager to give. I think I inherited this from her. I remember that every time we went for a walk in Plovdiv, she bought me some sweets or a pretzel. Although we didn't have much money, she always did her best to make me happy.

I was born in 1915, my brother Shelomo Mevorah Molho in 1920, and my sister Vizanka Gila Zur, nee Mevorah Molho, in 1922. When the war was finally over, I was already born and when my father came back home, he found my mother holding a child with long blond curls. In his opinion I looked too much like a girl, so he told my mother to cut the curls.

We, siblings, were all born in the house of my maternal grandmother Reyna. The house was a one-storied building and consisted of two rooms and a large corridor. My grandmother and my parents lived in one of the rooms and we, the children, shared the other. There were two more rooms in the house, which my father let out. At that time rents were very low and weren't regarded as serious income. We weren't well off and in the summer, when I was a student, I went to work as an apprentice at the hardware store of Uncle Vitali Bucha, who was married to Aunt Bucha. There was no electricity in our house and we used gas lamps. I did all my studies for elementary school and

commercial school with the light of a gas lamp. It wasn't until I graduated from the commercial school and started to work that I was able to buy a wardrobe with my first salary and electrical cables and equipment with the second. So we finally had electricity. There was a big basement in the house where we kept our food and the drinking water in the summer, since summers in Plovdiv are very hot. In the smaller room my mother had a loom on which she made blankets and rugs.

In my childhood we couldn't afford to go to holiday resorts. During our vacations my brother, sister and I went to work. Usually my maternal relatives went on excursions, to camps and resorts. When I was a student, my grandmother, who loved me a lot, gave me two levs every day. I remember that once she went on holiday to Chepino for two days. When she returned, I asked her to give me six levs - for the days when she had been away - and although she didn't have much money, she gave it to me. My father also gave me money, but only one lev. He didn't make much money, but he did his best to provide a good living for us. My brother, who was younger than me, was a bit more intemperate and sometimes my father had to borrow one lev from the shop assistant in the hardware store to give it to my brother. I was more diplomatic and didn't pester my father to give me money, if he didn't have any at that moment.

When I was 13 years old, my family organized for me the greatest Jewish holiday, my bar mitzvah, marking the occasion when a boy reaches the age of religious majority and responsibility. This was a very big celebration with many guests present. I had to learn by heart and deliver in front of the guests a speech, which was written by Rabbi Shemuel Behar, who later also led my wedding ceremony. I still remember the first lines of that speech, which I delivered in Ladino: 'Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, brothers and sisters! Today is the day of my holiday, which is also a holiday for the whole family.' Every day before the ceremony I rehearsed my speech a number of times at home. My grandmother would listen to me every time and get very excited and I would joke that I wanted my presents in advance. Moved to tears, she would promise to buy me the best presents. The ceremony took place in the synagogue. The rabbi was there and I made my speech, which was quite long - about eight pages. My grandmother Reyna bought me a suit and Uncle Albert a watch. During the ceremony we ate almond jam, also called marzipan.

Before 9th September 1944 [3](#) there was a big Jewish community in Plovdiv that had its own traditions. After the establishment of the Jewish state most Jews left for Israel and very few of us remained in Bulgaria. The small number of Jews who stayed here and their dispersion throughout the country led to their assimilation. That's why we aren't as religious as our parents, who strictly observed all the traditions. My father was a religious man: he observed Sabbath, ate kosher food and went to the synagogue. My mother organized the festivities for all religious holidays. She did all the household chores and prepared the kosher food for Pesach. The kosher dishes were arranged on a white tablecloth, and my father read the Haggadah. We also observed the other Jewish holidays - Purim, Lag ba-Omer, Sukkot.

I graduated from the Jewish school in Plovdiv - elementary and junior high school, that is, until the 4th grade. In the Jewish school we studied all general subjects, such as geography, history, and also Hebrew and the Talmud, and in this way we were raised Jewish. They taught us Hebrew very well. Thanks to it I have some basic knowledge in Hebrew now, which helps me very much today. I speak in Hebrew with my sister's husband, who is an Austrian Jew.

In Plovdiv I became a member of the youth organization Hashomer Hatzair [4](#). Hashomer Hatzair is a Jewish scout organization. In the Jewish school we also had a sports organization, Maccabi [5](#). In the Hashomer Hatzair organization we went to summer camps, where we slept in tents and were taught how to be scouts. We learned how to give first aid in case of injuries. When we were 17 years old, we had to decide whether we wanted to go to Palestine or not. At that age we became senior scouts. Some Jews went to the agricultural school in Sadovo [a small town near Plovdiv] for six months, where they were taught farming. My brother Shelomo went to this school before he left for Israel. I didn't want to leave because I didn't want to leave my parents, who weren't in good health and didn't have much money. I wanted to stay and help them.

There was a big Jewish community in Plovdiv, comprising some 8,000 people. There were many merchants, craftsmen, clerks, workers and many poor people among them. Politically the Jews in Plovdiv were divided into three groups. They were all united by the idea of the establishment of a Jewish state, but differed in the way in which they wanted it to happen. There was a left Zionist movement, a center, and right one. The youth organization of the left Zionists was Hashomer Hatzair, and that of the right Zionists was Betar [6](#). The general Zionists, the center, supported the sports organization Maccabi. The main idea of the left Zionists was working in a kibbutz, for which we were being prepared. The right Zionists advocated the establishment of a militarized Jewish state.

There was a small group of sheds next to the Jewish school, which we called the 'yard' - 'kortilo' in Ladino. This word has a slightly derogatory meaning, close to the meaning of 'ghetto'. These sheds were inhabited by Jews, who had moved from Odrin [town on the southern part of the Balkan peninsula, now in Turkey] due to economic reasons and had settled in Plovdiv. They lived in very miserable conditions. The children of those Jews went to our school. They were very poor students because they knew neither Bulgarian, nor Hebrew well. That gave rise to some very funny situations. The director of the Jewish school wanted us to know Hebrew very well so he appointed a teacher of Hebrew from Poland. This Polish Jew, whose name was Zimbalist, didn't know Bulgarian at all. He had come with his family and the director had arranged for him a house and a salary so that he would teach us Hebrew.

The Hebrew grammar was very difficult and we couldn't understand anything because he didn't explain it in an understandable language. In junior high school we knew very little Hebrew and the refugees from Odrin didn't know any. One day I was the student on duty. One child, Binyo, from the Odrin Jews, was a few minutes late. The teacher asked me to tell to him in Ladino that he must not be late again. I also translated to the others his request to open our notebooks with the homework. He summoned Binyo and asked for his notebook. I had to translate from Ladino once again. Binyo didn't have his homework and excused himself saying that his notebook had fallen into a puddle and he had had to tear out the pages with the homework. And he also swore at him in the end. I found it very funny and I couldn't help laughing while I was interpreting. The teacher didn't understand Ladino, so he didn't understand the swearing. However, the teacher had the habit of slapping the boys in the face. When he heard the story that Binyo had made up about his homework in Hebrew, he slapped my classmate and me on the ears. Later I found out that my eardrum was punctured, and even to this day I don't hear well with that ear. This was the reason why the teacher in Hebrew was sent back to Poland later.

Another classmate of mine, Albertico, also one of the Odrin Jews, had a father who was a saddler. Once Albert was expelled from class because he couldn't understand the language. During the recess interval after the third class, Albertico returned to the school with his father. Beside our Jewish school there was another one, which was new then. It was located three houses from ours. I think that students from the higher grades studied there. I had noticed that the teacher in Hebrew, Zimbalist, had gone to that school during the recess. I showed Albertico and his father where the teacher was. We found him, he tried to hide, but Albertico's father had it out with him, while, we, the children, jumped with joy. But after that the teacher's council expelled Albertico from school and I had my mark for conduct lowered. Yet, after that incident it became known that the teacher was beating the kids and a new teacher in Hebrew was appointed.

When I graduated from the Jewish school, I needed money to continue with my education. My father wanted me to study in the commercial high school, but he had no money to support me. Uncle Mois Molho, one of my father's brothers, had noticed that I did very well at school. He found out that I had graduated from the Jewish school with excellent marks and that I had received an award for that. He suggested that each of my father's brothers give 500 levs so that we could pay the fee for the high school. All my father's brothers managed to raise the fee and I enrolled for the commercial high school. My education lasted three years and each year a fee had to be paid.

This practical commercial high school wasn't recognized officially as a complete secondary high school education. Its graduates could work as accountants, economists or bank clerks, but couldn't apply to study at a university. We studied economics in school and the subjects weren't very different from those in the secondary business school. I think that we studied the same things, and the only difference was that we covered the material in three years, instead of five. Most of the students in the school were Bulgarians. There was no negative attitude towards the Jewish students.

My father didn't want me to remain poor like him and he did all he could so that I could be an accountant like my uncles. I graduated with excellent marks in 1931 and I really started to work as an accountant in a Jewish credit co-operative, Malka Kassa, which gave loans mostly to craftsmen. I worked there for two years. Then, by competition, since there was much unemployment and the economic crisis of the 1930s [7](#), I got a job as a bank clerk in the Jewish bank Atikva. It gave loans to Jewish merchants.

I remember a very interesting episode from the time when I was a bank clerk with the Hatikva bank in 1938-39. At that time I loved theater very much; and I still do. I had two friends - Mair Bivas, whom I had known since the Jewish school and Jacques Behar, whom I met later. He had come with his family to Plovdiv from Yambol [in Southern Bulgaria]. We were friends for 56 years. In 1938 we decided to apply for the position of amateur actors with the Plovdiv Municipal Theatre. There was a hierarchy in the Plovdiv theater with regard to the statute of the actors and the payment. The highest in the hierarchy were the directors, then came the actors, the trainees, the drama actors and lastly, the amateurs.

In 1938 the Plovdiv Municipal Theatre invited as a director the famous actor Georgi Stamatov. [Stamatov, Georgi (1869-1942): actor and director, born in Tiraspol, Russia, died in Sofia, Bulgaria.] He decided to select a team to work with. He announced an audition for actors, who were paid 820 levs, trainees, who received 710 levs, drama actors, who were paid 450 levs and amateurs. No

matter that we were all working, we decided to apply for the roles of amateur actors, who usually took part in the crowd scenes and received 20 leva a performance. Jacques worked as a sales assistant in a Jewish textile store, and Mair in another store. The requirement for the audition was to recite a poem by heart and each of us had prepared one.

The audition lasted two days. My friends went in before me and recited their poems. Finally, it was my turn. Georgi Stamatov looked me up and down and, to my surprise, asked me to perform a sketch before reciting the poem. But I had no idea what that meant. He asked me to imagine that I entered an official banquet, invited the most beautiful lady to waltz and dance with her. This is a sketch, which is a minimum requirement for drama actors. Anyway, I answered that I could act it out, but that I was against dancing.

At that time Hashomer Hatzair taught us to be against dancing, wearing ties, smoking and drinking. I was an ardent follower of these ideas. Although I worked as a bank employee, I didn't wear a tie, neither smoked, nor drank. The organization advocated that dances could distract us from our mission - to prepare for work as a 'halutz' - a worker in a village commune [in Palestine], and build the Jewish state. I explained that to Georgi Stamatov, who was sitting with his wife, also a famous actress, in the second row in the theater. He accepted my explanation and asked me to act it out up to the moment of the dancing and to imagine that I had no tie. The stage was well lit and I acted out entering the ballroom and heading towards the beautiful lady. When I had finished, Georgi Stamatov told me I was free to go and I left without reciting my poem. I felt a bit sad because I thought that he didn't like my performance. The results was to be announced in two days on the bulletin board of the Plovdiv theater.

When the results were out, I saw that my friends were admitted, but my name wasn't among the amateurs. However, my friend Mair spotted my name among those of the trainees. That was a big surprise for me because it could be my opportunity for an actor's career. My joy was great. I had to go straight away to rehearsals for the premiere of the new play. I had to play truant from the bank so that I could go to the theater. I found myself numerous excuses to go out during my working hours because the theater attracted me more. One day the director of the bank, Menahem Fardo, called me into his office and I had to confess about my new hobby. The director scolded me and I had to give up the theater. At that time the country was in a deep crisis; there were many unemployed men and I couldn't afford to risk losing my job. My father also talked to me about that.

I married on 1st September 1939 in Plovdiv, on the day when the Nazis invaded Poland [see Invasion of Poland] [8](#). My wife is, in fact, my first cousin because she is the daughter of my mother's brother Nissim Geron. At that time such marriages were allowed. In fact, I didn't know my wife well before we married. I remember that she first came to Plovdiv in 1934 to visit her relatives. She was supposed to live in the two-storied house of Aunt Roza, who, however, had gone on a holiday to Chepino. That's why my aunt asked me to meet my cousin Nina [Regina] at the station and I agreed. I remember that she was a beautiful girl and that she impressed me a lot. That's how our love started.

Nina stayed in Plovdiv for about a month and then left for Sofia. We wrote to each other from 1934 to 1939, when we got married. We had a religious wedding. Rabbi Shemuel Behar, who was a very dignified and clever man, married us. The rabbi prepared for us a special marriage certificate - a ketubah, which is written in ancient Hebrew. I remember the rabbi telling my wife to take good

care of the marriage certificate. At the wedding ceremony in the synagogue in Plovdiv I had to do the ritual of breaking a glass with my foot. A glass covered with a white napkin was put in front of my wife and me. I stepped on it heavily and smashed it. This is done in order to have luck in the marriage. Some people jokingly say that in this way the groom 'frightens' the bride into submission. The celebrations after the wedding took place in the house of Aunt Roza, my mother's sister.

After we married, my wife and I decided to go on a honeymoon to Belgrade. It was announced that on 3rd September 1939 England had declared war on Germany, but we decided to go anyway. We had a very good time there and we even found it funny that while we were in Belgrade, there was a food crisis in Bulgaria and a ration system was being introduced, according to which meat was given out only two days a week. At that time we were still not aware of the hardships we would experience in Bulgaria.

My wife graduated from the Third Girls' High School in Sofia with excellent marks. She was a member of the Workers' Youth Union [UYW] [9](#) and took part in protests against high school fees. She was arrested by the police because of that. Her father, Nissim Geron, who was my uncle, was relatively well off. He had the ambition to build a factory for glucose production. Unfortunately, he had two Bulgarian partners who cheated him and he went bankrupt. The construction of the factory had already begun and even nowadays a protruding chimney can be seen on Kniajevo living estate. [Editor's note: suburban estate in the south-west of Sofia at the foot of the Vitosha Mountain.] My uncle only managed to keep his apartment, which he had very wisely registered as property of his wife. I live in this apartment now. It has three bedrooms and is situated in the center of Sofia right next to St. Aleksander Nevsky Cathedral.

I lived in Plovdiv until 1939. In 1940 I moved to Sofia where my wife lived. My uncle Nissim found me a job in a wine company where I worked until 1942. Uncle Nissim was chief accountant of that company and I started to work as his assistant. My son, Benedict Molhov, was born in 1941. My family loved music. While I lived in Plovdiv, I sang in the Jewish choir. In Sofia I signed up with the Georgi Kirkov [10](#) choir. My wife also had a beautiful voice and I brought her to the choir where she sang for 26 years. My wife's parents also sang very well. Thus, our son, Benedict Molhov, grew up to become a famous composer, conductor and singer.

The name Mevorah means blessed by God, in Ladino - 'bendicho'. That's why I named my only son Benedict. When our son was born, my wife asked the rabbi in Sofia what the contemporary equivalent of the name Mevorah was. He told her that that was the name Benedict. At that time [1941] I was mobilized in labor camps [11](#) as a soldier and I was temporarily released for the circumcision of my son. They informed me that they will name him Benedict and I agreed. Now my son is a famous composer and performer and his name can often be seen on posters. I think that the name Benedict Molhov is quite fitting for a composer.

In 1940 the Defense of the Nation Act [see Law for the Protection of the Nation] [12](#) was passed in Bulgaria. In 1941 we started receiving calling orders for mobilization to labor camps, which were set up after the adoption of the Defense of the Nation Act. So my son was born while I was in such a camp.

One day in 1942 a priest came to our house in downtown Sofia with an accommodation order for our home. We realized that we had to move out. That priest was appointed to teach theology to the

son of King Boris III [13](#), Simeon II [see Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, Simeon] [14](#). We moved out of our house and didn't return to it until 1945. During that period I was mobilized three times to labor camps - in 1941 I spent five months in a Jewish labor group building the railway line Kulata-Blagoyevgrad, in 1943 I spent nine months in the same camp and in 1944 I was in Belovo. My wife, my son and her parents were interned. After my first mobilization I returned to work in the wine company because I was useful to them there and they had kept my place for me. After that I lost my job. Our life then was very hard, but we helped each other as much as we could.

In January 1943 I received a calling order for the labor camp in Marikostino. That village was located along the river Struma. During that year all Jews were mobilized, even those who had the so-called 'paragraph'. According to military laws 'paragraph' means that because of some illness, one can be exempt from the labor camp. But new commissions were formed then, who sent even the seriously sick Jews to work. I had the misfortune of also being mobilized in 1943. In 1942 I didn't go to a labor camp, thanks to my employers in the wine company. They needed me and procured for me a document stating that I was ill and in accordance with the 'paragraph' I wasn't sent to a camp.

I took part in the construction of a railway road and the Pirin railway station from Gorna Djumaya [present-day Blagoyevgrad] to Kulata. By that time there was a narrow-gauge line along the Struma River. We were around 2,500 Jews working there. We were divided into groups of 300-400 people. We had a supervisor, a sergeant major, responsible for us. The biggest malaria epidemic broke out in our camp.

I spent nine and a half months in the camp - from January to October. This was a malaria area and many of us went down with malaria. Within a year and a couple of months I was ill with malaria three times. The doctor was also a Jew; his name was Dr. Jacques Behar. He explained to me that they didn't have the medicine usually given to patients with malaria - quinine. At that time all the quinine was sent to the German army and only its substitute called Atabrine, which gave the skin a yellow tint, could be found in Bulgaria. They gave us this substitute and our skin turned yellow.

One of my most vivid memories from the labor camp is the passage of the deported Jews from Aegean Thrace and Macedonia through Bulgaria. Those territories were occupied by the Germans and annexed to Bulgaria during World War II. 11,382 Jews were deported irrespective of their age. Loaded into narrow wagons, they passed by us. We worked near the old narrow-gauge line and constructed the new railway line, which is used nowadays. We saw the tragedy of those people. They were transported to Gorna Djumaya, then transferred to wide wagons and deported to Poland, into the gas chambers. All that happened after the signature of King Boris III, which is his heavy sin.

While I was in the camp, my family - my wife, her parents and my child - were interned to Chirpan [a small town near Plovdiv]. There were around 48,000 Jews in Bulgaria and the plan was to send half of them to towns in Northern Bulgaria, and the other half to Southern Bulgaria. This was done in order to prepare the Bulgarian Jews for deportation to Poland or Germany. At first the order had been to send my wife's parents to Chirpan and my wife to Razgrad in Northern Bulgaria. With the help of the commissariat in Plovdiv, where we knew an employee, Nina's accommodation order for Razgrad was torn apart and a new one was written for Chirpan where her parents were. So, my wife received help from her parents.



My family was accommodated in a school and lived very miserably. At that time my wife developed a very serious form of diabetes. In October 1943 I was released from the camp and I went straight to Chirpan. I saw that my wife's condition had deteriorated. Her whole organism was weakened from the illness and her breath smelled of acetone. I rushed to the municipality and asked to be transferred to Plovdiv where my parents lived. There were also good Jewish physicians in Plovdiv. They allowed us to move to Plovdiv and we took my wife for a medical check. Three distinguished Plovdiv Jewish physicians decided that my wife should take insulin three times a day. My wife and I settled in an old house and my wife's parents went to live with some relatives.

My release from the labor camp was temporary because I was once again mobilized in April 1944. I once again took part in the construction of roads in Belovo and Sestrino in Central Bulgaria. There was a rumor that King Boris III had reached an agreement with Hitler to leave 22,000 Jews in Bulgaria to work, as I did, and deport the remaining women, elderly people and children, who were more than 22,000. That would have been a great tragedy...

In Plovdiv I saw how the Jews were saved by metropolitan Kiril [15](#), who later became bishop. He was friends with the distinguished Jews in the city and after the authorities in Plovdiv began gathering the Jews in the school to deport them, he arrived in Sofia to meet with the regents, since Boris III had already died, and declared that he would lie on the railway lines in front of the train and wouldn't allow the Jews to be deported. That was how we were saved. Meanwhile, the Soviet army was already winning the war and in July-August I was released from the labor camp.

After 9th September 1944 I was appointed director of the criminal department of the police in Plovdiv. I wasn't a member of the Workers' Youth Union, but I was a member of the Bulgarian Communist Party. In 1945 I decided to go to Sofia to check what had happened to our house. I made the priest move out and my family once again moved to live in Sofia. We lived in this house with my wife's parents. I still live here now. In Sofia I was appointed director of the economic department of the police. My job was very stressful and soon my health deteriorated sharply. In order to preserve my health I decided to change my life-style and after I completed my secondary education, I changed my well-paid, but very stressful job to a badly paid, but quiet job in the Chimmetalurgproyekt Institute.

I worked in the Chimmetalurgproyekt Institute for 26 years until I retired. While I worked there, I decided to apply for university. The three years in the commercial school weren't recognized as secondary education, so I first had to complete high school. I signed up with the technical school in industry chemistry. I enrolled in a correspondence course and went in for exams. While I was studying in high school I headed the personnel department of the institute.

After I graduated from high school, I went to work in the technical department. Along with two friends of mine - one of whom had been a political prisoner before 1944, and the other, Todor Milenkov, had a death sentence in the same period for antifascist activities - I decided to apply for a university degree in the Chemistry and Technology Institute. However, at that time I was 40 years and two months old and Todor Milenkov 40 years and eight months. It turned out that we couldn't be admitted to university because the upper age limit was 40 years.

We decided to go to the Education Minister, but we were received by Deputy Minister Ganchev instead. We explained to him our intentions and that our documents weren't accepted because we were a few months above the allowed age. At first, he refused to help us, but Todor Milenkov said

that we would go to the Prime Minister, Anton Yugov, whom we knew personally. Only then he agreed and took our applications. After one week I received a letter saying that the ministry allowed me to study in the institute. I graduated in 1963. In the same year and the same month my son Benedict graduated from the Music Conservatory. The newspaper Jewish News wrote about that saying that there were two university graduates in our home now.

I continued working in this institute and became head of the international relations department. I was in charge of the department, responsible for the free-of-charge exchange with designer organizations from the countries in the former socialist camp - Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, the USSR and Yugoslavia. We established relations with all designer institutes. I established contacts with the designer organizations in these countries and each year our institute sent Bulgarian specialists in the field of chemistry and metallurgy there. In this way the seven countries cooperated technically. When guests came from abroad, I was in charge of their accommodation, stay, program and the signing of contracts. I have visited many European nations due to my job.

My specialty was black metallurgy and when the institute divided into Chimproyekt and Metalurgproyekt, I chose to work in Metalurgproyekt although the director of Chimproyekt was a Jew. I retired at the age of 63 in 1978, but I still felt strong and motivated and I returned to work for two more years. At that time I headed the external relations of the institute with other similar institutions. After 1989 I was also a member of the Union of Engineers. Now the decay in Bulgaria is huge. The institute where I worked still exists but very little is left of it.

In 1980, two years after my retirement, I felt strong and eager to work again. So, I decided to go back to the Chimproyekt Institute. First, I went to the director of the technical personnel department and asked him if I could return to my previous position - to be in charge of the international exchange. He told me that I came just in time because the man they had appointed couldn't cope with the job and was absent very often. Then I went to the director of the institute, who turned out to be a new one, and to my surprise he knew everything about me, although we had never met. After all, I had spent 26 years in this institute and I myself had appointed hundreds of people to different positions here.

The director was happy to grant my request and appointed me director of the free exchange of technical experts between the country members of the Council for Economic Cooperation. I started working immediately and got in touch with my colleagues in Czechoslovakia, Poland, the German Democratic Republic and Yugoslavia. They all knew me and they were happy that I was back. I prepared the program of the institute for the next five years.

I liked my work in the institute and really put my heart into it. Although the institute didn't have much money, I came up with ideas of how to make the foreign guests have a good time during their visits. I organized excursions to Vitosha Mountain, visits to the opera and the theatre for them. They always liked their stay and often they themselves organized farewell dinners in gratitude for the attitude towards them.

During the totalitarian period my family and I didn't experience direct anti-Semitism. We experienced such an attitude for the first time in 1972 when my son Benedict, having graduated from the State Conservatory, was assigned to work for three years as assistant conductor with the Svetoslav Obretenov cappella choir. But he was only given a temporary job because he was

replacing a colleague on leave. During that time my son received a job offer from the Plovdiv Opera, but the salary they offered was low and he declined. At that time, in the middle of the 1970s, my son joined the choir of Professor Ruskov, with whom he went on tours abroad. Besides being a composer, my son is also a very good baritone.

I raised my son in the spirit of leftist ideas. My wife and I were left- oriented and supported the Communist Party. I continue to be left-oriented today. My daughter-in-law is a Jew from Plovdiv. This was important for our family. Our son is familiar with all the Jewish traditions.

My brother and sister left for Israel, not with the mass aliyah [16](#) in 1948-49, but earlier. My brother Shelomo graduated from the agriculture school in Sadovo and was ready to be a halutz and left for Palestine in 1942. He got issued a passport and with my help, almost illegally since he hadn't done his military service, left for Palestine. There he settled in a camp and later took part in the Haganah [17](#) resistance movement [17](#) against the English rule, which existed until the establishment of the Jewish state. My sister Vizanka also left before the establishment of the Jewish state - in 1946. She graduated from the special school for sewing crafts and consumers' goods in Sofia and was also prepared to live in a kibbutz. In Israel, after 1948, she became a tailor in the Ein Hahores kibbutz. There everyone does what he or she can and receives what all the others receive. Vizanka married an Austrian Jew, Michael Gila Zur, in Israel and adopted the name Gila Zur. My brother also married in Israel. My parents left for Israel in 1949. They settled in Haifa and died there in the middle of the 1950s.

I went to Israel for the first time in 1954 to visit my sister and my brother. My stay in Israel was planned for one month, but the ship with which I arrived and which was supposed to bring me back to Bulgaria, was three months late and I stayed longer. Meanwhile, I applied for non-paid leave to keep my position in the institute. I didn't have any problems with the authorities for staying in Israel for three months. I respect Georgi Dimitrov [18](#) a lot, since he, in contrast to Stalin, allowed the Bulgarian Jews to leave for Israel. At the moment there are very few Jews in Bulgaria and mixed marriages between Bulgarians and Jews happen a lot more often. They are the reason for the strange combination of Bulgarian and Jewish names.

During the rule of the Communist Party I have always supported the people's power and the official position of the party. As an employee of the People's Militia during the 1950s I was the 'fist' of the people's power. Now, looking back at those times, I regard the rule of the communist party as totalitarian. The power was focused on the people around Zhivkov [19](#) and the idea of the people's power was corrupted. Many of the party's activities were unknown to most people, for example the camps for political prisoners. These things became known only after the fall of the communist regime in 1989 [following the events of 10th November 1989] [20](#). I am pleased with the period of rule of the BCP [Bulgarian Communist Party]. During that time I managed to acquire a university education free-of- charge, and I had a good job. My son and his wife also graduated from the State Conservatory without paying any fees.

I think that the opening of the Eastern European countries to the West is a positive sign. However, I also think that the end of the rule of the communist parties in these countries was a result of the long-term work of the American intelligence, which led to the political changes. I was a BCP member and I'm still a member of its successor - the Socialist Party.

At the moment, according to my son's statistics, there are no more than 6,000 Jews left in Bulgaria. Nevertheless, the editor of the newspaper Jewish News, Mihaylina Pavlova, has found on the Internet a list of Jews who the unknown author of the list claims are racists. Many of my acquaintances are on this list; only my name isn't there. Some of the political parties advocate unofficially anti-Semitic ideas.

Nowadays life in the Jewish community is very good. Various cultural events are being organized for us. Every day I go to the Jewish cultural home to have lunch and meet my friends. Thanks to the international Jewish organization Joint [21](#) we receive aid and we can eat relatively cheaply. My son is the conductor of the Jewish choir and has taken up all the administrative work; that's why he has an office in the Jewish Cultural Home.

Glossary:

### **[1](#) Expulsion of the Jews from Spain**

The Sephardi population of the Balkans originates from the Jews 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, Izmir, etc.) and also in the ones situated on significant overland trading routes to Central Europe (Bitola, Skopje, and Sarajevo) and to the Danube (Edirne, Plovdiv, Sofia, and Vidin).

### **[2](#) First Balkan War (1912-1913)**

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

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

### **[3](#) 9th September 1944**

The day of the communist takeover in Bulgaria. In September 1944 the Soviet Union unexpectedly declared war on Bulgaria. On 9th September 1944 the Fatherland Front, a broad left-wing coalition, deposed the government. Although the communists were in the minority in the Fatherland Front,

they were the driving force in forming the coalition, and their position was strengthened by the presence of the Red Army in Bulgaria.

#### **4 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.

#### **5 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.

#### **6 Betar**

(abbreviation of Berit Trumpeldor) A right-wing Zionist youth movement founded in 1923 in Riga, Latvia. Betar played an important role in Zionist education, in teaching the Hebrew language and culture, and methods of self-defense. It also inculcated the ideals of aliyah to Erez Israel by any means, legal and illegal, and the creation of a Jewish state on both sides of the Jordan. Its members supported the idea to create a Jewish legion in order to liberate Palestine. In Bulgaria the organization started publishing its newspaper in 1934.

#### **7 Crisis of the 1930s**

The world economic crisis that began in 1929 devastated the Bulgarian economy. The social tensions of the 1920s were exacerbated when 200,000 workers lost their jobs, prices fell by 50 percent, dozens of companies went bankrupt, and per capita income among peasants was halved between 1929 and 1933.

#### **8 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 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.

## **9 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. After the coup d'etat in 1934, when the 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.

## **10 Kirkov, Georgi Yordanov (1867-1919)**

Bulgarian journalist, poet. One of the founders of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, which was established in 1903.

## **11 Forced labor camps in Bulgaria**

Established under the Council of Ministers' Act in 1941. All Jewish men between the age 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 Law for the Protection of the Nation**

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

## **13 King Boris III**

The Third Bulgarian Kingdom was a constitutional monarchy with a very 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. Most Bulgarian Jews saved from the Holocaust (over 50,000 people) regard King Boris III as their savior.

#### **14 Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, Simeon (1937-)**

son and heir of Boris III and grandson of Ferdinand, the first King of Bulgaria. The birth of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha in 1937 was celebrated as a national holiday. All students at school had their grades increased by one mark. After the Communist Party's rise to power on 9th September 1944 Bulgaria became a republic and the family of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha was forced to leave the country. They settled in Spain with their relatives. Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha returned from exile after the fall of communism and was elected prime minister of Bulgaria in 2001 as Simeon Saksoburgotski.

#### **15 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 stopping it by sending a protest to King Boris III, threatening the local police chief as well as by him lying across the railway track. 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.

#### **16 Mass Aliyah**

Between September 1944 and October 1948, 7,000 Bulgarian Jews left for Palestine. The exodus was due to deep-rooted Zionist sentiments, a 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. Further numbers 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 emigrated to Israel until only a few thousand Jews remained in the country.

#### **17 Haganah**

(Hebrew: 'Defense'), Zionist military organization representing the majority of the Jews in Palestine from 1920 to 1948. Although it was outlawed by the British Mandatory authorities and was poorly armed, it managed effectively to defend Jewish settlements. After the United Nations' decision to partition Palestine (1947), the Haganah came into the open as the defense force of the Jewish state; it clashed openly with the British forces and successfully overcame the military forces of the Palestinian Arabs and their allies. By order of the provisional government of Israel (May 31, 1948) the Haganah as a private organization was dissolved and became the national army of the state.

### **18 Dimitrov, Georgi (1882-1949)**

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

### **19 Zhivkov, Todor (1911-1998)**

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

### **20 10th November 1989**

After 35 years of rule, Communist Party leader Todor Zhivkov was replaced by 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 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.

### **21 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.