

Anna Danon

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Sofia

Bulgaria

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My family background

I have no information about my ancestors and I know just a few things about our family tree. I don't remember my paternal grandfather, Iakov Isak Grinberg as he died when I was a little baby. He was rather old, and basically the family was more engaged in looking after me because his days were already coming to an end. He was born in Russia. A picture of his hometown was hanging on the wall in our house with the name 'Kravishon' written on it. I suppose it is today's Kishinev [capital of Moldavia]. I have no idea how he had come to Bulgaria and where he had passed through.

My paternal grandmother Venezia Iako-Isakova was born to a large family in Sofia. She was a very domineering woman. She didn't wear a wig and dressed in a worldly manner. Before, during and after the internment she lived with us - in Sofia. It took a while before we found her a separate lodging. She died in 1946. I know that both of my paternal grandparents were religious and observed the kashrut and Sabbath. I can't say whether they visited the synagogue every Friday - but they were definitely not Jews of the Orthodox stream, demanding that everything be strictly observed.

I don't remember my maternal grandfather, Mordehai Aladjem. He died in 1930. We rarely saw my maternal grandmother, Ester Aladjem, because she lived in Kiustendil (where she was born), and we lived in Sofia, where my mother had settled after she married. We sometimes visited her. She seemed to be a village woman - she used to wear a bruchnik [the skirt of the Bulgarian national folk costume] and a kerchief, which she called 'shamia' [the Turkish word for kerchief]. In 1933 a few days after my granny's death - according to an old Jewish custom, I guess - all my mother's siblings gathered; there were 7 altogether. My mother took me there. I was very small but I remember everything because I was dumbfounded. We entered a big room and we sat on the floor in a semicircle. My granny's things had to be divided among her children. Of course, there were no quarrels among them. They all gave the greater part of their inheritance to my mother's younger sister, Rashel Fransez, who was a widow at the age of 22. Most of them said: 'This is for Rashel'



because she is the most embarrassed.' Her husband, Riachi Fransez, was arrested in 1925 for his socialist convictions and was beaten black and blue by the police. Within a year or two he died of tuberculosis - probably because of the traumas and hardships he had to endure during his lifetime.

I can describe my maternal grandparents' house because during the Holocaust we were interned to Kiustendil and we lived there, and I also visited it later. It was on Alexandrovska Street [the central street in Kiustendil]. Alexandrovska Street was paved. It passed through the whole town from one end to the other. Kiustendil's market was very close to our house. It was a large market, and I don't remember what day of the week it was that lots of the village people used to gather. I remember the town vividly: it had a fountain with hot flowing mineral water at every crossroad and we went there with buckets to fill them for use at home. It was an old house with two floors, with an internal staircase to the second floor and had a balcony facing the street. It was still there a few years ago. There was water and electricity but there wasn't a yard or any animals. My granny took care of the household by herself, as all her children were already married. She was very religious and strictly observed the kashrut and Shabbat, but she didn't wear a wig. She wore village clothes - bruchnik and shamia.

Our grandparents on both sides spoke Ladino with each other. We only spoke Ladino with our mother, and spoke Bulgarian with our father. I don't remember whether my grandfathers had participated in the wars, nor do I remember anyone commenting on their political convictions. My mother's youngest brother Isif Aladjem was a subject of frequent discussions because he was a socialist and everybody was scared that he might suffer for his political convictions.

My father Haim Iakov was born in 1895 in Sofia. My mother Rebeka Aladjem was also born in 1895 in Kiustendil. My parents married in 1919. They probably had an arranged marriage because he was from Sofia and she was from Kiustendil. I don't know who arranged it, but it was common practice in those times. In my opinion my mother made a mistake. They had different interests and mode of living. My father was a handsome man, always very tidy, always carrying three handkerchiefs in different pockets. He devoted considerable time to his morning toilette - teeth, ears, nose: everything. He was really good-looking and his nose was of the 'Jewish kind' - a big one. My mother was just the opposite - a humble woman, neat and simply dressed. She didn't pay attention to those things. My father was an experienced man. He was fond of music. I knew the overtures of several operas through him. The Barber of Seville was his favorite. As soon as he got up in the morning he started whistling. He adored music. I don't know how he had learned them, but he knew all the overtures.

I think my father had fought in all the wars [Balkan wars and WWI]. He was captured by the Italians during one of them. He often told us stories. He was very witty and amusing, always telling jokes. His elder brother, Iakov Isak, a pharmacist, was a military officer while my father was a simple soldier in the same army detachment. My father always tried to get away, and once he caused a great havoc. One day at firing practice they were given blank cartridges. Somehow my father found a live one. When the practice began, the sergeant major immediately realized from the sound that somebody had used a ball cartridge. They checked, and found out that it had been my father. He was punished and brought to the officer for the joke. My father told us that when Uncle Iakov saw him, he hit him so hard that one of his boots remained between my father's legs. But that was my father - 'zulumdjia' [a troublemaker].

My father had a nice job as a bookbinder. Every Sunday he used to go out, quite often without my mother. It was my mother's mistake. Instead of wasting 4 or 5 leva on the weekend, she preferred to save for the household for the rest of the week and therefore stayed home. She had a little stool that she used to put in front of the door so that she could sit and chat with the other women. When I was old enough I began to feel sorry for my mother that she didn't go out on Sundays. But it was not only my father - all men used to behave like that. My parents' circle of friends was Jewish. All my father's friends were Jews. My mother also had a circle of some 4 or 5 Jewish women friends. We, the children, didn't choose - most of my friends were Bulgarian and were either neighbors or from school. I still remember their names and we still keep in touch.

Growing up

I was born on March 5, 1928 in Sofia. I have two sisters: the eldest Klara Levi is 9 years older than me, the younger Ester Rubenova is 5 years older. Our family often moved from one house to another because our parents weren't able to pay the rent regularly, and the contracts were usually suspended. The new house needed to be cleaned up and whitewashed. My mother was a fastidious and very accommodating person. She got along with everybody and we co-existed well with our neighbors. We lived in Luchbunar [1](#), which was mostly inhabited by Jews and Macedonians. Jews and Macedonians used to coexist quite well together. My mother's best friend was a neighbor of ours, Donka the Macedonian. I don't remember any special custom observed by Macedonians, but the Jews mostly observed Pesach with boios and matzah. We lived in a yard with at least 4 or 5 small houses that were inhabited by separate families. We had no electricity. At a fixed hour each family's housewife used to go out and light a fire in a charcoal brazier in order to cook dinner. There was the constant smell of roast peppers. The streets were poor and miserable, but not covered in mud.

I'm not sure of exactly how many people the Jewish community included. There were two synagogues in Sofia: the central one, which was visited by the people who lived around Hristo Botev Boulevard, and our Luchbunar synagogue, which was the poorer one. I rarely visited the central synagogue. The Luchbunar synagogue doesn't exist any more. The 'large' building of the synagogue was used on Friday evening for the welcoming of Sabbath. And there was an additional small room in that synagogue where old Jews prayed every morning. There was a Jewish charity organization called Keren Kayemet [2](#). Schoolgirls from the senior classes went around the community and collected funds in money boxes in order to support the people in need. [Editor's note: The Keren Kayemet was founded with the purpose of buying land in the Land of Israel and not of helping poor community members.]

There wasn't any religious literature at home. My father was a worldly person, he only visited the synagogue on major holidays and only because other people went there, too - he did it for the sake of socializing. My mother was more religious without being fanatical. She went to the synagogue almost every Friday evening. At Pesach she didn't eat bread for 7 days. She ate boios [unleavened bread] instead.

On special holidays, particularly on Pesach, all families used to gather and every housewife arranged her table with unleavened bread, such as boios, matzah and other traditional dishes. They used to cover the table with a patchwork cloth and after dinner everybody sang the Pesach songs, which narrate Jewish history. They also used to sing another song about a little goat. My

father and the other men put several breads in a cloth -imitating the march for saving the Jewish people from Egypt. I remember we used to eat something like a roll with leaves of lettuce filled with walnuts and raisins, but unfortunately I don't remember its name.

We were always waiting eagerly and impatiently for those holidays - Rosh Hashanah, Pesach, Shavuot. For these holidays each one of us was presented with a new dress. Our family was quite poor - three children and a granny, and only my father was working - but my parents did their best to provide new clothes and other things for us. My weakness was shoes and as soon as they bought me a new pair, I would clean their soles and put them next to my bed. My sisters used to sew clothes for me - actually the eldest one sewed for the younger one, and the younger one, for me.

We attended elementary and high school at the Bulgarian schools, even though most of our Jewish coevals attended the Jewish school. My father had never been a slave to those things. Generally he had progressive views and didn't have concrete political convictions. I can definitely say that there was no anti-Semitism in school. I even remember that we studied religion at school and our teacher Miss Antonova used to say before the beginning of the lesson: 'Children, if there are any Jewish kids, they are allowed to play outside, it is not obligatory for them.' But I was a real 'grinder', striving for her attention, and when she asked questions about the different proverbs of the Bible, I fell over myself to participate. Once she said: 'Shame on you, children! Anna is an Israelite and look how assiduous she is in our classes!'

I was a good student and because of that I took part in the ceremony for the opening of the school year reciting 'I Am a Child of Bulgaria' every year. [This is a famous poem by Ivan Vazov, a doyen of Bulgarian literature.] And I recited it with such pathos! My favorite subject in high school was Bulgarian, and even now I help my granddaughter with learning it.

My friends from high school were Maria, Velichka... We were very close then and still are. As a child I visited a colony [children's summer camp]. As I was physically very weak as well as needy, they always included me in those colonies. I have visual memories from St. Konstantin and Elena [a Black Sea resort]. Almost every summer they used to list me in a colony. I was such a crybaby. From the first day to the last I used to cry for my mummy. My parents didn't have the opportunity to go on vacations and they were happy to send me, at least my food was provided there.

My eldest sister Klara, poor girl, started working in a tailor's atelier as soon as she finished the 4th grade, at the age of only 11 or 12. She was already a grown-up girl. She spent her money on clothes, saved some for home and bought me presents also. On 24th May 3 I had to be the color-bearer of the school. I was very happy - it was such a great honor; but I had to wear a uniform - a navy one, with white gloves. My parents couldn't buy it from anywhere. I started crying about not being able to go to the ceremony. And then one day Klara brought me a pair of beautiful white gloves. She had bought them especially for me! We borrowed the rest of the costume.

My second sister Ester took especially good care of me. She always took me with her when she went to organized school excursions. She introduced me to the theater. Ester was a very clever child and an excellent student. When she finished 3rd grade my father said that she would also have to start working. Her teacher came home to beg our father not to stop Ester's education, as she was an extremely smart kid. So she continued her education, although my parents could not support her financially. Ester graduated high school by correspondence, only after World War II.

Before the Holocaust there were various manifestations of anti-Semitism (beyond the governmental policy). For example, relatives of ours from Kiustendil were complaining that a boy who was a Brannik [4](#) was constantly harassing them. But here, in Sofia, in our close circle of people, there was no such thing. When a rumor spread that Jews were gathered in camps, enormous fear, actually paranoia, rose among us that something very bad was about to come. We received letters - orders for internment - that stipulated on which day, at what time, with how much luggage and where we had to report ourselves. A real tragedy took place on the streets of our quarter. My eldest sister, Klara, was about to be married and she had prepared a dowry for herself. But it had to be sold with the rest of our house and household goods. We took everything out to front of the house and the neighbors and other people bought it. We were only left with a few bundles.

The first town that we were ordered to go to was Vidin. We didn't know anybody from there. I remember the sad picture from the station to the Jewish school (they took us there) - a long train of wretches and children. It was really tragic, like in the movies. The rooms of the Jewish school were large and several families were put up in each one. To keep simple order they outlined borders with chalk to show each family where it had to settle, with beds arranged on the floor, and so on. We got food from a common kitchen, which I reckon was organized by the synagogue. They used to cook there with margarine that smelled of soap - it had nothing to do with what we have nowadays. I have always been a poor eater and thin. I couldn't even touch that food. It was so terrible. But we went to the kitchen with our mugs. We had to eat after all.

Later we moved to Kiustendil. It was better in Kiustendil because we settled in my mother's house. We had a whole room, and more space. My father took a part-time job - per day, even per hour - whatever he was able to find. We, the children, were bigger, so we went to the town's agricultural school every day and we were given tasks there. The masters of the school, especially the woman, were very kind. She always gave us something to eat and to take home. I remember my eyes being wide open when I saw that the other children were eating slices of bread with real butter. I have always loved butter very much but I could only watch. Our food usually consisted of a slice of butter with plum jam, which I hate even now.

During the war

As we were very restricted in our activities in those years, we didn't have much opportunity to observe the Jewish holidays and we marked them symbolically. For a year or so I worked in a ladder mending atelier in Kiustendil. This is how I made a living. Ester became a partisan. It was a real tragedy at home because it happened in the most difficult years, in 1941/42. My mother cried for days and days while my father said that perhaps the partisan-communists would bring us something better. He tried to reassure my mother that Ester would return. After the war he often used to joke that he was also a socialist, having sent his daughter to be a partisan. My eldest sister Klara cried and lamented for she already had a baby: 'She will burn our family, and my child will suffer because of her.' Ester trusted me very much, as I was engaged in the RMS [Revolutionary Youth Union] [5](#). She confided in me that she intended to join the partisan detachment: 'We'll leave with a group of partisans from Kiustendil. The connection has already been made. Don't say a word at home. I'll only leave you my ID card. Give it to mum as soon as you know that I've gone.'

We had a large gate in the yard, which we locked at 8 in the evening in order to protect ourselves from possible attacks or things like that. The day that Ester left it was 8, and she still wasn't home. Mother started to cry. She persuaded us not to lock the front door, as our sister was only running late and would turn up soon. My father began to reassure her. At the time appointed by Ester, when I was completely sure that she had already left town, I told them. And then Klara started again: 'That stupid little... She knew everything, yet she didn't tell us. Look what they brought to us.'

From that day onward we lived in constant fear. We were afraid that they would find Ester, or that they would come here looking for her. And our fears were justified. Within a month or two, the entire family of Iosif Kamhi - who had joined the partisan detachment with my sister - was sent to the Kailuka concentration camp in Pleven. [6](#) We were horrified. They were sent there because their son had become a partisan. Anyway, they [the authorities] didn't touch us. I don't know why. Perhaps a good angel had saved us. There were no victims from our family. But the camp was set on fire and our friend Iosif's mother burned to death there. Another story - one evening he came across my sister holding paint and a brush. She had written anti-fascist slogans on the walls. Instead of provoking a scandal, he simply told her to be careful, because it was a dangerous work.

Post-war

The most difficult thing for us after the war was to find a house in Sofia. The one we lived in before the internment had been given to other people. Iosif Kamhi's family gave us a room on Vladaiska Street. We lived in that room for quite a long time. I graduated from high school in Sofia after the war. During the internment in Kiustendil I tried several times, but I wasn't allowed to study. In 1948 I began studying medicine and I graduated in 1953. First I worked in Krainitsi village. I wasn't married at that time. My husband was a soldier, as they took him after he had graduated law. For three-four years I worked in Pernik and after that in Sofia. I was a doctor until my retirement. During the last three years I worked at the Ministry of Health. I was responsible for the instruction of college medical specialists.

I met my husband Shimon Danon in the synagogue's reading room - the central one. Now it has been reorganized. There used to be a reading room there, which was very useful indeed. First of all, it had heating. Every day they lit the stove, and it was pleasantly warm there. Secondly, they had a large library, including specialized sections in literature, medicine, engineering, mathematics, etc. We used to read there, and were always very disciplined. My husband was a librarian there, earning his living while studying. We had breaks at certain hours, during which we talked. That's how we met and then married. It was a love-match and we married for love. There weren't any religious motives in that. We had a civil wedding. It was a very modest wedding. My husband gave me a cloth for a blouse as a gift and I sewed myself a skirt from a pair of old trousers. We were both poor students.

My daughter Raia Danon was born in 1961. She graduated in Spanish philology and currently works as a Spanish teacher at the Spanish high school in Sofia. We didn't really raise her in the Jewish traditions. In socialist times we kept Sabbath mostly because of my mother (even after her death also), as she respected and insisted on that. But I must say that we weren't that strict and we didn't keep the kashrut, like in prewar times. But we often told Raia about the Holocaust. She simply grew up in such a circle; all our friends are Jews. She has developed a sense of belonging to

the Jews without being a maniac. Her husband is Bulgarian. She often brings her children to Betam, the Jewish cultural house. Lately there have been many activities there - many clubs - for children, for pensioners, etc. They also organize children's summer and winter camps. My grandchildren attend the events when they can. My daughter considers herself a Jew, but my grandchildren do not. My granddaughter Anna often tells me that she is not a Jew, but a Bulgarian. I have to explain to her that she is a half-Jew also. She considers that being a Jew is not a very good thing.

My sister Klara moved to Israel in 1948 because she didn't approve of the communist regime. We, under Ester's influence, stayed here to build up the new Bulgaria. At first we had difficulties in contacting our relatives in Israel, as it happened through letters. Now it is much easier via telephone, and we communicate almost every day.

The first time I went to Israel was in 1959. I was so happy. My sister, my brother-in-law as well as my friends also came here, though they had to face many more formalities.

The year 1989 brought a difficult change for us. We can't put up with many things, even now. I have been a member of the Bulgarian Communist Party (now called Socialist Party) since 1948 and I hold firmly to that. Democracy didn't lead to anti-Semitic manifestations, though lately signs have started to appear in the synagogue and in the Jewish school. Currently Jewish life is more intense, with many more activities. Events happen on a daily basis - artists and writers come.

Glossary

1 Iuchbunar

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

2 Keren Kayemet Leisrael (K

K.L.): Jewish National Fund (JNF) founded in 1901 at the Fifth Zionist Congress in Basel. From its inception, the JNF was charged with the task of fundraising in Jewish communities for the purpose of purchasing land in the Land of Israel to create a homeland for the Jewish people. After 1948 the fund was used to improve and afforest the territories gained. Every Jewish family that wished to help the cause had a JNF money box, called the 'blue box'. They threw in at least one lei each day, and on Sabbath and high holidays they threw in as many lei as candles they lit for that holiday. This is how they partly used to collect the necessary funds. Now these boxes are known worldwide as a symbol of Zionism.

3 24th May

The day of Slavic script and culture, a national holiday on which Bulgarian culture and writing is celebrated and St. Kiril and Metodii, the creators of the Slavic alphabet, are honored.

4 Brannik

Pro-fascist youth organization. It was founded 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.

5 Revolutionary Youth Union (also called the Union of Young Workers)

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

6 Kailuka concentration camp

Following protests against the deportation of Bulgarian Jews in Kiustendil (8th March 1943) and Sofia (24th May 1943), Jewish activists, who had taken part in the demonstrations, and their families, several hundred people, were sent to the Somovit concentration camp. The camp had been established on the banks of the Danube, and they were deported there in preparation for their further deportation to the Nazi death camps. About 110 of them, mostly politically active people with predominantly Zionist and left-wing convictions and their relatives, were later redirected to the Kailuka concentration camp. The camp burned down on 10th July 1944 and 10 people died in the fire. It never became clear whether it was an accident or a deliberate sabotage.