

# Leon Mordohay Madzhar

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Sofia

Bulgaria

Interviewer: Leontina Israel

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Leon Madzhar is a pensioner. He lives in Sofia in an apartment with his wife Suzana and one of his grandchildren Moni. He looks younger than he is, maybe because he is a very active man and is still involved in many activities in Bulgaria's Jewish community. He also continues to do a little bit of work, although he is retired. He is very talkative, speaks in an interesting and emotional way, emphasizing Jewish rituals he remembers from his youth and events from his life, which he regards as important and interesting. His apartment is very nice. There is a portrait of his mother and father on one of the walls, which is one of the few pictures he has of them. He often speaks about his children and grandchildren and it is evident that he takes to heart everything they experience and that he and his wife are an important part of their children's lives. They live in this apartment in the winter and spend the summer in their villa in Bankya, near Sofia, where they enjoy the silence, away from the noise of the big city.

My father's ancestors were Sephardi Jews. His family comes from Salonika [see Expulsion of the Jews from Spain] [1](#). My father's father, Sabitay Aron or Rahamin - I don't remember exactly which of the two names was his second name - Madzhar, came to Bulgaria as a young man and settled in Dupnitsa. [According to the Tirnovo Constitution of 1878 of the newly created Bulgarian state, Bulgarian citizens were required to adopt a third name. The patronymic Aron or Rahamin was attached to Sabitay Madzhar's name in his Bulgarian documents after he moved from the still Ottoman Salonika to the Bulgarian Dupnitsa.] I don't know when that happened, probably when he was young. I know nothing about his parents, or his brothers and sisters. But I know that he had siblings. They remained in Salonika. After World War II my father and I tried to find them, but we found no one. Most probably, they died in the death camps.

My grandfather Sabitay married Klara Pilosof in Dupnitsa. This was his second marriage. He was first married to another woman, from whom he had two sons and a daughter - Rahamin, Aron and Miriam. I never knew my paternal grandfather, because he died in 1925, one year before I was born, but I remember Grandmother Klara very well. She was born in 1850 in Dupnitsa and died in 1954 at the age of 104. She grew up in Dupnitsa. She and my grandfather had three daughters and one son - Buka, Vida, Rashel and my father Sabitay. My grandfather processed guts used to wrap sausages, a job my father inherited from him. They didn't make the sausages themselves, they only processed the guts and sold them.

My mother's father is Yuda David Komforti and her mother is Sara Yuda Komforti [nee Aron Bardevid]. At that time women took the two names of their husbands, not only their family names. My mother came from a very poor Jewish family. Her father was a tobacco worker, who was promoted to a tobacco manager in one of the tobacco warehouses in Dupnitsa. They were all born in Dupnitsa. Later the family came to live in Sofia, except for my mother, who was already married

to my father in Dupnitsa. For a while they lived in Kyustendil, because my grandfather went to work there. I don't know how long they lived there. Around 1939 they moved to Sofia, maybe earlier, because I know that one of their sons married a girl from Dupnitsa, another one married a girl from Kyustendil and the others married in Sofia.

They were a big family. My mother had four brothers and three sisters. They were eight children in all: Samuel, Rufel, Nissim, Alfred, Mois, Sterina, Rebeka and my mother, Buka. They had one more daughter, but she drowned very young in the river, poor thing! My mother was the eldest, which is why she was named Buka. She told me that they were so poor that they didn't even have beds. When she got older, her father bought her a bed and she was the only one in the family to have one.

My grandmother Sara was a housewife and looked after the children; there were eight of them, after all! My grandfather had elementary education from the Jewish school. He was a very polite man. I can't say that he was religious, my grandmother wasn't either. Only Ladino was spoken at home. They also knew Bulgarian, although my grandmother didn't know it very well. I don't know whether they knew any other languages.

I was born in 1926 in Dupnitsa. My real date of birth is 12th February, but the date written in the municipal registrar is 19th July. It's different, because when I was born my father was working in Kyustendil. He came for a very short time when I was born and went back to work right away. He didn't have enough time to write my name down in the municipality registrar. When he wanted to enter my name in July, he would have been fined if he told them the real date, so he wrote a date which was six months later.

I can't say that Dupnitsa is a very beautiful town. It is located between two hills and was not very big; round 1938 it had around 10-12 000 citizens. What distinguished the town was the large number of tobacco warehouses, owned by 'Nikoteya' or Jacques Aseov. I was told about this man that he was very poor, but later he got rich; he studied in Sofia and made a fortune out of tobacco. That was the main livelihood of the people in Dupnitsa. Almost half the people in the town worked in these warehouses.

We had electricity and running water. Our house was small, made of sun-dried bricks of straw and mud [airbricks], but it was cozy. We had a larger room, which was for my parents and a smaller one, in which I, my sister, and my grandmother Klara, my father's mother, lived. I remember that my grandmother and I slept in the same bed when I was a child. The room was small with a low ceiling. We had a garden. My father and my grandmother were known for doing farm work. They had an orchard garden in the town itself with peaches, plums and cherries.

My father also had two decares of grapevines near the town. [Decare: a unit for the measurement of area, generally used for land area. One decare is the same as 10 ares, which is the same as 1000 square meters. The decare is not widely used, except in Norway and many of the formerly Ottoman countries.] My father made wine out of the grapes. He also made at least 40-50 liters of 'rakia' [plum brandy], out of the plums. He loved drinking 'rakia' from time to time, but he never drank too much. He also had a field in one of the neighboring villages, where they grew tobacco when they were young and stored it for sale. They also grew maize back then. Both my grandmother and my grandfather also bought land to cultivate, although they had jobs. When my father earned more money, he would always go and buy some land. Jews had this habit - they

thought that the best way to preserve money was to invest it in land. I don't know what happened to this land, whether it was sold or nationalized; I just don't know.

I remember many stories about my grandmother Klara. She lived until she was 104 years old and until the very end she was strong and working. She helped my father with his business which was very dirty work and my mother refused to help my father. What's more, this kind of work can't be put off, because the meat goes bad. In such cases, we all helped my father, all the children and my grandmother. I remember that when she turned 90, she made a ritual. All her relatives and acquaintances gathered at home to sew the dress in which she would be buried. That was an interesting ritual, I don't know if it was performed for the men as well. It was a real celebration - everyone sang and danced. In fact, we buried her in that dress when she died.

I also remember an interesting story about her funeral. She was buried in the Sofia Central Jewish Cemetery. We asked the Rabbi of Sofia, Daniel Zion [2](#), to perform the ceremony, but when he found out how old she was, he said that no sad songs should be sung about her, only wedding, joyful ones. That must be the ritual when burying people who had lived for so long. But we weren't able to observe it, because a young woman was also buried on the same day and the rabbi had to pay respect to her age in the ceremony. That took place in 1954 in Sofia. In Dupnitsa grandmother Klara was famous as a healer. She was very good at setting dislocated legs and arms. I don't know how she did it, by some kind of massage. She was very religious: she went to the synagogue in the mornings and observed all Jewish traditions.

My father, Mordohay Sabitay Madzhar, was born in Dupnitsa in 1892. He inherited his father's gut processing trade, which had nothing to do with the kashrut; the guts were sold to Bulgarians who produced sausages. My father was a very kind man and was not strict; he never hit me. I remember that once he was very angry with me, and yet he didn't beat me. There was a ritual for the children to make small bags for Purim in which everyone would drop a coin. I had collected a lot, 3-4 levs and my father knew that. When I went out on the street the other children were playing some kind of game and were staking money. They talked me into joining them and I lost my money. How could I tell my father? So I did the following: I broke a glass into small pieces and put it in my pocket so that when they asked me where my money was, I would tap the pocket and they would hear coins chinking. But my father saw through the trick. He shouted at me a lot, but he didn't hit me. He was a kind-hearted man. He very much believed in people, he was kind of naive.

He had many Bulgarian friends. That's why during the Law for the Protection of the Nation [3](#) we didn't experience much hardship. We had friends in the villages and in town, who brought us flour and bread; there was a miller, who was a friend of my father. The baker also respected him. I remember that since we used coupons to buy food, I would give the baker a coupon for one loaf of bread, and he would give me more loaves. My father was a well-known man and everyone was willing to help him. But sometimes his faith in people got him into trouble. Once he came to work in Sofia with a fellow man from Dupnitsa. They earned a lot of money, but his so-called partner cheated him and gave him nothing. My father was very kind, but maybe because of his job and his fellow workers, butchers, who are on the whole ruder, wild and unrestrained, he was very brave. I can't say that he was rude, but he reacted very fast in dangerous situations.

I remember once during the war [WWII], a man came into our yard and broke our windows, probably because he hated Jews. My father jumped outside with an axe and ran after him. He found

the man hiding in the toilet in the yard, holding a knife. Attacking with the knife, he cut my mother's hand and my father hit him so hard with the axe that I thought he killed the man. The man was alive, thankfully, but my point is that my father was afraid of nothing. He had two brothers, Rahamin and Aron, and four sisters – Miriam, Buka, Vida and Rashel. All of them except Buka left with their families for Israel after the war. Rahamin processed guts, Aron was a butcher and the women were housewives.

My mother, Buka Yuda Madzhar [nee Komforti], was born in 1894 in Dupnitsa. She didn't work; she took care of me, my sister and the house. She was the one who cooked. My grandmother also cooked sometimes, but since she helped my father with his work, my mother was in charge of the household chores. When she was young, she worked in the tobacco warehouses; she came from a very poor family and didn't go to school. Although our family was poor, my father earned enough money so that we would not be among the poorest ones. Most of the people in Dupnitsa lived in misery. Only my mother looked after us, and we never had a maid.

My mother was a very good cook. My father would often bring some edible offal home from work and my mother made various meals with it. Take, for example, the lower part of the pork legs, where there is no meat, only bones and tendons. My mother cleaned them up and made various tidbits. She also made a dish out of brawn and eggs. It was delicious. All this was not kosher, of course, but we didn't keep kosher. When my father brought pork home, we hid it from my grandmother, who kept kosher until she died and couldn't get used to us eating pork. If my grandson were to see one of the meals we ate back then, I'm sure he would be sick, but they were very tasty. My grandson never kept kosher, but in principle these foods don't look very enticing. Nowadays the young don't like them and it's difficult for them to get used to the taste.

My mother was very strict. I remember many times when she beat me. When I was a child, I fell in the river [Struma] once and the people got scared that I had drowned. When they called my mother, instead of being happy that I was alive, she gave me a hard beating for going to the river without asking for permission.

No one from my mother's family had any formal education, but each of her brothers had his craft. The eldest one, Samuel, was a tobacco expert in the warehouses and bought tobacco. Rufel was a retailer. He had a grocery store, then a greengrocery, which he also set up in Sofia together with his father. Nissim was a hatter. He made bowler hats and had a workshop and a shop in Sofia. Alfred was a mechanic. Mois also had a grocery store. So although they were poor, they had their small businesses.

My mother and my father met in Dupnitsa. They told me that they were head over heels in love with each other. My father was made fun of, because every time he got home from work, he rode a donkey, which carried his things. So they used to say to my mother, 'A donkey on a donkey! You will get a donkey for a fiancé!' My mother was very young, around 17 years of age. I asked her whether she was asked for 'contado' ['dowry' in Ladino], but she told me that her father was very poor and could not even give her one lev. But my father loved her very much and married her without any dowry.

When they married, they were unable to have children for a long time. In fact, the children died immediately after their birth, due to some reason unknown to me and probably to my parents, too. So when my sister Sarina was born in 1920, they had to 'sell' her. That was an interesting ritual

among Jews. When the children in one family died as newborns, the child was symbolically sold to a relative or a friend, probably to be distanced from the family. The 'buyer' gave some money and was obliged to visit the child and take care of it. So my sister was sold in this way. I was also sold to a relative of mine, with whom we were very close for many years. Maybe my parents believed that this would lift the curse.

My sister studied in the Jewish elementary school in Dupnitsa, but the high school in our town was closed. My sister was a very conscientious student and my father wanted to send her to Kyustendil to finish her education, but my mother didn't let him, because she was afraid that my sister was too young and would not manage on her own. So my sister studied until eighth grade. She married a hatter who was an orphan. He and my sister fell in love when I was a child, I remember the other children joking with me and writing on the walls 'Sara and Telo.' They must have known that my sister and Telo were in love.

One day Telo's brothers came to ask for my sister to become their brother's wife. That was the ritual then. They asked my father to give 50,000 levs as 'contado,' explaining that their brother would open a hat shop with this money to support the family. But my father was poor, how could he find so much money? He told them that he would readily give them this money, if he had it, but he didn't! So, the engagement failed a couple of times. Then, my future brother-in-law came and told my father to promise a sum before the wedding and then not to keep the promise, so that he would be able to marry my sister. This is what they did. They signed a contract before the chazzan in accordance with the ritual that my father would give them a sum of money as 'contado.' Then they agreed that my father would give them 30,000 levs, 15,000 immediately, and the other 15,000 later on.

There was one more ritual. All the women and men at home were called to see what 'ashugar' ['dowry' in Ladino] my mother gave to her daughter. That was her dowry. I remember it, I wasn't so young then, it was 1938. A 'commission' came and the things prepared by my mother were laid down around the whole room: 12 bed sheets, covers, embroidered table cloths, pajamas and stuff like that. My mother wanted very much to prepare a beautiful dowry for her daughter, but in my opinion this was a great burden for parents, especially poorer ones. Yet, although they were poor, my parents tried to secure the lives of their children in the best way they could. So my sister married Telo Israel Mordoh.

In Dupnitsa we lived in the Jewish neighborhood. It was very large; there were quite a few Jewish families in town. There were some Bulgarian houses among the Jewish ones, but most were owned by Jews. We were very united. Usually during the holidays we gathered in the so-called 'kortigos' ['yard' in Ladino], something like common yards of five to six families. There were doors between the yards, through which we could pass from one yard to the other. There were around 2500 to 3000 Jews in Dupnitsa, among whom a lot of craftsmen and merchants. There were also some rich Jews: flour dealers, tobacco dealers. There were many intellectuals, teachers and doctors among the Jews in Dupnitsa.

The Jewish community in Dupnitsa was very united and active. We had two Jewish community houses. One of them was called 'Saznanie' [Conscience], which had a theatrical troupe and a very rich library. Various celebrations, concerts and performances were organized there. I don't remember the name of the other community house. Jews helped each other a lot.

I remember a story they told me. My grandfather Yuda had a brother named Sabat, who earned his living as a cab driver. But his horse died and he couldn't buy another one. Then he went to Jacques Aseov, who was a very rich Jew in Dupnitsa, known for helping fellow Jews. So my uncle Sabat went to Jacques, but he was not let in the house. That took place around 1939. Sabat stayed in front of the house the whole day until finally Jacques agreed to see him. Sabat asked Jacques to give him money to buy a horse otherwise his family would have to starve. But Jacques refused. Sabat fainted, he stopped breathing and everyone got very scared. They called for a doctor and until Jacques said, 'Okay, I will give you money to buy a horse,' Sabat lay motionless on the floor. But when he heard the cherished words, he came to his senses right away. We all laughed a lot when we heard this story.

We celebrated most of the Jewish holidays at home, gathering with four to five other families. We had an attic in the house where we kept 3-4 baskets with dishes for Pesach. We used these dishes only on Pesach and when the holiday was over; we boiled them and put them up in the attic for the next year. Two weeks before Pesach the whole house was cleaned so that no bread crumbs would be found. We also had a special machine with which we made bread for Pesach. The special loaves of bread we made were called boyos. Boyos were similar to matzah, but not exactly the same. They were also a type of unleavened bread made especially for Pesach, without yeast. We also had matzah. We made some special meals for Pesach. For example, we made pastel out of matzah. We also made a matzah soup, but I didn't like it. We also made burmolikos [4](#), both salty and sweet ones.

Everybody fasted on Yom Kippur, even my parents, despite not being religious. I don't remember us, the children, fasting. Another thing that impressed me was that there were days during the week when there was no cooked food, but on Friday night, on Sabbath, there were at least three cooked dishes. The holiday atmosphere could be felt. My father didn't read prayers, because he didn't know Hebrew, but we sang many songs in Ladino, which I still remember. My grandmother was the one who was most strict about observing traditions. She was very religious.

We had a very nice and big synagogue in Dupnitsa. The women stayed on the balcony. It wasn't very high up. We had a shomer - Jacques Haim. He was loved by everyone. The Jews kept kosher. There were three or four Jewish butchers, including my father's brother Aron. First the shomer went to see the meat and placed stamps on the kosher ones. For example, the beef rounds were not considered kosher and were not eaten. I don't know if it was allowed to eat beef legs, but my parents did. Only my grandmother didn't. So we bought the meat from Jews. Everything else we bought from other merchants in the town. There was no Jewish baker.

When we were children, one or two weeks before Purim, we gathered in groups and prepared a special program to perform in front of people when we visited them in their houses. We carried the Keren Kayemet [5](#) money box and for each song or act we performed they gave us money. There were three to five such groups in Dupnitsa and we entertained the people. We all wore masks. For Purim we always made various sweets, roskitas de alhashuv, filled with walnuts, sugar and something else, I don't know what.

I vaguely remember celebrating Sukkot. I remember that we made a sukkah in the yard and in the yard of the synagogue, but I think that we observed this ritual only when we were young. We covered the shed with leaves and there was a table inside.



Las Fruitas [6](#) was also a merry holiday. We now know it as Tu bi-Shevat, but we called it Fruitas then. Our parents made big bags and filled them with fruit. They put inside carobs, oranges, pomegranates, nuts – walnuts, almonds, peanuts. The children also got candies.

We also celebrated many Bulgarian holidays. For example, I don't remember us celebrating Rosh Hashanah, but we celebrated New Year's Eve on 1st January, especially when we were young. On Easter my parents visited at least four or five other Bulgarian families and came back with Easter eggs [painted eggs]. I don't remember Bulgarians coming to our Jewish holidays, however. We didn't observe Bulgarian rituals. I remember that my grandmother made fun of the Resurrection of Christ, telling jokes in Ladino.

Like my sister I studied in the Jewish school in Dupnitsa. It was a two-story building very close to our house. There were some gyms on the first floor and the classrooms and a large hall were on the second floor. Besides all the usual subjects, we also studied Hebrew. We weren't taught to read the Torah, but the spoken language in Israel. The headmaster was Alkalay. We had a Hebrew teacher who hit us with the pencil on the fingers when we couldn't answer his questions. It was horrible! Only Jews taught us. We had a teacher named Mrs. Ester. The school was very nice, but it was only an elementary school. There was one class in each grade; ours included no fewer than 25 students. All Jews sent their children to study there. There was even a pre-school before the first grade, which I also went to. At the end of each year an expert from the Ministry of Education came to check whether we could pass to a higher grade. At school we were also told various stories about the life of the Jewish people.

Unfortunately, I didn't manage to learn Hebrew. Well, I know enough to make myself understood in Israel, but I don't know it well. My favorite subject at school was maths. The classes given in Bulgarian were very difficult for me, maybe because everyone at home spoke Ladino. Until I went to high school I found it very hard to read in Bulgarian, but later I got over it.

When I turned 13, I had my bar mitzvah. The ritual was very interesting. The hakham [wise man] gave me a speech, which I had to learn by heart and say in front of everyone. I don't remember it in detail, but it was about goodness and treating people well. I also don't remember whether it was in Ladino or Bulgarian.

It was interesting that Jewish families always went somewhere during the summer holidays, no matter how well-off they were. Every summer we went to Sapareva Banya. It was a village with mineral baths. We spend two to three months there. There were some families there who were our friends, who gave us a room to rent. A bull's cart came from the village, onto which we loaded our luggage and slowly made our way to Sapareva Banya. My mother also went very often to the mineral baths in Ovcha Kupel [district in Sofia]. Our family wasn't the only one who went on such vacations, all Jews did that. Sometimes during the vacations I visited my grandmother Sara in Sofia. They had a house in the neighborhood Fakulteta, which was a suburb of Sofia, it was like a village. They had two rooms and a kitchen.

After the first four grades in the Jewish school, I went to junior high school in Dupnitsa until it was time to apply for high school. My father decided that I had to study in the trade high school in Sofia. That was a very practical school. It gave qualifications for being an accountant, a merchant, on the whole, to do business.

At that time a number of anti-fascist organizations were set up in Sofia and one of them was the Union of Youth Workers – UYW [7](#), of which I was a member. All members were progressive young people, from whom I learned a lot. In Sofia I was also a member of Betar [8](#), a Zionist youth organization. It was very strict, resembling a military organization. It was also involved in educational activities. I was also a member of Hashomer Hatzair [9](#). It was a Zionist organization with leftist views, which were more modern compared to those of Betar.

The UYW members were both Bulgarians and Jews. They gave lectures on various topics: for example on Darwin’s theory and other interesting issues. The members were also involved in anti-fascist propaganda. In 1942 my obligation as a UYW member was to spread appeals in the form of leaflets in the mailboxes with propaganda against the fascists. The goal was to attract more of the intelligent people on our side. In my class in the trade school there were five Jews and I showed them the leaflets, because I didn’t know whether they shared the UYW ideas. Unfortunately, I was very young and I didn’t hide the leaflets well; they slipped out of my bag and fell to the floor. To my worst luck they were seen by a Bulgarian, a Brannik [10](#), who showed them to the business teacher. She showed them to the headmaster. The blame fell on me and two other Jews, Albert Behar and another boy. We were expelled from school. Yet, they gave us the chance to enroll as private students in another high school.

For around three months in 1942, I also worked in Shomrei Cholim [a Jewish charity organization helping sick Jews]. When the Law for the Protection of the Nation was passed all Jewish organizations were disbanded, including Shomrei Cholim. I remember a number of Jewish protests in Sofia against the laws. One of them was on 2nd June 1942 when a mass procession of all Jewish organizations was organized. It was dispersed by soldiers. It took place in the Borisova Garden [in the center of Sofia]. As early as 1941, windows of shops owned by Jews on Lege Street were being broken. I don’t remember if I wore a yellow star in Sofia. But I remember wearing it in Dupnitsa, because I have a photo of me wearing it in my work-book from the barber’s where I worked at that time.

In 1942 I was forced to return to Dupnitsa, because I was no longer a student and all Jews were interned from Sofia. There were other interned Jews in Dupnitsa. Some of them lived in Jewish families, others in the houses of Bulgarian families. My mother’s sister was at our place. We even prepared the basement to be good enough to live in. My parents’ financial situation was very bad, because according to those laws Jews couldn’t have a business of their own, so they couldn’t work and earn their living. Then I started working as a sausage maker for a man who had taken my father’s business after he won a tender. I stayed with him for five or six months. Then I worked for a while in the tobacco warehouses until some friends offered for me to start work as an apprentice in a barber’s. So in 1943 I started working there.

The owner said he would give me 5-6 levs a week, which was a minimal sum, but he assured me that I would receive more from tips. I knew that I would learn the craft quickly and I would pass the apprentice period. After three or four months I worked for a percentage of the total earnings; I received half of the earned money and the other half I gave to my employer. I was already 16-17 years old at that time and the municipality mobilized us to dig hiding-places against the bombardments around Dupnitsa. We dug holes in the earth and took out the soil with trolleys [wagons] and we made tunnels.



The other Jews were sent to labor camps [11](#), but I was not old enough so I remained in the town. All my uncles were sent to labor camps during the war. They built roads and railroads: for example, they built the Sofia-Kulata line. They were sent far away: Svoge, Lovech and other places. We were very close to town and in the evenings we went home. We were given lunch, but a very small sum of money. All Jews were mobilized; if someone refused, they were sent to court. Only some of the rich boys sometimes found ways to be released from work. We were usually mobilized in March when the weather got warmer and we worked until September. In the winter I worked in the barber's.

During the war [WWII] I witnessed many cases of anti-Semitism from the Bulgarians, but there were some Bulgarians who were against the absurd laws against us and helped us in whatever way they could. I had the feeling that the people didn't hate us much, but the propaganda they were subjected to was so strong that sometimes they hated us without knowing why. For example, there was a case which was very indicative of that. One of those families had a son who was our age and with whom we played as kids. He had even learned Ladino. When the Law for the Protection of the Nation was passed, he was already married, maybe he even had kids and he had started to hate Jews. He gave us a lot of trouble. For example, there was a curfew for the Jews, 8pm if I am not mistaken, and he stood in front of our houses checking whether someone would be late. If he caught someone who got home later, he chased him and wanted to beat him. On the other hand, his father was a very good friend of my father. He was a blacksmith and his workshop was very close to my father's one. Once his son came and started threatening my father that if he didn't move his workshop, he would kill him. Then my father talked to his father, who promised that he would talk to his son.

There were other such cases. Branniks and Legionaries [12](#) came to our neighborhood and broke our windows. But I wouldn't say that we were seriously harassed. The curfew was not a problem either, because as I mentioned, we could pass from house to house through the yards without having to go out on the street.

I remember a period of about a week when we were forbidden to go outside, because they were about to send us to the death camps together with the Macedonian Jews. They told us to prepare our luggage, around 5-6 kg and to be ready to be sent somewhere to work. I wouldn't say that we knew where we were going, although we were informed what was happening at the warfront. We listened to London Radio and Moscow Radio. We, the Jews, were forbidden to have radio sets, but we went to Bulgarian families to listen. So we weren't allowed to leave our homes, only small children under ten years of age were allowed to go outside and buy bread. The police, Branniks and Legionaries stood on guard.

We were about to be sent to the camps together with the Jews from Macedonia and the Aegean region. In 1944 the trains with those Jews passed through Dupnitsa. They tried to travel only by night using freight wagons, but we were close to the railway and we heard them. The trains stopped in Dupnitsa and the Jews were taken to the tobacco warehouses until their fate was decided. The Jewish community in Dupnitsa raised some aid for them. A cousin of mine, Borcho Komforti, who was a glazier, said the he had some work in the warehouse and managed to reach the Jews and talk to them in Ladino. At least he managed to tell them where they were. It was a great tragedy! There were small children and many old people among them. Meanwhile, I remember that a friend of my father came, a Bulgarian. He carried two buckets; he called my

father and left the buckets in front of the door. There was compost in the buckets, and under the compost – flour. He hid it that way so that it would not be seen. That man was worried that we had nothing to eat. So there were kind and conscientious people!

During the war in Dupnitsa I joined the anti-fascist movement. We were involved in propaganda activities, we bought weapons, raised money and clothes for the Rila-Pirin partisan squad. Two Bulgarians and I wanted to join the partisan squad in 1944, but the arrangement failed so we waited in Dupnitsa for the partisans to come down from the mountain.

When the fascist power fell, on 9th September 1944 [13](#) I was a barber. Since I was participating in the revolutionary movement in the town, I joined the army as a volunteer, because I was not yet 18 years old. This happened in October 1944. I took part in the war for the liberation of Yugoslavia. I was part of the Third Guards regiment commanded by Jelyu Demirevski. I was a platoon political commissioner and since I had some education I gave lectures to the soldiers and read them the newspapers. There were some horrible battles, one of them around Stracin [Macedonia].

The second phase of the war was in Hungary and I didn't want to be a volunteer any more as I wanted to finish my education. In January 1945 I was released from the army and continued my education in the trade high school in Sofia. After two years I finished my secondary education. While I was a student before 9th September and after that I lived at my grandmother Sara's place. I celebrated many holidays at their house. Usually the whole family from Sofia gathered on such days. My grandfather had a grocery store on Pozitano Street. After that I applied to the Institute of Economics and I rented a room of my own. I studied Finance from 1946 until 1950. When I graduated, I had to do my military service and although I took part in the war I had to serve more than two years. It was not a difficult service, I was in the military command office in Dupnitsa.

My wife, Suzana Buko Madzhar [nee Levi], was born in Kyustendil in 1933. She is also a Jew and has a brother and sister. Her brother was a partisan and on 9th September he came down from the mountain, took part in the battles in Serbia and was killed there. He was only 21 years old. Her sister Vitka was also born in Kyustendil. She was a housewife and for some time she was a sales assistant. She and her husband have passed away. Suzana finished school in Kyustendil and came to Sofia to study Law. We met when she was in her first year. We became very good friends and married in 1954. We didn't have a religious wedding, because there were no such weddings at that time. We married in Dupnitsa. Then she finished her education and she worked as a lawyer and legal adviser until she retired.

Around 1946-47 the Mass Aliyah [14](#) of the Jews to Israel started. All my parents' brothers and sisters decided to leave. They wanted to take my maternal grandparents, but they didn't know where they were going and what life they would lead there. My grandmother was sick so she decided to stay in Bulgaria with my grandfather until their children settled in Israel and she got better. I was asked to take care of them and I was left some money. Unfortunately, my grandmother had a sick heart and died soon after that. My grandfather also developed pneumonia and was hospitalized when my grandmother died. On the day of her funeral we decided to tell my grandfather the sad news and were told that he died the same day. So he died without knowing about the death of my grandmother.

When I finished my military service, I came back to Sofia and started work in the Ministry of Agriculture. At first I was an ordinary accountant. After a number of years I acquired more

qualifications and knowledge and became head of department, then deputy chief accountant, chief accountant and then economic director of a co-operative which was repairing agricultural machines. In 1980 I started work as deputy director in chief of another co-operative, in poultry breeding, again at the Ministry of Agriculture. I retired in 1989. I was much respected, climbed up the career ladder and was valued by my colleagues. I could have retired when I was 55 years old, because my involvement in the UYW and my participation in the anti-fascist movement in Dupnitsa were taken into account. I was an Active Soldier, but I continued to work until I was 65 years old.

I remember a case where there was an anti-Semitic attitude towards me at my workplace. There was one man who was about to retire. He started writing some things about me which were lies. In one of his writings he said that I was a Jew and that I defended Israel. He also made very spiteful remarks about my financial state, how many apartments I had and things like that. The head of that department, Kanev, who was a deputy minister, defended me and said that the words of that man had no value. There were people like him, too. Most of the people were very nice and admired our way of working. After I retired I continued to work in a company, 'Balkan Chicken,' where I was executive director.

My wife and I have a son and a daughter. Morits was born in 1954 and Nina in 1959. Both were born in Sofia. Morits graduated as an architect. He has two children: Leon, born in 1979 and Daniela, born in 1980. My daughter Nina finished high school and wanted to study in the Institute of Economics, but then she gave it up. She worked as an economist for a long time, and now she helps her husband, with whom she has a stall in the market. They have two children: Moni, born in 1979 and Suzana, born in 1983.

I went to Israel for the first time with the 'Georgi Dimitrov' [15](#) ship. [The only transport from Bulgaria to Israel was by sea. The 'Georgi Dimitrov' was the only ship used for that destination.] I traveled with my wife and my son Morits, who was six then. The voyage was terrible, because the ship was a mess. We all got seasick, especially my wife. I remember that we carried apples, because our relatives didn't have any at that time. I carried 100 kg apples in a crate and some dinner sets. There was not much choice of products in Israel at that time [1960]. I wanted to give each of my cousins a small gift and this was not easy, because my first cousins alone are around 80. So in order to support ourselves during our stay in Israel and not to be a burden to my sister, we brought 12 kg of walnuts with us, which we sold. There were no walnuts in Israel then and we sold them for 12 dollars a kilo.

After that I went many times to Israel. I remember that I went with my daughter when she finished high school so that she would see her relatives. Then we went again with her husband when she married. I went there almost every year and when my son lived there I went every three months. I like it there very much. I think that the way of life there is much healthier than the one here. I think that the climate there is much more suitable for older people, it is not as cold as here. Well, July and August are hotter there, but I can stand heat.

My son Morits moved with his family to Israel in 1994. At first they lived in Beer Sheva, then they moved to Tel Aviv. Morits had many years of work experience as an architect, he had won awards, but he was not paid well there. In Tel Aviv he started work in an Italian company, and gradually and with much hard work he started earning more money. Meanwhile, we realized that their children weren't doing very well at school, because they were enrolled in the same grade as they were here

in Bulgaria and they did not know the language. So they needed time to catch up, but this meant that they wouldn't have a good diploma. So we decided that they and their mother should come back and finish their education here while our son remained to work in Israel. And so they did. But soon, our son returned, too. Now he has his own studio and he earns good money. He builds very nice family houses.

When his children finished school, they decided to have their university education in Israel. But they only lost two years, because they weren't able to enroll in any university and they came back. They knew Hebrew, but not well enough to study in university. Now my grandson Leon studies architecture in the Higher Architecture and Building Institute and my granddaughter studies psychology in the Southwest University in Blagoevgrad. My other grandson, Moni, Nina's son, graduated from the Institute of Economics with excellent marks and now he is studying for the master's degree. He is very ambitious. He lives with us. At the beginning my daughter's family didn't have an apartment and came to live with us. When they bought an apartment and moved out, Moni remained with us, because his school was here. My granddaughter Suzana studies acting in the New Bulgarian University. We were all very surprised by her decision, because I don't think it's a very profitable job, but she chose it and she is very happy, and her teachers are very pleased with her, too.

Now we try to gather together on the Jewish holidays. My wife and I invite them on Pesach. My wife makes burmolikos, fritikas de prasa [fried meatballs made of leeks and veal minced meat]; there is always matzah, but there is also bread, unfortunately. We don't observe the rituals strictly, but we gather together. It's very difficult in these times to gather all the family, everyone has their obligations, which can't be put off. Sometimes only the grandchildren come. I try to sing the three or four old songs I remember from my grandmother. One of them is 'El kavritiko.' We don't observe Yom Kippur. Holidays such as Sukkot and Fruitas are more or less forgotten now. We go to the synagogue sometimes, but not because we are very religious.

I take an active part in the life of the Jewish community in Sofia. I am chairman of the financial control council of the Sofia Jewish organization. I control the financial income and expenses of the Sofia branch of the Jewish organization. Even before 1989, when I worked in the poultry breeding co-operative, I was called to the council as consultant, heading the finance and accounting department. I have always been involved in the Jewish organization and the Jewish community in Sofia.

The changes after 1989 [16](#) were very good for me, because they allowed me to improve my financial situation. I made a private company right away. While I worked in the ministry, I received a good salary and I can't deny that I lived very well. This might also be due to a trait in my character, which doesn't allow me to enjoy working just because it's work. I always look for some material benefits from the work I am doing. We lived well, we went on holidays twice a year, 20 days at the seaside and 20 days in the mountains. We had everything we needed; we didn't spend much money. I traveled to many places around the world. I often went on business trips; I have been to all former socialist countries. We had a nice home, a villa, a car, yet, we couldn't save much money.

After 1989 the opportunities for work and earning money were much better. I opened two warehouses: one for wholesale eggs and the other for poultry. I received the goods from the

poultry breeding factories and I sold it to retailers. I also imported breeding stock from Israel and exported poultry to Georgia, Russia and Armenia. I had also involved my daughter in my business. So our financial situation improved and I didn't find myself in the present state of many of my fellow citizens. When I retired, my pension was 450 levs, which is a very good pension. My wife also has a good pension, so we have no problem with money. But we don't rely only on our pensions. Half of our pensions are for medicines, so I can imagine how miserably the pensioners with smaller pensions than ours live!

I am satisfied with my life! I have always been realistic and never a dreamer. I also had an accounting house and a number of big companies used my services. Since I can't stay without work, I'm now also keeping the accounts of two small companies. I'm looking for ways to help my grandchildren in their studies, because I see that they are working hard, but find it hard to make ends meet. I like democracy. The times today have their advantages and disadvantages. Before we missed freedom, but we had a life, which was better financially.

Glossary

### **1 Expulsion of the Jews from Spain**

In the 13th century, after a period of stimulating spiritual and cultural life, the economic development and wide-range internal autonomy obtained by the Jewish communities in the previous centuries was curtailed by anti-Jewish repression emerging from under the aegis of the Dominican and the Franciscan orders. There were more and more false blood libels, and the polemics, which were opportunities for interchange of views between the Christian and the Jewish intellectuals before, gradually condemned the Jews more and more, and the middle class in the rising started to be hostile with the competitor. The Jews were gradually marginalized. Following the pogrom of Seville in 1391, thousands of Jews were massacred throughout Spain, women and children were sold as slaves, and synagogues were transformed into churches. Many Jews were forced to leave their faith. About 100,000 Jews were forcibly converted between 1391 and 1412. The Spanish Inquisition began to operate in 1481 with the aim of exterminating the supposed heresy of new Christians, who were accused of secretly practicing the Jewish faith. In 1492 a royal order was issued to expel resisting Jews in the hope that if old co-religionists would be removed new Christians would be strengthened in their faith. At the end of July 1492 even the last Jews left Spain, who openly professed their faith. The number of the displaced is estimated to lie between 100,000-150,000. (Source: Jean-Christophe Attias - Esther Benbassa: Dictionnaire de civilisation juive, Paris, 1997)

### **2 Daniel Zion**

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

### **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 Burmoelos (or burmolikos, burlikus)**

A sweetmeat made from matzah, typical for Pesach. First, the matzah is put into water, then squashed and mixed with eggs. Balls are made from the mixture, they are fried and the result is something like donuts.

#### **5 Keren Kayemet Leisrael (K**

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

#### **6 Fruitas**

The popular name of the Tu bi-Shevat festival among the Bulgarian Jews.

#### **7 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.

#### **8 Betar in Bulgaria**

Brith Trumpledor (Hebrew) meaning Trumpledor Society; right-wing Revisionist Jewish youth movement. It was founded in 1923 in Riga by Vladimir Jabotinsky, in memory of J. Trumpledor, one



of the first fighters to be killed in Palestine, and the fortress Betar, which was heroically defended for many months during the Bar Kohba uprising. Its aim was to propagate the program of the revisionists and prepare young people to fight and live in Palestine. It organized emigration through both legal and illegal channels. It was a paramilitary organization; its members wore uniforms. They supported the idea to create a Jewish legion in order to liberate Palestine. From 1936-39 the popularity of Betar diminished. During WWII many of its members formed guerrilla groups. In Bulgaria the organization started publishing its newspaper in 1934.

### **9 Hashomer Hatzair ('The Young Watchman')**

Left-wing Zionist youth organization, which started in Poland in 1912 and managed to gather supporters from all over Europe. Their goal was to educate the youth in the Zionist mentality and to prepare them to immigrate to Palestine. To achieve this goal they paid special attention to the so-called shomer-movement (boy scout education) and supported the re-stratification of the Jewish society. They operated several agricultural and industrial training grounds (the so-called chalutz grounds) to train those who wanted to immigrate. In Transylvania the first Hashomer Hatzair groups were established in the 1920s. During World War II, members of the Hashomer Hatzair were leading active resistance against German forces, in ghettos and concentration camps. After the war, Hashomer Hatzair was active in 'illegal' immigration to Palestine.

### **10 Brannik**

Pro-fascist youth organization. It started operating after the Law for the Protection of the Nation was passed in 1941 and the Bulgarian government forged its pro-German policy. The Branniks regularly maltreated Jews.

### **11 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.

### **12 Bulgarian Legions**

Union of the Bulgarian National Legions. Bulgarian fascist movement, established in 1930. Following the Italian model it aimed at building a corporate totalitarian state on the basis of military centralism. It was dismissed in 1944 after the communist take-over.

### **13 9th September 1944**

The day of the communist takeover in Bulgaria. In September 1944 the Soviet Union 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.

**14** 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.

### **15 Dimitrov, Georgi (1882-1949)**

A Bulgarian revolutionary, who was the head of the Comintern from 1936 through its dissolution in 1943, secretary general of the Bulgarian Communist Party from 1945 to 1949, and prime minister of Bulgaria from 1946 to 1949. He rose to international fame as the principal defendant in the Leipzig Fire Trial in 1933. Dimitrov put up such a consummate defense that the judicial authorities had to release him.

### **16 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.