

Mazal Asael

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Sofia

Bulgaria

Interviewer: Dimitar Bozhilov

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Family background

My ancestors came to the Balkan Peninsula after the persecutions in Spain five centuries ago. My mother's family lived in the town of Nis that is situated in Serbia now.

They moved to Sofia, Bulgaria at the beginning of the 20th century.

My mother Delicia had four sisters and two brothers but one of her brothers drowned in a river while they were still living in Nis.

All my mother's sisters and brothers were born in Nis, where there was a big Jewish neighborhood. My mother's family members spoke mostly in Ladino. They also spoke Serbian because they had lived in Serbia. My mother knew a lot of songs in Serbian and she sang very well. I suppose that there was a certain reason that made my mother's family move from Nis to Sofia. The fact that one of her brothers drowned in a river near Nis might have also influenced their decision to leave.

My maternal grandfather, Bohor Benjamin, made his living as a pastry-maker. My maternal grandmother Lucia Benjamin was a very nice woman and she was a housewife. They settled in the Jewish neighborhood named lutchbunar after coming to Sofia. This quarter was to the west of the center of Sofia and the poorer Jews lived there. The richer Jews in Sofia lived in the center of the town. My grandfather opened his own pastry shop on Pozitano Street and he used to make the best pastry in the whole neighborhood. I suppose that the pastry he made was kosher. Most of the Jews in the lutchbunar Quarter bought kosher food. They would buy live hens and take them to the shochet in the synagogue to kill them. My mother's family's economic status was not good and they didn't have their own house - that is why my grandparents used to live paying rent in the house of their youngest daughter Mazal. My mother and her sisters and her brother were still young



when they came to Sofia and none of them was married then. They all got married in Sofia. My grandfather Bohor had a beautiful tallith and books in Hebrew from which we used to read on holidays. My grandfather Bohor was a religious man and he went to the synagogue regularly.

My mother's sisters and brother already had families at the time that I remember them. My mother's oldest sister is named Bucha and she has three sons who live in Israel. My mother's other sisters are named Lenka, Mazal and Blanka, and her brother, Marko. My mother's youngest sister's husband was a housepainter. His name was Leon. His father had been a chazzan at the synagogue and people in the quarter respected him very much. They had six children. One of their sons became a hero in Israel later on. Aunt Lenka had two children who also lived in Israel. My Uncle Marko was a barber. Aunt Blanka went to Belgrade in 1939 and married a Bulgarian Jew there. She were told that she was sent to a concentration camp during the Holocaust and killed. We did not get any message from her after the invasion of Serbia by the German troops. Aunt Blanka had one son, who lives in Israel now. My mother's youngest sister lived on Bregalnitsa Street with her husband who had his own house, and my grandparents lived there with them for a time. My mother's other sisters and her brother lived in rented places in lutchbunar.

My mother Delicia was a hairdresser. I remember that there were special curling irons at home that she used in her work. She had worked as a hairdresser before she got married. I suppose that she learnt this trade while she was living in Nis. She went to school in Nis up to the fourth class.

My father's family comes from Sofia. My father Mehanem Eshkenazi has one sister, Ester, and four brothers. One of his brothers, whose name was Leon, went to America when he was very young and we have no information about him since then. Another brother of his, Israel, left for Tzarigrad (now Istanbul) in the 1930s. He owned a hemp goods factory and his material status was very good. He had a big family, six children - two sons and four daughters. One of his sons, Robert, lives in Israel and the other one, Nisim, in England. My father's oldest brother was called Rahamin and he was a tailor. We used to keep in touch all the time until 1943 when we were interned from Sofia. My paternal grandmother lived for some time in Tzarigrad in the house of the youngest brother Israel. So I practically never saw her. My paternal grandfather had died before my grandmother went to Tzarigrad to live with her richest son.

My father was born a short time after the liberation of Bulgaria from the Turkish yoke in 1878 and there wasn't a Jewish school then so far as I know. I guess that he went to a Bulgarian primary school. He had been a hired laborer before he got married. My father probably fought in the

Bulgarian army during the Balkan war in 1912. During WWI he was captured in 1918, but I don't know where.

My father had been married to another woman but she died very young. It was a coincidence that my mother had been a bridesmaid at their wedding. My father's first wife knew my mother and that is how my parents met each other. My mother Delicia and my father Menahem married in 1920. My parents got married in the synagogue. Civil marriage did not exist at that time and all Jews married in the synagogue. My father worked as a hired laborer for many years at the fruit and vegetable shop of a friend of ours on Sveta Nedelia Square in the center of Sofia. I remember that every evening my father used to come home very tired from work and he would send me to the nearby pub to buy some anisette for him. I used to taste a little from it every time, and that's why it's the only drink I like, even now.

Every Saturday my father used to go to a Jewish café on Pozitano Street in the center of Sofia and play cards and backgammon there. I remember that they played for chocolate bars, and we little kids used to go to the café to check if our fathers had won chocolates so that we could take some of them.

Growing up

My home was on Opalchenska Street. It was a run-down, two-floor brick house where we lived together with some other families. We had electricity in the house. All the occupants were Jewish. We had a neighbour who breast-fed me after I was born because my mother couldn't, and our neighbour had a baby at the same time. This house no longer exists. A new one was built in its place and the children of the previous owners live there now. All my maternal and paternal relatives lived in the Jewish neighborhood.

I don't know how long I lived in the house on Opalchenska Street for we moved while I was still a very little girl. We lived at many places until 1943 - on Ovcho Pole, Odrin, Slivnitza and Naicho Tsanov streets. I suppose that my parents were really poor and they had to move very often. We lived on Odrin Street for the longest period of time, in two different houses. These houses no longer exist and there are big blocks at their place now. My brothers and I were already grown up when we lived on that street. My brothers were taken from there to the labor camps in the 1940s. We lived together with Bulgarians in Odrin Street but I never felt a negative attitude towards us though one of them was a member of Brannik. (Brannik was a pro-fascist youth organization. It started functioning after the National Defense Law was passed in 1939 and the Bulgarian government formed its pro-German policy during WWII. Brannik's members regularly maltreated Jews.) In every house we lived we had a little space and it was never enough for our big family.

There were two Jewish schools in Sofia, one in the center of the town and one in our neighborhood. The children of the richer Jews who lived in the center used to study in the central school. I went to the one on Osogovo Street. Everything in the school was free of charge for us. The textbooks were free and sometimes we were even given shoes and clothes. I went to the Jewish school until the third grade (equal to today's seventh grade); up until then, I had studied there for four years. We used to study all day at the Jewish school: general subjects in Bulgarian in the morning; and the same subjects, such as reading, writing and mathematics, in Hebrew in the afternoon. In the upper classes we started studying Jewish history, too. One of the subjects we studied was Tanach. We studied the history of the Jewish people and the Five Books of Moses. We also had religion class, taught in Hebrew.

The Jewish school organised excursions and summer camps. There was a Jewish summer camp in the town of Berkovitsa where we used to go on holiday. Children from the poorer families were accepted in that camp. My mother went to this camp to work as a cook so that my brother Benjamin and I could both go on holiday there. I remember that one summer I fell into a deep pool and had to be rescued. I have very pleasant memories from those vacations and also many good friends with whom I keep in touch even today.

We had various organizations in the Jewish school: Maccabi, Akiva, Hashomer Hatzair. Maccabi was a sports organization that organised international competitions and Hashomer Hatzair was a scout organization and we used to learn Hebrew there. We used to stay after school and play different games or learn Jewish dances; we would try to speak only in Hebrew. These organizations had a very positive educational influence on us, teaching us to be very well organised. While I was studying in the Jewish school all my friends were Jews. They were mostly my classmates and we were all members of Hashomer Hatzair. The Jewish organizations existed until 1943 when internments from Sofia began. The Bulgarian government banned them when the National Defense Law was passed in 1939, but they went on functioning illegally. (The National Defense Law was a law against Bulgarian Jews, featuring detailed regulations. According to this law Jews did not have the right to own shops and factories. The Jews that lived in the center of Sofia were forced to move to the outskirts of the town. The internment of Jews to certain designated towns was legalized. This was in preparation for the deportation to the concentration camps.)

I did not have the possibility to continue my education after I graduated the third class of the Jewish school and I started work at an upholsterer's atelier. I worked until 1943 when the internments started. I continued my education after 1944. I graduated from the evening school in Sofia. Because our financial status wasn't stable, I used to work every summer. As a student I used to work in an umbrella workshop on Dondukov Boulevard. I

also worked for a friend of my mother's who sewed corsets. One summer holiday I worked for a Bulgarian lady who had a millinery workshop.

My parents were not very religious and they didn't go to the synagogue very often, only on the high holidays. I used to celebrate most of the holidays in the Jewish school when I was a student. We all gathered at home together with our neighbors on Pesach. Sometimes we gathered with some relatives in the house of an aunt of my father's who lived far away from our house. We used to lay a big table with matzo and boio (bread balls made of water and flour without any salt and yeast); there was only kosher food on the table. My mother took care of the whole household. She had separate dishes that she used on Pesach only. Tinkers used to pass through the Jewish neighborhood every year and tin the copper dishes so they always looked as good as new ones. We did that also in order to make sure that the bread did not have any contact with the dish. After the holiday we put away the dishes until the next year.

When Pesach was coming, the chocolate factory in Sofia would bake matzo, which we would buy for the period of eight days when we did not use any other bread. We always got new shoes for Pesach, though our family was very poor. I had cousins older than me and I wore their old clothes. There was a synagogue next to the school in our neighborhood and there were a chazzan, a shochet, and some clerks there.

We made a Pesach Seder. There had to be seven special dishes on the table and they had to be arranged on one plate. We made a special dish of ground walnuts, sugar and apples. We laid that on a leaf of lettuce, and we called it maror. We did tanit for Yom Kippur: on that day we didn't eat anything till evening when the shofar was sounded at the synagogue.

We didn't work on Saturdays and that is how we observed Sabbath. We didn't turn the lights on until a certain hour then. We observed the rest of the Jewish holidays also. The holiday of fruits, Frutas, is in February. Purim, the day of the masks, is in March, and Pesach is after that. The most fun holiday for the children, Lag Baomer, is forty days after Pesach. We used to go to the field then and gather grass. There was the holiday of fruitfulness, Succoth, when we built a special small straw cottage at the synagogue and arranged all kinds of fruits and things gathered after the summer labor.

During the war

I came into a Bulgarian circle of friends in the late 1930s. I was already a left-winger then. We had to trade in our ID cards for new pink ones in the 1940s, and some of us had our names changed. (Repressive measures against Jews were taken after the National Defense Law was passed in 1939. Their ID cards were replaced by pink ones so that they differed from the ID

cards of other Bulgarian citizens. Many Bulgarian Jews were moved to designated towns where they had the right to leave their lodgings at certain times only.)

The names of some Jews were changed to typically Jewish ones so that our Jewish origin was clear to the other citizens. My name was from Matilda to Mazal.

We had to wear yellow badges that showed our Jewish origin but I hardly ever wore mine because I was living in a mostly Bulgarian circle. Anyway I was always ready to show it when necessary.

On May 24, 1943, Slavic Script and Bulgarian Culture Day, there were sudden protests among Jewish youth against the authorities' decision to forcibly move our families out of Sofia. Many of our families had already received notices for a forced internment. In 1943 the removal of the Jews from their homes started in order to organize their deportation to concentration camps abroad. Because of the sharp reaction of the Bulgarian population and of some of the members of Parliament, the deportation was stopped at the last moment. I was a member of the Revolutionary Youth Union by then. Both Jews and Bulgarians were members of the RYU, a pro-Communist and anti-fascist youth organization. My parents couldn't prevent me from taking part in the RYU's activities during WWII, as I did not let them know exactly what I was doing. My father was a liberal man but he didn't take part in politics. My brothers didn't have a particular political orientation either. I was the only one in the family who participated actively in anti-fascist activities. That's because of where I worked-- at a bazaar on Klementina Street where there were many workers - cooks, tailors and others - and that is how I came into contact with left-wing youth who were members of the RYU.

We gathered at the synagogue in our neighborhood that May 24. My neighbour Solomon Leviev, a member of the RYU, spoke before the Jewish people and called on us to go on a protest march to the center of the town where Tzar Boris III was going to congratulate Sofia's citizens on the May 24th holiday. So we went in that direction. We were walking on Klementina Street (now Alexander Stamboliiski Boulevard). Suddenly mounted police intercepted us and started to arrest people at random. I managed to escape together with Solomon Leviev to the village of Kniazhevo (now a neighborhood of Sofia).

Right after these protests, on that very day, arrests at our homes started. The father of the boy with whom I had escaped was arrested and sent to a labor camp. We lived underground in Sofia after this and we hid from the police. I did not want to move out of Sofia but had to anyway. My family got a notice that we had to leave for the town of Dupnitza and my parents made me to go with them. Both my older brothers were in labor camps at that

time. My family left for Dupnitsa at the end of May. I went back to Sofia the next day. My parents did not know about that. They suspected that I would join an armed anti-fascist guerrilla squad and didn't want me to go back to Sofia.

I went back to Sofia with a fake ID card with a Bulgarian name on it, which I got from my friends in the RYU. I lived in the lodging of a friend of mine, Boris Brankov. After that I moved to the underground group in the Lozenetz Quarter. We decided to join a guerrilla squad but the head of our organization was arrested and so we failed. I was also arrested in June 1943. Someone had disclosed the fact that I was Jewish and I was sent to Sveti Nikola, a concentration camp near Asenovgrad in South Bulgaria. These camps were built as prisons for the anti-fascists but not especially for Jews. I was sent there because of my anti-fascist activities, not because of my Jewish origin. I stayed there until it was closed in November 1943. The Bulgarian government changed that year. Ivan Bagryanov's government came into power and he closed all political prisons but also founded some new ones such as Sveti Kirik. When I came back to Sofia from the camp I didn't have any identification again and I hid in the home of some friends of mine. I understood then that my parents had been moved to the town of Mihailovgrad, which was named Ferdinand then.

My maternal relatives were also forcibly moved from Sofia during the Holocaust. My mother's older sister Bucha and her family were interned in the town of Pazardjik. My mother's other sister Mazal was interned to Ruse together with her big family and six children. They were all interned except Blanka who went to Belgrade; unfortunately, she was sent to a concentration camp there. I remember that my maternal grandfather died just after the internment in 1943 and we did not even manage to put a tombstone on his grave. My father's relatives were also interned. My father's sister's children had already grown up and were sent to forced labor camps. One of my father's brothers, Josif, was interned together with my father in Dupnitsa. My parents spent only a few months in Dupnitsa and after that they moved to Ferdinand (now known as Montana).

I went after them and joined the Jewish section of the local RYU organization in the town of Ferdinand. My parents were suffering terribly during the internment in Dupnitsa and Ferdinand. My parents, my younger brother Samuil and I lived in one small room. My older brother Benjamin was in Sveti Vrach in the South near the town of Gotze Delchev. He worked building roads there. My other brother, Eliezer, was sent to a labor camp near the town of Svoge and he was also a road construction worker.

I tried to work while I was in Ferdinand to help my family. I sewed for the neighbors so that we could buy some food. I was not a professional dressmaker but I mended clothes. In Ferdinand I also looked after children,

made bricks, dug in the vineyards. All that was illegal and I did it without the knowledge of the police as we had the right to go out of our homes for only three hours a day. I worked as an assistant in the shop of some friends of my parents. I used to hide my badge while I was at work, and when the police found out that I was a stranger in town, and that I was working illegally, they didn't know about my Jewish origins. So I managed to leave town before they discovered my identity. I used to hide my badge all the time and the police didn't know that I was a Jew.

I joined the Hristo Mihailov guerrilla squad in August 1944 together with 35 people from the town. All our actions were strictly organised and disciplined because the authorities were after us and we lived underground. We had leaders who decided who was suitable to join the squad. We went 40 kilometers during the first night after we joined the squad and crossed the Serbian border. The police were chasing us the whole way. We met the local guerrillas there - our squad was in touch with them all the time. On September 5 we learned that the Soviet army was near the Danube and was about to enter Bulgarian territory. Then we came back to Bulgaria. We passed through the town of Ferdinand and on September 8-9 we were in Berkovitza and we established the government of the Fatherland Front there. (September 9th 1944 was the day of the communist coup d'etat in Bulgaria. It meant the beginning of a new era in the history of Bulgaria, that of the totalitarian rule of the Bulgarian Communist Party. The Fatherland Front was the most popular anti-fascist and pro-Soviet organisation in Bulgaria that existed formally during the whole period of the Bulgarian Communist Party's rule.)

The situation changed and the guerrillas started to chase their persecutors, mostly the so-called "desperados" who were famous for their cruelty to guerrillas. The desperados had been authorized to persecute and kill the guerrillas in Bulgaria. Many guerrillas had been executed in 1943 and 1944. We established the people's rule everywhere we went. Local people knew their persecutors and the people who had maltreated them. All the Jews in the squad, however, were from Sofia.

Post-war

I stayed for a few days in the town of Berkovitza after September 9 and I went back to Ferdinand after that. Together with a cousin of mine, I went to Sofia to look for a lodging for our families. We found one on Naitcho Tzanov Street and we called our parents. My brothers came back from the camps. We lived at that place until my parents and my brothers left for Israel. My brother Benjamin left first and he spent two years at a transient camp in Cyprus. The British blocked the emigration of Jews to Palestine because Palestine was an English dominion at that time. My brother managed to move to Israel only after the establishment of the

country. I did not want to go with them because I thought my place was in Bulgaria and I had to take part in the building of the new political and economic system under the guidance of the Bulgarian Communist Party.

In 1948 we received clothes from the "Joint," the American Joint Distribution Committee, a Jewish relief organization. We had a Jewish organization in Sofia after 1944. We also had a Jewish hospital on Pozitano Street and a relative of mine used to work there. This hospital is a cardiac clinic at present.

We went on observing Jewish holidays until my parents left Bulgaria in 1948, gathering for the holidays and going to synagogue. After my parents and my brother left for Israel, my husband and I didn't observe Jewish traditions so strictly. I used to work on Saturdays, as it was a working day in Bulgaria for a long time. Jewish traditions lost their meaning gradually because my husband Mois Asael and I were both very busy with our work. We used to work full-time, six days a week.

My family and I had to leave many precious belongings and books when we were interned in 1943. That is why I don't have many souvenirs from my relatives. My family had many beautiful books in Hebrew with velvet covers and the Star of David embroidered on them, but we had to leave them. I have kept a small carpet from my mother that is over a hundred years old. I have also kept special clothing that my mother used to wear when delivering her children and some special sheets also. The clothing that she wore was made of a silky material - something like brocade. It was rosy with golden and silver threads in it. Unfortunately those things of my mother's got lost during an exhibition at the Jewish Cultural Home.

I have three brothers. The oldest one, Eliezer, is from my father's first marriage. He used to live together with my mother and father. After that his maternal grandmother took him to live with her. In 1941 he came back to live with our family. My two other brothers are Benjamin and Samuil. They all graduated from the Jewish school in Sofia. My two older brothers left for Israel together with my parents.

My parents settled in the town of Jaffa. My brother Samuil still lives there. My father became a peddler after they settled in Israel and my brothers did dirty jobs. Only my brother Benjamin managed to do well for himself. My other brother, Eliezer, who married there and had a big family with five children, was a retail merchant. My youngest brother Samuil worked in a film studio. I have one brother and many nephews in Israel now. My maternal relatives also settled in the town of Jaffa. My aunts settled in Jaffa, Bat Yam and Rechovot.

I have been to Israel about ten times. All my relatives on my mother's side live there. Only one cousin of my paternal side lives there now. She is a

daughter of my father's oldest brother Rahamin. Only my mother managed to come to Bulgaria after they left in 1948. She came here to see my daughter in 1971. My brother comes almost every year. I keep in touch with him, as the situation in Israel is very hard at the moment.

In 1944 I went to work in the militia as an operative officer. I worked there till 1952 when a decision was made that Jews should be dismissed from leading positions. A trial against doctors started in the Soviet Union in 1952. The Jews were accused of working against the Soviet authorities. As Bulgaria was subordinate to the Soviet Union, all Jews were dismissed from work at the militia. There were many Jews in the militia hierarchy at that time, especially in my department, which dealt with the press, cultural societies and schools. People who were fired were highly qualified, for one had to speak foreign languages to work in my department. I couldn't find a better job after 1952 because of my Jewish origins. I had to accept whatever I was offered. I found work in the personnel department of the City Management of the People's Health Administration after I was fired. The Administration existed only for a short period of time and after that I went to work in the personnel department of Material and Technical Supply at the Ministry of Construction, from which I retired later.

After 1952 it was difficult for Bulgarian Jews to visit their relatives who had left for Israel. I managed to go to Israel with great efforts in 1957. I went with the special permission of one of the undersecretaries of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Only a few Jews went on working as operative officers in the hierarchy of the MFA after 1952, and they used to teach law and criminology. I kept in touch with my parents regularly at that time. The Ministry told me that I couldn't do that anymore if I worked there. I chose to keep in touch with my parents and that is why I was dismissed with the explanation that I had an "unsuitable environment" for a ministry officer. That "unsuitable environment" was in fact my connection with Israel.

I worked in the Ministry of Construction in 1956. I was working in Personnel and it was my duty to keep an eye on the workers' inclinations so that we wouldn't repeat, in Bulgaria, what had happened in Hungary the same year. This was carried out through stronger discipline at the work places. The ministries took steps to avoid any kind of anti-Soviet inclinations in Bulgaria.

After my parents went to Israel in 1948 I moved to a better lodging that was in the apartment of some Jews who had already left for Israel. I had the right to live in one of the rooms there. I met my future husband in that lodging. My husband Mois Shemaia Asael was born in the town of Dupnitsa. He is an optician. He graduated from the Optics Institute of the Ministry of Health in Sofia and he has worked as an optician for more than

40 years. His family didn't go to Israel but bought a house on Sofronii Vrachanski Street where I lived with my husband for almost twenty years, until 1970. After that we moved to the Mladost Quarter, a suburban neighborhood in Sofia, and we still live there.

It was good for us Jews that the Bulgarian Communist Party was governing. This gave us the chance to take part and work in state institutions. Before 1944 we did not have the chance to do that; we were deprived of our rights. We didn't have the chance to study even if we wanted to. I supported the official party position regarding the political developments in Hungary in 1956 and in the Czech Republic in 1968 during the whole period of BCP rule. I myself was a member of the BCP and now I am a member of its successor, the Bulgarian Socialist Party.

My daughter Regina was born in 1968. She wanted to go into her father's profession and she went to study at the optics technical school. She chose to deal with laser optics there. She used to work in UchTehProm, a laser technology factory, but when the orders from the Soviet Union ceased after the political changes in Bulgaria in 1989, she was dismissed from work. Now she works at Social Care Centre in Mladost Municipality. My daughter married a Bulgarian and she has two children, Simona and Martin.

I used to go on vacation with my husband every year in the 1960s. I took my daughter to the seaside every summer in the 1970s. We had work then and we had the financial ability to go to resorts. When my daughter started school she used to go on vacation during the winter, the spring and the summer holidays. We lived well until 1989. Now, after the political changes in Bulgaria that began on November 10th 1989, we don't live well.

We have a group in the Jewish Community Center where we gather to talk in Hebrew. There is a group for Ladino speakers also. I take part in both groups. I graduated a Jewish school 65 years ago and I can speak Hebrew. There are other groups where they teach Hebrew to those who want to go to Israel. I do my best to help my daughter's family now. I observe all the Jewish holidays and I go to the synagogue regularly. I have a special chandelier for the Jewish holiday of light, Hannukah. I recently organised a Bat Mitzvah for my granddaughter Simona at the central synagogue. 120 people attended the ceremony. My granddaughter had prepared a speech that she read before the audience. It was a great festival. We treated the guests to kosher food.