

# Ester Josifova

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Sofia

Bulgaria

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Date of interview: June 2002

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## Family background

My family on both my mother's and my father's side originally comes from Spain. My father's ancestors hadn't settled in Bulgaria straight away - they first lived in Western Europe. I know that my paternal great-grandfather, Iacov Pinkas, was born in the Netherlands but went to live in Germany later, and my grandfather, Naftali Pinkas, was born there in the 1860s. He was the one who came to Bulgaria, settled in Kovachevtsi village [50 km west of Sofia] and built a dairy there. He made kosher cheese and sold it to the Jews from Dupnitsa, Kjustendil and other nearby places. I suppose that his ancestors had also been in the dairy business. The village of Kovachevtsi was a relatively small one. Only a few hundred people lived there; they were stock-breeders and supplied my grandfather's dairy with milk.

My paternal great-grandfather and grandfather were very religious and they had both been rabbis in the Netherlands and Germany. They wore payes and had studied in special schools for rabbis. My grandfather spoke and wrote Ladino fluently, and he also knew Hebrew. He strictly observed Jewish traditions and rituals. Despite the fact that he lived in a village far from Sofia, he used to come to Sofia to buy kosher meat from the kosher butcher's in the central market hall.

My grandfather married Rebeca Farhi, who was born in Dupnitsa, and went to live in Kovachevtsi village with her. Unfortunately she died of tuberculosis very young - shortly after my father, Buko Pinkas, was born. My grandfather married Mazal Alkalai after that. She was born in Sofia and she was an educated and refined woman, she spoke French and often used French expressions in her speech. She originated from the rich Jewish kin of Alkalai, who were leaders in the tobacco business. I remember that she was a very beautiful woman with blond hair and blue eyes. She looked after my father as if he was her own child. Though her family was rich she did the housekeeping on her own. She treated all her grandchildren very well. My father supported her until the end of her life - he used to send her money every week. It was a tradition in Jewish families that the older children looked after the younger. That's why, after my grandfather's death



in 1908, my father looked after his mother as well as his brothers and sisters.

My grandfather's first wife, my real grandmother, had a brother, Haim Farhi, who was one of the most eminent Zionist leaders in Bulgaria. He knew Theodor Herzl [1](#) personally. He warned my father many years before the Holocaust that hard times for Jews were to come. He even advised him to leave for Israel with the family. My father said that it wasn't the right time because the children had to continue their education in Bulgaria. However, he bought land in Israel, before the country was even founded, with foresight for his children's future. When my sisters went to live in Israel in 1948 they settled on this plot of land.

Haim Farhi was a close associate of King Ferdinand. He was sent to Spain as a diplomat for five years thanks to his excellent knowledge of Spanish. He had studied diplomatic science before that. I remember that he lived on Pirotka Street and there were security guards in front of the house. He held a very high public position. I remember that he visited my father in 1926-1927 to advise him to emigrate to Palestine. Haim Farhi supported many Jewish emigrants financially when they left for Palestine. After World War I, Haim became the Foreign Affairs Counselor of King Boris III, the son of King Ferdinand. He was sent to Palestine in the 1930s with great respect from the King of Bulgaria. There is a street named after Haim Farhi in Jerusalem.

At the beginning of the 20th century Jews could work in high diplomatic positions in Bulgaria. Religion wasn't an issue regarding the social or political position of people back then. Grasiani and Tacher, for example, became colonels during World War I just because of their personal merits. [Editor's note: They were both of Jewish origin: Grasiani was a doctor and Tacher a lawyer.] I didn't feel any anti-Semitic attitude until Hitler's rise to power. I lived in a Bulgarian neighborhood, and my family always got along very well with the Bulgarians.

My maternal ancestors lived in Nish, Serbia. My grandmother, Lucia Ninio [nee Benmajor], was born in 1847. She emigrated to Sofia after the invasion of Serbia by the Turkish army in the 1860s. She was almost 15 years old when her family loaded their luggage on carts and moved to Sofia. She said that the whole family came to Sofia to live with some relatives. She remembered and used to tell me how Vasil Levski [2](#) was hanged in 1873 on the central city square. There was a lake there back then, and now the King's Palace is situated on the spot. The first Bulgarian monarch, Alexander I Battenberg, built it after the liberation of Bulgaria from the Turkish rule [3](#).

My grandmother was a very beautiful girl, and Serbs used to call her 'avaklata' [Serbian expression for a beautiful woman] because of her nice black hair and her lovely eyes. Being the wife of a famous Jewish citizen, my grandmother used to wear a bonnet, a special hat made of fine textile with gold pieces on it. She spoke Serbian and Ladino until the end of her life. She died in 1949 when she was 102 years old.

My maternal grandfather, Moshe Ninio, was a merchant. He exported eggs, flour and grain from Bulgaria to Austria, Greece and the Czech Republic. He was a very rich man and owned a big property in the center of Sofia, where the Sheraton Hotel stands today. Their house was there. It was a low building and consisted of several wings and an inner yard. There were houses of other families in the yard, and only Jewish families stayed there. They lived in harmony and gathered every morning to have coffee in the yard.

My grandfather was very religious, he had a long beard and used to spend the entire Saturday praying. He was the president of the Jewish community in Sofia and the director of the Jewish school. He wasn't only well-known in Sofia but in the whole country.

They used to talk in Ladino in the family but my grandfather also knew ancient Hebrew. He died in Sofia in 1906. After my grandfather's death the children looked after my grandmother. I recall that my father took her to live with us for some time in the 1920s.

My maternal grandmother was married twice. The first time her mother arranged for her engagement, she was only 18 years old. Unfortunately her first husband was ill and died. My mother, Sofi Pinkas, is the oldest child from my grandmother's second marriage. She was born in Sofia in 1888 and went to school there. She completed four classes of the Jewish elementary school. My mother had two sisters, Victoria and Tamara, and a brother, David.

Aunt Victoria married a Greek Jew, Mois Arenos. They lived in Plovdiv where Mois owned a shoe shop. They had one daughter, Zelma. They were sent to Greece during the Holocaust. Later they were deported to Poland and killed in a concentration camp. My other aunt, Tamara, lived in the town of Shumen. She married a rich merchant called Meranda, and they had five children. Her husband went bankrupt and for a certain period of time my father provided for their family. Aunt Tamara's family left for Israel in 1948 and settled in Jaffa.

My mother's brother, David, was a very good musician and a singer. He was the founder of the well-known Sofia choir 'Gusla'. He completed his musical education in Italy. My father provided for his studying there. David got married in Sofia and had one son. His family went to Israel in 1949. He was a musician there, too. Unfortunately his son died in an accident in Israel.

My father had three stepbrothers and two stepsisters. Josif was born in 1897 in Kovachevtsi. He graduated from the commercial school in Sofia and became a merchant. He lived in Sofia with his wife Estrea and their children: Mati, who became a famous singer later, and Klara, who became a philosophy professor. Josif died in 1937.

My father's second stepbrother, Nisim, died very young, in 1933. My father's third stepbrother, Leon, was born in Sofia in 1906. He was a merchant and a musician - he sang in the Sofia choir called Gusla, founded by Uncle David. My father's stepsisters were named Rebeca and Victoria. Rebeca was also born in Sofia. She got married and had a son who became a famous opera singer. Victoria married a woodworker and they had two children. In the 1940s they went to Israel and settled in Jaffa.

My father was born in Kovachevtsi in 1885 and moved to Sofia as a young man to study to be a hakham - that is what we call the rabbi's assistant in our synagogue, who can also read prayers and perform religious rituals. A hakham has a lower position in the hierarchy than the rabbi. There was a special Jewish religious school in Sofia that existed before the Central Synagogue was built in 1913.

My father married straight after graduating from the hakham school, stayed in Sofia and started trading. My father wasn't a chazzan at the synagogue, but he often went there to recite prayers because he had a lovely voice and knew a lot of prayers in Hebrew. He translated several books from ancient Hebrew to Ladino, including one book of the Talmud. This way my father contributed

a lot to Jewish culture in Bulgaria. I donated his religious books to the synagogue after his death.

My father took part in both Balkan wars from 1912-1913 and in World War I from 1916-1918. He was awarded several medals for his military exploits. He sang very well and he used to lead the soldiers into battles with a song. He had always been devoted to Bulgaria and when he got a notice that he would be interned from Sofia in 1943, he and a group of ex-Bulgarian army soldiers, who had taken part in the wars, took their medals and went to the palace of King Boris III to return them. That was how they wanted to express their disappointment in the policy the king and the government pursued towards Jews, and especially the people who had defended Bulgaria in the long hard wars. In my father's opinion King Boris III respected the Jews deeply, but he didn't have the courage to oppose the German policy during World War II. When the Jewish delegation arrived at the gates of the palace they were told that the king was absent and they couldn't meet him. The truth was that the government didn't allow the king to have this meeting.

My mother and my father met each other on the great Jewish holiday of Purim. My father lived in the village of Kovachevtsi at the time and came to Sofia especially for the holiday. He saw my mother in the carnival - she was dressed as Queen Ester. He fell in love with her at first sight. My father was tall and well built and my mother was very short but very beautiful. He was very impulsive and he introduced himself immediately. I remember my mother telling me about what my father looked like at their first meeting. He was dressed in typical Bulgarian village clothes. He wore poturi, traditional loose trousers worn by villagers, and socks with beads on them. He spoke the local Kovachevtsi dialect fluently and also sang the local folk songs very well. My father eliminated another candidate for my mother's hand. They got married in 1907 in Sofia. They had a religious wedding with a rabbi in the synagogue. All my father's relatives from Kovachevtsi attended the wedding.

My parents settled in Sofia after the wedding. They lived in the city center. My brother, my two sisters and me were born in that house. My brother, Moshe, was born in 1908, my older sister, Lika, in 1910, I followed in 1914 and my younger sister, Lili, in 1925. The part of the city has changed a lot since then, and at present the main building of the Central Universal Shop is situated at the place where our house used to be.

## Growing up

More than 30,000 Jews lived in Sofia in the first half of the 20th century. The richer Jews lived in the city center and the poorer ones in Luchbunar [4](#). There were many people in Luchbunar who needed help to survive. There were many refugees from Aegean Trace and Macedonia who were forced to emigrate after the Balkan wars. This district looked like a ghetto compared to the center of the city. The richer Jews had an interesting way to support the needy ones. They had small boxes at home into which they put as much money as they could afford during the week. A sexton used to come every Friday to take the boxes to the synagogue and returned them empty later. Our family also had such a box at home. The funds were mostly collected for the education of the children of poorer families. This way these children could be sent to study abroad.

My father and some other men sent the future conductor of the Jewish choir in Sofia to study in Vienna and provided for his education. He was the son of a humble washerwoman. My mother-in-law's brother from Pleven studied commerce in Vienna with the financial support of the local Jewish community. Many of the poor Jewish girls couldn't get married because their families couldn't put

together dowry for them. They received money from these voluntary donations. When a great Jewish holiday was forthcoming, for example Pesach or Yom Kippur, the rich Jews used to send hens or other poultry to the synagogue, and they even bought matzah. The chocolate factory 'Beraha' also made matzah. Some people didn't have white tablecloths for Pesach and all the poor Jews used to receive a white tablecloth with at least twelve table-napkins.

My father had a shop for glass and crystal goods. The shop was very big and we had three branches. There were two laborers and an accountant, and my mother worked at the cash-desk. My father's clients were rich people because fine glass and porcelain were expensive. He didn't produce things, he only traded with fine glass, crystal and porcelain. He imported it from Austria and the Czech Republic. He always closed the shop on Sabbath and Fridays. I remember that on Fridays in winter he used to close at 4.30pm so that he could go to the synagogue.

Our house was big: my father had the first floor for himself and there was a signboard on the door which read Pinkas. Bank Alkalai was situated on the second floor. Our family lived on the third floor. My sisters and I lived in one room; our parents in another one, and my brother Moshe had the biggest room. He had a piano and an easel for his violin there. He had portraits of great composers, such as Beethoven and Mozart, on the walls.

Moshe expressed his musical talent from his early childhood on. My mother told me that while my father was in the war in the 1910s, my brother often used to visit my grandmother's house. Some Gypsy [Roma] families had settled there, who were very musical and sang and danced a lot. My brother was very interested in them and used to spend the whole day listening to them. When my father came back from the front my mother told him about Moshe's passion for Gypsy music, and he immediately sent him to take music lessons. He developed his musical talent very fast and enrolled to study violin with the well-known Czech professor Koh, who introduced violin education in Bulgaria.

We had housemaids. They were Bulgarians and came from some nearby village. We had housemaids from Vakarel and even from Kovachevtsi, my father's birthplace. Their duties were to clean the house. Cooking wasn't their job, my mother cooked herself. We considered our housemaids members of the family. We ate at one table and slept in one and the same room. My father even introduced the maid from Vakarel to one of his shop attendants and found a lodging for them. They got married later. My older sister, Lika, also helped in the household. She went to school, played the piano and took care of our upbringing. My mother left home early to work at the shop.

Unfortunately my father couldn't cope with both jobs - being a merchant and a cantor at the synagogue - simultaneously. He went bankrupt in the 1920s. I was in elementary school then, my older sister was in high school and my brother was a first-year-student at the Music College. I remember that my father closed himself in one of the rooms and solely devoted himself to books and prayers. My mother was more pragmatic and managed to convince him that they had to take certain steps. Thanks to my mother we found a small shop and a new lodging. My father went on trading with fine glass, crystal and porcelain.

We used to gather at my father's stepmother's for our greatest holiday, Pesach, to show her our respect. My maternal grandmother, who was a widow, used to come with aunt Tamara's, Miranda's and Uncle Moshe's families. Around 40 people used to gather. We arranged long tables with white

tablecloths, left the doors open and put a lit candle on the window sill. This meant that if a hungry man passed by he was welcome to come in and join our table. The oldest in the family, my father, read the prayer in Hebrew. [Editor's note: Ester probably means the Haggadah.] He also translated the texts into Ladino. The oldest child in the family, my brother Moshe, was given a clean white bag into which the matzah was put. He had to hold it the whole night so that he would always remember how the Jews had saved themselves in the desert. That's how the story of the 40- year wandering of Moses in the desert and the exodus from Egypt was reconstituted.

We observed all other Jewish holidays as well. We had dinner at six o'clock on Yom Kippur and went to the synagogue. We stayed there until eight o'clock in the evening. The next morning we went to the synagogue again and either spent the whole day there or went several times a day. We didn't eat anything the whole day. We sang and after that we went home. The song was about the hardship of the Jewish people.

The first thing to be served on the table after the fasting is a sweet called tespishtil. It's made of thin pastry and a lot of walnuts and almonds and soaked in sugar syrup. There should be apple with honey on the table and the oldest child gives a piece to everyone. This is done in order to make sure that the forthcoming year would be as sweet as honey, nice as an apple and peaceful. On Sukkot adults went to the synagogue every morning before sunrise for the whole week and there was a special tent, the sukkah, in the yard of the synagogue. There were a lot of delicacies in that sukkah. We celebrated the holiday of fruits, Fruitas, in February and Purim, the day of the masks, in March. [Fruitas is the popular name of the Tu bi-Shevat festival among the Bulgarian Jews.]

I remember a tradition in Sofia which started in the early decades of the 20th century: the Jewish sports organization Maccabi organized parades on the great Jewish holidays. It was a festive procession and the strongest youth led it holding a torch in his hand. The youth passed on the streets and people stopped to watch them and show their respect.

When I was a child we spoke both Ladino and Bulgarian in the family. I think that my parents didn't have the best pronunciation of Ladino. I learned a lot from my mother-in-law after I got married. She spoke Ladino perfectly. Sofia Jews have a special pronunciation of Ladino. The pronunciation of some consonants resembles Portuguese. You can hear the best-spoken Ladino in Plovdiv and in South-Eastern Bulgaria. Jews in Russe also speak very clear Ladino. Sometimes the difference in the pronunciation in Sofia and in some other towns is so big that we hardly understand each other. For example the Jews in Sofia pronounce the word for woman 'mojer' and Jews in Plovdiv 'moher'. I find the Sofia Ladino a little rougher.

My father believed that we had to have secular education and sent us - my two sisters, my brother and me - to study in a Bulgarian school. He wanted his children to speak Bulgarian well. Many Jewish children went to Bulgarian schools. I had friends who went to Bulgarian schools just like me.

I graduated from the economics high-school in Sofia. That school was the closest to our house. After that the Jewish choir sent me to a private music school because I had a nice voice and they thought that I should develop my singing talent. My favorite subjects at school were history and singing. I even went to an opera singing competition at the Sofia Opera before our internment in Kjustendil. I won it but my brother advised my father to make me give up my career in singing because he thought that I might enter an 'unsuitable' surrounding. I dealt with the household until

our internment and did some dressmaking - I sewed clothes and designed models. My older sister, Lika, graduated from a classical studies high- school.

Most of my father's and brother's friends were Bulgarians. My brother Moshe played in the royal orchestra and lived a Bohemian life with his Bulgarian friends. Moshe and the popular Bulgarian singers Lea Ivanova, Zdravko Radoev and some other musicians founded the first jazz band in Bulgaria in 1933. Our house was bigger than those of the other musicians so they used to come to us for rehearsals. Another famous musician who first played his repertoire at our home was Asparuh Leshnikov [5](#). Moshe was a universal musician and he used to play saxophone in the orchestra. His band was very popular in Sofia in the 1930s.

There were matinees in the Royal Cinema-Theater in Sofia every Sunday, and the symphonic orchestra and my brother's jazz orchestra used to play there. Those matinees were very successful, and there was always a big audience. The owners of the cinema-theater were Jews from a rich tobacco business family. There were three Jews in the jazz band. The drummer's name was Eshkenazi and he was the best drummer around at that time. His rhythm drove people crazy. Lea Ivanova was the singer. Those matinees existed for many years, I remember them as early as of 1931, and they ended in the 1940s during World War II.

### **During the War**

Our family had to leave the house in the center of Sofia after the Law for the Protection of the Nation [6](#) was accepted in 1939. We had to move to the Jewish neighborhood of Iuchbunar. The law said that Jews didn't have the right to live in the center of Sofia. Boulevard Hristo Botev marked the border. I didn't know the district of Iuchbunar before then. We rented a house on Nishka and Sofronii Vrachanski Street. That's how we became neighbors with my future husband Menahem Josifov's parents. My mother found a relatively big house, and we lived with Uncle Josif and his two children. We were interned in the town of Kjustendil in 1943 from where we were to be sent to concentration camps.

There was a great demonstration in Sofia on 24th May 1943 [7](#) against the politics of repressions against Jews and, most of all, against the decision according to which Jews were interned from their homes. A large group of Bulgarians - workers, students, doctors and lawyers - went out to demonstrate their support for Bulgarian Jews. The Jewish youth also took part in that demonstration. I recall that mounted police came from Sofronii Vrachanski and Tzar Simeon Streets and chased the demonstrators away using force. It was very scary and many people were arrested.

Our landlords during the internment in Kjustendil were Sabbatarians [8](#). They got along very well with my father, who was a very well-educated man and had many common topics to talk about. These people were very polite and friendly to us. They got up early in the morning to bring us a newspaper and a loaf of bread. We were forbidden to go out ourselves before 9 o'clock. We were only allowed to leave home for two hours - between 9 and 11 in the morning. There were days when we couldn't go out at all - we were in a terrible situation, but our landlords did their best to help us. I became friends with the neighbors' children. My mother made tasty pastry as a sign of her gratefulness, and I sewed clothes for them.

Our relations with our neighbors and landlords during the internment in Kjustendil were fine, but trouble was awaiting us on the street. I remember that one night my younger sister and I were

waiting on the street for our father to come back from the synagogue. He was wearing a yellow star, which he managed to hide discretely. Suddenly two youth stopped us on the street, one of them was the son of the well-known Bulgarian army general Zhekov. They were Branniks [9](#) and acted in a hostile manner. They stopped us to check if we were wearing the yellow star. One of them even took liberties with my sister. Then my father got angry, caught his jacket lapels and shook him. He explained to them that he had fought in the wars for them and that they didn't have the right to behave that way. My father was very proud of his war medals and put one of them next to the yellow star. He showed them the yellow star and the medal and told general Zhekov's son that he had fought side by side with his father in the war. When we went home my father felt really bad because of the humiliation he had had to experience.

My brother Moshe also experienced such trouble. He used to play in a band of Jews, and one evening they organized a small concert. A group of Branniks intercepted and attacked them. They wanted to take my brother's violin away. He fought bravely and managed to keep his violin but they stole his expensive watch.

I remember an incident from the beginning of the 1940s. I had already got engaged to my future husband, and I was walking with my sister-in-law on Klementina Street, which was a Jewish street back then. Suddenly Branniks started to come out from all the small streets and intercepted us. They started to pull us, humiliated us and even tore my sister-in-law's blouse. When they attacked us, a group of young Jewish men saved us in a very witty way: they chose a Brannik, claimed he was a Jew and attacked him.

We experienced terrible times but the attitude of Bulgarians towards Jews was mostly good. I remember that general Zhekov desisted from his son, the one who had humiliated my father during the internment in Kjustendil, in the state newspaper after 9th September 1944 [10](#). He did that because of his son's outrageous deeds as a Brannik. The general went to the Jewish community to ask for a public excuse because of his son's behavior.

There was a lot of violence against Jews in Dupnitsa. Some witness told me that Brannik members used to take girls against their will to the Germans. There wasn't anything like that in Kjustendil, probably because there was a strong pressure on behalf of the local deputies against the repressions of Bulgarian Jews.

Our family was in a difficult situation after the failure of our first shop. We all did our best to help. I was a dressmaker and helped my family, even during the internment. Thanks to the fact that I was a dressmaker I managed to earn some money. My parents had sent me to a dressmaker and designer's course, held by the court dressmaker at the palace, and that was where I learned my profession very well. I managed to help my fiancé Josifov, who was in Pleven back then. I used to send his family parcels. I also provided for my brother and my sister Lika, who came to live with us to give birth to her first child. My life was hard, but I didn't think that way back then, and I cannot say that I suffered because I worked hard to help my family. I have always been in high spirits and believed that I had to work to provide for my family. I still think that way today.

We came back from the internment at the end of 1944 and found our house completely robbed. It was very cold and one of the walls was ruined. Lika and her child also came with us because her husband had gone to the front with the Bulgarian army. After the Soviet army entered Bulgarian territory many Bulgarian soldiers joined it and took part in the battles against the Germans. My

brother was also mobilized. I couldn't even see him off because he left straight after he was freed from the labor camp where he had been sent to from 1942-1944.

### After the War

Our father owned a little shop opposite our house and a Bulgarian rented it. He turned out to be a very good person and even came to Kjustendil during the internment to assure us that the shop would be ours again when the internment was over. That shop was where I began to work later and that was how we started our life in Sofia again.

My husband's father, Israel Menahem, was an important egg merchant - he exported production wholesale to Austria. He lived in the town of Pleven. There was such a concurrence of circumstances that he went bankrupt and died. His family moved to Sofia in 1935. They rented a lodging in the town and started to work. The Jewish choir was a meeting place for young Jews. My husband and I met each other in the choir of the synagogue where we both used to sing. I married him on 30th June 1945. Our marriage was one of the first civil marriages in Sofia. Our love lasted and we waited for several years for each other while we were interned from Sofia. My family was interned in Kjustendil and his in Byala Slatina in Northern Bulgaria.

We went to live on Ekzarh Josif Street opposite the central public baths after we got married. Several families lived there. It was very packed, so we rented a lodging on Dondukov Boulevard with the help of a friend of my father's. We didn't live on our own there either - we shared the place with one more family. Menahem and I hardly managed to see each other in that period for we were both busy working all the time. We worked hard, and I even had to look after my two children after work. My older daughter, Lora, was born in 1946 and my younger one, Iza, in 1950.

Young Jews couldn't study at university between 1939-1944. My future husband had to interrupt his education in law at Sofia University. He continued studying after 9th September 1944 but he didn't graduate. It was his own decision not to. He started to work in the choir of the Ministry of Internal Affairs as an announcer. After we married our family financially relied entirely on me. I was very good at my profession as a dressmaker, and I worked with two other girls. Later my husband found prestigious work as deputy general manager of the trade and industry association called Co-operative Union. Even so we were short of money and I continued working.

The great Jewish departure to Israel began in 1948. I was very sad that my two sisters were leaving. My daughter, Lora, was grieving a lot over my older sister's child. When my husband saw how sad I was because I wasn't leaving with my family, he told me that I could leave if I really wanted to. However, he insisted that I left our child with him. He didn't want to go to Israel, and that's why we stayed in Bulgaria. My brother and my sick parents also stayed here. My brother said that he had to stay here and take care of them. Moshe became a first violinist at the Musical Theatre and retired from there later.

I was very happy and enthusiastic in the first years after 9th September 1944. We had survived the hard times and were safe. Gradually I started to understand what was happening in the country. Many people without any education were privileged and allowed to work in leading positions. My husband's director, for instance, was an illiterate man. My husband was the one who wrote the reports all night long and did all the work for him. I suppose that his Jewish origin was the main reason for that. He also got disappointed with the communist rule, especially after a visit to the

Soviet Union. He met a Georgian Jew there who was afraid to tell that he was a Jew. My husband was an extremely honest person, and he truly believed in communism, but he got quickly disappointed with it because of the great injustice of the totalitarian system that stimulated privileges and theft.

It was difficult for Jews to go on living their traditional life during the times of the Communist Party rule. It wasn't a secret that the authorities kept the people who entered the synagogue under observation. It wasn't desirable to go to the synagogue, especially not for young people. I didn't have any problems because I used to accompany my husband's old mother. Old people could go there unobstructed. There was a certain anti-Semitic attitude towards me at my workplace though. I heard unpleasant things about my origin but only in everyday conversations. For example, after I became the director of the Zoia designer's studio, a colleague of mine said that Hitler should have killed us all so that I wouldn't have become her boss.

I continued to observe all Jewish holidays after 9th September 1944. My husband's mother lived with us, and we used to prepare for all the Jewish holidays together. In recent years I've been going to the Central Synagogue regularly as it's very near our home. We make special dishes for Pesach. We have been conducting a seder in the last ten years. We have a specially arranged table: there must be fish on the table.

I have suffered a lot during the two wars in Israel [the Six-Day-War and the Yom Kippur War] [11](#), because I have many relatives there. We also suffered because there was no objective information in Bulgaria at that time, and there was an anti-Israeli campaign. The authorities were pro-Arab during the wars in Israel.

I started work at the dressmaker's studio of the Joint. It was founded by the Joint [12](#) in order to provide jobs for Jews. I worked there until I retired in 1970. I was asked to go back to work after that because the studio needed a designer. Several dressmakers' studios merged back then. I fell severely ill with radicolithis. A Jewish doctor advised me not to have an operation and told me how to cure it myself. Upon that I started work as a quality controller at the Rodina dressmaker's studio.

Both my daughters are musical. My older daughter plays the piano very well. Lora was a ballet dancer as a little girl, and it was her decision not to continue with music. She has two university degrees, one in chemistry and one in journalism. She works as a journalist now. Iza graduated from the Faculty of Pharmacy at the Medical Academy. She owns a small pharmacy now and works there. My two daughters aren't married.

Life became more agitated after the political changes in Bulgaria in 1989, and people feel less secure. My daughters are extremely busy all the time. I think that Bulgaria hasn't been developing very well in recent years.

I welcome Eastern Europe's opening to the West. We can travel freely everywhere now. I was investigated for a month before I could go to Israel in the 1960s. I was instructed what to say when I would return from Israel. My cousins used to come to Bulgaria more often, and it seems they didn't experience the problems we did.

I visit the Jewish cultural center regularly now. The Jewish organisation in Sofia, Shalom, gives us the chance for entertainment, cultural events and meetings. We are organized in clubs that we visit

several times a week. We have the Health Club where we do physical exercises, the Ladino Club where we practice our language and we also have a doctor at the club who takes care of our health. When I went on vacation to Kovachevtsi with Shalom, I asked a local man to take me to my grandfather and father's dairy. He took me there and it really looked ruined but there was someone who continued to take care of it.

I live with my daughter Lora, who is very dedicated to me, and her younger sister. I meet my friends, who come here often to see me and I spend a lot of time doing handiwork. I have always had many close Bulgarian friends. In my opinion, nowadays the attitude towards Jews is a question of intelligence. There are many uneducated people who cannot define their negative attitude towards Jews. Such people have a negative attitude to other ethnic groups in Bulgaria. There are also many intelligent people who don't pay attention to people's ethnic origin.

## Glossary

### **1 Herzl, Theodor (1860-1904)**

Jewish journalist and writer, the founder of modern political Zionism. Born in Budapest, Hungary, Herzl settled in Vienna, Austria, where he received legal education. However, he devoted himself to journalism and literature. He was a correspondent for the *Neue Freie Presse* in Paris between 1891-1895, and in his articles he closely followed French society and politics at the time of the Dreyfuss affair. It was this court case which made him interested in his Jewishness and in the fate of Jews. From 1896, when the English translation of his *Judenstaat* [The Jewish State] appeared, his career and reputation changed. He became the founder and one of the most indefatigable promoters of modern political Zionism. In addition to his literary activity for the cause of Zionism, he traveled all over Europe to meet and negotiate with politicians, public figures and monarchs. He set up the first Zionist world congress and was active in organizing several subsequent ones.

### **2 Levski, Vasil**

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.

### **3 Liberation of Bulgaria from the Turkish rule**

Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire in early 1877 in order to secure the Mediterranean trade routes. The Russian troops 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 prescribed 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.

#### **4 Iuchbunar**

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

#### **5 Leshnikov, Asparuh (Ari) (1898-1978)**

Bulgarian musician. Ari Leshnikov was a man of extreme fate which stretched from world fame to complete oblivion. He studied at the Berlin Conservatory and in 1927 he became the first tenor of the Comedian Harmonists, the sextet which later gained international recognition. When Hitler came to power, the sextet had to split because of its three Jewish members. Leshnikov returned to Bulgaria, but in his native country no one trusted a singer who had performed in Germany. Bulgaria thought of him again on his 70th anniversary in 1968. This belated recognition was due mainly to the political conjuncture rather than to lack of respect from his colleagues and the audience.

#### **6 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 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 occupied Macedonia and Thrace the Bulgarians treated the Jews with exceptional cruelty. The Jews from these areas were deported to concentration camps, while the plans for the deportation of Jews from Bulgaria was halted by a protest movement launched by the vice-chairman of the Bulgarian Parliament.

#### **7 24th May 1943**

Protest by a group of members of parliament led by the 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, political parties and non-governmental organizations stood out against the deportation of Bulgarian Jews. Although there was no official document banning deportation, Bulgarian Jews were saved, unlike those from Aegean Thrace and Macedonia.

#### **8 Sabbatarian Socinians**

This judaizing sect was founded in Transylvania, Hungary, towards the end of the sixteenth century. Their first principle, which led them to separate from the rest of the Unitarian body, was

their belief that the day of rest must be observed with the Jews on the seventh day of the week and not on the Christian Sunday. The greater part of this particular Sabbatarian sect joined the Orthodox Jews in 1874, thus carrying out in practice the judaizing principle of their founders.

## **9 Brannik**

Pro-fascist youth organization. It was founded after the Defense of the Nation Act was passed in 1939 and the Bulgarian government forged its pro-German policy. The Branniks regularly maltreated Jews.

## **10 9th September 1944**

The day of the communist takeover in Bulgaria. In September 1944 the Soviet Union unexpectedly declared war on Bulgaria. On 9th September 1944 the Fatherland Front, a broad left-wing coalition, deposed the government. Although the communists were in the minority in the Fatherland Front, they were the driving force in forming the coalition, and their position was strengthened by the presence of the Red Army in Bulgaria.

## **11 Six-Day-War**

The first strikes of the Six-Day-War happened on June 5th, 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.

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.

## **12 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 WWI. 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.