

# Aron Ishakh

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Ruse

Bulgaria

Interviewer: Patricia Nikolova

Date of Interview: October 2003

*Aron Ishakh is an energetic, sensitive and intelligent man, who spent all his life in the town of Ruse. Although he is retired now, he is very involved in social activities as a member of the leadership of the 'Shalom' Organization [1](#) of Jews in Ruse and chairman of the local Israelite Spiritual Council. Deeply connected to Jewish life, he lives in a small space, together with four generations of relatives. His hobby is to investigate the history of Jewry in Ruse in detail – from the time of its establishment, through its flourishing and almost complete disappearance today. This is his greatest passion, giving him answers to many questions and providing him with a rare opportunity to preserve the memory of generations of distinguished Ruse Jews.*

I come from a Sephardi family, whose roots reach back to Tsaribrod [today located in the Pirot District of Serbia and officially known as Dimitrovgrad] under Turkish rule. Unfortunately, I don't have many concrete facts or emblematic family stories related to my ancestors. What I do know is that some time around 1917-18 Tsaribrod became Serbian territory and some of the Bulgarians living there together with some Jewish families moved to live in Bulgaria [2](#). One of these families was that of my paternal grandfather and grandmother. They moved to live in Ruse – the beautiful Bulgarian town on the Danube coast, famous for its flourishing Jewish and Bulgarian communities.

I don't know anything about my grandfather's kin, except that the whole Ishakh family from Tsaribrod was burned to death in the death camps in 1943, when the Macedonian Jews were deported. Only one relative remained alive. I only know that he lived in Israel. My grandfather, Samuil Moshe Ishakh, was a very quiet man, although he worked as a tinsmith. He had a workshop in Tsaribrod. When he came to Ruse, he opened another small workshop, 'Tishina' [Silence]. My father, Gavriel Samuel Ishakh, also worked in it.

My grandmother, Luna Ishakh, came to live in Ruse in her last years. Most probably she was a housewife before that. She was a stout, beautiful woman. She wore two or three skirts at the same time. You could even say that she wore all the clothes she had at the same time, in a Turkish fashion. In the end, she came down with a serious illness; she had hallucinations of devils playing.

I don't know when my father's parents were born. I know no details of their life before they came to Bulgaria. In any case, they weren't religious and weren't interested in politics. I remember their house. It was a sagging low house, plastered with mud and lime, similar to the typical Turkish houses from those times. When there was heavy rain, the water poured into the room. They had no garden. They lived in misery. Their neighbors respected them as elderly people. They spent the last years of their lives in a home for the elderly in Ruse.

My father came here as a young man with his family from Tsaribrod. As soon as he came to Ruse, he started looking for work as a tinsmith. So, he was hired in the tin factory of Moreno Atias; he is a relative of mine on my mother's side. My father was so diligent in his work, that Uncle Atias liked him very much and suggested to him, 'Let's marry you to a girl of ours!' It was he who introduced my mother to my father. They married in Ruse in 1919. The ceremony was in the synagogue; in fact, there were no civil marriages at that time.

The family of my mother, Sofi Aron Ashkenazi are native inhabitants of Ruse. My grandfather, Aron Ashkenazi, had his own dressmaking and tailoring studio. This is how he provided for his large family with six children. He used to be a famous tailor in Ruse. My maternal grandmother, Duda Ashkenazi [nee Alfandari], was a housewife. They were religious. I don't know anything else about their kin.

My mother, who was born in Ruse, died young. She was a dressmaker and came from a family of craftsmen. She was a sociable woman. The neighbors, the Bulgarians and the Jews, respected her very much. Before she married my father, she was not poor. But we were very poor, because my father had to support his father, his mother, and us, the four children, at home. Besides, he was forced to sell what he had made extremely cheaply to the merchants.

My parents were neither religious nor political and this passed on to my children as well. We seldom went to the synagogue. We went only on holidays: Yom Kippur, Pesach, Chanukkah, Lag ba-Omer, Purim, Rosh Hashanah. My favorite holiday was Pesach, because the poor children, including my siblings and me, received shoes and clothes from the Jewish community.

We lived in two rooms and a small kitchen. We were four children, plus my mother and my father – six people in all. There was no electricity at that time, we used a gas lamp. Later, when electricity was introduced, we also used it. But we lived in a rented house, and we moved from one house to another. We used wood to warm the rooms. My father made a cooker, which could burn wood. By the way, I do not remember him telling us any war stories.

At home we all spoke only Ladino, but we also understood Bulgarian. My grandfather, grandmother and my mother could also speak Turkish, but my father could not. We did not read religious books; we read mostly secular novels, such as Mayne Reid. Later, during the war, we children also read Marxist literature, dialectical materialism.

There were very nice markets organized in Ruse. Villagers brought their produce and the locals crowded to buy it. There was a big market and a small market. They were organized every Tuesday and Friday. We went to the small market. But we did not have any favorite vendors.

When I was young, I went to the Jewish preschool at the Jewish school in Ruse. It started with the first grade and went up to seventh grade. I graduated from the Jewish school in the town of Ruse. Our teacher was Adon ['mister' in Hebrew] Yosif Safra. He was our favorite teacher. He was very educated. There were no teachers or subjects that I hated; I didn't go to any private lessons, nor did I play any instruments. I started working when I was 14 years old. I must say that everything I have achieved, I have done all by myself, with a lot of hard work and perseverance.

At that time charity giving was very popular in our neighborhood. The resources from the Jewish community's budget were used to implement concrete programs for the separate commissions.

These programs gave poor people the chance to have a normal life. The whole community was involved. Jewish traditions were to a great extent supported by the Jewish school, funded by the Jewish community. In our Hebrew classes we read Tannakh and learned the origins of Jewish traditions. The school headmaster, Adon Yosif Safra, read the Tannakh and taught the children Ivrit. [Editor's note: It must have been classical Hebrew that he taught (maybe besides Ivrit, the modern language) as the religious scripts are written in that language.] The school had 15 classrooms, a canteen and a gym. This is where the Jewish children received their primary education. We did not have a yeshivah. There was a canteen, where many children of poor parents ate, including my brothers and I.

As for our vacations, in 1929 and 1930 I was sent from the Ruse Jewish school to Varna [on the Black Sea coast] to a holiday home owned by the Jewish community of Varna. They took some poor children and with money from the Jewish community, they sent us on vacation. That was the first time I got on a train. A number of rooms with beds awaited us in Varna. There was also a cook, we called her Tanti [Aunt] Hursi. My friends at that time were Jewish kids living on the same street: Miko Polidi, Meto Rubitsa, Itshak – I don't remember his family name, Fiko Koen, Marsela Blansh – we were all the same age, studying in the same class, and living close to each other in the Jewish neighborhood. Usually after school we went to the yard owned by 'Maccabi' [3](#) to play. We were very poor. We had no time for hobbies. Later, I was a member of Maccabi.

The history of Ruse and the Jewish community is the following. In the year 967 the future citizens [he refers to the Bulgarian tribes coming from the plains of Eastern Europe to the Balkans] of the town of Ruse passed the Danube near Silistra and found a way between the river and East Stara Planina [Balkan Mountains]. They founded many villages and towns, among which the town of Ruse in 968, whose name is translated from Ruscuk, its Turkish name meaning 'many Russians'. [Editors note: The Ottoman Turks appeared in the Balkans as late as the late 14th and early 15th Century. The city must have had different names before the Turkish Ruscuk (Slavonic, Greek or Bulgarian) when it was founded in the 10th Century.] We know from Bulgarian history that in 1365 Ivan-Alexander divided the Bulgarian kingdom between his sons. Ivan Shishman, son of Queen Teodora [Empress of Byzantium], a Jew by origin, received the greater part from the Tarnovo Patriarchy, including Ruse. In 1398 after a big battle near Razgrad, the Turks seized Ruse.

In 1519 Ruse was struck by a horrible plague, probably brought by the Turkish army from Odrin. Later, from 1546 until 1561, Rosten Pasha was governor and then vizier [military commander] of Ruse. He had a big mansion near Ruse, called 'seray ciflik' in Turkish, with many watermills. He also built a mosque and other buildings. By the end of the 17th century, Ruse was a small town, with small significance for trade. It is said that the population was around 6-7,000 people, of which 600 families were Bulgarian. [The rest was probably mainly Turkish.] There is no trace of the presence of any Jews in Ruse at this time. After 1788, according to the historians Joanen and Van Gaver, Jewish merchants settled in Ruse, but only temporarily. They point out the names of Eliya Primo, Haim Alhalel, Itshak Alevi and the son of Yosif Benaroyo.

The first Jew to move to Ruse, was Mayer Ben Aron, nicknamed Bohor Karpus. He was the founder of a family with the same family name in the town of Ruse and they lived here until they moved to Israel in 1948. He came, according to some, from Tzarigrad; according to others, from Vidin or Nikopol, brought here by his master tinsmith – an Armenian, to whom the Jew was an apprentice. Before he died, Mayer Ben Aron told the rohet [Hebrew for hospital attendant], who was with him

that he was the first Jew to have settled in Ruse. He also said that the first Jews who moved into Ruse came from Belgrade, where there was a big Jewish community. So, it is assumed that the migration of Jews to Ruse began in 1792.

The governor of Ruse was Mustafa Pasha from Trastenik [a village near Ruse.] He was a brave and humble governor with a big heart, who strongly believed in justice; that is how the Turkish historian Fazif Efendi described him. He loved Jews and encouraged them to settle in Ruse. Mustafa Pasha's wife was sick. A Jewish woman, who was a midwife, looked after her all the time. When the holidays approached, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Jewish woman informed Pasha that she would have to go to Giurgevo [capital city of Giurgiu County, Romania, on the left bank of the Danube] to see her family, since there was no synagogue or Jewish community in Ruse at the time. All Jews who were temporarily in town returned to their families during the holidays. So Mustafa Pasha realized that a synagogue would keep Jews in Ruse during the holidays and each of them would bring their family here. That happened in 1797. Since he was ready to do anything for his sick wife, Mustafa Pasha gave one of his houses on the Danube coast, near the Old Bath, to serve as a prayer house for the Jews. Thus the first synagogue appeared in Ruse.

Two years later when fleeing from Vidin, which was struck by a plague, a group of Jews also settled in Ruse. In 1800, the first chazzan of the synagogue was Rabbi Avram Graciani, who founded the first Jewish community and selected five board members, called madjihidim [an old Spanish word; 'concillors' in Ladino] and a gabbai. They received a Sefer Torah from Giurgevo. Rabbi Avram Graciani was born in Vidin and was said to be a great scholar. According to the rabbi of Odrin, Rabbi Avram ben Aroyo, Rabbi Avram Graciani was worthy of the position. At a general meeting of the community in Ruse, Rabbi Avram Graciani was elected for a term of seven years. He was also a judge and a confidant. Everyone was obliged under oath to recognize his authority and not to contradict him. The elected madjihidim had the task, depending on the material well-being of the community, to set and collect annual taxes, called 'mas' or 'paca.'

The authorities gave a municipal lot to the Jewish community for free and Rabbi Avram Graciani built the first Jewish cemetery for Ruse there, and established conditions for the foundation of the Chevra Rehitza [he refers to the Chevra Kaddisha], which started functioning in 1824. According to the book ['History of the Jewish Community in Ruse', by Shlomo Rozanis, published in 1914] the founding document said: 'We, the undersigned members of the Ruse [then Ruscuk] community, have unanimously decided to establish a 'Chevra Rehitza.' We approve the askama [Hebrew for recommendation] of Rabbi Eliyau Ventura and of the rabbi of the community, Rabbi Avram Graciani, and we are bound to do all that is necessary in case of death.'

Ever since their settlement in Ruscuk, the Jews took an active part in the economic progress of the town, because they were quite well-off. This was due mostly to their knowledge and skills in trade and entrepreneurial spirit. The Ruse Jews, who were merchants, together with the Bulgarians, were one of the first to organize import-export trade. They imported manufactured goods from England and Brasso [town in Transylvania], haberdashery from Bohemia, ironware from Saxony and colonial goods from France. They traveled to Bucharest, along the Danube to Vienna, and from there to Leipzig, or even to Manchester. Their high incomes gave them the appearance of a bourgeois class in the heart of the Ottoman feudal order. Their travels to Europe helped to establish useful connections. When the Habsburg Empire decided to establish a consulate in Ruse, Avram Kaneti was chosen to be their agent.

As early as 1867 the Jewish community founded the first school called mildar, which in Ladino means a place for reading. Such mildars existed in almost all Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire. They were very primitive educational facilities. The first teacher was Sinay Graciani. The classes consisted of reading the Pentateuch. They read it and wrote in Ladino. In 1869, under the initiative of the chairman of the Jewish community in Ruse, Avram Rozanis, the foundations of a modern secular school were laid. He managed to buy an old house for the school and attracted the famous pedagogues Menahem Farhi, Isak Davidovich Bali and Haim Bidzherano. Ten years later the school was restructured into an alliance with new rules and regulations and became the first secular school in Bulgaria, free from religious dogma.

The community of Ruse was the fourth largest Jewish community in Bulgaria, after Sofia, Plovdiv and Varna. According to the 1934 census, 2,356 Jews lived in Ruse, and in 1942 they were 2,630; so over a period of 8 years there was an increase of 270 people, newly-born and coming from other towns. Looking at graphic data on the people living in Ruse, we can see that in 1942 the overall population of the town was 52,000, with 2,630 Jews. In other words, the Jews comprised 5.1% of the town's population. In 1945 the population had reached 55,000, of which there were 5,500 Jews, or 10%. In 1944 the population was 58,000, with 6,132 Jews, or 9.1%. The increase in number of Jews in Ruse in 1943 was due to the forced internment of the Jews from Sofia during the Law for Protection of the Nation [4](#). So, some 3,502 people were interned in Ruse.

During my childhood, the Jewish people in Ruse still continued to take an active part in the development of the economic life of the town. The founders included wealthy Jews such as Avram Ventura, owner of the Zhiti Factory, producing ironware and wire; Iskovich Levi, producing paint and varnish; Mushon Melamed, producing stationery; Nissim Mevorah, producing rubber materials; Herman Hirsch, producing cement, Atiyas and Buko Heskiya, producing canned vegetables; Haim and Shimon Barutchievi, producing cartridges and explosives; Nissim Nissimov, producing hats; Solomon Arie, producing shirts; Lazar Aron, import and trade of petrol products; brothers Mizrahi, Fazan Factory producing socks; Alkalay and Panizhel, trading eggs; Sabetay Beniesh, oil-factory and production of confectionery; Blaushtain, producing ladies' palarii ['hats' in the local Bulgarian dialect] and haberdashery; Samuil Patak, producing stationery; Asher and Mois Yakov, commissioners.

The famous merchants in Ruse were Nissim Surozhon, Avram Bensusan, brothers Arditi, Asher Uziel, brothers Benvenisti, Nissim Dzhivri, Fiko Kapon, Marko Kohenov, brothers Aladzhem and brothers Shoev.

In the crafts sector there were tinsmiths with their own workshops: Haim Alfandari, Avram Ashkenazi, Sabetay Benyamin Ashkenazi and my grandfather, Gavriel Samuel Ishakh. Tailors and seamstresses: Sinto Ashkenazi, Rashel Vidas, Nora Fortune, Ester Machilarkata, Regina Ayzner.

The statistical data for the town of Ruse show that the majority of the Jews in Ruse were hired workers, craftsmen, retailers and servicemen – they earned their living with hard labor.

There was also a Jewish choir called 'David', which had a special wedding program, which they performed at Jewish weddings in the synagogue with the participation of talented Jewish singers. The opera 'Cornevil Bells' was performed in the theater in Ruse and was very successful, as well as the operetta 'The Black Spot'; unfortunately I don't know the authors and directors of these works. The musical association 'David' was run by the conductor Isak Leon Ashkenazi and by the deputy

chairman Rober Beraha. There was also a choir and an orchestra at the synagogue, and a youth jazz orchestra – one of the first in the country, run by Ziko Graciani. You could say that the musical association ‘David’ laid the grounds for the art of opera in Ruse.

The youth Zionist organizations Maccabi [3](#) and ‘Hashomer Hatzair’ [5](#) and mass events like maccabiada and moshav [summer camps of ‘Hashomer Hatzair’] were very important for Jewish communal life. The maccabiads were accompanied by gymnastic competitions. So, once a year, almost the whole Jewish community gathered together. For example, in 1930 a big gym was built on 20 Vidin Street in the Jewish neighborhood. Every day when classes were over, you could hear the hubbub of the Jewish children playing in the yard. The noticeable ‘Hashomer Hatzair’ youth leaders, were Elika Ayzner, Yonel Markus, Iko Konorti, Sofi Kapon, Yako Yakov and Tinka Dzhain. And for ‘Maccabi’ – Mimi Bensusan, Moni Hakim, Fifi Mashiah, Miko Yulzari, Itsko Ayzner and Rafael Kauli. The yard of the old Jewish school, which was opposite the Odeon cinema, was the girls' and boys' meeting place, fans of ‘Hashomer Hatzair’; they sang Jewish songs, whose lyrics and melodies I, personally, do not remember; played Jewish dances; and learned to love Palestine, which was also called ‘The Jews' Promised Land’. During summer vacations they sent groups of boys and girls to hakhsharah in state agricultural farms such as Obraztsov Chiflik [meaning ‘Model Farm’ in Bulgarian] – in Ruse and Sadovo, in the Plovdiv region, where they worked and learned how to cultivate the land. They were being prepared to be future members of kibbutzim and in fact, after the emigration of Bulgarian Jews from the shomrim [in Hebrew - members of ‘Hashomer Hatzair’], flourishing kibbutzim were created in bare, rocky areas. In 1939, an aliyah for Palestine was organized, and a group of young men from Ruse took part in it. Such an aliyah was also organized in 1941.

In the Jewish neighborhood in my childhood on the streets of David, Vidin, Klementina, Gurko, Dondukov, Korsakov and others, densely inhabited by Jews, you could see small sagging houses, where the poor Jews lived in misery. In some places there were nice, tall houses owned by the richer Jews. Social interaction between the poor and the rich was helped by the Jewish community, who did everything possible to collect money from the richer Jews in order to support the poorer ones.

Archive documents show that on 1st July 1912, 33 Jews from Ruse founded a charity called ‘Malbish Arumim’ [this name is taken from a blessing said every morning, thanking G-d for ‘clothing the naked’.] They elected Moysey Avram Ventura as chairman and David Geron as secretary. The aim of the charity was to give away clothes and shoes to the poorer students from the Jewish school in Ruse. In 1913 the Education Ministry approved the charity's statute and it was registered in Ruse's district court as a legal entity. A letter from the charity to the Jewish Sephardi community [there was also an Ashkenazi community] shows that the initiative to found such a charity dates back to 1891. In 1938, remembering the history of the founding of the ‘Malbish’, one of the founding members, Samuil Ventura, tells how, they gathered and founded the charity, led by their good intentions. At first, their resources allowed them to dress 10 poor students, but over the course of time, this increased to 65 children. On 2nd April 1932, the charity bought a two-storey house on 16 Gurko Street from the Catholic bishop Damian Yosif Telen, which still exists, and it's still ours, now owned by ‘Shalom’ ; they used it as an office and club, in which to organize their meetings, so that the Jews would not be dispersed among other cafés and clubs.

Now this house is rented by various companies and the money goes to the regional 'Shalom' organization. The association is being funded by members' fees, income from the café reading room, which was in the building, periodic charity events, charity Purim balls and evening parties, and the daily 'Hazkarat Neshamot' [memorial services]. In 1933, the general assembly voted for changes to the Statute, increasing the goals of the association, including setting up a refectory in the Jewish school in Ruse where the poor students could eat, so that they would be supported in their physical, moral and intellectual growth. Such a refectory existed in the Jewish school on 30 Rila Street until the school was closed. A change to article III from the Statute was accepted; this stated that 'honored members are those Jews who have donated at least 5,000 leva to the association.' The first honored members were Jacques Elias, Perets Pizanti, Israel Moshe Levi – the founders. But in 1937, when they were declared as such, they lived in Sofia. Dr. Isak Kalmi was also an honored member. He was a long-time chairman of the board of the association.

At that time the Jewish community had its own building, consisting of three offices, a big hall and a library. It also stored various registers on the Jews of Ruse – a family register, marriage register, birth register and funeral register. The birth register noted the date of brit milah. There was another register for bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah. They are still preserved today. The Bikur Holim commission, chaired by Mois Israel Ashkenazi, provided nurses to sick and lonely poor Jews. The people responsible for the Chevra Kaddisha were Mois Aron Hakim and Yosif Shlomo Kapon. They took care of the Jewish cemeteries and made sure that funeral procedures were done in accordance with religious requirements of the Jewish tradition. There was a small house in the cemetery, where a paid guard lived the whole year. The women responsible for Etz Haim, the commission for sick poor people and women who have given birth, were Mari Avram Asher, Ernestina Aron Dzhaldeci and Sofi David Maer. They visited sick people and gave them money for medicine. The people responsible for the charities commission were Isak Leon Ashkenazi and Baruh Yako Magriso. Their mission was respected in the Jewish community, who provided money for the budget. Dr. Yako Kapon was in charge of the home for the elderly, which was owned by the community. Twenty poor and lonely people were fully supported there by the Jewish community. My grandfather and grandmother were among them.

In 1942 my mother died from stomach cancer and we, the four children, remained with my father. I knew that my mother had cancer, but I did not know that she was so seriously sick. I remember clearly that on 16th November 1942 when we were released from the camp in the village of Mikre, Lovech region, coming to Ruse, I found my mother on her death bed. When she saw me, she said, 'I am very sick, I am going away...You take care of the kids.' I was 18 years old then. Three days later my mother died. A year after her death, my father remarried and went with Shlima, his second wife, to live in Sofia. We, the children, remained alone in Ruse. I know nothing more about Shlima. My brothers' names are Moni [Solomon] born in 1925 and Sami [Samuel] Ishakh born in 1930. My sister Rifka [Rebecca] Levi was born in 1928 and now lives in Holon, Israel. I do not know the family name of my stepmother. At that time, since I was the eldest, I had to work and support my brothers until they left for Israel with the big aliyah of 1948. My father also moved to Israel and died there in 1969. My brothers and sister still live in Israel with their families.

My mother's death combined with another hard event in my life. When I was 18, I was sent to the forced labor camp in the village of Mikre, in the Lovech region. I was there until November 1942. We were released on 16th November and we spent December and January at home. In February we

were sent to another camp – ‘Sveti Vrach.’ We were there until the end of the year. We were once again released for one or two months and in May we were sent to a third camp – in the village of Vesselinovo, in the Shumen region. 9th September [1944] [6](#) came while we were there. In fact, we were used as a free labor force. At that time we were building the road Shumen-Burgas. It was very hard.

What happened in the end was interesting. On 6th September 1944 Israel Mayer [a Jew from Ruse, taking an active part in the illegal UYW [7](#) organization, which continued to exist secretly in the camp], who was in the sixth group, while we were in the eighth, came to the camp. He brought a flag with the image of Lenin [8](#) and told Solomon Aladzhem, who was a member of the communist party, that he should disarm the guards and let the Jews go to their homes. Solomon Aladzhem gathered a few people, also progressive men: Albert Filkenstein [a lawyer, later he was prosecutor in Sofia], his brother Jacques Filkenstein and me. He ordered us to disarm the guards. I had to disarm the captain of the guards. I do not remember his name. I knocked on the door of his office and told him that I had a letter from the eighth group. I entered, holding my hand in my pocket and said ‘Raise your hands, give me your weapon!’ He panicked and shouted, ‘It is in the briefcase, take it!’ I took the gun and went back to give it to Solomon Aladzhem. But it turned out the gun was without a cartridge. ‘Where is the cartridge?’ he asked. I went back to the shed, ‘Give me the cartridge!’ I took it and brought it to Solomon Aladzhem. Jacques and Albert Filkenstein disarmed the three non-commissioned officers. Then we made an improvised general meeting in the camp and said to everybody, ‘Go wherever you like, because we could be pursued.’ So, we freed the Jews in the camp and came back to Ruse.

One year before the death of my mother I experienced the first anti-Semitic reaction against me. In 1941, since my mother was already very sick, I had to get up early in the morning to buy yoghurt. But the Law for Protection of the Nation forbade us to go out earlier than 8am. Despite this, I went out and bought it, but a policeman met me on my way. ‘What are you carrying’ – ‘Yoghurt’ – ‘Give it to me!’ He took the yoghurt and took me to the police. They prepared an act and fined me 500 levs for going out before the appointed hour. We were poor and thankfully a cousin of mine took pity on us and gave us the money to pay the fine.

This incident affected me. It was true that in Ruse in particular the Jews were invited to share the Bulgarian traditions, which formed the basis of their friendship with the Bulgarians. However in the years before the war, with the support of the pro-German movement ‘Social Power’, youth fascist organizations were set up in Bulgaria: Brannik [9](#), Ratnik [10](#), Legionaries [11](#) and ‘Otets Paisii’ – modeled after the German Hitler Youth [Hitlerjugend] with emphasis on anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic activities. They wrote anti-Jewish slogans on the walls of the houses and distributed leaflets urging the population to despise and hate the Jews.

Between 1940 and 1941, 460 Jews were sentenced to imprisonment in the Bulgarian jails. Examples of such Jews from Ruse were Moni Hakim, Sason Panizhel, Liza Hason, Jules Aroyo, Yako Melamed, Salvador Papo, Eli Ashoev, Hor Eliezer, Mois Natan, Izidor Ayzner, Izho Levi, Yako Yulzari, who were imprisoned for being members of the UYW. 260 Jews fought in the partisan squads, among them Yako Izidor Yakov and Miko Yulzari from Ruse.

The leadership of the Jewish community included a large number of Jews mainly from the Zionist organizations. Individuals from other political parties and organizations did not have much

influence in the Jewish community. The Jewish community's political inclinations fell in two directions – Zionism and Jewish religious rites and traditions. Suddenly, the military period aggravated the scuffles between the various Jewish organizations and increased the gap between their ideological beliefs. At one end of the spectrum were all the Zionist organizations: 'Poale Zion' [leftist Zionism]; 'General Zionists'; and 'Revisionists', who were unanimous that the Jews should avoid any intervention in the war against fascism. They thought that any participation of Jews would increase anti-Semitic attitudes. So they ran an overt campaign to dissuade the Jews. The leadership of the Jewish community, headed by the chairman Yosif Levi, took their side. On a number of occasions on Erev Sabbath in the big synagogue, he appealed to the parents to do their best to influence their children not to take part in the anti-fascist struggle. At the other end of the spectrum was 'Hashomer Hatzair', under the influence of Izidor Ayzner, Yako Yakov and Tinka Dzhain, who supported the anti-fascist struggle. Some of the youth from 'Maccabi', among them Moni Hakim, Miko Yulzari, Fifi Mashiah and Liza Hason, attracted a large following. These young people from Ruse, organized into groups of three, were involved in illegal activities against fascism.

In 1941 when the German army invaded the USSR, Leon Tadzher, a port worker in Ruse, who had escaped from a Jewish concentration camp, set fire to the petrol factory's refineries. When the German guards tried to capture him, he stabbed them to death, but was captured by the workers chasing him. He was later sentenced to death and hanged. After this act the Ruse GESTAPO ordered the regional police chief to detain 300 of the most distinguished Jews from the town and hand them to the Germans to deport them to the death camps. Yosif Levi, chairman of the Jewish community, had to prepare the list. He did so, but instead of including distinguished Jews, he included the relatives of Jewish political prisoners and communists, who were involved in anti-fascist activities. The rich Jews gave a large sum of money to the police chief Stefan Simeonov, who was also a delegate for Jewish issues and in this way they were exempt from the list. I personally do not approve of that. The Jews on the list were arrested and sent to temporary detention camps in Somovit and Pleven, in the Kailuka, region with the intention to deport them to the death camps. The camp in Kailuka [12](#) was set on fire. One man from Ruse, Nissim Benvenisti, was among the ten people who died. The replacement of the names on the list and the bribe given to the police chief was made known later, after the fall of fascism in Bulgaria. Yosif Levi hid in the English embassy, from where he went to Palestine. But he was not put on trial, because he was forced to prepare that list.

I have a similar memory from the 'Sveti Vrach' camp. We were a group of progressive young men there: Ariko Haimov, Yako Yakov, Miko Yulzari, Pepo from Haskovo [town in South Bulgaria], and we kept in contact with partisan supporters. On 6th March 1943 we received a telegram - we were allowed to receive telegrams - from our parents in Ruse that they had been ordered to collect luggage of no more than 20 kg and within three days gather at the port centers for deportation to the death camps; of course, it is only now that we know of the death camps, they had no idea where they were to be sent at the time. We, the progressive youths, decided that if this deportation took place, we would kill all the guards, including a captain, sergeant major and four NCOs and go into hiding. But we didn't have to do that because we received a second telegram on 8th March from our parents saying that the evacuation [that is, the deportation] had been canceled.

My other memory is from the camp in the village of Mikre. There was a very cruel lieutenant there; I don't remember his name. One morning, people from the village offered us bread and yoghurt, which we bought. The poorer ones among us washed the dishes of the richer ones – Avram Ventura was among them – for pocket money and that's how we had some. The lieutenant caught us at that moment – me, Fiko Koen, Aron and Rafael Abular and chased us with a shovel. Two of us managed to escape, but Fiko couldn't and the blade of the shovel split his back in two. He lay in stitches for two weeks.

Honestly, I have not had problems with my origin at my workplace, because after 9th September 1944, right after I returned from the camp, I started to work for the police force and spent fifteen years there. I retired as an officer. But we, the Jews, had to work twice as hard as the others to prove that we are good and to keep our jobs.

I met my wife, Bela Alfandari, in 1945. At that time we were UYW members and we had to prepare a wall-newspaper. We gathered on 6 Gurko Street in the UYW club. I accompanied her to her house on the way home and we became friends. We married on 19th September of the same year. Ours was one of the first civil marriages in Ruse. She was born in Ruse. She is a hairdresser and has two sisters; she was the youngest and the first to marry. Her sisters' names are Victoria Markus and Ester Alfandari. Both are now in Israel. Ester Alfandari lives in Rishon Le Zion; she has a son, who is a doctor. Victoria lives near Haifa.

After the state of Israel was established, we all felt it was our country and we felt very close to the Jewish people. During the wars in Israel in 1967 and 1973 we read the news in the Bulgarian press, but we didn't believe it. We knew from the letters we received from our relatives that the war was provoked by the Arabs. I went to Israel only once – in 1989. I spent a month visiting my brothers. I liked life there very much. But when I came back to Bulgaria, I felt the difference in all aspects of the progress of the two nations – Bulgaria and Israel.

I have two daughters – Sonia, born in 1946 and Roza, born in 1953. My older daughter graduated from the mechanical technical school 'Yuriy Gagarin' in Ruse. Now she works in 'Shalom' and chairs the finance division at the local 'Shalom'. She collects the rent from the organization's properties. This money is used to run the Jewish organization in Ruse. My younger daughter works as a statistician. Roza is divorced. Her surname was Dalakmanska by her husband, now she is Ishakh once again. My elder daughter's surname is Grigorova. Her son, Aron, lives in Ramat Gan. He graduated from college in trade and industry management and is now in his last year of studies for a degree in engineering. He works in a company and the management is very happy with his work. His name was Roman before, because there was a regulation in Bulgarian law that children from mixed marriages were Bulgarian nationals and could not have Jewish names. That law was adopted during the totalitarian regime in Bulgaria.

My children were raised to feel Jewish by their grandparents, Menahem and Roza Alfandari, my wife's parents, who were quiet people. They were very religious and observed all the traditions. They taught my children about Jewish cuisine and our holidays: Pesach, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, Sukkot, Lag ba-Omer. They observed them at home. Of course, we also went to the synagogue. There were three synagogues in Ruse; two for Sephardi Jews and one for Ashkenazi Jews. Various religious rites were performed in the two Sephardi synagogues, which were called the 'small' and the 'big' synagogue. During the week the prayers were performed in the small

synagogue. My family usually went to the big synagogue. On Erev Sabbath and on Jewish holidays the Torah was read in the big synagogue. In it every family who had paid a voluntary fee had their own seat. On prayer days such as Pesach, Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, women also came into the synagogue and sat separately from the men on the balcony.

Menahem Alfandari [Aron Ishakh's wife Bela's father] was a son of the rabbi in Silistra [their family moved from Silistra to Ruse after Silistra was annexed to Romania after the end of WWI]. When our fellow Jews immigrated to Israel and we were left without a chazzan, he used to read the prayers in the synagogue. His wife, Roza Alfandari, was a housewife.

The chazzan of the Sephardi synagogue was Yosif Alhalel, who was the secretary of the Jewish community. Albert Yulzari was shammash and in charge of the archives. The rabbi of the Ashkenazi synagogue was Naftali Rut and the shammash was Lupo Geldstein. Simon Segal and Morits Kronberg were in charge of the Chevra Kaddisha. The Sephardi and Ashkenazi synagogues were religious centers, in which young and old Jews gathered on Erev Sabbath and on religious holidays, which kept the Jewish traditions alive and passed them from generation to generation. The religious activities of the synagogues were part of the overall activity of the Jewish community in Ruse.

There were no major differences between the Sephardi and the much smaller Ashkenazi community in Ruse – neither in religious aspects, nor in everyday life. We shared one Beit Aam [cultural and administrative center, including the head office of the community administration, various clubs, the library, etc.]. Concerts and parties were regularly organized there. The events organized by the Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities were for all the Jews; we were not strictly divided into Ashkenazim and Sephardim, only our synagogues were separate. But when the Law for Protection of the Nation was passed, the Ashkenazi community was closed, and their synagogue too. Then the two communities merged. That happened in 1943, when the authorities fired the rabbi Naftali. In 1947 he immigrated with his family to Israel, together with most of the Ashkenazi Jews. Only two families remained – Ayzner and Goldstein. Meanwhile, all property owned by the Jews, including the synagogues, were nationalized by the communist authorities and returned after the political changes in 1989.

We, the Jewish members of 'Shalom', are an apolitical organization. We're not involved in politics; the positive thing is that we had our properties given back, which allowed us to lead a better life and to have the freedom to restore our traditions. I was a member of the leadership of 'Shalom' for 30 years, from 1961 until 1989. I was also deputy chairman of the organization for some time in the last few years. I remember that, during the totalitarian regime, all our properties were confiscated, the reason given to us being that a cultural and educational organization should not own property. The leadership of the 'Shalom' center in Sofia supported us. We received 2,000 – 3,000 levs per year, with which we paid the rent on the hall we used in the building on 6 Gurko Street. We had our own building taken away and we had to pay rent to 'Zhilfond' [meaning 'housing fund' in Bulgarian]. We were not allowed to perform Jewish activities. We had to organize events together with the Fatherland Front [13](#); we were afraid to organize anything. The aim of the Central Committee of the Communist Party's policy was to assimilate the Jews faster and painlessly. They also wanted to assimilate us with mixed marriages – they agitated us to have mixed marriages, so that we would change our names and abandon the traditions of the Jewish family. That was a bad period for us.

When they took our properties, they also took our synagogues – the Ashkenazi synagogue and the big Sephardi synagogue. The small Sephardi synagogue was demolished a long time ago. The big synagogue was given to a sculptor from the City Council and he made his sculptures there. The synagogue was in a decrepit state. The Ashkenazi one was rented by ‘Sport Toto’ [state lottery]. They built 12 rooms in it. So when we had our properties back, we had the synagogues too. Thirteen properties were returned to us, while we had given them thirty two properties with a protocol from the community. The others were sold or demolished. In the Ashkenazi synagogue we had to knock down walls and restore it to be a synagogue again. We needed money, which we did not have. So in 1992 we sold a property on Alexandrovska Street and started the repairs. But the big synagogue also started falling apart, and we once again did not have money for it. We asked for a loan of 100,000 levs from the central leadership of ‘Shalom’ in Sofia – a lot of money, and no one could give us so much. That's why the leadership of ‘Shalom’ decided to sell the synagogue to an Evangelist sect. So we sold it. They spent \$120,000 USD to restore it. Now, the synagogue has been restored to its former state.. We have no money to buy it back. The small Sephardi synagogue was demolished in 1935, because it was falling apart and the Jewish community decided to demolish it and build a housing estate in its place.

I have chaired the Israeli Spiritual Council in Ruse for three years. The previous chairman was Robert Beraha; the problems with the return and restoration of the synagogues happened during his term. Of course, now people don't approve of the sale of the synagogue, because it's said that even if one Jew remains, the synagogue must exist until the end.

After the changes I received aid from the Swiss fund three times. But my political views as a communist do not square with all that democracy brought to Bulgaria. Unemployment, the misery of the people, I don't approve of them. In 1989 everyone had a job; people lived more or less well: we could build our own houses; we had a piece of land, which we cultivated. Now my family is also affected by unemployment. My grandson, Roza's son, is without work. He is 30 years old. His wife is unemployed too – we helped them with our pensions and with the help of the girl's parents.

Glossary

## **1 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.

## **2 Bulgaria in World War I**

Bulgaria entered the war in October 1915 on the side of the Central Powers. Its main aim was the revision of the Treaty of Bucharest: the acquisition of Macedonia. Bulgaria quickly overran most of Serbian Macedonia as well as parts of Serbia; in 1916 with German backing it entered Greece (Western Thrace and the hinterlands of Salonika). After Romania surrendered to the Central Powers Bulgaria also recovered Southern Dobrudzha, which had been lost to Romania after the First Balkan War. The Bulgarian advance to Greece was halted after British, French and Serbian troops landed in Salonika, while in the north Romania joined the Allies in 1916. Conditions at the front deteriorated rapidly and political support for the war eroded. The agrarians and socialist workers

intensified their antiwar campaigns, and soldier committees were formed in the army. A battle at Dobro Pole brought total retreat, and in ten days the Allies entered Bulgaria. On 29th September 1918 Bulgaria signed an armistice and withdrew from the war. The Treaty of Neuilly (November 1919) imposed by the Allies on Bulgaria, deprived the country of its World War I gains as well as its outlet to the Aegean Sea (Eastern Thrace).

### **3 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.

### **4 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.

### **5 Hashomer Hatzair in Bulgaria**

'The Young Watchman'; A Zionist-socialist pioneering movement established in Bulgaria in 1932, Hashomer Hatzair trained youth for kibbutz life and set up kibbutzim in Palestine. During World War II, members were sent to Nazi-occupied areas and became leaders in Jewish resistance groups. After the war, Hashomer Hatzair was active in 'illegal' immigration to Palestine.

### **6 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.

## **7 UYW**

A communist youth organization, which was legally established in 1928 as a sub-organization of the Bulgarian Communist Youth Union. After the coup d'état 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.

## **8 Lenin (1870-1924)**

Pseudonym of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, the Russian Communist leader. A profound student of Marxism, and a revolutionary in the 1890s. He became the leader of the Bolshevik faction of the Social Democratic Party, whom he led to power in the coup d'état of 25th October 1917. Lenin became head of the Soviet state and retained this post until his death.

## **9 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.

## **10 Ratniks**

The Ratniks, like the Branniks, were also members of a nationalist organization. They advocated a return to national values. The word 'rat' comes from the Old Bulgarian root meaning 'battle', i.e. 'Ratniks' fighters, soldiers.

## **11 Legionaries**

Members of the Union of the Bulgarian National Legions. The UBNL was a pro-fascist non-governmental organization, established in 1930. It aimed at building a corporate totalitarian state on the basis of military centralism, following the model of Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy. It existed until 1944.

## **12 Kailuka concentration camp**

Following protests against the deportation of Bulgarian Jews in Kjustendil (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.

### **13 Fatherland Front**

A broad left wing coalition, created in 1942 in order to oppose the governmental policy of allying Bulgaria to the Triple Pact (Germany, Italy, Japan) in WWII. The government that came to power on 9th September 1944 was a Fatherland Front government, actually ruled by the communists. In the years 1944-1989 the organization became a satellite of the Communist Party aimed at leading it to absolute power.