

# Mois Saltiel

Mois Saltiel

Sofia

Bulgaria

Interviewer: Patricia Nikolova

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*Mois Saltiel is an energetic, sociable, good-mannered and dedicated man. He is responsible and devoted to his work for the Jewish community and Bulgarian society. He lives in a cozy two-room apartment in the suburbs of Sofia. He is an introvert, but talkative, emotional and an easily impressed person.*

My ancestors came from Spain in the 16th century. They settled in the Ottoman Empire and some of them went to live in Bosnia. Later they moved to the town of Pirot in present-day Serbia and shortly before my elder uncle was born, my grandfather Avram Saltiel moved to live in Sofia. The reason was that his wife Tamara died in Pirot and he married her friend Mazal, which was the tradition at that time. [Editor's note: Actually the tradition is that if somebody's wife or husband dies he/she must remarry one of his spouse's single siblings.] Mazal looked after his children after the death of his wife. Mazal was from Pirot.

I do not remember my grandfather because I was born in 1923 and he moved to Jerusalem in 1926. I also do not remember my grandmother for the same reasons. What I know about them, I have heard from other people who knew them. So, it is difficult for me to talk about them, because I have no personal impressions of them.

What I know is that my grandfather was a glass-maker and at one point he was a gabai of the synagogue in Pirot. He spoke mainly Ladino, his family talked in Ladino 1 at home. I do not know how they dressed; I do not have any photos of them. As far as I have heard, they were religious people. They observed the Jewish tradition.

I do not know what my father [Solomon Saltiel] did before he married. As for his sister, Tamara, she was married to Avram Ashkenazi, who was a teacher. He taught geography in the Jewish school in the capital. They married in Sofia and lived at the corner of Sredna Gora Street and Stamboliiski Street. They had a bookstore under their apartment.

They had two sons and one daughter: Shlomo, David and Yodita. Shlomo died in Israel. David also lived in Israel, but later immigrated to the USA where he founded his own company for vinyl records. I don't know when they immigrated. Yodita died in Israel where she moved around 1948. I do not know to what extent they were religious. But I think that in principle Bulgarian Jews are not very religious.

My father had four brothers and one sister. As I said before, his sister was Tamara and the brothers were called Meshulam, Yosif, Benjamin and Mois. None of them is alive any longer. Mois died in

1921 in Sofia; he did not have a family.

Benjamin and Yosif were merchants. They had a shop on Nishka Street where they sold materials for cobblers. They had secondary education and many heirs, who now live in Israel.

We kept in touch with most of our relatives, but we met most often with my aunt Tamara and uncle Benjamin. They did not come to our house often, because we were poorer. They were all better off financially and we were the ones to contact them. My aunt Tamara gave a plot near the entrance to her house on Stamboliiski Street to my brother Haim so that he would build a shed and start repairing shoes there.

I do not have any information about my mother's life before her marriage, but I know where she lived before that. The family house was on 10 Bregalnitsa Street in Sofia.

My parents were Solomon Avram Saltiel and Rebecca Eliya-Kyoso, which is her father's family name. They were born in 1892 and had secondary education. They spoke Bulgarian and Ladino. My mother was a housewife and my father was a cobbler. He had a workshop where he repaired shoes. I do not know how they met or if the marriage was arranged or not, because I was not born yet. They had a religious wedding in Sofia. They dressed in accordance with the tradition at those times.

We were not doing very well financially. We were not extremely poor, but we were not rich either. We lived in my maternal grandparents' house so that we would not have to pay money for rent. Our home had two rooms, where the six of us lived. My parents slept in one of the rooms and my three brothers and I slept in the other. At first we did not have a kitchen or closet so we made a small kitchen in the corridor. We used coal-burning stoves for heating. We did not have a garden or animals.

In the beginning there was a maid, who helped our mother, but my mother looked after us mostly – we did not have a nanny or a governess. I did not go to a kindergarten. I spent my childhood at home with my mother and playing games with the children.

We had mostly secular books and a few religious ones. My parents read books, but only when they had some free time. My father's obligation was to earn money to support us, and my mother's – to cook and buy food. They also helped us in our education – advised us what to read and how to study.

My parents were not very religious, but they observed the Jewish traditions – mostly on the high holidays Pesach, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, and Sukkot. They were not members of any political parties or cultural organizations. They got along well with our neighbors, most of whom were Jews, but there were also Bulgarians who were very tolerant.

I had three brothers. The eldest was Albert, who was born in 1916. Haim was born in 1918 and the youngest, Yako, in 1928. They all spoke Bulgarian and Ladino, had a secondary education and studied in the same Jewish school as I did. Albert was a dental mechanic. Haim was a cobbler, but later in Israel he worked in the El-Al [Israeli national airways] company, and Yako, who was the first to move to Israel as a young man, worked as a salesman in a shop in Yaffo.

My brothers lived in Bulgaria until 1948 and then moved to Israel. Albert had two children – Solomon and Pnina; Haim also has two children – Rivka and Tali [affectionate for Naftali], and Yako's children are Rivka and Shlomo.

My brothers Albert and Haim Saltiel married in Sofia in 1943 and 1945, respectively, in accordance with the religious ritual. Yako also had a religious wedding, but in Israel in the 1950s. They were not very religious, but they observed the traditions.

I was born in Sofia on 30th November 1923. This is the capital of Bulgaria – a city surrounded by a mountain range, in the middle of which is the beautiful Vitosha Mountain. I was born at the corner of Boris I Street and Tsar Simeon Street where I lived for four or five years. This was in Iuchbunar [2](#), the poor Jewish quarter in Sofia. Then a big fire broke out in our house and spread into many of the rooms, where other families lived. We moved to live in the family house of my mother on 10 Bregalnitsa Street in Sofia.

In contrast to our previous home, which was close to the town's center and closer to the central Jewish synagogue, 10 Bregalnitsa Street was at the heart of the Jewish quarter [Iuchbunar]. Of course, there were Bulgarians there too, but most of the people were Jews, who were very united. At that time there were around 20,000 Jews in Sofia.

There were a number of synagogues: the central one, the Iuchbunar one, the Ashkenazi one and maybe some more, which I did not know. There was a rabbi, a shochet, a chazzan – I cannot say how many they were. This is what I remember.

The [Iuchbunar] Jewish school where I had my elementary and junior high school education was close to our house. I finished my secondary education as a student in the evening high school in Sofia on Stara Planina Street. There we studied all subjects, which were taught in the other schools in Bulgarian and Ivrit. I cannot remember who taught us Ivrit then but one of the teachers there, who is still alive today, was Mati Albuhaire. My favorite subjects were literature, maths and French. I did not take private lessons.

Most of the Jews in Sofia were craftsmen or street vendors. For example, my father had a small shoemaker's workshop. It was located on Serdika Street and occasionally the Jewish school used to organize an auction for the manufacturing of the students' shoes. During the times when my father won the auction, our economic situation improved, because we had more money. Then we could afford to buy some new clothes or shoes for the joy of the children in the family.

We had electricity in the house, but no running water in the kitchen. We had a faucet in the yard, where we had to go in the winters and in the summers to pour water, although we lived on the first floor. A little later, we made another faucet in the corridor on the first floor and used it instead of the one in the yard.

On the whole, the Bulgarian people treated the Jews with tolerance. As a child I was a typical Jew, so to say, with red hair and a freckled face. So, the Branniks [3](#) and Legionaries [4](#) vented their anger on me; that is, they beat me up and insulted me for being a Jew, but I cannot say that I suffered much strong anti-Semite attitude directed towards me when I was young.

On the contrary, I remember occasions showing quite the opposite. For example, every vacation I went to work in a shop close to my father's workshop. It was owned by the Bulgarian Nesho

Draganov and sold electrical appliances. He was always very understanding, gave me work and he saved us from being banished from the country, on which I will return later. We had other neighbors, too –Hristo, a knife-grinder, close to my father. My father and I got along very well with him.

As for the way we were brought up at home, naturally, we, as all the other children, celebrated the Bulgarian holidays. If there was a parade, we went to watch, but I do not have any concrete memories. When Simeoncho [5](#) was born, we went to the palace to celebrate the birth of the heir to the throne.

We, the children, learned patriotic poems and songs. But I cannot sing them to you, because I cannot sing well. We observed the Jewish traditions at home, but no one was deeply religious to such an extent as to observe every minute detail of the holiday ritual.

Besides the vegetable markets, which were not as many as today, what is interesting is that there was also a market for servants. It was situated in a park close to the place where the present-day Tsentralni Hali [central covered market in Sofia] is located now. When the season for hiring servants and maids came, all girls from the villages were brought by their parents and a kind of bargaining began – if you needed a maid, you went there and started bargaining for this or that girl – you asked the father, the neighbors and then hired a maid.

We went shopping to the neighboring shops, which were mostly owned by Bulgarians, with whom we got along well. There was a grocery on the corner of Bregalnitsa Street and Positano Street where we went when we had no money – the shop assistant gave us the food we wanted for free and wrote down in a notebook the amount of money we owed. When we had money, we went there and paid our debts.

I had many friends, most of whom were Jews and classmates of mine. I can name Professor Shimon Ninyo, Tiko Israel, Solomon Haimov and many others. I spent my free time in the Jewish organizations. I met my future wife, Juliet Fridman, there, because we went out with the same friends from the Jewish community center.

At that time there was an association named ‘Toshavim,’ which means ‘Natives’ [nonpolitical Zionist association whose members gathered regularly to discuss contemporary issues related to Israel]. Its head office was at Stamboliiski Blvd. opposite the Bet Am [6](#). It had a small library and young people went there to borrow books and read various papers. Different youth groups formed there. The leader of our group was Albert Kohen – a future writer, who is no longer alive. Other members were David Elazar, Zacho [Isak] Benvenisti and others.

In fact, my journalist career started there in 1941, when I made the first ‘live’ newspaper in the form of a notebook, including articles, short stories and poems. The newspaper had only one issue – a notebook, which was handed from one person to the other between the members of the association. Unfortunately, the police banned it. Everything was done with educational purposes, but they said we were engaged in anti-fascist activities.

As a student I was also a member of Hashomer Hatzair [7](#). As scouts we learned the history of the Jewish people, prepared for our departure for our own land there, and on the whole did everything that the present members of Hashomer Hatzair do.

I got on a car for the first time quite late, but I traveled by train, with a steam engine, for the first time in 1934 when I went to Kjustendil. I had surgery on my appendicitis and I went to my aunt in Kjustendil to recover. My favorite place to spend the vacations was the seacoast. I saw the sea for the first time after 9th September 1944 [8](#) - in 1947 or 1948.

I had various jobs. I started as a worker in the workshop owned by Nersez Shirinyan, and later, between 1941 and 1942, I worked as a clerk in the lawyer's office of Yosef Moshev. I did not have any trouble at work for being a Jew. My first boss was an Armenian and the second one a Jew, so there were no problems.

In 1941 the government ordered that all Jews, who had foreign citizenship and who were not protected by the relevant country should leave Bulgaria. Since my father was a Serbian subject, we had to leave for Varna. Our whole family, that is, my parents, my younger brother and I - because we still did not have Bulgarian passports and were regarded as Serbian nationals - were ordered to go to Varna and wait for transport to Israel.

So we went to Varna, but before that we took pictures with our friends, relatives, and of our house. We settled in a village near Varna waiting for the ship. Meanwhile, some Bulgarian friends of ours started looking for ways to cancel our deportation order. One of them was Nesho Draganov, former officer of the reserve, who had connections with the police. While we were there, he managed to arrange an order allowing us to remain in Bulgaria and return home. One of the ships, which we probably would have boarded, sank at sea and all passengers drowned.

When the Toshavim association was forbidden in 1941/42, I became a member of the Jewish state community center, which had a library on the corner of Stamboliiski Blvd and Opalchenska Street. Various groups formed there and some of them became members of the UYW [9](#). We read a lot, we presented various papers, went on excursions etc. At that time the anti-Jewish legislation was adopted - the Law for the Protection of the Nation [10](#), together with the fascist legislation - and we became involved in anti-fascist activities.

One of our activities, for which I was sent to prison, was as much comic as tragic. In 1942 the platform of the Fatherland Front [11](#) was read on Hristo Botev radio from Moscow. It had some demands and tasks set by the Fatherland Front for the democratic development of the country, including some against the anti-Jewish legislation. We decided to popularize this platform, because the government and the newspapers said nothing.

I was the leader of a number of [UYW] groups. In one of them we decided to make copies of the platform. Writing by hand would have taken a lot of time and we had no printing house. Then we decided to make copies of some passages in a photo studio. One of the members, Sabat Melamed, worked in one. He took the necessary materials and a cassette for film copying and we gathered in the apartment of Mois Perets on the corner of Odrin Street and Stamboliiski Blvd. at around 11-12 o'clock at night in August.

We started working. But the opening and closing of the box, in which we took the pictures was very noisy. The house was run-down and some Bulgarians lived on the floor below. We had put blankets on the doors and windows so that the room would look dark from the outside.

But we made a lot of noise and when it was midnight the neighbors came upstairs to see what was happening. They tried to open the door, but we locked it. They said, 'You are doing something illegal, we will call the police if you don't leave'. They went downstairs and we decided it would be best to stop working and leave.

One of us, who lived nearby, Leon Levi, took the box with all the materials to hide it at home. But there was a policeman in the café on the opposite street who noticed a young man carrying a box at night. He started shouting at him, 'Stop! Stop!' Leon started running. We heard everything from the room. Leon was caught and arrested.

Meanwhile, Sabat Melamed and I climbed over the roof and walking on the roofs of the small buildings reached the corner of Positano Street and Odrin Street where another friend of ours, Daniel Albahari, lived. We entered the house, waking the people up, but they let us spend the night there.

Meanwhile, when Leon Levi was beaten up, he confessed who lived in that house and Mois Perets was also arrested. That was when our illegal life started. The police started searching for me. They took a photo of mine from home and sent it everywhere. I hid at various places, but the police arrested many of the people who were members of my [UYW] groups, they organized a trial and sentenced me to death. But since I was under age, I was sentenced to 15 years of imprisonment. The sentence was by default because I was not present at the trial.

Later on, still living illegally, despite my efforts the police caught me because of the betrayal of one man and because I was not shrewd enough to evade them. It happened in 1942. Since I already had a sentence, I was sent to Sofia prison. After half a year I was sent to Skopje prison in Idrizovo.

During that period, 1942-1943, the anti-Jewish legislation was fully in force, and in 1943 my parents as all Jews in Bulgaria received orders for internment to Razgrad [12](#). My younger brother and my parents went there, while my two brothers were sent to labor camps. My mother's health deteriorated, because while still in Sofia my family was often beaten by the police who were searching the house for me.

The life of my family in Razgrad was very hard. My mother died in 1943 while I was still in prison. I was not allowed to go to her funeral. I know that her funeral took place in accordance with the Jewish traditions. Of course, all that reflected on my education, and although I had finished my secondary education, I could not go to study at university. My father also suffered, because he had to close the workshop, sell some of the property and give the rest to friends to keep. So, my family led a very difficult life.

The conditions in the prison were very bad. It was a two-story building situated in the center of a farming field, surrounded by a tall stonewall, and there was a faucet in the yard. We lived in big rooms, which at first had had spring beds, but when we arrived these beds were taken away and wooden bunk beds with hay mattresses full of dust and bugs were made for us. We were 19 Jews there. To name but some of them: David Shabbat, Samuil Nisimov, Isak Samuilov, Solomon Haimov, David Solomonov, Rudolf Levi, Rudolf Benvenisti, Isak Alvas and others. We were allocated in eight cells.



Let me tell you about the death of one of the Jews – David Shabbat. By coincidence, he was sent to prison for a reason similar to mine. He had decided to spread the platform of the Fatherland Front. His friends and he had bought a lot of sticking labels for notebooks from bookstores. They wrote some passages from the platform on them and stuck them to post boxes, fences etc. He was arrested and beaten by the police. They deliberately kicked him in the kidneys and damaged them badly. The police arranged a trial and sentenced him to many years of imprisonment.

At first he was in the prison in Sofia and then in the one in Skopje. From the beating he continued to suffer strong pain and swelling of the kidneys. So David turned to the management and asked them to send him to hospital for treatment. They ignored him completely. He turned to the prosecutor and asked him to help him. The prosecutor said to him, ‘You should be sent to Hitler to help you.’ The political prisoners went on a hunger strike demanding that David be treated.

After that his condition worsened – he fainted and then he was taken to the Skopje prison, seemingly to treat him in hospital. In the evening they locked him in the moist lock-up room where he shouted in pain and asked for a doctor or to be sent to hospital, but no one of the guards came to help. The prisoners from the neighboring cells also banged and shouted, but no one went to help David the whole night. In the morning when the guard opened the door of the lock-up room, David was already dead. So, a nineteen-year-old young man died only because he wanted to make the [Fatherland Front] platform more popular.

Most of the other Jews were in that prison for similar reasons. I must say that we, the Jews in the prison, were under even greater stress, especially at the beginning of 1944. German officers came to the prison in Idrizovo, and one of the guards told us that they asked him if there were political prisoners and Jews there. He said that they were only criminals.

So, we found out that the deportation of the Jews to Germany was being organized. Meanwhile, in 1943 all Jews from Macedonia were sent to Auschwitz. The leadership of the political prisoners organized our escape from prison and on 28th August 1944 we escaped with the help of some soldiers from the guard, and with the support of the Third Macedonian Youth Partisan Brigade we reached Bulgaria. Let me tell you how that happened.

We were often sent outside on the field to do hard physical labor – harvesting and other things. We organized the escape of four people – two local Macedonians and two Bulgarians. They contacted the partisans in Macedonia and together with them arranged for some progressive soldiers to be sent as guards to the prison.

One of the organizers was Metodi Stoev, who kept in touch with the soldiers and was allowed to sleep outside prison – in the rooms where the guards slept. Vasil Ivanovski, who managed to escape, contacted the partisans and organized the contact with the partisans.

We realized the escape in the following way. After we, the political prisoners, were taken out to do our everyday work on the field, the older one of the guards was distracted by a political prisoner with some stories. When he was no longer paying attention to the other four prisoners, they managed to escape.

They had a preliminary arrangement to meet some people from Macedonia. Through these people from the Bulgarian army our people contacted the Macedonian partisans. In this way the guard at

the prison was replaced with progressive soldiers who kept our connection with Metodi Stoev. That is why, after the escape the guards were on our side.

After the escape while we were on our way to Bulgaria with the Macedonian brigade a big army unit came from one of the villages to accompany us, because they saw that the situation in Macedonia was not good for the Bulgarian army. We dressed in army uniforms and reached Bulgaria on 15th September 1944.

I went to Kjustendil and from there to Razgrad to look for my family. I arrived in Shumen and found out that one of our political prisoners, Metodi Stoev, was already director of the police there. I worked as a policeman for some time to help maintain the people's authority in Shumen.

Later, seeing that my family wanted to leave Razgrad, I went there, found them – of course, without my mother who had passed away – and returned to Sofia. Our house had been preserved. My father had given most of the household stuff to friends to keep so we settled in our old home although it was much more humbly furnished than before.

At the end of 1944 our neighbors and friends were very happy to see that we were alive and well. Although our property had dwindled significantly, we still had our home – a place to sleep and start our lives anew. Each of us started work – my father reopened his workshop, I started work in the Head Office of the People's Police.

Yako, my younger brother, was the first to move to Israel. In 1948 my other relatives also decided to go there. We all gathered and discussed what we wanted to do. I did not want to move to Israel, because I had devoted my youth and my health to create a new authority. I thought that it was my duty to work for its strengthening in Bulgaria, for the realization of our dreams. So, I remained here to work, while my family, even my father, left. They reached Yaffo by ship.

Juliet Fridman did the same even before we decided to get married. When her parents decided to leave, they prepared to get passports including for all their children. But Juliet went to the police and said that she did not want to leave.

Juliet was born on 17th December 1925 in Sofia. Her mother tongue is Bulgarian, she had a secondary education, and she worked as a sales assistant. Her parents were Yosif and Blanche Fridman, they both moved to Israel and are no longer alive.

My wife's parents were relatively religious, which means that they observed the Jewish traditions, but not every single detail of them. Juliet's father was of Ashkenazi origin, that is, a Russian Jew, and her mother Blanche Israel was of the Sephardic Jews in Bulgaria [13](#). After they left for Israel, they lived in the town of Yazur.

Juliet's brother, Shrata Fridman, still lives in Israel. He worked as a construction technician, and now he is a pensioner. The only information I have about his family is that he has two daughters and a son: Hanita, Pnina and David. They have a lot of grandchildren. He was relatively religious.

When I went to prison, Juliet was interned to Asenovgrad and occasionally she would send me postcards secretly from her parents. When I returned from prison we renewed our friendship. She started work, we became close, and we got married in 1947. We married before the registrar, that is, we did not wed in the synagogue in accordance with the Jewish ritual.



She had a bed and a chest and I had another bed, quite different. But we put them one close to the other and made a double bed out of them. But we had no stove for heating. There was nothing in the shops to buy, everything was distributed in rations. To buy a stove, we had to get a special note from the Supply Commissariat. Since my wife got pregnant, we went there and asked them for such a note. They gave it to us to keep the baby warm. We bought a cooking stove to use it for various purposes.

We have three children: Solomon, Yosif and Ani. They were born in Sofia where they live now. Solomon is professor, doctor of sciences, working in the area of quantum electronics. Yosif is automation engineer, has a private company. Ani is an architect and is not working at the moment.

They have families and each of them has two children. I even have two great-grandchildren from Ani. Ani's children are Nikolay and Elena Mladenovi. Nikolay works in Canada as a computer specialist, and Elena is an engineer in the Water Supply and Drainage company.

Yosif's children are Georgi and Monica Saltiel. Georgi graduated in chemistry from the Chemical Technical Institute, but he also works with computer technology. Monica is a student in the tenth grade in the Sofia Natural and Mathematical High School. Before that she studied in the Jewish school on Pirotska Street near the synagogue in Sofia.

Solomon's children are Juliet and Kalina Saltiel. Juliet is a third-year student in architecture management at the American University in Blagoevgrad. My great-grandchildren – Mladen and Anton Mladenovi – seven and two years old, are the sons of my grandson Nikolay and grandsons of my daughter Ani.

We did not educate our children in the Jewish traditions. Maybe this was a mistake. They know what had happened to my family and me during the war, but they do not talk much about it. They know that they are Jews, but I do not think they feel Jewish. We celebrate the Jewish holidays very rarely, we started doing it only recently and we invite them here, but they are not used to that. They do not go to the synagogue.

All my children are married to Bulgarians, so they celebrate both Pesach and Christmas, but they do not celebrate Christmas in a religious way, they just mark the holiday. My wife prepares some Jewish dishes, she also taught her Bulgarian daughters-in-law to prepare matzah, make a soup with matzah balls, make pastel for Pesach, agristada [14](#), anjinara [15](#). My wife Juliet learned the recipes for these dishes from a special collection of recipes published by the Shalom publishing house at the Shalom Organization of Jews in Bulgaria [16](#).

I was a member of the Communist Workers' Party and I still have the same beliefs and think that they are the most adequate. I became a member of the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1946 [17](#). I have not changed my views. I do not feel I have to give an explanation why I still find them relevant today.

I remember, of course, all friends who left for Israel. I went there on excursions a couple of times and met them. I have been to Israel three times: the first time in 1974 when my father was still alive. Then I saw all the sights, met all my relatives and I was very impressed. My other two visits were in the 1980s. Now we still write to each other, they come to visit, we go there – so we still keep in touch with our friends and relatives in Israel.

I have a lot of friends today. They are mostly Jews, with some exceptions. We do not meet often with our relatives in Israel, but we respect each other. One of my hobbies is to make a complete family tree of my father's family, my mother's and my wife's. I have made much progress in collecting factual data.

Thanks to the family tree made by me I got in touch through the Internet with cousins of mine living in Jerusalem – ancestors of Meshulam. He was a brother of my father, adopted by an Israeli citizen when he was eight years old. His ancestors sent me their own family tree and I combined the two into one.

My family tree is the only one of the Saltiel family in Bulgaria and other family trees were sent to the management of the international meeting of the Saltiel families in Thessaloniki, where all saw it. For more information about the meeting, one could read the electronic edition of the Saltiel magazine and of the Bulgarian newspaper 'Evreiski Vesti' [Jewish News], which is published by the Shalom Organization of Jews in Bulgaria.

For 16 years I worked as an editor of the 'Protivopojarna Ohrana' [Fire Prevention Service] magazine, I contributed to many Bulgarian dailies, radio and television in the area of fire prevention.

I want to tell some anecdotes of how my Jewish origin influenced the attitude towards me at my work place. After 9th September 1944 I had a responsible job at the Ministry of Internal Affairs. But there was an order at that time, which started in the Soviet Union and came to Bulgaria, which said that people who keep in touch with relatives abroad cannot work for the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

My colleagues respected me very much and wanted me to keep my job, but the management pressed them to fire me, because I was a Jew and had relatives in Israel. So, a friend of mine told me, 'Listen, you will not survive long here in State Security around such people. Let me transfer you to another job, where you will survive. I can appoint you as a deputy director of the Fire Prevention Service Bureau. Do you want to go there?' I agreed, because I was tired of fighting.

In 1953 I started working in the Fire Prevention Service. I worked there for 26 years and a half. I worked in the system of the ministry more than 36 years. I had one more conflict when I worked in the Fire Prevention Service. In 1957 during the war between Egypt and Israel [18](#) the attitudes towards Israel here were very negative and strong.

I said to a neighbor ironically, 'These 'brothers' the Arabs, who you Bulgarians regard as brothers, will play a bad trick on you. You should be careful about them...' He wrote a report to the ministry and they started questioning people trying to prove that I was a Zionist – I have never been a Zionist –, that I was saying bad things about our friends, the Arabs.

At that time the Interior Minister was a man who had been a prisoner in the Skopje prison with me, Angel Solakov. The deputy minister was Vladimir Borachev. They told me that I was doing a very good job, but I must not remain there. They sent me to a lower position, although I was paid the same salary. That was the second case. Although I retired in that system, I was continuously appointed to more and more insignificant positions, although I received the same money.

After 10th November 1989 [19](#) the dictatorship fell. There is freedom of speech, but the economic instability is greater than before. There is political freedom, but the economic freedom is weak,

because people are not well financially. This is especially true of retired people like us, because I receive the maximum pension, which is now 200 leva, less than 100 dollars, with which it is hard to make a living. My wife receives a pension of 100 leva.

After 1989 my contacts with the Jewish community changed. Firstly, the activity of the Jewish organizations increased, because the new conditions allowed it. Many institutions were created within the framework of the Shalom organization in 1990. The Organization of Jews in Bulgaria has existed for decades. Until the changes on 10th November 1989 it was chaired for many years by Yosif Asparuhov, who was a deputy of the Bulgarian Communist Party and represented Jews in the Bulgarian Parliament.

In the second half of 1990 the organization's name was changed to OJB 'Shalom' [Organization of Jews in Bulgaria]. It was chaired by the theatre director and art critic Eddi Schwarz. He was a chairman for two mandates and then he was replaced by Emil Kalo, who is doctor of philosophy sciences and has lead the organization ever since.

I was a chairman of the Jewish State Community Center 'Emil Shekerdjiiski' for four years and member of its management for eight or ten years. For two years now I have been a member of the 'Golden Age' club uniting the efforts of 100-150 retired Jews living in Sofia. Every Saturday there are some programs and birthday parties organized, we mark the contributions of various people from our community to different areas of culture - music, art.

The Jews in our town live in the same way as those around the world - everybody has some problems, but the good thing is that we can get together at events organized by the Jewish community.

I, personally, do not receive aid, but many people from the community receive aid from Joint [20](#) and other organizations. My wife and I received money from Switzerland; I do not have precise information. Germany rejected our request for compensation, because they do not regard our pain and suffering as a sufficient reason for compensation.

## Glossary

### **1 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.

## **2 Iuchbunar**

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

## **3 Brannik**

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

## **4 Bulgarian Legions**

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

## **5 Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, Simeon (b**

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.

## **6 Bet Am**

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

## **7 . Hashomer Hatzair ('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.

## **8 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.

## **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 (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.

## **10 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.

## **11 Fatherland Front**

A broad left wing umbrella organization, created in 1942, with the purpose to lead the Communist Party to power.

## **12 Internment of Jews in Bulgaria**

Although Jews living in Bulgaria were not deported to concentration camps abroad or to death camps, many were interned to different locations within Bulgaria. In accordance with the Law for the Protection of the Nation, the comprehensive anti-Jewish legislation initiated after the outbreak

of WWII, males were sent to forced labor battalions in different locations of the country, and had to engage in hard work. There were plans to deport Bulgarian Jews to Nazi Death Camps, but these plans were not realized. Preparations had been made at certain points along the Danube, such as at Somovit and Lom. In fact, in 1943 the port at Lom was used to deport Jews from the Aegean Thrace and from Macedonia, but in the end, the Jews from Bulgaria proper were spared.

### **13 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.

### **14 Agristada**

traditional Jewish holiday dish prepared from fish with sour egg sauce, oil, salt and lemon, which is served on Rosh Hashanah.

### **15 Anjinara**

traditional Jewish dish made from pickled vegetable marrows, oil, salt and wild plums, which is served on Rosh Hashanah.

### **16 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.

### **17 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.

### **18 Suez Crisis**

In 1956 the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the strategically crucial and since its construction international Suez Canal and it was followed by a joint British, French and Israeli



military action. On 29th October Israel attacked Egypt and within a few days occupied the Gaza Strip and most of the Sinai Peninsula, while Britain and France invaded the area of the Suez Canal. As a result of strong American, Soviet and UN pressure they withdrew from Egyptian territory and UN forces were sent to the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip to keep peace between Israel and Egypt. (Information for this entry culled from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suez\\_Crisis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suez_Crisis) and other sources)

### **19 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.

### **20 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.