

Yosif Avram Levi

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Sofia

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Interviewer: Dimitar Bozhilov

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Yosif Avram Levi is a former chairman of the Israeli Spiritual Council in Bulgaria. He is of medium height, always dressed in a suit and when he works in his office in the Sofia synagogue, he wears a beautiful blue kippah with golden embroidery. He is widely recognized among his coevals as the one with the deepest knowledge in Ivrit. Therefore he is in great demand as a Hebrew translator. There is always an Israeli daily at his desk and portraits of Sofian Rabbis are hanging on the walls of his office. He spends every working day in the Sofia synagogue. On Sabbath and holidays he reads the prayers and demonstrates an excellent talent in singing.

As you know, most of the Jews in Bulgaria came from Spain [following the expulsion of the Jews from Spain] [1](#), therefore the Jews on the Balkan Peninsula, from Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, Macedonia, part of Yugoslavia and a small part of Romania spoke Spanish [i.e. Ladino] [2](#). Our origin is Sephardic as well as the traditions we observe. Wherever we go in Spanish speaking countries, we can easily communicate in this language. We have good contacts here, at the Sofia synagogue with Spanish Jews, with people of any ethnic origin from Spain and Latin America, and we maintain good relations with them. Yet, there is quite a difference between our ancient Spanish, which is the language of Servants and the contemporary Spanish language. This is a very interesting topic for the Spanish linguists.

There are a lot of rabbis in my father's kin. My paternal grandfather, as well as many of his ancestors used to be rabbis, who have played an important public role. They were Spanish Jews who used to live for a long time in Solun [today Thessaloniki, Greece]. My grandfather went with his family to Gorna Dzhumaya and settled there.

I can't tell anything specific about my grandparents, as our father was quite old when he got married. There is a big age gap between my parents. It was a second marriage for both my parents. My father used to have a wife but they had no children. His first wife burnt to death in a tragic accident in Dupnitsa. There was a fire in their house and she died in it. He was 46 or 47 years old at that time. Then he went to Sofia in order to look for a wife. My mother was born in 1889, and my father in 1865. Their age difference was 24 years.

My father's name was Avram Levi. He was the third child in his family. The first-born child was his eldest brother Haim, followed by Shabat, and then he. I suppose my father's brothers used to be merchants. My father had two names: Avram-Nissim. At the time of his birth his mother had severe pains and the family decided that if a boy was born they would call him Avram, yet because of the fact that he was born with difficulty, they added also Nissim, which means 'wonders.' He was

known among people as Avram-Nissim. He was the only one with two names in our family and among our Jewish community. The fact that he had two names caused quite a lot of trouble for us, because it isn't common in Bulgaria for someone to have two names. Our family name is Levi. I was called Yosif Avram-Nissim Levi, thus they become four names, which isn't customary here neither among Jews, nor Bulgarians. Therefore, we accepted only the first and last name: Avram Levi. In his youth, my father used to sign himself as Avram-Nissim David Levi, while later, when he grew older, he signed himself as Avram-Nissim Levi.

Both my father and mother originated from Sephardic families and the language spoken at home was Ladino. Of course, as soon as we started attending school and in a Bulgarian environment, we learnt Bulgarian well. Our Bulgarian was more fluent than our Ladino.

I know an interesting story about my mother's kin. Two thousand years ago the Jews in Palestine used to live in tribes. When the Roman legions realized they wouldn't be able to conquer them, they chased all of them away. They set out in the four cardinal points. The chosen direction of each tribe was known by its tombstones. When the Spanish Jews settled on the Balkan Peninsula they found other Jews. Those were the local Jews, who had settled there before the arrival of the Spanish Jews. The chief family among them was the Behar family. My mother's kin is Behar: her father was called Isak Behar. My grandfather originated from those Jews. According to sources of Bulgarian history, at the beginning of the 14th century the Bulgarian tsar, Ivan-Alexander, sent his first wife to a monastery and married a beautiful Jewess, Sarah, who gave birth to his heir to the crown: Tsar Ivan Shishman. According to our Jewish laws, Tsar Ivan Shishman was a Jew, as his mother was Jewish.

My mother, Rashel Levi, was from Dupnitsa. She had been married before but her first husband perished on the front during the First Balkan War [3](#). Thus she remained a widow with one daughter. From Dupnitsa she moved to Sofia, where her brother lived. There she searched for an opportunity to get married. And this is how my parents met. My father learned somehow about her, likewise she learned about him and he took her to Gorna Dzhumaya. They got married and every two years my mother gave birth to a child: she gave birth to six children. All my siblings were born in Gorna Dzhumaya, except for my eldest sister. The story of my family, which I'm about to narrate began in the town of Gorna Dzhumaya, where my family lived until 1925.

My father used to be a rabbi in Gorna Dzhumaya. The rabbi played a very significant role in such [small] places, as he used to perform all the rituals. He not only read the prayers but also slaughtered the animals, circumcised the boys after their birth, and conducted wedding ceremonies. I don't know why my father decided to settle in Vratsa, moreover it seems to me that I had never asked him, but during the 1920s many emigrants from Macedonia settled in Gorna Dzhumaya and there were a lot of murders. My father got scared of these things and in 1925 my family moved to Vratsa.

My father was the only one in the town to perform Jewish religious customs: beginning with the reading of the prayer on Friday and Saturday as well as all the holiday rituals. Moreover, he was also a shochet: he used to slaughter the animals and provided meat for the Jewish community. When he slaughtered the animals he used to bring home meat and pluck from the slaughterhouse. We were fed up of eating liver and pluck as when he slaughtered the animals he always brought such things. In accordance with our custom he made us put liver and heart on a plate and take it to

other Jewish families. It's also done during the holiday of Purim.

When my brothers and I were still small the spirit of patriarchy used to dominate in our family. Every evening we used to get together and read the prayer before eating. After finishing dinner we used to say the prayer again. It was quite long and therefore we, the kids, impatiently waited for it to finish. We also performed all customs in accordance with our traditions during the holidays: Rosh Hashanah, [Yom] Kippur and Pesach.

We weren't quite well-off in those times. Begging us to eat wasn't typical for our parents likewise in other families. Our food was always scanty. We always observed who would receive less and who would receive more. My mother always split the food equally, but in the end she would always give me just a little bit more.

My father was the head of the family and he made most of the money. We used to consult him concerning every problem which had to be solved. Life was difficult for him. He gave all the money he earned to his family: he never kept it for himself. It was very rare for him to have a suit made for him, or buy something for him personally. Money was never enough and we were in a difficult financial situation. But I must emphasize that despite the financial limitations we had to endure, as a whole we grew up comparatively healthy. Diabetes was the illness of rich people, who pampered themselves with food containing a lot of sugar. This illness was quite 'popular' among Jews, as the rich Jews did like to overindulge into it. We had nothing to pamper ourselves with. We ate less butter and fat food unlike the others, but at dinner time when my mother used to cook beans, we used to eat two plates of it, or potatoes with meat balls, which was also among our favorite dishes. As a whole our cuisine was a 'soup' one, i.e. it consisted mainly of liquid dishes, which could be poured into the plate, so that we could eat more. Anyway, financial difficulties never became an obstacle for us, always being very glad and happy at home.

I was born in Vratsa in 1925. I remember very well that at that time we still didn't have electricity in the town. The synagogue was stuck to the house we used to live in. We shared it with another family. I remember my mother washing the gas lamp every Friday, changing its candlewick, and lighting it up. In fall, my mother used to prepare a special grape wine so that my father could read the blessing for Sabbath after returning from the synagogue. On Sabbath we usually had chicken with rice or pastel [traditional Jewish dish made of flour and mince veal]. This is a pastry with meat. During the week we had ordinary meals but on Friday evening and on Saturday there was always meat, and it was a great pleasure for us. Our family was poor and we didn't keep any special dishes for holidays except for Pesach.

We used to get together during the holidays when we were young: on Pesach and Rosh Hashanah, and my father performed the rituals. Yet, after some time, when my brothers started to work, the closeness of the family gradually disappeared. The family couldn't gather any longer. Only the two of us: my sister Adela and I were present. Yet all of us did gather on Pesach and the other great holidays. And my father always performed the ritual in accordance with the Jewish customs.

I remember that in the morning when we wondered what our breakfast would be that day, I usually went to buy a large piece of khalva [oriental dessert delicacy: the word is of Turkish origin], which was around a quarter of a kilo. My mother gave each one of us a piece, and that was our breakfast. I was always sent to do the shopping and although I didn't have any financial guarantees, every day I took on credit four breads from a bakery on Sredna Gora Street. We ate mostly bread on a

regular basis. As soon as the 15th or the 30th day of the month arrived my father and brother went there and paid for the bread for the whole period. That's how our life went on.

In 1933 the family moved to Sofia with the help of my uncle, my mother's brother, who assisted us in finding a place to stay. In Sofia my father wasn't a chief rabbi but he served in small prayer houses which were spread all over the city. It was done because according to our customs Saturday is forbidden for traveling, using a car or any vehicle. People insisted on having a prayer house near their homes so that when the prayer was over they could easily get back home. So, my father served in one of those houses.

When we moved from Vratsa to Sofia I had already finished the first grade. There were no Jewish schools in Vratsa, so when we moved to Sofia my father decided to send me to a Jewish school. But the children here first had cheder and then there came the first grade. I was about to start the second grade, so they enrolled me in the second grade. I didn't know anything in the beginning: I had no idea of the language. The first day I went home crying. I told my parents that the children at school were laughing at me because I didn't know anything. My father calmed me down and said to me that I had to be patient. One of the children I used to study with had an uncle who was a shoemaker in the Jewish neighborhood, where we lived. He used to come home and little by little he taught me the alphabet and how to read. At that time there was a very interesting method in the Jewish school, which is no longer being practiced: the classes were separated under a certain criterion. There were A, B, C classes. 'A' class was the best, 'B' was the average, and 'C' was the weakest. In the beginning I was enrolled in 'C' class and for a year I studied there. The next year, after the teachers revised the selection, I was moved to 'A'. When I was in 'C' I was the best among the weakest, yet when I moved to 'A' I was already at the average level.

There were two Jewish schools in Sofia. One was in the center of the city, and the other one was in the Jewish neighborhood to the west of the center, which was called Iuchbunar ⁴. The concentration of Jews in the central part of the city was smaller than in Iuchbunar and there was a shortage of students there. Therefore, about 20 children from Iuchbunar's Jewish school were moved to the central Jewish school. I was in that group. There was even greater competition there because the children there were from intellectuals' families whose parents were doctors and teachers. I could no longer be in the elite as I was somewhere at the average level. Our teachers were very good indeed and I finished with a 5 & 4/5 mark out of 6 maximum. This is equal to 5.80.

I was very good in Ivrit indeed and I got 5 & 5/6, which is more than 5.80. I remember that at the end of the school year representatives of the Ministry of Education came in order to examine how the Jews studied the Bulgarian language and history. Therefore, our teachers were very strict and demanding, as a result of which I never had more than a four in Bulgarian. No more than two people from our class got a five, and no one could even imagine a six. But the knowledge we gained was so useful for us and later when I was in high school, I knew much more than the rest of the students. The high school was a Bulgarian one and I studied there till the fifth grade. That was in 1941. The situation then was very hard and I had to begin to work, on the suggestion of my brother Isak. At 16, I started working in a drugstore as a laborer.

Before the war [World War II] my family lived harmoniously. We changed houses all the time searching for something better. Our last home was at Sofronii [today Vrachanski] and Pirotska Streets and was comparatively nicer. Anyway, the authorities decided to build a high school at that

place and the house we used to live in was destroyed. Thus we moved to a new place in the Jewish neighborhood again. Although we were poor, we survived because we grew up healthy. No one has ever had diabetes because we ate neither butter nor delicacies, but only simple food.

As a family we were united. Our living conditions were very miserable: in one of the houses we used to live in, there was a room which was divided into two and another one with a corridor opposite it. We lived in one of the rooms and the other one was occupied by another family. The only restroom was outside. The conditions we lived in were similar in all our lodgings. We used to heat water for our domestic needs and visited the public baths because there were no bathrooms in the houses we inhabited at that time.

During our childhood we were brought up in the spirit of creation of our Jewish country. The leftist Hashomer Hatzair [5](#) organization existed. There were the rightist Zionists Betar [6](#) and the center - Poalei Zion [7](#). We became members of Hashomer Hatzair when we were small children. We were brought up well over there. We discussed scientific matters, and went together to the cinema and theater. Mountain camps were organized during summer. We spent our time there nicely and usefully. We were occupied with serious things and played a lot. There were also sporting activities.

When fascism started in Bulgaria, we gradually realized that we should stay aside and watch its invasion. When I was 15 or 16 years old, after the Germans invaded Russia in 1941, my adherents and I decided that we should help the Soviet army who were struggling with fascism. Many of the Hashomer Hatzair members passed on to UYW [8](#), the [communist] youth organization fighting against fascism. In fact our opposition was a rather harmless one. But there were combat groups, which carried out sabotage activities on trains as well as some restaurants attended by Germans, where they threw bombs. We were younger at that time and our task was to raise funds and provide food and medicines for some friends of ours, who had landed in prison under hard conditions. Once we had a set-back during the setting up of such a group. We were detained by the police: some of us were set free, while others were sentenced. This happened in February 1943. In May 1943 I was sentenced to 15 years of imprisonment.

At first I was in Sofia prison. This coincided with the events of deportation of Jews in March 1943. At that time we were about eight Jews in the prison. The deportation failed and Jews were saved. In order to compensate this failure the Bulgarian fascists decided to intern all the Jews from Sofia. At that time around 25,000 Jews lived in the city. Orders were given for every family to be interned to a particular town: Kyustendil, Shumen, Ruse or others. They had to leave with a maximum of 20 kilograms of luggage and abandon their houses. It was a very ugly scene. The people took their belongings to the market and sold them very cheap as they neither knew what they were destined to, nor whether the deportation would be temporarily stopped. A lot of Jews thought that it was temporary and that from the Danube they would be deported to the death camps. In the meantime I was in prison and it can be said that I was comparatively well until May 1943. There was no food for most of us. Actually we were given some kind of a soup, which was close to nothing. Until May [1943] my relatives were still in Sofia and they would bring for us some food occasionally. After 24th May 1943 [9](#) all Jews were interned from Sofia. My relatives went to Kyustendil and Lom. Thus we couldn't communicate with them and the situation became much worse.

At the end of 1943, Italy was already out of the war, terminating its alliance with the Germans. Both the Americans and British had entered Italy. So, from Italy they started bombarding Sofia and

most of all Romania. But things changed and instead of symbolically, as the Bulgarian Government hoped, the Americans started bombarding Sofia for real in October. They were passing through Bulgaria and on their way to Romania they bombarded Sofia, Vratsa and some other towns. So, bombs were falling down in Sofia including around the central prison. One day the wall near my place was destroyed by a bomb because next to the prison there were barracks. The planes bombarded the barracks and the raids ruined part of the prison as well. Therefore, on a freezing January day in 1944 around 800 people from Sofia prison were loaded up in horse wagons and taken to Sliven prison.

We traveled for around 30 hours because of the damaged railway road. It was terribly cold and all of us were frozen in the train. Finally, we reached Sliven civil prison: it was called a civil prison, as there was a military one there also. Once it used to be some kind of a Turkish prison or an inn. In Sofia prison our cells were very narrow: 1.5 meters wide by 7-8 meters long. This accommodated around eight people. Sliven prison had larger cells and accommodated 30 to 35 people in one room. There were no beds so we slept on the floor, and everyone covered themselves with whatever they had at hand. Life became somehow easier, I mean that we were a larger group of people in Sliven and it was warmer. Moreover, we started receiving aid: mostly food and clothes. On the other hand we didn't waste our time there, as we began to learn languages and read, and we also formed various groups, in which we studied different things. This is how time passed for us until August 1944. The Soviet troops were already by the Danube and on 2nd September the last Bulgarian Government before 9th September 1944 [10](#), fell from power. In order to enter Bulgaria, the Soviet Union declared war on Bulgaria and it was then that I was set free.

The Soviet army crossed Bulgaria not as a conqueror but as a liberator and it was very well accepted by the people. Every power has its good and bad sides. Fascism was good for its upholders, giving them rights and privileges. But the more progressive people wanted to oppose this policy of supporting the Germans. Therefore, a partisan movement was developed in Bulgaria in order to fight against the Germans. The Government, in its turn, murdered the partisans and burnt their houses. There was a great terror during this period, especially in 1943 and 1944. A lot of young people, among them many Jews, were killed in Plovdiv and Sofia. Besides, there was a concentration camp in Pleven [see Kailuka camp] [11](#), where close relatives of the partisans were imprisoned. This camp was set on fire and burnt by some fascist organizations in the summer of 1944. Around ten Jews were killed in this fire. There were elderly people there, who couldn't escape.

On 24th May 1943, a protest was held in Sofia against the internment of Jews from Sofia and the deportation of Bulgarian Jews. The demonstration had started from the Iuchbunar Jewish school where 130 High School is located now. People walked from the synagogue to the school along Stamboliiski Blvd towards the King's palace to ask him for help. At that time people believed in King Boris III [12](#). Yet, the police met the demonstration somewhere on Opalchenska Street before Stamboliiski Blvd on Vazrazhdane Square and arrested a lot of people putting them in trucks and thus the protest was kept under control. The protest was led by Rabbi Daniel [Zion] [13](#). He succeeded in hiding at Sofia metropolitan Stefan's place. He was among the people who actively opposed the deportation of Jews.

A lot of Jews who were scared for their lives converted to Christianity. Yet, the police and the fascists issued an order that the newly converted Jews would be treated in accordance with the

Law for the Protection of the Nation [14](#), just like the non-converted Jews and regardless of their conversion. I have to mention that the Christian churches were like centers of anti-Semitism all over the world. This not only happened among Catholics but also in Russia where they practiced Eastern Orthodox Christianity. A notion was spread that the Jews crucified Jesus ignoring the fact that he was actually a Jew himself. They used to say, 'Christ, our God, was crucified by the Jews,' and this spread hatred against Jews among the masses. Children were also told the same thing. Anti-Semitism had been implanted on other grounds as well. Jews were quite skilled in their professions and I'm not praising myself. For example, if we take the doctors: a Jewish doctor often had a lot of patients and the other doctors envied him. This became a basis for anti-Semitism. So, here in Bulgaria there were manifestations of anti-Semitism.

There were rumors among the Bulgarians that during Pesach the Jews took a child, put it in a nailed-up casket and sucked dry its blood, because we needed blood for our rituals. Therefore, some superstitious and ignorant women would say, 'Let me take my children home.' Yet, there were provocations, i.e. some Christians deliberately kidnapped a child, hid it somewhere for some time so that people would think that the Jews had stolen it. There were such cases of outrage against Jews in Vratsa and in some other towns. These were separate cases, and it wasn't a common phenomenon. As a whole Bulgarians and Jews coexist well and keep good relations. Of course, speaking about Bulgarians, I don't mean the entire nation, because back then fascist organizations existed, which used to chase the Jews. In 1940 a lot of Jewish shop windows were broken during a persecution of Jews. Therefore we say, 'If there are Jews, there is anti-Semitism.' We can't compare the local manifestations of anti-Semitism with the ones in Ukraine, Russia, Hungary and France. As early as the Middle Ages, Jews had settled in Bulgaria because they led a calmer life, unlike in other places.

In the period between 1939 and 9th September 1944 Jews used to live under quite heavy conditions because of the Law for the Protection of the Nation. Especially Sofia Jews were in a very difficult situation. We were interned to schools and in lodgings inhabited by two to three families in a room. The men were sent to forced labor camps [in Bulgaria] [15](#) in order to work in the mountains on road and other construction sites. Yet, there was one good thing the authorities did: as they saw that the people had nothing to eat, they spared part of the money, which had been confiscated from the Jews so as to build communal kitchens. Once a day every family went there with its pots in order to receive warm food with or without meat or potatoes, yet there was food. Some Bulgarians undertook to keep the property of interned Jews.

Not only the Jews from Sofia were interned, but also the ones from Kazanlak. Because there were, and still are military enterprises there, Jews were suspected of spying there. I know that Jews were interned from Ruse too. Jews were forbidden to own chemists' shops and this favored the Bulgarians, who took charge of a lot of them. Jews used to have very nice chemist's shops in the center of Sofia and in other places as well. There were also restrictions for Jewish merchants. Students of Jewish origin weren't allowed to study at the universities. Many other restrictions of different characters were imposed. There was a one-time tax: if you had 100,000 leva deposited in a bank, 30 or 40 percent of it was directly confiscated. The ones who had factories were immediately deprived of them. So, from this point of view Jews were in a very difficult situation, yet they survived in the end.

You know about Dimitar Peshev [16](#) and how he contributed to the salvation of the Bulgarian Jews. Yet, he didn't improve the situation of the Jews. That law existed and not until August 1944 all its clauses were effective. After that some of its clauses were repealed. Then the authorities with a more conformist disposition took power in Bulgaria. Witnessing how Germany was losing the war, they wanted to make it up to the Americans, English and Russians. It was then that certain clauses from the Law for the Protection of the Nation were abolished.

After 9th September 1944 the rights of Jews were regained. But after the establishment of the state of Israel, i.e. after 1948, there were some problems again. During the communist regime, if you had connections with a capitalist country, this made you a threat to the regime. Therefore, the Jews who had connections in Israel were almost entirely removed from office in the Department of the Interior, Ministry of Defense, as well as some international commercial organizations. This was one of the forms of hidden anti-Semitism. Jews weren't allowed to hold such posts. There were Soviet councilors everywhere, carrying out this policy. There were a few diplomats or employees in the Ministry of People's Defense [as it was actually called then] or the Ministry of Interior, but these were separate cases. Until 1948, which was the year of the establishment of the Jewish state, there were more Jewish employees in these two ministries, but after that many of them were discharged because of the above-mentioned reasons. There were Jews who visited the Embassy of Israel and were detained as a result of this. There were also several Jews in the Central Committee of the [Bulgarian Communist] Party [17](#). One of them was the ideological adviser of Todor Zhivkov [18](#). But as a whole Jews didn't hold leading positions.

I have three brothers and two sisters. My eldest brother is called Isak Levi and he is a textile technician. He is a widower already with a daughter: Ema. They both live in Sofia. My second brother is Mordechai Levi and he used to work as a printer. My sister Oro Morits Frank didn't have any special profession and she used to work in a glass shop as a laborer. She finished secondary school and had no other qualifications. She married in 1938 and her wedding was a disappointment for us because in accordance with our traditions, when a girl is getting married she is supposed to bring a dowry into her new family. We had no money and had to take loans. Mordechai had to work for a whole year in order to pay off the loan.

My other brother is called David Levi. He wasn't very ambitious, he remained uneducated and he used to be a laborer. He used to sell seeds, ice-cream or something like that. He felt underprivileged in our family because we didn't pay much attention to him. We treated him well, although as a child he began speaking only when he was four or five years old. He got married in Bulgaria and had four children: his two daughters were born here. He used to work in a textile factory then and was given a small room, which he used to live in. He moved to Israel as early as 1949, where he continued to work: he did whatever job he got. But his kids are very good. One of his daughters used to be a bank clerk, and the other one has a career as well and they both have nice families. The kids born in Israel aren't as skillful as their parents.

My sister Oro had two children before leaving for Israel: Morits and Lily. Morits finished technical school and built a car garage. He was successful. He is 65 years old and leads a good life. The daughter is also alright. She became a bank clerk; she used to work for a long time in an Israeli bank. She is now retired, had two daughters, granddaughters, etc. My sister died quite early, before her 70th birthday, and my brother-in-law remained alone. He is of Russian origin. During the Russian-Turkish war [see Liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman rule] [19](#) some Jews went to

Bulgaria and settled there. He loved drinking and it seems like it had affected him because in the last years of his life his children took great care of him. They placed him in an elderly people's home. They were very good kids. Now, I visit my nephews in Israel.

Mordechai married Sofia. She was a seamstress, and they got two sons: Avram and Emil. They lived in Sofia on Dimitar Petkov and Albert Antonov Streets. They used to have a house there, which has already been destroyed and replaced by an estate. Each of them bought an apartment on Dimitar Petkov Street. Meanwhile, my brother managed to somehow get an apartment in 'Mladost' residential quarter near the Regional Hospital. He passed away a year ago. Now one of his sons, Avram, has a problem because both his sons left for Israel. My brother's children stayed in Sofia. Avram finished military school, but he was unemployed and he became an insurer. His wife wants to be closer to her kids and she visits Israel on a regular basis and stays there for quite a long time. She wants him to leave for Israel also, but he thinks that he has nothing to do there. He is already 54 or 55 years old, doesn't receive a pension, and would have to learn the language and find a job there, so he considered all these aspects as extremely difficult.

Only my sister Adela currently lives in Israel. Her fate was unfortunate. For a year or two her husband has been paralyzed. He isn't able to speak or do anything and so she is taking care of him. They have a daughter who is a hot head. She was married to a boy in Israel, but got divorced, and then she left for South Africa and married an African from Nigeria. She gave birth to two children, who are black. It was a very hard blow for my sister: it was something difficult to cope with. Her daughter got divorced again. Her two boys are already grown-ups. They are soldiers now.

I met my wife Matilda accidentally at a youth club. We didn't know each other before the war at all, because at that time I was in prison for half a year, while she had been interned to Shumen. After 9th September 1944 she went back to Sofia from Shumen. We got married in August 1948 and a few days ago we celebrated our 55th wedding anniversary. We have been together for a long time. After 9th September [1944], she worked at the Department of the Interior for a while, which also contributed to our meeting as I worked there as well.

I have two children: Sonya Avramova and Albert Levi. They both graduated from the French Language School. My son finished international economic relations, while my daughter did home trade. My son is married, his wife isn't Jewish and her name is Elena. She has a degree in English philology, but she couldn't start working anywhere. She never liked anything for real and she always found obstacles, and as soon as she got married to my son, she stopped working completely. She is taking care of their child, she helps her husband, but obviously she would never start working on her own. Their daughter is eleven years old and is in the fifth grade.

My daughter has worked for different companies, but hasn't been very lucky. My son succeeded in establishing a cosmetics company, as a distributor for a Greek company. Currently my daughter works for him.

After 9th September [1944], we used to live in rented rooms. Later, in 1977 we managed to buy an apartment. So, now I have a home of my own. Otherwise, I have lived much longer in rented rooms.

My mother Rashel used to live for some time with me, and for some time with my brother Isak, yet mostly with my youngest sister Adela. There, when she lived with Adela, she passed away. After

her death my sister left for Israel.

I had a small circle of family friends: Jewish family friends we used to know since early childhood, our school years, and we used to be a little company. We used to get together almost every week at one family's place or another. We used to gather with our children or spend our vacations together. One of my friends was also an official at the Department of the Interior and we had the opportunity to spend our vacations together. We spent considerable time going to the cinema and theater. We spent a lot of time at the cinema because my wife used to work in the field of cinema so I had free access to many cinema halls and had the opportunity to watch a lot of films without queuing like it used to be in the past. Wherever I would go even in the most prestigious cinemas of the time: 'Blagoev', 'Mlada Gvardia' [Young Guards], 'Moskva' [Moscow], as soon as I said that she was my wife they let me in immediately without any problem. We used to go to operas, theaters as we had cultural interests, we weren't, so to say, idle. The fact that we used to get together every week kept us closer together and we spent our time most pleasantly. Otherwise, everyone performed their duties during the week: with their children, and work. Unfortunately, most of these people have already gone away.

After 9th September [1944], I completed high school via correspondence and after that I graduated in law. I started working as a state official at the Department of the Interior and I retired in 1982. Since 1983, as I hadn't forgotten Ivrit yet, I was invited at the synagogue as chairman of the Central Israeli Spiritual Council. During the totalitarian years the Jewish organizations in Sofia used to be an educational center. It didn't deal with Jewish questions. At that time, 1st May, 9th September, and 7th November [October Revolution Day] [20](#) were celebrated and these were holidays of the Jewish community in Sofia also. Yet, here, in the synagogue, the status quo was quite better and during this period of time I managed to read lectures about Chanukkah, Pesach, Moses and the migration of Jews from Egypt. Our holidays are most often connected with history, so the Jews in Sofia became aware and began to realize the true meaning of the Jewish history. Besides, I visited quite a lot of conferences of the Jewish World Congress and some other organizations. I was well accepted as I spoke Ivrit well, which was rather uncommon for most of the people there, because most representatives of other countries spoke English. Therefore, my speech in Ivrit was always a huge success.

I was quite efficient in terms of public activities not only for local organizations but also with international Jewish organizations. Yet, when 10th November [1989] [21](#) came things changed as Shalom [Organization] [22](#) took over the international Jewish activities and it was their responsibility to maintain contacts with international Jewish organizations. Actually, from 1983 to 1989 I established a lot of contacts, and provided matzah and other things here, which was quite difficult at that time because the Department of Ecclesiastical Matters had a negative attitude towards religion. There was even a representative who kept a close watch on the quantity of published calendars. It was a great achievement for him if he could report that in the course of years fewer and fewer calendars were issued, which proved the death of religion. Yet, the Jews are a hardy nation and they couldn't vanish so easily.

In totalitarian times people visiting the synagogue were treated as suspicious characters. If an official of Jewish origin was spotted visiting the synagogue, he became a subject of persecution. There wasn't a law forbidding visits to the synagogue, on the contrary, the state financially supported the synagogue. Yet, it was forbidden for children, young people and citizens here. All

religions were treated in that way, and this didn't only happen to us. Religion was considered something bad which had to be abolished. There is also another thing: as a whole, the Bulgarian people aren't fanatics concerning religious matters, unlike the Catholics, for example. This could also be one of the reasons that in Bulgaria there weren't large manifestations of anti-Semitism.

Adela had a problem before leaving for Israel. That was in 1966 or 1967. My brother-in-law used to work as a refrigerator technician and upon his immigration to Israel he had to expatriate, sign different declarations, and it was very difficult for him to get permission to settle in Israel. In 1948 there wasn't such a problem. A lot of people immigrated to Israel then and some of them even wanted to return. Yet, Chervenkov banned the returning [Valko Chervenkov was Prime Minister of Bulgaria between 1950 and 1956]. People were forbidden to come back to Bulgaria on the occasion of weddings or funerals, or as guests, and this brought families a lot of grief.

During the totalitarian times we never attempted to leave for Israel as nobody was allowed. After 1982, when 'perestroika' [23](#) started, another problem occurred, also of importance. The authorities told us that we could leave but only if our relatives over there sent us tickets. It was impossible to buy tickets here. It was rather inconvenient to ask them to buy us a ticket in our local currency in order to go and see them. I remember also that this was a problem even earlier when my wife wanted to visit Israel in 1956. Only by co-incidence then an acquaintance of mine was the Deputy Governor of the People's Bank and I was able to get some foreign currency through him in order to buy tickets for my wife and daughter and thus they went to Israel. They had only left when the Soviet campaign in Hungary began, the war started and it was a problem for her to return. I went to Israel in 1981 and saw my brother David a year before he passed away. Then I went there after 1985: three years after I had retired.

During the wars between Israel and the Arab countries [see Yom Kippur War] [24](#), of course, we were on Israel's side. However, Bulgaria was on the side of the Arabs. It was a curious fact that in 1973 when Egypt attacked Israel the newspaper here wrote that it was vice versa: that Israel attacked Egypt. Things were interpreted in that way.

I didn't openly express that I was on Israel's side during the wars, but it was natural for me to be on Israel's side. Politics at that time was a completely different thing. Bulgaria had strong contacts with the Arab countries at that time. It supported the Arab cause, because it maintained close economic relations with Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and other countries and it was natural for it to support their interests. At some point Bulgaria's position was overdone. There were such writings that Israel was an artificially created country and that it shouldn't exist. The communists also supported that thesis because it was the political line followed by the Soviet Union also.

I can say that I felt a certain change of attitude towards me during the wars in Israel. It was because of the people's general disposition at that time: they used to consider Israel the greatest aggressor. Israel was a synonym of aggression. The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs [Andrey] Gromyko [1909-1989] announced that an Arab-Palestinian state must be founded and it was immediately accepted by Bulgaria.

The events in 1989 in Bulgaria and Europe: the opening of Eastern Europe, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the changes, are a contradictory moment, because it's wrong to deny everything which was done in socialist times, and at the same time some acts during socialism can't be justified. So, on one hand, the changes brought good things, and on the other hand they brought a lot of misery,

because during socialism no matter that people weren't rich, they used to receive small salaries, which gave them the opportunity to go every year on vacation, they retired and led a calm and secured life as pensioners. Their pensions were enough to cover their expenses. In winter they used to pay almost nothing for heating, as at that time heating was only around five percent of one's income. I mean that socialism has its pros and cons.

Therefore, some people dream of restoring socialism, because during those times everything was provided for them even though scanty and poor. And there is something else, which is of great importance: people felt safer at that time, i.e. people were afraid of the authorities and the level of crime was much lower. These things can't be judged one-sidedly: there are good and bad things. And it applies to socialism too. Now, after 1989 things are good for people who have got back their property, yet, for most of the people life is hard indeed, as they are forced to spend all their earnings only on heating.

Currently, I'm doing translations from Ivrit into Bulgarian and vice versa. I have a small room in the synagogue for that purpose. Of course, most of the work I do here is in favor of the synagogue. During the holidays I assist the rabbi, who is from Libya and sometimes I have to translate from Ivrit to the congregation present there. We have a tradition to gather in the synagogue on Sabbath.

Glossary

1 Expulsion of the Jews from Spain

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

2 Ladino

also known as Judeo-Spanish, it is the spoken and written Hispanic language of Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin. Ladino did not become a specifically Jewish language until after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 (and Portugal in 1495) - it was merely the language of their province. It is also known as Judezmo, Dzhudezmo, or Spaniolit. When the Jews were expelled from Spain and Portugal they were cut off from the further development of the language, but they continued to speak it in the communities and countries to which they emigrated. Ladino therefore reflects the grammar and vocabulary of 15th century Spanish. In Amsterdam, England and Italy, those Jews who continued to speak 'Ladino' were in constant contact with Spain and therefore they basically continued to speak the Castilian Spanish of the time. Ladino was nowhere near as diverse as the various forms of Yiddish, but there were still two different dialects, which corresponded to the different origins of the speakers: 'Oriental' Ladino was spoken in Turkey and Rhodes and reflected Castilian Spanish, whereas 'Western' Ladino was spoken in Greece, Macedonia, Bosnia, Serbia and Romania, and preserved the characteristics of northern Spanish and Portuguese. The vocabulary of Ladino includes hundreds of archaic Spanish words, and also includes many words from different languages: mainly from Hebrew, Arabic, Turkish, Greek, French, and to a lesser extent from Italian.

In the Ladino spoken in Israel, several words have been borrowed from Yiddish. For most of its lifetime, Ladino was written in the Hebrew alphabet, in Rashi script, or in Solitro. It was only in the late 19th century that Ladino was ever written using the Latin alphabet. At various times Ladino has been spoken in North Africa, Egypt, Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, France, Israel, and, to a lesser extent, in the United States and Latin America.

3 First Balkan War (1912-1913)

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

4 Iuchbunar

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

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 Betar

(abbreviation of Berit Trumpeldor) A right-wing Zionist youth movement founded in 1923 in Riga, Latvia. Betar played an important role in Zionist education, in teaching the Hebrew language and culture, and methods of self-defense. It also inculcated the ideals of aliyah to Erez Israel by any means, legal and illegal, and the creation of a Jewish state on both sides of the Jordan. Its members supported the idea to create a Jewish legion in order to liberate Palestine. In Bulgaria the organization started publishing its newspaper in 1934.

7 Poalei Zion

Leftist Zionist movement, founded in the late 19th century in Russia that combined Zionism with Socialism. The early Poalei Zion found its expression in the organization of trade unions, mutual aid societies, and Zionist groups of workers, clerks and salesmen. These groups emphasized the need for democracy within the Jewish community. The Austro-Hungarian branch of Poalei Zion differed markedly from the Russian one. Its ideologists maintained that the Zionist movement was an expression of the entire Jewish people and transcended class interests. It maintained that the position of the Jewish worker and commercial employee was different from that of the non-Jew, since the Jew had to face both exploitation and discrimination at the same time. It warned the Jewish workers against following the teachings of the Social Democrats in Austria-Hungary who

denied this fact. It negated the socialist solution unless it were combined with a Jewish autonomous territory. Instead it stressed the need for the conscious direction of the migration of the Jewish masses to Palestine. The Poalei Zion groups in other countries followed in their ideology either the Russian or the Austrian models. Poalei Zion in Romania and Bulgaria adhered to the Austrian school. In 1907 a World Union of Poalei Zion was founded. In 1920 the movement split over the attitude toward the Socialist and Communist Internationals, the Zionist Organization, and the place to be accorded to the movement's activities in Erez Israel. Left Poalei Zion sought unconditional affiliation with the Third International (Comintern); by 1924 it had abandoned this attempt and reorganized itself on an independent basis. The other faction, the Right Poalei Zion, merged in 1925 with the Zionist Socialists.

8 UYW

The Union of Young Workers (also called Revolutionary Youth Union). A communist youth organization, which was legally established in 1928 as a sub-organization of the Bulgarian Communist Youth Union. 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.

9 24th May 1943

Protest by a group of members of parliament led by the deputy chairman of the National Assembly, Dimitar Peshev, as well as a large section of Bulgarian society. They protested against the deportation of the Jews, which culminated in a great demonstration on 24th May 1943. Thousands of people led by members of parliament, the Eastern Orthodox Church and political parties stood out against the deportation of Bulgarian Jews. Although there was no official document banning deportation, Bulgarian Jews were saved, unlike those from Bulgarian occupied Aegean Thrace and Macedonia.

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 Kailuka 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 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 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.

12 King Boris III

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

13 Daniel Zion

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

14 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.

15 Forced labor camps in Bulgaria

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

16 Peshev, Dimitar (1894-1973)

Bulgarian politician, former Deputy-Chairman of the National Assembly. Peshev was the leader of the group who opposed to deportations of Bulgarian Jews. According to Gabrielle Nissim, author of the book 'The Man Who Stopped Hitler': 'He was the only politician of high rank in a country allied with Germany who broke the atmosphere of complete collective silence with regard to the Jewry's

lot.

17 Bulgarian Communist Party

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

18 Zhivkov, Todor (1911-1998)

First Secretary of the Central Committee of the ruling Bulgarian Communist Party (1954-1989) and the leader of Bulgaria (1971-1989). His 35 years as Bulgaria's ruler made him the longest-serving leader in any of the Soviet-block nations of Eastern Europe. When communist governments across Eastern Europe began to collapse in 1989, the aged Zhivkov resigned from all his posts. He was placed under arrest in January 1990. Zhivkov was convicted of embezzlement in 1992 and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. He was allowed to serve his sentence under house arrest.

19 Liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman rule

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

20 October Revolution Day

October 25 (according to the old calendar), 1917 went down in history as victory day for the Great October Socialist Revolution in Russia. This day is the most significant date in the history of the USSR. Today the anniversary is celebrated as 'Day of Accord and Reconciliation' on November 7.

21 10th November 1989

After 35 years of rule, Communist Party leader Todor Zhivkov was replaced by hitherto Prime Minister Peter Mladenov who changed the Bulgarian Communist Party's name to Socialist Party. On 17th November 1989 Mladenov became head of state, as successor of Zhivkov. Massive opposition demonstrations in Sofia (with hundreds of thousands participants) calling for democratic reforms followed from 18th November to December 1989. On 7th December the 'Union of Democratic Forces' (SDS) was formed consisting of different political organizations and groups.

22 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.

23 Perestroika (Russian for restructuring)

Soviet economic and social policy of the late 1980s, associated with the name of Soviet politician Mikhail Gorbachev. The term designated the attempts to transform the stagnant, inefficient command economy of the Soviet Union into a decentralized, market-oriented economy. Industrial managers and local government and party officials were granted greater autonomy, and open elections were introduced in an attempt to democratize the Communist Party organization. By 1991, perestroika was declining and was soon eclipsed by the dissolution of the USSR.

24 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.