

# Leon Seliktar

Leon Moshe Seliktar

Sofia

Bulgaria

Interviewer: Stephan Djambazov

Date of interview: February 2005

Leon Moshe Seliktar is a former army officer, but he is peacefully disposed towards the world and people. You could say that he is very kind-hearted, and it's difficult to imagine him in military uniform. Perhaps the reason is that he never particularly wanted to serve in the army, yet his life turned in that direction. In fact, he didn't have much of a choice, especially when the military refused to let him immigrate with his parents to Israel, which he has always regretted, and he says that he has always envied the immigrants. Leon is an intelligent and well-read man, but he is worried about some of the newly-published Bulgarian books with anti-Semitic content. Now he lives with his wife Rositsa and their poodle in a cozy apartment they own in Iztok, one of the nice Sofia housing estates behind Moskva Park Hotel, near the woods at the end of Borisova Garden.

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## **Family background**

My ancestors came from Spain after 1492 when the persecution of Jews took place [see Expulsion of the Jews from Spain] [1](#). They traveled along the northern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, passed through Greece and arrived in the Ottoman Empire. Then they gradually moved north and settled in present-day Bulgaria. [During the Sephardi settlement, the whole Balkan, including both Greece and Bulgaria, were integral parts of the Ottoman Empire.] But before that, in the ancient times, before the settlement of the Slavs and the proto-Bulgarians, in the times of the Roman Empire, there were Jews here already, who had come from the ancient Jewish land: Israel. There were such colonies in Plovdiv, along the Danube River, Nikopol, Silistra, and other places. This has been proven by a number of documented archaeological excavations. At the time the Turkish Sultan was far-sighted and accepted them, because they carried the contemporary European culture, crafts and new science. They came with a lot of doctors and other Jews with knowledge and abilities, which were useful for the Ottoman Empire.

Most of those Jews were doctors, craftsmen, and merchants, who had strong connections established with the West, although they had been subjected to humiliation and had actually been banished from Spain. But they had connections throughout Europe, because of the trade business. This was appreciated by the Turkish [Ottoman] authorities and they were allowed to settle there.

That took about ten to fifteen years, so they settled there around 1500-1510. I can't say exactly when, because I have no documents regarding it. [This was the first wave of Sephardi settlement; others were to follow later on.] They were religious, but we are different from the Jews who lived in Russia and the Baltic countries. We say that we are Sephardim [see Sephardi Jewry] [2](#), which comes from the ancient name of Spain. [Sefarad means Spain in Hebrew.]

The others are Ashkenazim. The difference lies in the religious traditions, services and also in the way the rabbis dress. Our rabbis dressed as the common people did and couldn't be distinguished from them. The Ashkenazi and Orthodox Jews wear black hats and have beards, and are easily recognized on the street. [Editor's note: The Sephardim as well as the Ashkenazim have their own traditional dress code; however, they are different from one another. It's the degree of modernization which manifests itself in the outlook and clothing.] The Ashkenazim lived in Germany, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. [More exactly until the time of mass emigration (after the late 19th century) Ashkenazim mostly lived in the territories of Germany, the Habsburg and the western parts of the Russian Empire.] They didn't come from Spain.

I know that my ancestors came through Salonica [today Greece] and settled in Sofia. My paternal ancestors were merchants: my father, grandfather and great-grandfather. Some of my maternal ancestors were also merchants, but there were also many craftsmen, working with metal, in particular. Both my paternal and maternal families have been living in Sofia for more than two or three hundred years. My great-grandparents observed the religious traditions and went to the synagogue. They raised their children to observe all holidays. They got on very well with the Bulgarians and helped them. When Levski [3](#) came to Sofia, he hid at one of our relatives' place. My father told me that.

When the Turks were leaving Sofia and set fire to the town, my paternal great-grandfather's brother, Gavriel Seliktar, gathered a group of Jewish young men and tried to put out the fire [see Liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman rule] [4](#). That is included in the research of the famous historian Prof. [Ivan] Undjiev [5](#). My more remote ancestors spoke the ancient Spanish language: Ladino [6](#). They also spoke Turkish. Some of them also knew western languages. In more recent times, both my parents, for example, knew French very well. They even spoke French at home so that we, the children, wouldn't be able to understand them. But they stopped when we started studying French too.

I remember my grandparents very well. My paternal grandfather was Avram Seliktar. My maternal grandfather was Leon [Sarfati]. I was named after him. My grandfathers were strict and serious, but they loved us very much. Yet, they didn't show it all the time. They dressed in secular [modern] clothes. My maternal grandmother Linda [Sarfati, nee Beni] was very wise and the whole neighborhood went to her for advice, especially if there was a quarrel in some family. She was also a healer. I remember very well that she could treat dislocated joints or broken bones. At first, all my grandparents lived near the present-day Sheraton Hotel in Sofia [in the very center of the city]. But when the authorities started to design the central part in Sofia, they moved down to the beginning of the Jewish housing estate Iuchbunar [7](#). They all lived there, but in different houses.

My maternal grandfather Leon lived with his family of five daughters and one son in a two-storey house. We, together with my father's brother and his family lived in the other house, which had been inherited by my father. There was electricity, sewerage, water and a toilet inside the house.

We had a nice yard with a fence around it. My father liked gardening: he cultivated flowers and small trees. When we were very young, some maids helped my mother, but the girls lived with us as if they were members of the family. They were Bulgarian girls. There were no maids at my maternal grandfather's house, because he had five daughters. My grandparents were religious and observed the traditions. They went to the synagogue on Saturday and on big holidays and observed the other holidays at home. They weren't members of any party or political organizations, but their children were. Their neighbors were Jews, but there were also many Bulgarians, with whom we got along very well.

We played with the children and the adults helped each other. Grandfather Avram was a merchant. His wife was a housewife. They had three sons and one daughter. My grandfather had two brothers and two sisters, but I don't remember them. Neither do I remember the brothers and sisters of his wife Lea. Grandfather Leon had one sister and one brother and his wife Linda had one brother. Grandpa Avram worked with his brothers and Grandpa Leon worked with him. They were craftsmen and worked with metal: they made dishes, constructions, anything you can make out of metal. They were called 'zhelezari' [blacksmiths]. In those times weddings were usually arranged by the parents without their children even knowing each other. But Grandmother Lea found out where her fiance, whom she had never met, lived and when he was going to work one day, she had a look at him. And what's more, she liked him. My grandfathers served in the army. I don't know where Grandfather Avram served, but Grandfather Leon fought in the First Balkan War [8](#) and the Second Balkan War [9](#). He was a sergeant major and had a military cross and some medals, with which we played.

Around 9th September 1944 [10](#) there were around 50,000 Jews in Bulgaria. About half of them lived in Sofia. [In 1945 a total of 49,172 Jews lived in Bulgaria, of who 27,000 were Sofia residents.] I'm not sure of the exact number. Besides the Great Synagogue [12](#), which still exists, there was another one, in our neighborhood in Iuchbunar, and another one which was destroyed during the bombings [during WWII]. There were synagogues on Ekzarh Yosif Street and a smaller one in another residential district near the 'Krasno Selo' district, but I've never been there. There was a rabbi, a shochet and a chazzan. For example, in the Central Synagogue besides the chief rabbi of Bulgaria, Dr. Hananel [Hananel, Asher (1895-1964): rabbi of Sofia, later Bulgaria's chief rabbi (1949)], there were at least two or three other rabbis. There was one in our synagogue in Iuchbunar and two or three in the destroyed synagogue. There were two Jewish schools: the central one was near the present-day Rila Hotel. Its yard was very large and it consisted of three buildings. The nursery school was in a separate two-storey building. The main school which was up to fourth grade was in another two-storey building. The junior high school was in the third building which was the largest one. There were classrooms there and a gym. We played soccer in the yard. The other school was in the present-day Zona B-5 residential district. We studied the Torah, Jewish history and the subjects obligatory for the Bulgarian schools.

Some Jews lived outside the Jewish neighborhood Iuchbunar. There were also Bulgarians in Iuchbunar. The typical Jewish professionals were merchants, doctors, engineers, bankers, common workers, craftsmen, tailors, cobblers, carters, and even porters. There was electricity and running water in most of the houses. I didn't feel anti-Semitic attitudes towards me when I was a child. We sang 'Hubava si, moya goro' ['You are beautiful, my forest' by Lyuben Karavelov], 'Stani, stani, yunak Balkanski!' ['Rise, rise, Balkan hero!' by Dobri Chintulov], and all other patriotic songs, which

were taught in the Bulgarian schools. [These are songs from the Bulgarian Revival period (prior to the 1878 liberation) based on poems by Lyuben Karavelov and Dobri Chintulov respectively. Dobri Chintulov's 'Stani, stani, yunak Balkanski!' was the hymn of the revolutionaries in the April Rebellion in 1876.]

There wasn't a special market day. We went shopping every day. We, the children, bought the bread and milk and my mother all the rest. We had our favorite merchants: a grocer and a baker, from whom we bought food. As for the political events which took place during my childhood, I remember that once or twice there was a blockade in Sofia and there were a lot of policemen and soldiers. It must have been between 1934 and 1936. [These events are related to the period after the coup by Kimon Georgiev on 19th May 1934, with the participation of the political circle 'Zveno' (Link) and the Officers' League. This coup suspended the Tarnovo Constitution, and the Parliament stopped working as a legislative body until 1938. A special law from 1934 dissolved all political parties and the property was confiscated by the state. The blockades in Sofia aimed to ban and stop the activities of the political formations.]

My father, Moshe Avram Seliktar, was a very kind, educated and intelligent man. He had a degree in finance from Vienna [today Austria]. He was very honest and that is why he didn't become rich, although he was one of the first chartered accountants around. I remember that when he endorsed the balance sheet of a merchant and he signed it, it was considered final and wasn't checked by finance or tax inspectors. My mother, Rahel Leon Seliktar [nee Sarfati], was a nice woman and a housewife and she looked after us. When she was young, she worked as a clerk or a secretary. Then she stayed at home. My father was born on 8th August 1888 in Sofia and my mother on 15th August 1898 in Sofia. She had secondary education and my father a university education. Their mother tongue was Bulgarian, but they also spoke French and Spaniolit [Ladino]. My father also knew German. They first met in the neighborhood. Their houses were on opposite sides of the same street. They had a religious wedding in Sofia. There were no other kinds of marriages at that time. They dressed according to the fashion of the time.

We weren't rich, but we lived comfortably. We had two rooms, a kitchen and a small room we used for storage. My parents, brother, sister and I lived in that house. There were other rooms too, but my father's brother and his family lived in them. That house was my grandfather's. My grandfather had died, but my grandmother was alive. There was running water, electricity, and we used stoves to heat the rooms. My father looked after the garden. A girl came to help us in the house. She was from the village of Studena. She was a very nice Christian girl. It was a custom in Bulgaria for young girls from the villages to go work as maids in the towns. Almost all of them were Christians. She was older than us. She must have been 15 or 16 years old. She was like a sister to us.

We had a lot of books. Only one or two of them, owned by my father, were religious ones. The others were secular ones. Some of them were financial books, which my father had brought with him from Vienna. He also subscribed to economic magazines. We also had a lot of fiction literature, and the French classics: Victor Hugo, Emil Zola, Guy de Maupassant. From the Bulgarian ones: Ivan Vazov [13](#), Elin Pelin [14](#), and Dimcho Debelyanov [15](#). We had the Larousse Encyclopedia in French. My parents also read the dailies. I don't remember which ones, but we didn't subscribe to them: my father bought them. We also rented books in Bulgarian from the Jewish community house.

My parents were religious, but not Orthodox Jews. [In general religious orthodoxy isn't typical for Sephardi Jews in Bulgaria.] My grandfather went to the synagogue every Saturday but my father more rarely. On high holidays everyone, including the children, went to the synagogue. We didn't always observe the kashrut at home, but we always observed Sabbath. My parents were part of the Jewish community. I remember that my mother very often raised money for the poor families and widows. I even remember that some neighbors lived in a very old house which was about to fall apart and some firefighters went to demolish it, because they were afraid that it would collapse and kill people. So, my mother and some other women went from house to house and raised money to build a small room to shelter those people in the first days.

My father was a social democrat and a member of the [Bulgarian] Social Democratic Party [16](#); my mother didn't have any political affiliations. My father took part in the First Balkan War. I don't know where he fought, but he had two medals from the war. He was 23 or 24 years old then. I don't know the exact year my parents got married. They got along perfectly well with the neighbors, who were both Jews and Bulgarians. My parents sometimes went on holidays. We went to Bankya, Gorna Banya [places with mineral springs near Sofia. Gorna Banya is now a district in Sofia]. One year we went on holiday to Boyana [now a district in Sofia at the foot of the Vitosha Mountain]. When we went on holiday, we rented a room in a house.

My father had two brothers and one sister. The elder one was Chelebi and the other one was Yosif. My father was in the middle. His sister was Sarina. She was the youngest of all. I don't know when they were born. The elder brother and the sister died in Israel; my father died in Israel too, in 1961, and the youngest brother died in 1957 in Sofia. Chelebi was a merchant, Yosif was a teacher of Bulgarian in the Jewish school, and Sarina was a housewife. My mother was the eldest in her family. She had four sisters and a brother, who was born last. Liza was born after my mother, then Suzana, Lora, and the youngest daughter, Stela. Her brother's name was Adolf. They all died in Israel. They moved to Israel in 1949 [see Mass Aliyah] [17](#); my parents and sister also left for Israel with them. My parents kept in constant touch with their brothers and sisters.

## Growing Up

I was born in Sofia on 11th September 1927. I went to kindergarten. It was called nursery then. We went to it one year before we started school. At that time we started school at the age of eight, so we went to the nursery at the age of seven. Before that our mother looked after us at home. My brother was older and the two of us went together to the Jewish school. My favorite subjects were history and geography. I loved my elementary and nursery teacher. My elementary school teacher's name was Suzana. She was beautiful and taught us Bulgarian. Our other teacher, Batia, was also very nice. She taught us Ivrit. My friends at school were my classmates, who were all Jews. After high school I had other friends as well. I studied in a Bulgarian high school as there wasn't a Jewish one then. I studied at the 3rd Men's High School.

When I was a pupil, my only friends were my classmates. We went to the cinema, played soccer, and bought adventure books which we read. I remember 'Old Shatterhand' from my childhood years [Character and chapter in Karl May's novel Winnetou], 'Robinson Crusoe' and 'Snow-white and the Seven Dwarfs' from even earlier. I was a member of the Maccabi [World Union] [18](#) sports organization, which still exists. At school we played team sports, such as volleyball or did gymnastics. The first years we also went to school on Saturdays. On Sundays we usually went to the cinema or for a walk. My parents took us to the park called Borisova Garden. During the

summer holidays we went once or twice to Varna by train. [Varna is the main port city of Bulgaria on the Black Sea, also a popular resort area.]

The first time I got on a train was before that, when we went to Bankya. Our family also went to restaurants. There was a restaurant called 'Batenberg' which we visited. There was another restaurant on the so-called 'Fourth Kilometer' in Sofia where we went to eat barbeque: kebapcheta [grilled oblong rissoles, a national dish in Bulgaria]. Sometimes on Sundays, after a walk in the park, we went there to have dinner. We had dinner early, while it was still daylight, and walked home, although our house wasn't very near. We usually went to that restaurant once a month, or more seldom.

I have a brother and a sister. My brother Albert was four years older than me. He was very smart and an excellent student. He had a degree in medicine. He was the head physician of the Infections Hospital. He died at fifty in 1973. He has a son [Nikolay] from his first marriage and a daughter [Irma] from the second one. They live in Sofia. We went to school together and walked back along Pozitano Street. There wasn't so much traffic there as now, but there were some cars, especially around Solni Market: it was dangerous. So, initially I wasn't allowed to go to school by myself. My sister is six years younger than me. She was born in 1933. She also studied in the Jewish school. Her name is Adela and she is now in Israel. She has two children: a boy [Meyron] and a girl [Egmonda], and five grandchildren. She married in Israel after she immigrated. We loved all Jewish holidays, because we had so much fun. We received new clothes. There is a holiday, on which children receive money. It was nice. [Editor's note: The interviewee probably refers to Pesach and Chanukkah.]

The first more serious limitations for Jews started after the Law for the Protection of the Nation [19](#) was passed. Firstly, my father was no longer allowed to work. Until that moment we worked in private companies. Then, a notice saying 'A Jewish house' was placed on the door of our house. Some restaurants and cafes in Sofia put up notices reading 'Entrance Forbidden for Jews' on their doors. We were obliged to wear the yellow stars [see Yellow Star in Bulgaria] [20](#). There was a curfew: I don't remember the exact times in the morning and evening when we weren't allowed to go out. I don't know how we managed to make ends meet. My parents sold what we had and we already had some savings. But, by the way, in accordance to the Law for the Protection of the Nation, there was a new tax where Jews had to fill in declarations on what possessions they owned and on that basis they had to pay a special tax not related to the other taxes. Everything more valuable in the house was included in that declaration: furniture, carpets, etc. All Jews had their radio sets confiscated and so did we.

At that time I was a high school student. There were Brannik [21](#), Legionaries [see Bulgarian Legions] [22](#), and Otets Paisii All-Bulgarian Union [23](#) members among my classmates. I wasn't made to discontinue my education. There were some anti-Semitic incidents in my high school: students from other classes sometimes chased Jews and beat them up. But there were no such people in our class; on the contrary, the Bulgarians in it protected us. Maybe this was because all the students in the class were from poor families. We were four Jews in our class. There were Branniks and Legionaries among the students, but they didn't beat us or harass us.

## **During the War**

When we heard that the Jews from Sofia would be deported to Poland on 24th May 1943 [24](#), in the Luchbunar Synagogue, which was later destroyed in the bombings, rabbi Daniel Zion [25](#) said during

the prayer, 'Brothers, let's go to the king and ask for his protection.' I wasn't present at that prayer. So, a demonstration started which reached Vazrazhdane Square, where it was stopped by mounted policemen. They started beating and arresting people. So, they detained a few hundred people and took them to the Konstantin Fotinov School. [The interviewee says that the Jewish people talked about the deportations. At that time the Soviet Union was already at war with Germany, the non-aggression pact had been violated and the left press wrote about those deportations. And the Bulgarian Jews were known to be of strong leftist orientation. Thus it's not surprising that they knew about the camps.]

As a student in high school I also took part in the manifestation on the occasion of 24th May [26](#) [27](#), I was even in the marching band. Manifestations usually passed along Ruski Blvd, near the National Assembly, where King Boris III [28](#) welcomed the parade, and then the students went home. That morning our student manifestation also took place: we passed along our route, then we returned to the high school and were free to go home. I walked along Strandja Street in order to cross Alexander Stamboliiski Blvd. When I was 50 or 60 meters from the boulevard I saw three people. Two of them were Jews and I knew them. There was also a civilian with them. So, I walked towards them because I didn't know what was going on. And in fact, they had been detained.

Suddenly, a woman from some window shouted at me, 'Hey, boy, run, all of your people are being arrested!' I was so shocked. I couldn't see who had shouted at me. I even looked for that woman later on, but couldn't find her. I turned back and ran. The man who was guarding the two Jews probably didn't want to leave them, so he didn't come after me. I went back to the high school. I had a classmate who lived on Tsar Simeon Street. His name was Lyuben Peshev. I went to his place and said, 'Please, go and see what is happening in our neighborhood!' He went and after a while he returned. I waited for him at his place. He said, 'Disturbing things are taking place, they are arresting everyone they catch. But I went to your mother and told her not to worry, because you are with me.' So, later during the evening he went to check again and when he returned he said, 'It's calm now, you can go home.' So, I returned home.

Some time after that, a decision was taken to intern the Sofia Jews in different cities [see Internment of Jews in Bulgaria] [29](#). We were interned to Dupnitsa. We left our house and our possessions and took as much as we could carry. We locked the house, but later we found out that that didn't stop the burglars. We went to Dupnitsa. It was very difficult to find a place to live there; there was no work. The Jewish municipality had organized some food for the Jews. I was with my sister, and my brother had been mobilized to the Jewish labor camps [see Forced labor camps in Bulgaria] [30](#). He had graduated from high school and was mobilized every year. Suddenly, in September some policemen came to Dupnitsa, took our family and 10-15 more Jews, mostly intellectuals, and put us on a train. We were being guarded by armed policemen. We spent the night in Sofia, in the basement of the police commandant's office: the men were separated from the women. During the night we heard some screams, in the morning we found out that my sister had had a nervous breakdown. Then we were once again put on the train and taken to Somovit. That was a camp for Jews to be repatriated to Poland. The barges were waiting on the Danube and the policemen showed them to us, 'You see, we are waiting for the order to put you on them.' By the way, in Somovit I met the two Jews who were detained on that corner in Sofia during the 24th May demonstration.

My mother and sister weren't with us, because after my sister had the nervous breakdown, she was taken to Alexandrovska Hospital in Sofia and my mother was with her. But we didn't know what had happened and were wondering where my mother and sister were. After a few days my mother arrived. We asked her about my sister and she said she was in the hospital: Adela was ten years old then. But the policeman who was guarding my mother and sister turned out to be a kind man, because he agreed to find a Bulgarian, a friend of ours, who would look after Adela. The Bulgarian promised to help and he really kept his word. After a few days he took Adela with him and hid her. When we were released from the camp we took her home. We spent two and a half months in the camp. At first, we were accommodated in a school: a few hundred people slept next to each other on the floor. We could only walk around in the yard of the school, which was guarded at several places. We were given food, but it was terrible. The moment we arrived, we were searched and all our money and jewelry was confiscated.

When September came and the village children had to start school, they built some sheds on a hill and took us there. The place was surrounded by barbed wire and there were guards. We were made to work: we made the sheds and some other buildings. We lived there until the end of November when the orders started coming and we were released in groups. It seems that the policy was changing, because at the end of 1943 the Allies had major success in the war: the Russians were in Romania, and the Americans in Italy. [Editor's note: The Soviets entered Romania only in April 1944 and occupied Bucharest on 31st August the same year.] There were rumors of a second front in France: the Kursk battle [31](#) had ended. We went back to Dupnitsa and took our sister with us. We did whatever work we got: digging, manual labor, etc. Sometimes we were given some work to do, but weren't paid after we had done it. My brother was still in the labor groups at various places in Bulgaria: they built roads. We slept at some distant relatives' of my mother's in Dupnitsa. We were there until 9th September 1944.

Then we went back to Sofia, and we found our house stripped bare. They had taken everything they could. We had left some things with some Bulgarian neighbors. Of course, they returned those back to us; they were good neighbors. I continued to study at the same high school with the same classmates and teachers. My brother started studying medicine. My father started working as an accountant once again. In 1946 I graduated from high school and was conscripted. I graduated from the School for Officers in Reserve and I became an officer and served at that base. Meanwhile, Jews started to immigrate to Israel: friends and relatives. I also wanted to leave. I even applied for immigration, because my parents and sister were leaving on 10th April 1949. I was still a regular soldier then, my application was approved by my commanding officer, and then it was passed through the Chief of Staff Gen. Kinov. He even asked to see me, he was very considerate, but told me that he couldn't let me go: 'You will remain on duty until your period of service is over.'

But since my duty was a bit classified - I was a tankman, and I worked with some kind of new communications system - when my military service was over, my superiors told me, 'We will not let you go to Israel, so you'd better stay and work here and you'll have enough money.' So I joined the military. I was an army officer until I retired in 1982. I retired in the rank of colonel. My brother stayed in Bulgaria, because he was already married and had a family. I envied the people who were leaving for Israel. Even when my parents were leaving, I went to the local Israeli organization, which was sending the groups and explained to them my situation. They warned me not to think of escaping, because if I was caught, I would be shot. I was still a conscript then. In my career I had a



few problems, not so much for being a Jew as for having relatives in Israel. For example, I wasn't promoted as regularly as the Bulgarians; once my boss' wife, a Bulgarian, asked him, 'How long are you going to live with that Jew?' I also had other problems, but I don't want to talk about them.

## After the War

I have known my wife for a long time. We met during the youth brigades [32](#) in 1945 or 1946 and in the Union of Young Workers [see UYW] [33](#). I was also a member of the Bulgarian Communist Party [34](#). We married in 1951. My wife's name is Rositsa. She was born in Sofia. She is a Bulgarian. She was born on 1st October 1930. She is a meteorologist. She graduated in meteorology and geography [from the St. Kliment Ohridski University in Sofia]. She has two university degrees. We have a son, Ilya. He was born in Sofia in 1952. Now he lives in Sofia. We have a grandson and a granddaughter. My grandson is 25 years old. His name is Leonid and my granddaughter is Irina, 18. My son is an engineer. He graduated from the Higher Machine Electro-technical Institute in Sofia. He is working as a freelance journalist. He also has a company for advertising and information about automobiles, mostly. His wife is also an engineer: a designer. She also graduated from the Technical University, which is now called Higher Machine Electro-technical Institute.

My son identifies himself as a Jew, but he isn't very familiar with the Jewish traditions. We observe Pesach, the New Year [Rosh Hashanah], and we buy matzah. My wife learned how to make burmolikos [see Burmoelos (or burmolikos, burlikus)] [35](#) from matzah. I go to the synagogue every Saturday. I have a lot of friends there. Most of them are Jews. We meet on holidays. My wife also goes to the synagogue. She takes part in the events organized by the Jewish Shalom Organization [36](#). I went to the Bet Am [37](#) as a child, then as an officer during totalitarianism together with my wife. In Sofia I have two cousins. They are also Seliktar like me. I see one of them every day. My wife worked until she retired. She was a meteorologist, and then she went to work for the Bulgarian Tourist Union. I was in the army. The severing of the diplomatic ties with Israel [38](#) and the wars in 1967 [see Six Day War] [39](#) and 1973 [Yom Kippur War] [40](#) affected me in my duty. I was observed if I had ties with Israel and with whom, and if I received any letters.

I didn't go to Israel before 1989. I kept in touch with my relatives by phone. While I was in the army, I didn't receive any letters; after that I received letters regularly. One year while I was a colonel, my mother came to visit. Before that my sister and brother-in-law came, in 1962. Of course, they slept at my place. I reported to my superiors that some relatives of mine had come on a visit, but my chiefs respected me and didn't make any problems about that. My sister and brother-in-law came one more time and then my mother came in 1966. She was quite old by then. I was very happy when they came. My mother saw her grandchildren. My father died in 1961 and I wasn't able to see him again after he left for Israel.

After the democratic changes on 10th November 1989 [41](#), I went to Israel with my wife a number of times. My sister and her husband came a few times as well. They restored their Bulgarian citizenship. I remember the fall of the Berlin Wall and the political events, which took place here in Bulgaria. Now I go regularly to the synagogue, but I did that before 1989 as well. I received aid from international organizations. I also received some money from the German Red Cross. In Sofia Jews live well, except for some anti-Semitic events recently. Some notes appeared on the walls, some books by Hitler, Goebbels, Bulgarian writers, among which a book by Kubrat Tomov, who says that there wasn't a Holocaust at all and all that is fiction without any proof. [Kubrat, Tomov (b.

1938): writer and popular pseudo-scientist, who touches upon nationalist issues too and denies the Holocaust.] But such anti-Semitic incidents are rare, on the whole Bulgarians are tolerant towards us. After all, we, the Jews, are quite few in number in Bulgaria. Most of us are in Sofia. I haven't heard about a Jew who is a member of the mafia, or a killer, or an explosives maker, and yet, there are some anti-Semitic attitudes towards us.

## Glossary

### **1 Expulsion of the Jews from Spain**

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

### **2 Sephardi Jewry**

Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin. Their ancestors settled down in North Africa, the Ottoman Empire, South America, Italy and the Netherlands after they had been driven out from the Iberian peninsula at the end of the 15th century. About 250,000 Jews left Spain and Portugal on this occasion. A distant group among Sephardi refugees were the Crypto-Jews (Marranos), who converted to Christianity under the pressure of the Inquisition but at the first occasion reassumed their Jewish identity. Sephardi preserved their community identity; they speak Ladino language in their communities up until today. The Jewish nation is formed by two main groups: the Ashkenazi and the Sephardi group which differ in habits, liturgy their relation toward Kabala, pronunciation as well in their philosophy.

### **3 Levski, Vasil (1837-1873)**

Bulgarian national hero. Vasil Levski was the principal architect of the campaign to free Bulgaria from the oppression of the Ottoman Empire. Beginning in 1868, Levski founded the first secret revolutionary committees in Bulgaria for the liberation of the country from the Turkish rule. Betrayed by a traitor, he was hanged in 1873 as the Turks feared strong public resentment and a possible attempt by the Bulgarians to free him. Today, a stone monument in Sofia marks the spot where the 'Apostle of Freedom' was hanged.

### **4 Liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman rule**

Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire in early 1877 in order to secure the Mediterranean trade routes. The Russian troops, with enthusiastic and massive participation of the Bulgarians, soon occupied all of Bulgaria and reached Istanbul, and Russia dictated the Treaty of San Stefano in 1878. This provided for an autonomous Bulgarian state, under Russian protection, bordering the Black and Aegean seas. Britain and Austria-Hungary, fearing that the new state would extend Russian influence too far into the Balkans, exerted strong diplomatic pressure, which resulted in the Treaty of Berlin in the same year. According to this treaty, the newly established Bulgaria

became much smaller than what was decreed by the Treaty of San Stefano, and large populations of Bulgarians remained outside the new frontiers (in Macedonia, Eastern Rumelia, and Thrace), which caused resentment that endured well into the 20th century.

## **5 Undjiev, Ivan (1902-1979)**

Bulgarian historian and leading expert on the National Revival period. He graduated in Slavic philology from Sofia University and worked as a professor and chief historian at the Ministry of People's Education, was deputy director of the 'St. Cyril and Methodius' library and research secretary in the 'Botev-Levski' institute. He was also a member of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. His best known studies include: Vasil Petleshkov, Vasil Levski's Biography, Karlovo, the history of the town until Liberation, Hristo Botev and Georgi Benkovski.

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

## **7 Iuchbunar**

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

## **8 First Balkan War (1912-1913)**

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

## **9 Second Balkan War (1913)**

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

## **10 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.

## **12 Great Synagogue**

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

## **13 Vazov, Ivan (1850-1921)**

Bulgarian writer, who, following Bulgaria's liberation from Turkey in 1878 almost single-handedly filled the void of a national literature. He wrote in every genre and set a standard for subsequent literary developments in his homeland. He published several volumes of poetry and won international recognition with his novel 'Pod igoto' (Under the Yoke), published in 1893.

## **14 Elin Pelin (1877-1949)**

Born as Dimitar Stoyanov, he ranks among the greatest short story writers in Bulgarian literature, the 'painter' of the Bulgarian village. He was an editor with 'Balgaran,' 'Slanchogled' and 'Otechestvo' magazines; 'Razvigor' and 'Voenni izvestia' newspapers, as well as of many children's periodicals. He was the author of a number of children's books, including one of the most famous and loved juvenile Bulgarian novels: 'Yan Bibiyan' (1933). His most famous works also include the collection of sketches 'Pizho i Pendo' (1917), the novelette Zemya (1928), the 'Pod manastirskata loza' collection of short stories (1936); the novelette 'Geratsite' (1943), etc. His works have been translated into more than 40 languages. (Source: <http://www.slovo.bg/>)

## **15 Debelyanov, Dimcho (1887-1916)**

One of the greatest Bulgarian poets, born in Koprivshtitsa and lived in Plovdiv, Ihtiman and Sofia.

Memories of Koprivshtitsa sunny days, his native house and happy early childhood days haunted him, driving him back to his idyllic past in his poetry. He worked as a reporter for newspapers and magazines, translator, editor and journalist, as well as a stenographer in the National Assembly. Debelyanov joined the army as a volunteer in World War I. He was killed in a combat near Demir Hisar (region in Macedonia) at the age of 29. His posthumous fame was considerable. His poetry is in many respects symbolist, and is distinguished by its technical innovation, its precise rendering of nebulous emotional states, and its remarkable musicality. (Source: <http://www.plovdivcityguide.com>; <http://www.scuttlebuttsmallchow.com>)

## **16 Bulgarian Social Democratic Party**

founded in 1891, based on the program of the French and Belgian Social Democrats, with the leadership of Dimitar Blagoev, Evtim Dabev, Nikola Gabrovski and Ianko Sakazov. In 1892 a new formation, the Bulgarian Social Democratic Alliance seceded, but already in 1894 they reunited under the name Bulgarian Social Democratic Labor Party. Finally it split again in 1903 to the narrow and broad socialists.

## **17 Mass Aliyah**

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

## **18 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.

## **19 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.

## **20 Yellow star in Bulgaria**

According to a governmental decree all Bulgarian Jews were forced to wear distinctive yellow stars after 24th September 1942. Contrary to the German-occupied countries the stars in Bulgaria were made of yellow plastic or textile and were also smaller. Volunteers in previous wars, the war-disabled, orphans and widows of victims of wars, and those awarded the military cross were given the privilege to wear the star in the form of a button. Jews who converted to Christianity and their families were totally exempt. The discriminatory measures and persecutions ended with the cancellation of the Law for the Protection of the Nation on 17th August 1944.

## **21 Brannik**

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

## **22 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.

## **23 Otets Paisii All-Bulgarian Union**

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

## **24 24th May 1943**

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

deportation, Bulgarian Jews were saved, unlike those from Bulgarian occupied Aegean Thrace and Macedonia.

## **25 Daniel Zion**

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

## **26 24th May**

The day of Slavic script and culture, a national holiday on which Bulgarian culture and writing is celebrated, paying special tribute to Cyril and Methodius, the creators of the first Slavic alphabet, the forerunner of the Cyrillic script.

## **27 St**

Cyril and Methodius: Greek monks from Salonika, living in the 9th century. In order to convert the Slavs to Christianity the two brothers created the Slavic (Glagolitic) script, based on the Greek one, and translated many religious texts to Old Church Slavonic, which is the liturgical language of many of the Eastern Orthodox Churches up until today. After Bulgaria converted to Christianity under Boris in 865, his son and successor Simeon I supported the further development of Slavic liturgical works, which led to a refinement of the Slavic literary language and a simplification of the alphabet - The Cyrillic script, named in honor of St. Cyril. The Cyrillic alphabet today is used in Orthodox Slavic countries such as Bulgaria, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. It is also used by some non-Slavic countries previously part of the Soviet Union, as well as most linguistic minorities within Russia and also the country of Mongolia.

## **28 King Boris III**

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

## **29 Internment of Jews in Bulgaria**

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

### **30 Forced labor camps in Bulgaria**

Established under the Council of Ministers' Act in 1941. All Jewish men between the ages of 18-50, eligible for military service, were called up. In these labor groups Jewish men were forced to work 7-8 months a year on different road constructions under very hard living and working conditions.

### **31 Kursk battle**

The greatest tank battle in the history of World War II, which began on 5th July 1943 and ended eight days later. The biggest tank fight, involving almost 1,200 tanks and mobile cannon units on both sides, took place in Prokhorovka on 12th July and ended with the defeat of the German tank unit.

### **32 Brigades**

A form of socially useful labor, typical of communist times. Brigades were usually teams of young people who were assembled by the authorities to build new towns, roads, industrial plants, bridges, dams, etc. as well as for fruit-gathering, harvesting, etc. This labor, which would normally be classified as very hard, was unpaid. It was voluntary and, especially in the beginning, had a romantic ring for many young people. The town of Dimitrovgrad, named after Georgi Dimitrov - the leader of the Communist Party - was built entirely in this way.

### **33 UYW**

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

### **34 Bulgarian Communist Party**

a new party founded in April 1990 and initially named Party of the Working People. At an internal party referendum in the spring of 1990 the name of the ruling Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) was changed to Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). The more hard-line Party of the Working People then took over the name Bulgarian Communist Party. The majority of the members are Marxist-oriented old time BCP members.

### **35 Burmoelos (or burmolikos, burlikus)**

A sweetmeat made from matzah, typical for Pesach. First, the matzah is put into water, then squashed and mixed with eggs. Balls are made from the mixture, they are fried and the result is something like donuts.

### **36 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.

### **37 Bet Am**

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

### **38 Severing the diplomatic ties between the Eastern Block and Israel**

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

### **39 Six-Day-War**

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

### **40 Yom Kippur War**

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

### **41 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.