

# Bina Dekalo

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Sofia

Bulgaria

Interviewer: Dimitar Bozhilov

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Bina Dekalo is a pleasant elderly lady, who is always ready to tell stories about her big family. She lives in the Mousagenitsa living estate [consisting mostly of concrete panel apartment blocks and located in the southeast part of Sofia], where she has also accommodated a young family who looks after her. They are friends of her granddaughter, who lives in Israel. She has a big room of her own, with a desk on which she has placed a typewriter, carefully covered with a piece of embroidery. With great sadness she explains that she cannot use it anymore, because she has a serious problem with her sight. She also has a wardrobe, a bed, and a big table with a dark red velvet cover with embroidery, which she keeps as a souvenir from her mother. Her favorite pastime is literature. She knows Ivrit very well and teaches it to students who come to her home several times a week. She is visited by guests very often and does not go out much now, because she is still recovering from a heavy fall. She is always elegantly dressed, with a nice hairdo. She is very kind and always willing to help with what she can.

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## **My family background**

My paternal and maternal ancestors came from Spain after the persecutions against Jews there some centuries ago [see Expulsion of the Jews from Spain] [1](#). My paternal grandfather, Avram Aroyo, used to gather us and tell us about the beautiful Spain. We passed these stories from generation to generation. His father used to tell him about the famous Aroyo family, who was named after a river in Spain, near which they lived. Our grandfather told us that his great great-grandfathers lived in Toledo, had big dairy farms and were very rich. Their produce of yellow cheese, cheese and milk was in high demand by all citizens of Toledo. Their company was famous and much respected. We were all sitting listening, fascinated by his words. He was very excited while telling us about the banishment of the Jews from Spain. In order to save themselves, his great great-grandfather, his family and relatives paid a lot of money to board a trade ship with some other Jewish refugees. They traveled for months around the Mediterranean Sea until they reached

the shores of Turkey at that time, where they were welcomed very well.

My paternal grandfather was born in Yambol [a town in Southeast Bulgaria] in 1847. He was the most respected of all in our house in Yambol. He was a handsome man with a short white beard, brown eyes, lean and agile, always wearing a kippah. He loved his grandchildren very much and never forgot their birthdays. I remember that he always whispered some prayer. He was present at the brit milah of each of the boys. These were grand ceremonies. On holidays such as Purim and Tu bi-Shevat he brought presents accompanied by something made of yellow cheese from his dairy farm. My grandfather had a big dairy farm near the town. A Bulgarian, Bai Yordan, was his partner. They were very good friends and we always invited him and his wife to lunch during our Jewish holidays. On the Christian holiday Easter my parents and my grandfather were invited to their place to eat kozunak [Easter cake] and eggs.

My grandfather was very hard working. He got up early every morning and went to the dairy farm. It was located on the outskirts of the town. I searched for some traces of that dairy farm later on, but I couldn't find any. They produced dairy products there and every day my grandfather brought home yellow cheese and butter. Mostly Bai Yordan, whom my grandfather trusted a lot, did the sales and production. My grandfather supervised the production process and paid much attention to quality and hygiene. Three or four workers worked in the dairy farm. It was a building consisting of a number of sheds. One of the sheds housed wooden dishes for the separation of the butter, and the other big troughs, in which they made yogurt. Everything was very clean and produced in a primitive way; I don't remember seeing any machines there. Grandpa Avram was very proud of this dairy farm. Everything they produced was much sought on the market. They made good money and my grandfather helped his three sons financially. But he loved my father most and they were always together. Grandpa Avram lived with us in the big house. When he returned from work in the evening, he washed himself, put on a housecoat, ate something and left fresh cheese and butter from the dairy farm in the kitchen.

My grandfather insisted that his children and grandchildren observe the Jewish laws, study Tannakh and the history of the Jewish people. Every Saturday he took us to the synagogue and taught us to be proud of our origin. He himself went to the synagogue very often, even twice a day and gave money for its maintenance. On every holiday he told us the story of the Jews from the time of King David and King Solomon - 'Shlomo ha Melech'. He told us about the Jews' exodus from Egypt and how the waters of the sea parted to let them walk across the seabed, while the Egyptian soldiers following them drowned.

My grandfather had small books with prayers in ancient Jewish, most of which he knew by heart. We had one room on the first floor in our big house in Yambol, where my grandfather went every morning to say his prayers.

My grandfather got along very well with my mother. They often sat together, drinking coffee and talking. My mother used to tell him about her family in Odrin and my grandfather about Spain. Once it was very hot and he told my mother that he wasn't feeling well. My mother advised him not to go to the dairy farm. Soon after that he died. He was a much-respected man and many people came to attend his funeral. The hall was large and full of people standing. Some Jewish women also came to sing Jewish mourning songs, praising God in Ladino. The rabbi of the synagogue came to my grandfather's funeral and said the funeral prayer. We missed our grandfather very much and

talked about him very often.

My paternal grandmother, Sunhula Aroyo, was a humble woman devoted to household work. She was very hard working, always busy cooking, cleaning and looking after the children. Every day I saw her in the kitchen with a big apron and a kerchief on the head. I was impressed by the fact that all Jewish women in Yambol wore kerchiefs. My father had two brothers, Jules Aroyo and Lia Aroyo. Lia was a craftsman in Aytos, and Jules, my father's younger brother, married in Rousse, where he had a haberdashery.

My father was a prosperous merchant and he could afford to support our big family. After he built the big house, he settled in it while it was still damp and that was the reason for the illness of his first wife Bina, who died very young. My grandmother Sunhula took up looking after the children: Albert, Mois, Aron, Sami, Jacques, Carolina and Herzl. They also hired a woman who helped them.

My father had a very big shop for textile at the square in Yambol. His shop was always full of quality textile and that's why it had many clients. Besides, my father was a much respected and liked man, and many people entered the shop just to meet him.

My maternal grandfather, Mordohay Behmoaras, was very conservative. He forbade his daughters to walk freely beside a man and married them to the men who chose them. I saw my maternal grandparents a number of times. They lived in Odrin, which is in Turkey. Grandfather Mordohay was a chazzan in Odrin. He had a beard and wore a special hat, which was part of his special costume as a chazzan in the synagogue and a black cloak with stripes. His hat was small and round, black in color with seams in the middle, which were sewn with golden thread. This was his uniform, which he always wore. I went to visit my grandfather in Odrin and I have seen the synagogue there. My first impression from that synagogue was that it was richer than the one in Yambol and there were a lot of candlesticks with gas lamps in them. The Odrin synagogue had marble walls, which I found very beautiful. The synagogue in Yambol was made of bricks, which were whitewashed and painted. I remember that the Jews in Odrin were different from the other people. All men had a small well-formed beard and behaved differently. They were reserved and polite and always greeted each other in Ivrit.

My mother Victoria was named Viducha in Odrin. When she was young, she didn't want to go to school. Her father sent her to a religious school, where they studied Tannakh in Ivrit. She had a great memory and memorized a passage by heart as early as the first lesson. When she went home, she recited it to her father. But instead of being happy with his daughter's abilities, he got angry, because he thought that a woman shouldn't study much, but should look after her children and her husband instead. That's why he forbade her to go to school. So, my mother didn't go to school and remained illiterate. When she issued her documents in Bulgaria, they wrote her name down as Victoria.

When she was 19 years old, my mother was married to a banker in Odrin, who was thirty years older than her. In the first year of their marriage she gave birth to a girl, Bella. After the birth she came down with a mysterious illness, similar to sleeping sickness, and her husband returned her to grandfather Mordohay. He decided to take her to Jerusalem, to the places sacred for the Jews in order to heal her. In Istanbul, where they were about to board a ship, they met a physician from Vienna, who asked my grandfather some questions and advised him to cancel his journey and visit his hospital in Istanbul. He started treating my mother by drawing blood from her arm and she

started to recover very quickly. After a month she was completely well. My grandfather paid the physician generously. They were very happy and went on a holiday in some resorts in Turkey. After they returned to Odrin, the first thing my mother did was to go and see her husband and daughter, whom she hadn't seen since the delivery. It turned out that the banker had found another woman and had even bribed the authorities to marry them legally. Yet, my mother sued him for divorce. The banker paid a big compensation and so, at 21, my mother got divorced, without any rights over her daughter, but with a big sum in the bank. After my mother divorced, she returned to live with her father.

My father often traveled to Odrin and Tsarigrad [Istanbul] on business trips. Once when he was in Odrin he saw a tall, beautiful and elegantly dressed woman crossing the street. That was my mother. He immediately asked around about her and found out that she was from a highly religious Jewish family.

### **Growing up**

My father proposed to her and she agreed. They married in Odrin around 1906- 1907. My father, however, didn't tell her that he had seven children from his first wife in Odrin. They left for Yambol and all my father's children lined up and kissed her hand. After the seventh child my mother couldn't take it any longer and fainted. After she regained consciousness she cried bitterly. All my father's relatives started to console her; his former wife's relatives also came and promised her that she wouldn't have to look after all the children on her own. My parents loved each other and my mother decided to stay and accepted the seven children. Everybody in Yambol talked about my mother's sacrifice. After she married in Bulgaria my mother received the name Victoria. Three children were born out of the big love between my parents: Marco, Lazar and I. My name was written as Bienvenida Aroyo in my birth certificate. My father, however, thought that the name sounded very strange for the Bulgarians and shortened my name to Bina. That's how my name was written in my first documents.

So, from my father's first marriage I have seven brothers and sisters and from my parent's marriage I have two brothers. We were all born in Yambol. From my mother's first marriage I have a sister, Bella. She was born in Odrin. Of all my brothers only Marco followed my father's will and graduated from college. All the others had elementary education in the Jewish school in Yambol. We had special teachers in Ivrit from Poland in our school. For the holidays each class had to prepare a program. I remember that I had to talk about Pesach in Ivrit. We had to speak in Ivrit about all the holidays and explain what we were celebrating. Our holidays are related to the history of the Jews and that's how we learned our history.

My sister from my mother's first marriage, Bela Benaroya, married a well- off merchant in Istanbul and lived there for a long time. She has two sons and one daughter. Her first child died of an illness when it was 12-13 years old. Her other children, Raphael and Sarah, settled in the USA and in the 1990s she moved to live with them in Chicago where she died.

### **War memories**

My oldest brother, Albert Aroyo, was a representative of a French perfume company. They liked him and invited him to work in Paris. I remember that before he left, he lived in Sofia. He married a Jew born in Rousse and called Rashel. So, he left for France with his family in 1936. His two

daughters were ballet dancers and were immediately accepted in the general ballet group of the opera. When the Germans invaded France, they were interned to Lyon.

All Jews there received an order for deportation. My father's friends from the company, however, didn't let him go and hid him, his wife Rashel and his two daughters in a basement in an inner yard. They didn't go outside for six months. But the elder daughter of Albert, Jana, couldn't stand it any longer and said that she would go to the ballet again. So, together with some children, friends of my brother, Jana went to the ballet. Every night her worried family waited eagerly for her. One night Jana was late more than usual and my brother Albert went out to look for her. But he had hardly crossed the first street when a German patrol stopped him. They saw that he was a Jew and surrounded him. At the same time Jana also appeared and when she saw what was happening, she ran to her father. So, they were both detained and deported together with the other Jews to the Auschwitz concentration camp. My brother was killed there. Jana survived by a miracle, but at a very high price. She was a very attractive girl with a slender figure. They violated her sexually and made her clean the toilets. All that, however, left its mark on her psyche.

### Post-war

After the end of the war Rashel, the wife of my brother, was still in the hiding place and knew nothing about the fate of her husband and daughter. Jana was released from the camp and went to see her mother in Paris. Jana was unrecognizable and Rashel went into a shock at the sight of her daughter. Jana was also not well mentally, so they both spent some months in a hospital to get over the shock. After that, they received a rented apartment and some money to live on. I learned all that from Jana's letters, which she sent me throughout the years. My niece Jana is still alive and lives in a senior home in a Paris suburb. My other niece Sofka has run the ballet of the London television. She lives in London.

My next brother, Mois Aroyo, married a Jew from a very rich family in Rouse. They had a factory producing gunpowder called 'Buko Eshkenazi and Co'. They produced gunpowder and weapons. My brother was the director of that factory and was well off. His wife was Matilda. They had a daughter, Jana, who graduated from the French College in Rouse. During World War II they weren't deported, because they paid much money. In 1948 they moved to Israel, in Haifa. There Jana's children, Herman and Mois, run together a factory producing passementerie.

My brother Aron was very adventurous. Even when we lived in Yambol, he had such inclinations. He loved trading with gold and valuable items and even when he was young he started secretly from my father with money from the turnover of the shop to buy gold and valuables from the villagers living near Yambol. Meanwhile my father couldn't sleep during the night worrying why the business wasn't going well. One night my brother Aron decided to gather the whole family and told us that he had prepared a surprise. He made us enter the hall where the lights were out. After we all gathered, he lit the lamps and drew the cover from a heap on the table. It was all gold and valuables. My father gasped, my mother scolded him very seriously for what he had done. My brother lived in Paris for twelve years before World War II. I guess he earned his living by selling that gold. He married in Pleven Mazal Behar, who was born there and they lived in Pleven all their life.

My next brother, Sami, married while we lived in Yambol. He married a Jew from Drama, Greece, named Sophie. During the wedding the bride was dressed in white and had a hat and a veil on her

head. The veil was embroidered in such a way as if it was sprinkled with gold. The hat of the bride was decorated with artificial flowers. My brother Sami was dressed in a tailcoat, white shirt and black tie. There was an orchestra playing music. Special songs in Ladino were also sung during the wedding, mostly by my mother. One of them said: 'Bless them and let them live in peace and love'. There was also a song about the evil mother-in-law and the great love between the bride and the groom. Then followed blessings: 'May God give them health', 'May God give them wisdom', 'May God give them material prosperity'.

The ritual for the wedding started in the morning. At that time three or four young girls came, who helped the bride put on the wedding clothes. In accordance with the Jewish rituals the bride had to dress away from other people's sight. The music started playing early in the morning and it was very merry. The whole neighborhood gathered to watch, to listen and see the bride. It is typical for our Sephardic wedding rituals that an engagement should be made before the wedding, at which 'ashogar' [dowry] was made - the bride shows what she will bring into her new home - clothes, blankets, covers. They had to be luxurious and if possible with embroidery.

After the bride is ready, the groom comes to take her with a carriage. Then they go to the synagogue. The best man and maid of honor take the newly-weds by the hand and go to the pulpit where the rabbi is. Before the people enter the synagogue, they stay besides the entrance and the bride and the groom walk in first. The rabbi starts reading prayers for the wedding, which have very beautiful ancient Jewish melodies. Then they take a sip of wine and the groom breaks the glass. Then the rabbi declares them husband and wife and blesses them. After that the guests approach them and congratulate them.

Sami's wife was very beautiful but suffered from strong headache, for which she took very strong drugs and opiates. Consequently, she became dependant on these medicines and they ruined her health. My brother Sami was the only one in the family who remained living in Yambol. He was a retailer. He has two children, with whom he left for Israel in 1948: Pepo or Yosif, who was a clerk in Tel Aviv and Mois, who worked as a shop assistant in Tel Aviv.

My next brother is Jacques. He came with us to Rousse and even worked for a short while there as a director of the factory producing springs, which my father built. Both Jacques and my father didn't understand much of this business and they went bankrupt. When we left Rousse, Jacques went to live in Sofia where he had a shoe shop and got married. His wife is a Jew born in Sofia, called Jula. In 1948 they all left for Israel and settled in Tel Aviv.

My sister Carolina had an unfortunate fate. She married a Turkish Jew in Sofia named Buko Agranati and lived with him. I remember that she went to live in Sofia at the place of our brothers Albert and Jacques, who found her that man. But my parents didn't like him much. He worked as a shop assistant. They had three girls. Buko Agranati had no Bulgarian documents and when the Law for the Protection of the Nation [3](#) was passed, he had to leave Bulgaria. So, he decided to join the group of refugees intending to go to Palestine on a sailing boat through the Black Sea and Turkey. My brothers advised Carolina to stay and promised her they would support her. But she decided to leave with her husband and somewhere around the first kilometer from the shore the boat named Salvador crashed and my sister and her three children drowned. Her husband was among the few people who survived. He got married once again in Israel and had three children. The trip with the boat was organized by a Zionist, named Komforti who had taken much money for it.



My grandfather Avram said about my brother Herzl that he was the amulet of the family. When he was very young, he went down with meningitis and that affected his mental development. On holidays my grandfather would always give him the best present and always told us to look after him, because he wouldn't live forever. Herzl went to live with our brothers Albert and Jacques in Sofia and found work there as a salesman at a stall. They found him a wife named Ernesta. In 1948 he moved with his wife to Israel and found himself some small job in the trade business in Tel Aviv.

My brother Marco graduated from the French College in Rouse. From an early age he started supporting my parents and me. After my father went bankrupt in Rouse, we were left with no money and we went to our brother in Lom, where he worked as a correspondent in French in the newly opened branch of the General Bank. Without his help, I wouldn't have been able to finish my high-school education. He insisted that I should study, while I wanted to work and help my parents.

Every year my brother Marco went on an excursion to a European country. One year he visited Palestine. Then he decided that he should move to live there to help in the establishment of agricultural farms in the country, where the people struggled with the marshes and the desert storms. In May 1936 he left us a big sum in the bank and left for Palestine joining a group of Jews from Bulgaria, who were sent to the northern part of the country - Tiberias. There they founded that agricultural village Kfar Hitim with much hard work and deprivation. Before that German and Turkish Jews had tried to cultivate the land there. But they couldn't cope with the harsh climate. The Bulgarian Jews worked very hard to solve the problems and brought water from Lake Kineret following the project of my brother Marco. Together with the other settlers from Bulgaria they planted green belts against the warm winds, which destroyed the harvest. Today Kfar Hitim is a picturesque village at a high peak and there are many trees and flowers. My brother still lives in the village. Although he is quite old, he does some office work part-time for the village and welcomes guests and tourists from around the world. He is one of the most respected people in the whole region.

When my other brother, Lazar Aroyo, reached the age of 13 and seeing that my father couldn't support the family and send him to study, he decided to go to Pazardjik, where there was a school funded by the Zionist organization teaching agriculture and various crafts. After he studied two years in that school, around 1927, he left for Israel. He traveled two months until he reached the country. Together with other youths from Bulgaria, Poland and Russia they founded the Ma'abarot kibbutz struggling with the Arabs, the marshes and poverty. Today the Ma'abarot kibbutz is quite advanced in all respects. My brother was in charge of repairs and maintenance of the cars and farming machines. He had learned that craft in Bulgaria in the school in Pazardjik, which was called 'haTikva' [Hope]. Lazar married a Bulgarian Jew in the kibbutz. Her name was Rosa and she was a teacher in Ivrit in Yambol. They had two children, Gidon and Oro. They live in the kibbutz.

### **Childhood memories**

Yambol was a small, but lively trade town. The Tundzha River passes through it and its waters were used to irrigate the gardens growing mainly vegetables. The horse tram transporting the people to the railway station was remarkable. The station itself was outside the town. My brothers and I used to go to watch the two pairs of horses, which pulled two carriages each, always full of people on their way to the station.

Another remarkable thing about my hometown were the 'market-gardens' near the Tundzha River. In the evenings many families went near the gardens to buy special lettuces, which they called 'fat hens', from the gardeners. This is a special kind of enormous and very juicy lettuces, which were grown only near Yambol. The villagers were friends with the Jews and every evening waited for them to come again. One of my brothers, Mois, who married in Rousse, always said that such lettuces grew nowhere else in the world and he missed the Yambol ones very much.

I remember the Turkish bath as a low building made of solid stones. In the middle of the bath there was a large area of stone plates, which had been heated and on which people sat in order to sweat. After that people rubbed themselves with special kinds of bags and washed at the fucets. I remember that there were no showers. The bath had separate rooms and entrances for men and women. Usually we went to the bath on Thursday or Friday. There was an entrance hall where we ate. My mother used to prepare a bag with cheese, bread, eggs and butter; we sat on some chairs and ate. It took quite some time until we entered the bathing rooms, because of our breakfast. After a while we went to the entrance hall to eat again. The children had great fun playing at the bath. All evening we would tell each other stories about what we did there. My grandfather Avram Aroyo said in Ladino 'Se fue Djoha al banio tuvo ke kontar mil i un anyo', that is, 'Went Djoha to the bath and had stories to tell for one thousand and one years.'

I remember that everyone at home paid much attention to hygiene. There was a room with a tub, which was covered with tiles. We filled it with warm water and bathed every day.

Many Jewish families lived in Yambol. They were mainly merchants and craftsmen. All spoke to each other in Ladino; they were very united and were free to celebrate all Jewish religious holidays. The people united around Zionist organizations such as the General Zionists [4](#), Poalei Zion [5](#), Maccabi [6](#) and others in the town. Both young and old were members of Maccabi. On Yom Ashekel [7](#) the Maccabi members made a manifestation wearing sports clothes, passing along the main street of the town and all people would go out to watch them. The whole town danced with them. During that time all Jews were very inspired by the ideas of Theodor Herzl [8](#) for the foundation of the Jewish state and Yom Ashekel was a day when they raised money to buy lands in Palestine.

In order to solve the financial problems related to the municipality, the synagogue and the school, every Friday, before Sabbath, the richer Jews gathered in the municipality and decided what to do.

Yambol was a town celebrating freely and united the Jewish holidays. All Jewish families dressed in their most official clothes and went to the synagogue. The synagogue was always crowded and many times people were left outside. The women always had to wear kerchiefs and there was a separate space for them - on the balcony. I remember that once I went to the synagogue without a kerchief and they didn't let me in. When I was very little, they didn't bring me to the synagogue. After some time I had to wear a kerchief in order to enter the synagogue. Once the balconies where the women prayed were being repaired. We had a rabbi then, who didn't allow the men and women to mix, and so that the women wouldn't be left outside, he ordered that a cloth be put as a screen between the men and the women. Everyone was much surprised what that cotton print was doing in the synagogue.

Jews owned the whole trade street in Yambol. It started from our house, which was in the center, then followed the house of Mois Kohen, the brother of my father's first wife, who had a big textile store. There were a lot of shops after his house - all Jewish ones. There were goldsmiths, grocer's



stores, selling lettuces, potatoes, onion, garlic, fruit and vegetables, and a shop from which we always bought on Rosh Hashanah, because they sold oranges. There were also some shops on this street, which sold kosher food.

My father, Yosif Aroyo, with the help of my grandfather and the dowry he received from his first wife's brother managed to build our big house in Yambol. The house was always full of people, even my father's younger brother had settled to live with us together with his wife from Pazardjik. My father's house was built near the main village square, the 'megdan' as the large empty area in the center of Yambol was called. The meetings and festivals in the town were organized there. The Friday market was also there. The General Zionists held meetings on Yom Ashekel and on other occasions.

Our house had two floors and a yard, where when we were children we played with the others, some of who were Bulgarians and others weren't. There were eight rooms on the first floor, a long hall and a big kitchen with a balcony. In the summers we went out to eat on that balcony. Gas lamps, very modern for the times, hung from both sides of the walls in the hall, which we called the salon. Banquets of the leaderships of the Zionist organizations took place there. Speeches were held, awards were given to people who had excelled in the social work, the hymn of the Jews and many other songs in Ladino and Hebrew were sung. Alongside the hall we placed a long table covered with white blankets, which encompassed the whole room. We put on it beautiful silver spoons and forks. We, the children, weren't allowed to stay at the banquets and peeped through a half-open door during the ceremonies. Our whole family loved the big house and was very proud of it. The rooms were well furnished with different furniture for the children of my father's two marriages - eight sons and two daughters.

I will always remember that house. When my family moved to Rousse we always regretted selling the house, leaving the town and the good life we had in Yambol. I cannot forget the big kitchen we had in that house. It was as big as the other rooms and had a large window looking at a yard with a covered well. People told various incredible stories about the well to frighten the children. There was an extraordinary cooker in the kitchen made of fireproof bricks and taking up almost the whole wall. My mother used it in the mornings and in the afternoons. The cooker wasn't lit on Saturdays only. My grandfather Avram forbid us to light a fire then, and my mother was 'chasida', that is, pious. Bags with vermicelli and couscous made by my grandmother Sunhula for the winter hung from the white walls of the kitchen. In the fall we made bottled bruit, liutenitsa and jams. It was typical for that time to hang turkey rounds from the ceiling to dry up.

One of the remarkable things I will never forget is the big 'mangal' [a kind of coal-burning stove] with tall cast-iron legs. Every Friday gypsies came to sell us charcoal. My grandmother kindled the fire with the charcoal and put the stove on the balcony and a horseshoe among the charcoal to protect us from the carbon dioxide and when everything turned to embers, she brought it into the large hall. We warmed all the rooms in this way during the winter. In Yambol the winter wasn't as cold as in other towns of Eastern and Northern Bulgaria. The stoves were enough to warm the rooms. The 'mangal' had another function too - when the fire subsided, my grandmother put crushed onion with cheese in the embers and this was a wonderful breakfast.

Our relations with the Bulgarians and the Armenians were very warm. And since my mother was born in Turkey and knew Turkish, our family was friends with some Turks, too.

We strictly observed the Jewish rituals and traditions in my father's house. My mother Victoria was very religious. When my grandmother Sunhula and she cooked, my mother said that the meat should be salted an hour before it was cooked, because that was what the Jewish laws said. She also said other things, which unfortunately I don't remember. On Sabbath she followed the tradition: not to work, not to light a fire, to go to the synagogue, to prepare in advance special dishes for this day. These dishes were put in the big cooker, where they remained warm without a fire being lit up. On Sabbath my father closed the shop, put on his new clothes and went to the synagogue with a prayer book in hand. He knew all prayers by heart. My grandfather Avram had taught him the prayers when he was a child and in the Jewish school it was obligatory to repeat the prayers many times, not only on 'Erev Sabbath', but also on the other high holidays. When my father returned from the synagogue on Saturday, the big table in the hall would already be laid on for breakfast. It would be full of cheese pastries, cheese crackers, boiled eggs, cooled brandy and fruit. All children would stand up until the prayer was said, after that we would all say 'Amen' and sit down to eat.

We used special dishes for Pesach. We had a nice big wicker basket, nice cooking pots, special plates, glasses and everything necessary. On Pesach the house was cleaned thoroughly and in the evening before the holiday my grandfather would go around the house with a candle to check if no breadcrumb, 'chametz', had been left out. It was forbidden to bring bread into the house on Pesach. We took out the new dishes and arranged them on a long table. My father's two brothers with their families always came for the holidays. The wife of one of my father's brothers was a very good cook and prepared some chickens in the cooker.

On Pesach we prepared special loaves of bread without salt and soda resembling matzah. They are called 'boyos'. These loaves were very hard and we had to dip them in water to be able to eat them. We arranged the table for the holiday very carefully. The 'boyos' loaves were put in water in the evening and the next day we would drain the water and prepare a mixture with eggs, which we fried in the form of small balls. We also sprinkled them with sugar or sugar syrup. We do this today too. On Pesach we ate the best dishes - roasted hens, leeks balls, potato balls, lots of nice paste products such as cheese crackers, spinach pastry, meat pastry and sweet things such as quince jam or cherry and morello jam.

On Pesach, my grandfather or my father read the Haggadah in Hebrew. In Bulgarian the prayer was told in the following way: 'What happened this night, as different from all the other nights, is that every other night we are different, but on this night we are all gathered together at one table'. Then God is praised: 'You are the king, you are the master, you are everything.' After the praise for heaven, the story of Moses is told.

On Yom Kippur when we fasted the whole day, we all went to the synagogue in the evening. The children who had reached ten years of age also fasted. We were allowed to eat by seven o'clock the previous day and nothing was eaten on Yom Kippur. There was a small fountain in the yard of the synagogue in Yambol, in which the shochet slaughtered a hen for us, when we brought him one.

On Sukkot, the holiday marking the gathering of the harvest, we made tents in the synagogue. We sang very beautiful songs then. We blessed fertility and everything, which grows and feeds us. There is a very poetic psalm of David for this holiday. It is a thanksgiving prayer in ancient Hebrew,

which is said in the synagogue.

Purim is a holiday related to the salvation of the Jews. On Purim we made very nice masquerades with masks. People also made ring-shaped buns decorated with red paint and various figures with flowers. There were some sweets typical for Purim, which were called 'roskas de alhashuv' in Ladino. 'Alhashuv' in Ladino means a mixture of sugar and walnuts. These were tasty ring-shaped buns, sprinkled with sesame and filled inside with this mixture of sugar and walnuts. Among all the thanksgiving prayers said in the synagogue there was one during which one knocks with a hand on something, symbolizing the killing of Haman, who had prepared the conspiracy against the Persian king according to the story about Purim. Masks are put on at home in the evenings. I had a very beautiful mask, which one of my brothers had made for me. It was a smiling black girl. I would put on a pleated dress without sleeves and I loved dancing. On Purim the town musicians came to the Jewish school and people had a great time there. Even Bulgarians celebrated with us. Our relations with the Bulgarians were very warm and I remember that they congratulated us when we had holidays. Various neighbors, friends of my mother and clients of my father came to greet us.

Even today I still light candles on Chanukkah. It wasn't a practice to exchange presents on Chanukkah. On that occasion we would light one candle each day for seven days and an eighth candle was always burning for the shammash. The shammash was the servant in the synagogue who kept watch on the candle all the time.

We also had a holiday called slichot. Then we didn't sleep all night and we went to the synagogue precisely at 12 o'clock at midnight. I remember people going to the synagogue during the night and the whole street leading to it turning black with them. We had a very good time. We loved slichot and my mother held us by the hand while going to the synagogue. 'Slichot' means evening prayers to God before a holiday. [Editor's note: the interviewee mixes up some information because slichot is special order of service consisting of non-statutory additional prayers which are recited on all fast days, on occasions of special intercession and during the Penitential season which begins before Rosh Hashanah and concludes with the Day of Atonement.] We went to evening prayers before Rosh Hashanah. I think on the occasion of slichot we went for a number of consecutive nights. At that time no Jew was sleeping and we all gathered in the synagogue.

My father was selected chairman of the General Zionists in Yambol. He was a gifted speaker and held speeches at the meetings, which took place in front of our house. He told the people about Theodor Herzl [8](#) and his book 'The Jewish State' and about the buying of lands from the Arabs in Palestine. For his successful social activities he was awarded a medal from the leadership of the General Zionists. I remember that we were very proud of this medal. My mother hid it in the wardrobe wrapped in a golden cloth and on Yom Ashekel she brought it out and my father put it on his lapel.

Life in Yambol was very nice. We all lived very happily. But at the end of the 1920s the country fell into a grave economic crisis [see crisis of the 1930s] [9](#). As a result, my father's business declined and he went bankrupt. He had to support his big family by himself and that wasn't easy. So in 1929 my father had to sell the house and our whole family moved to live in Rousse [a town on the Danube in Northern Bulgaria]. My father decided to build a factory producing bedsprings with the money he had left. He took for a partner an Ashkenazi Jew named Berkovich. I remember that he came to our house, which we had rented and we were impressed by the fact that he ate lots of

sausages and threw their peelings on the floor. My mother would ask him politely not to do that. My father, however, understood nothing of this business and went bankrupt very quickly. This was a hard blow for him and he went down with a very serious sclerosis. After the bankruptcy our brothers supported us and we sold some more valuable things. My mother had a very nice gold necklace and a watch, which she sold. In the meantime, my brothers from my father's first marriage married and found work.

We lived in Rousse for around two years. I studied in the high school there in my 1st and 2nd grade after the four elementary grades in the Jewish school in Yambol. And since there was no one to support us my brother Marco called us to live with him in the town of Lom [a small town in northern Bulgaria also on the Danube coast], where he had settled. I continued to study there in the local Bulgarian high school. There I had a music teacher, Motsev, who had formed a choir, in which I took part. He liked my singing and advised me to apply in the conservatory and study singing.

Around 1935 my parents and I moved to live in Sofia. My brother Marco who supported us decided to leave for Israel and we decided to leave Lom. In Sofia we rented a house at the corner of Hristo Botev Blvd. and St. Cyril and Methodius Street. [The western part of the center close to the Jewish neighborhood of the town.] It was a two-storied house with a ground floor. We had to climb some stairs with iron railings. The house was old, but beautiful. There was one more Jewish family on the upper floor. My father died in 1936 in this house and was buried in the Jewish cemetery.

In Sofia I worked as a shop assistant and tried to help with what I could, because the money was never enough. I enrolled to study singing in the conservatory. I was admitted to study dramatic soprano. The director of the conservatory advised me to take additional singing lessons and his wife Ruth Tsankova, who was German, became my tutor. I didn't graduate from the conservatory, because the Law for the Protection of the Nation was passed and I was expelled, because I was a Jew.

In 1938 I married my first husband, Israel Vasser, who was a secretary of the spiritual council in the central synagogue. Our love was great, especially his. We married in the synagogue, where a chazzan read the wedding prayers and the rabbi was present as an honorary guest. Both my husband and his father were very devoted to our religion. They didn't eat food other than kosher. The ritual required that the dowry be presented first - usually this is money the bride's family gives to the groom's family. We didn't have a civil marriage.

### **During the war**

In 1941 we had a son, Rami. We lived in our house with my mother who looked after the child. At that time I worked in a socks production factory. However, I didn't know that he was a member of an illegal communist group. In 1942 he disappeared with a group of Jews and until 1950 I knew nothing about him. Then I found out from my brothers in Israel that he had abandoned us and I was very hurt. I learned that he regretted leaving his family very much and that he didn't stay in Bulgaria where the Jews were saved. While running to Palestine, he passed through a lot of places where he saw horrible massacres of Jews. I heard that he had met a family and started seeing another woman. I don't know what happened to him after that.

In the meantime, after the Law for the Protection of the Nation was passed in 1939, we were given badges and a signboard with a yellow star was put on the door of our house. The situation of the

Jews grew worse. At first we were registered in the municipality. There the clerks treated us very badly. They created a commissariat for the Jewish issue and a plan for our deportation to Poland. When we heard that, my Jewish friends and I went to the Turkish mosque, because we planned to accept the Islam religion and save ourselves. This was a stupid decision and of course the imam dissuaded us. The authorities had issued an order that Jews shouldn't go out after 9pm, but the Bulgarians helped us and we could walk more freely. The commissariat decided to send the men to labor camps [see forced labor camps in Bulgaria] [10](#). There was also one group who were sent to a prisoner's camp in Kaylaka near Pleven. The building of this camp was set on fire and some people burned to death, while others managed to save themselves.

In the spring of 1944 my mother and I were interned [see Internment of Jews in Bulgaria] [11](#) to the town of Haskovo [a town in Southeast Bulgaria]. My brother Sami was with us, too. At first we were accommodated in the school, and then an order came that we could rent an apartment in a specific living estate. So, I managed to find a small room where we settled. It was great poverty. We didn't have a bath and we had to go to the town's bath. And to reach it, we had to violate the ban to enter other living estates. We had no right to go out and walk around.

In Haskovo the Jewish women were allowed to arrange fruits at the train station and the men dug hiding places for the army near the town's hills. There was a synagogue in Haskovo and a very rich Jewish family lived near it. They gave us delicious food - buns and chocolate. When I was in the school, a Turkish family brought us food for the child. A boy also brought us some food from home. I had sold everything I had at the black market - clothes, shoes, and cloths. But the money was spent very quickly. There were some good people, and if it hadn't been for them I don't know how I could have coped. My brother Jacques and his wife had some money saved, which helped them. In the school yard there was a cauldron, in which beans were cooked every evening.

There was an illegal communist organization in Haskovo. I was in touch with this organization. I started meeting members of this organization, because I sympathized with the communist ideas. There were many Jews in the illegal communist organizations at that time. I remember that the police caught one member of our organization and after they beat him up, he told them the names of most members. He omitted only my name. There was a trial and sentences. There was one Jew from Plovdiv, who was killed without a trial and sentence. Others were sentenced to life imprisonment. But they were released the same year, because 9th September 1944 [12](#) came. Others saved themselves by escaping to the partisan squads. On 9th September 1944 they came down from the mountain and were welcomed with flowers.

I remember that once a Soviet plane had made an emergency landing in Haskovo. The pilot was very surprised that people welcomed him with flowers. He was hidden away by the communist organization. After some time 9th September 1944 came, which was a joyous day for all. On that day we were told that we were free and we took the badges off. Everybody was very happy and we walked freely outside. After the internment to Haskovo, I went to live on Veslets Street in Sofia.

Shortly after 9th September 1944 a Jewish cultural and educational organization was established in Sofia. I started working there. This organization solved various problems - accommodating people, who had been interned and returned to Sofia, distributing clothes and food received from the Joint [13](#) organization. I was very eager to continue my education in the conservatory, but everything I had experienced during the Holocaust, the hunger and deprivations, had affected my vocal

capabilities and I could no longer sing in the high pitch range.

After 9th September 1944 Eli Ashkenazi, who was a lawyer, but was very interested in scholarly issues, founded the Balkan Studies Institute in Sofia. There was a project in the institute to teach all Balkan languages and Ivrit. I was appointed there to teach Ivrit.

The first years after 9th September 1944 were, on the whole, poor. We didn't have much money then. The situation in Bulgaria was such that we all received rations for bread. The Joint organization helped the Jews a lot then. An American representative of the organization arrived in Sofia and brought us many new and second-hand clothes, powder milk and canned food. Then gradually the country stabilized. After the Central Committee of the Communist Party was founded and established itself as leader of the nation, the Joint organization was banished from the country, because they thought that their representative was a foreign agent. All property of the organization was given away to senior homes and other places. Joint had brought to Sofia knitting and sewing machines to give the Jews employment.

Before 9th September 1944 the supporters of communist ideas were divided into two groups. One we called 'the real communists'. They distributed leaflets, carried out sabotages and attacks. I was a member of the sympathizing groups, which weren't given very hard and responsible tasks. I started to support these ideas when I was 13 years old. At that time we lived in Lom. There was a lawyer there whose name was Asher Levi. He had a remarkable appearance. He walked around with a black 'rubashka' [a coat without lapels with buttons from top to bottom] and a golden necklace with two tassels. He had wild hair, which he combed backwards. He was the 'flag' of the communists in Lom. He was a Jew and he organized meetings in the Jewish school in Lom. There he managed to form a group of sympathizers to the communists, which I also joined. When the Law for the Protection of the Nation was passed the whole country was flooded with leaflets against this law. The communists did this.

## Married life

In 1948 I married Mois Dekalo. We met in Sofia in the Lenin regional committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party. We had a civic marriage. He regarded the Jewish rituals as old-fashioned. He was a wise man, but he wasn't religious. On the issue of the establishment of a Jewish state, he thought that the Jewish people must have their own state. Only I was interested in Judaic issues. My second husband was born in Bourgas. He joined the Union of Young Workers [UYW] [14](#) at an early age. His whole family was very poor and they were all communists. My husband was in prison because of his anti-fascist activities in the 1940s. After 9th September 1944 he was released. Afterwards he returned for a short time to Bourgas and then came to Sofia. We met in Sofia and we married. We rented a small apartment on Ekzarh Yosif Street in the center of the town.

My husband wasn't very pleased with his work, because he preferred social sciences and art to trade. The leadership of the Communist Party, however, thought that since he was a Jew, he understood more about trade and didn't make him head of a department. My husband was a great idealist, for example, he didn't want us to buy an apartment, because he thought that he didn't fight for that. But I saw what life really was and what the others were doing and I bought the apartment in the Mousagenitsa living estate in which I live today.



In 1950 I started working in the Lenin District Committee of the Communist Party, firstly in the business department, later in the department for campaigns and propaganda. But I was overloaded with work there and my husband and I decided that I should quit that job, because I couldn't bear the stress. We went for a long holiday at the seaside. After I recovered, I started work as a clerk in a workshop producing metals named Vaptsarov. Then I went to the Zemlyane construction plant. I was appointed party secretary there. I worked there with a colonel, who was about to retire and all the time passed most of the work to me. I found all that very hard, because I had household work to do, too.

After 9th September 1944 I was very happy. Firstly, the Law for the Protection of the Nation was abolished. We became citizens with equal rights of the so-called 'people's republic' of Bulgaria. Party groups and district organizations were formed. I joined the party organization in my living estate - at that time I lived on Veslets Street, which is in the center of Sofia. I was wholly devoted to my work in the Lenin District Committee of the Communist Party. The main task of the district committees of the Communist Party was to strengthen the new model of government, which was expressed in the dominance of the Communist Party. My work was a social one. We organized lectures in Marxism and Leninism; we introduced people to the statute of the Bolshevik Party in Russia. They liked me and wanted to transfer me to the city committee of the party. But there wasn't enough staff in my district committee so I stayed there. During the communist rule I visited the best holiday resorts. Together with my husband and my son I loved spending holidays at the seaside, mostly in August. There were a lot of organized excursions by the district committee of the party. We visited historic and natural sights throughout the whole country - monasteries, resorts, and towns.

I'm very grateful to my husband for helping me with the household work. He did the shopping and sometimes cooked. When I wasn't at home, he took care of everything. We found enough free time for some cultural activities. We didn't miss a new performance by the Ivan Vasov state theatre and by the youth theatre. I liked very much the repertoire of the youth theatre, because it was more modern. At that time theatre tickets were very cheap, much cheaper than now. I went to the cinema very rarely.

During the communist rule we observed the Jewish traditions to a lesser extent. I always observed Rosh Hashanah, Pesach and some of the other holidays. When I wanted to celebrate some of our holidays at home, I let my management know and they even gave me a day off. On the whole, when I lived with my parents we observed the Jewish rituals and traditions. When my husband and I went to live on our own, we weren't often able to do that, because I was devoted to my work in the district committee of the Communist Party.

I worked in Zemlyane until 1972. After that I gave private lessons in Ivrit to children and students of Bulgarian and Jewish origin and wrote for the Evreiski Vesti newspaper [a monthly newspaper, published by the Jewish community in Bulgaria Shalom]. The editors there liked my style very much. They published some of my short stories and feature articles.

My son Rami studied in a Bulgarian school in Sofia. After that he graduated from the Chemical and Technological Institute. He had to do some training and was appointed in a tire-producing factory, which was a Jewish one and was called Bakish. He was an ordinary worker there. He married a Jew from Sofia, while he was a university student. Her name is Matilda. She was studying dentistry.

Their wedding wasn't a religious one and we didn't go to the synagogue. Matilda became a dentist in the First City Hospital. However, my son divorced his wife, who soon after that went down with some disease and died. My son has a daughter from this marriage, Sabina. She graduated from the Music Academy and now lives in Israel.

After that my son started working in a laboratory testing nuclear energy. There he was assigned the task to develop a plan for the utilization of prescribed doses of nuclear energy in some machine. Many teams had tried before, but unsuccessfully. My son, however, managed to do it. Everybody congratulated him and he was told that he would receive an award of 800 levs, which wasn't a small sum at that time. But the board of directors decided to spend the money on a banquet. My son was very hurt, because he had devoted a lot of months to this project. So, he decided to leave the job and move to Israel.

My son moved to Israel in 1990. He studied the language in the town of Akko for six months. Then he started work in the village of my brother Lazar near Akko. He started work in a chemical laboratory in Beer Sheva. He had an accident there. One night he went to check something in the lab. Just at that moment something started hissing and there was an explosion. In order to save himself, Rami jumped out of the fourth floor and injured his foot badly. There are Jews all over the world living in that town. My son, however, didn't manage to become close with them, because they had a different lifestyle. He has a girlfriend, a Bulgarian Jew born in Sliven who has been living in Israel for a long time.

I have been to Israel four times. Since I was a member of the Communist Party, it wasn't a problem for me to go there. But always before I left, some people from the intelligence service came and asked me where I was going. I just told them that I didn't know Israel and went only to see my brothers. My first impression from Israel was that the country was making progress. Everything was in the process of construction. I went there for the first time in 1952 with my husband. I was visiting my brothers, who welcomed me warmly. We, however, decided not to remain in Israel, because we felt distant from the mentality of the people living there and we were very poor.

I was in my brother Lazar's kibbutz - the Ma'abarot kibbutz. He had a service station for machines. There were cars, harvesters, tractors and other agricultural machines in the garage, which were given to him by the state and had to be maintained. There were some people who were in charge of that there. My brother was building his house at that time. They lived in some kinds of sheds: big wooden houses, made of some material, which was very good. My brother had a bedroom, a corridor and a dining room. Everything was very modern. The kitchens were small, but comfortable, they had everything - a refrigerator, freezers, and dishwashers. I was also impressed by the organization and life in the kibbutz. Everyone worked at what he or she could do best.

During the events in the Czechoslovakia in 1968 [see Prague Spring] [15](#) and in Hungary in 1954 [Editor's note: in fact, the events in Hungary took place in 1956] [16](#) the information about them reached us through a bulletin issued by the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party. The official position was against these coup attempts. But there was much false information in them.

The Jewish organization decreased its activity after the mass aliyah [17](#) in 1948-49. During the totalitarian regime the Jewish organization was most of all a cultural organization. Yet, there were some religious Jews left and the synagogue was kept in a good state. In the other towns, however,

most synagogues were turned into warehouses and small halls. I remember that even the central synagogue in Sofia was about to be turned into an opera. This however sparked the disapproval of the Jewish organizations throughout the world and the decision was cancelled.

After 9th September 1944 the general policy of the party was against any religions. The Communist Party forbade Jews to celebrate holidays together. Although it was officially forbidden, we found our ways to celebrate them. I went to the synagogue too, although the communist organizations didn't approve it. Ever since I was a child, I have been listening to the prayers of grandfather Avram and my father; I understand them and I like them very much. I remember that I had asked a woman working in the Central Committee of the BCP [Bulgarian Communist Party], Velicha Kostova, why Jews weren't allowed to celebrate their holidays while the Armenians and Turks were allowed to. She couldn't answer me. I was always afraid when I went to the synagogue. There were some informers, watching what the people were doing and speaking and then reporting to the secret services. A Bulgarian friend of mine, who was an active member of the Communist Party, told a joke about Todor Zhivkov [18](#) during one meeting. Some informer reported that to the authorities and he was imprisoned for twelve years. So, one joke could destroy one's whole life at that time.

I went to Israel in the 1970s too. But at that time I was very cautious. I had a friend in Haifa, whose husband worked as a customs official. Their family had a friend in the Israel intelligence service. When he found out that I was from Bulgaria, he wanted to visit them, to meet me. He was a Polish Jew and tried to question me about some specific sites in Bulgaria, which I knew nothing about. I kept in touch with my relatives in Israel mainly by letters. I loved writing letters. My brothers Sami and Jacques wrote to me the most. I could correspond freely with my brothers in Israel.

During the totalitarian regime my financial situation was quite good compared to the times around World War II and the times after 1989 [see 10th November 1989] [19](#). I think that we live in some 'sick' capitalism, that this is not a democracy. Besides, the money that most people receive isn't enough. This capitalism in which we live today is like a prematurely born child.

When the changes in Bulgaria and in Eastern Europe started in 1989, I was against them. Of course, I wasn't against democracy and freedom of speech and the press. I think that a large part of the advantages of democracy related to the free professional fulfillment of the individual didn't take place.

Most of my friends throughout the years have been Bulgarians. There are also some Jewish families who visit me. I keep in touch with them by phone, because I am recovering from a heavy fall. We have a good organization of clubs in the Jewish home. We have a club 'Health', club of Ladino speakers and club of Ivrit speakers. Cultural programs, discussions and lectures are being organized for the Jews there.

## 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, Izmir, etc.) and also in the ones situated on significant overland trading routes to Central Europe (Bitola, Skopje, and Sarajevo) and to the Danube (Edirne, Plovdiv, Sofia, and Vidin).

## **2 French College**

An elite Catholic college teaching French language and culture and subsidized by the French Carmelites. It was closed in 1944.

## **3 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.

## **4 General Zionists**

A social political formation of followers of the ideas of Theodor Herzl for the foundation of a Jewish state. In Bulgaria the members of this formation were among the more well-off Jews and paid a member's fee.

## **5 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.

## **6 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.

## **7 Yom Ashekel**

Day devoted to the collection of money to be used to buy land in Palestine for the foundation of a Jewish state.

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

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

## **9 Crises of the 1930s**

The world economic crisis that began in 1929 devastated the Bulgarian economy. The social tensions of the 1920s were exacerbated when 200,000 workers lost their jobs, prices fell by 50 percent, dozens of companies went bankrupt, and per capita income among peasants dropped by 50 percent between 1929 and 1933.

## **10 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.

### **11 Internment of Jews in Bulgaria**

Although Jews living in Bulgaria were not deported to concentration camps abroad or to death camps, many were interned to different locations within Bulgaria. In accordance with the Law for the Protection of the Nation, the comprehensive anti-Jewish legislation initiated after the outbreak of WWII, males were sent to forced labor battalions in different locations of the country, and had to engage in hard work. There were plans to deport Bulgarian Jews to Nazi Death Camps, but these plans were not realized. Preparations had been made at certain points along the Danube, such as at Somovit and Lom. In fact, in 1943 the port at Lom was used to deport Jews from Aegean Thrace and from Macedonia, but in the end, the Jews from Bulgaria proper were spared.

### **12 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.

### **13 Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee)**

The Joint was formed in 1914 with the fusion of three American Jewish aid committees, which were alarmed by the suffering of Jews during World War I. In late 1944, the Joint entered Europe's liberated areas and organized a massive relief operation. It provided food for Jewish survivors all over Europe, it supplied clothing, books and school supplies for children. It supported the establishment of cultural meeting places, including libraries, theaters and gardens. It also provided religious supplies for the Jewish communities. The Joint also operated DP camps, in which it organized retraining programs to help people learn trades that would enable them to earn a living, while its cultural and religious activities helped re-establish Jewish life. The Joint was also closely involved in helping Jews to emigrate from European and Muslim countries. The Joint was expelled from East Central Europe for decades during the Cold War and it has only come back to many of these countries after the fall of communism. Today the Joint provides social welfare programs for elderly Holocaust survivors and encourages Jewish renewal and communal development.

### **14 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 (BCYU). After the coup d'etat in 1934, when 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.



## **15 Prague Spring**

The term Prague Spring designates the liberalization period in communist-ruled Czechoslovakia between 1967-1969. In 1967 Alexander Dubcek became the head of the Czech Communist Party and promoted ideas of 'socialism with a human face', i.e. with more personal freedom and freedom of the press, and the rehabilitation of victims of Stalinism. In August 1968 Soviet troops, along with contingents from Poland, East Germany, Hungary and Bulgaria, occupied Prague and put an end to the reforms.

## **16 1956**

It designates the Revolution, which started on 23rd October 1956 against Soviet rule and the communists in Hungary. It was started by student and worker demonstrations in Budapest started in which Stalin's gigantic statue was destroyed. Moderate communist leader Imre Nagy was appointed as prime minister and he promised reform and democratization. The Soviet Union withdrew its troops which had been stationing in Hungary since the end of World War II, but they returned after Nagy's announcement that Hungary would pull out of the Warsaw Pact to pursue a policy of neutrality. The Soviet army put an end to the rising on 4th November and mass repression and arrests started. About 200,000 Hungarians fled from the country. Nagy, and a number of his supporters were executed. Until 1989, the fall of the communist regime, the Revolution of 1956 was officially considered a counter-revolution.

## **17 Mass Aliyah**

Between September 1944 and October 1948, 7,000 Bulgarian Jews left for Palestine. The exodus was due to deep-rooted Zionist sentiments, relative alienation from Bulgarian intellectual and political life, and depressed economic conditions. Bulgarian policies toward national minorities were also a factor that motivated emigration. In the late 1940s Bulgaria was anxious to rid itself of national minority groups, such as Armenians and Turks, and thus make its population more homogeneous. More people were allowed to depart in the winter of 1948 and the spring of 1949. The mass exodus continued between 1949 and 1951: 44,267 Jews immigrated to Israel until only a few thousand Jews remained in the country.

## **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 10th November 1989**

After 35 years of rule, Communist Party leader Todor Zhivkov was replaced by the 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 of 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.