

Avram Pinkas

Avram Moisey Pinkas

Sofia

Bulgaria

Interviewer: Stephan Djambazov

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Avram Moisey Pinkas, 78, lives alone in a two-room flat on the last floor of a standard concrete block of flats in Musagenitsa - one of the nice Sofia's residential areas. His wife Lilyana has died and his daughter Adriana lives with her two daughters in the USA, where she works. His daughter is divorced, but her ex-husband looks after Avram, as the latter says. Avram is a vigorous man, he doesn't put much emphasis on his Jewish origin, and thinks his daughter doesn't either. However, he keeps in touch with Jews in Sofia, mainly with his childhood friends, among whom is the famous Bulgarian theater director Leon Daniel, whom Pinkas meets every week. Otherwise, he almost never goes to the synagogue and the Jewish cultural club (Bet Am), which has become a very attractive place for many Sofia Jews now.

My ancestors came somewhere from Central Europe yet during the Ottoman Yoke [1](#) here. Memoirs of an Austrian diplomat who arrived in Vidin in 1838 read that he was welcomed here by a Pinkas who was an interpreter at the Austrian Embassy in Vidin. The text also says that this Pinkas had already adapted himself to the surrounding Balkan situation and had already lost his European and Austrian 'polish'. The roots of the Pinkas family in Bulgaria start from Vidin, go through Lom and reach Ruse. In a book about the Jews in Vidin I found the name of my grandfather who was something like a street vendor. I thought he was a trade intermediary in the grain crops business. The father of the famous Bulgarian painter Jules Pascin [2](#) (who lived and worked in Paris at the beginning of XX century) was in the wheat trade and I thought my grandfather worked for his company. But perhaps there is something I don't know. My grandfather moved to Ruse from Lom. He was a middle-class man - when he arrived in Ruse he bought a house from a Turk. It was probably cheap because the Turk was to emigrate and the house was an adobe. My grandfather's name was Mair [Moisey Pinkas], while my grandmother was Bea [Pinkas (nee Almozino)] - Beatrice. She was an intelligent woman. She used to read books in Ladino. At home, they spoke Spanish, but my grandfather could speak Bulgarian, too.

My mother's family came from Razgrad. Researchers of economy in Bulgarian territory of that period found the name of my maternal great-grandfather in some Turkish papers. His name was Sadak Geron and he was a guarantee to people who took loans. My grandmother told me that a long row of shops in the Razgrad's main street was owned by her father. Sadak Geron was rich and helped debtors. When the Russian-Turkish war [3](#) kicked off, he got frightened and gave a bag of gold coins to each of his children, so that they would hide it. After that, he moved to live in Palestine. In old Hebrew Sadak or Sadik means 'Saint'. He moved to Palestine after the Liberation of Bulgaria [4](#). My brother told me he found his traces there - a professor in the Jerusalem University

was telling that a Sadak Geron helped him when he moved to Palestine, so that he could study and become a professor. My maternal grandfather Avram Geron was a trader – intermediary in the leather business in Razgrad. He used to travel around the villages in winter when people were sticking some of their livestock and he was buying the leather. But he didn't have good luck with this undertaking. He had three daughters and a son. After the Liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman Yoke in 1978 he moved to live in Ruse. My maternal grandmother's name was Simha – an old Jewish name, something like the Bulgarian Sofia [Editor's note: actually the name is of Greek origin (Sophia) and means 'wisdom']. She was a housewife and she couldn't speak Bulgarian - she could speak Ladino and Turkish. But my grandmother and grandfather were no longer rich – in fact they were quite poor, because as my mother used to tell me – when they were in Ruse they didn't have what to eat and my grandfather used to cook a salt of lemon with water instead of soup. They used to wear standard clothes.

My father [Moisey (Bucco) Mayer Pinkas] was born in 1889 in Vidin. He completed his fourth grade in the primary school and started working as an employee at a trading company. At the beginning, he had to sweep the pavement most probably, as every freshman. I have seen a picture of him in a military uniform. I can't say where he was in the World War I [5](#), but what is sure he was taken hostage by the English near Salonika (Greece). I have asked him what they were forced to do. 'We had to clean the ship' – he would simply say. Then he was liberated and came back to Ruse. Later, he found a job with a big company owned by Jews in Ruse, and step by step he was promoted to the position of a traveling tradesman. He was traveling between Gorna Oryahovitsa, Elena, Ruse, Sevlievo and Dryanovo and that's how he found his clients. He was selling haberdashery goods of the 'Obon Gu' company ('the good taste'). My aunt told me that once tradesmen from the country came to the company for which my father was working, and the son of the company's owner tried to serve them, but they said they wanted my father to attend to them. They preferred him, because they trusted my Dad – everything what he had told them about the goods had turned out to be true. After that he and my uncle formed up their own enterprise, because they had already gained some clients. They worked as both retail and wholesale sellers. I remember my uncle (my mother's brother) teaching me how to make parcels, how to fill in declarations and various forms.

My father had a sister and two brothers. Chelebi Pinkas, who lived in Bucharest and Constanta, was younger than my father who was the eldest. Chelebi married in Silistra, before the town was annexed by Romania [after WWI], and had two daughters. He remained a Bulgarian citizen even after the town became part of Romania. He moved to Bucharest and then to Constanta, where he opened a clothes shop. In 1940, when Dobrudzha was regained by Bulgaria, Romanian authorities expelled him from the country because of his Bulgarian citizenship. So he, together with other people like him, were waiting at the border with Bulgaria, because Bulgaria didn't want to let them in. My mother then went to Varna to meet with certain generals, even the regional governor and she managed to get permission for these people to be let into Ruse. Their luggage had arrived in the town long ago before them. Until 9th September 1944 they lived in Ruse, after which they went back to Romania. Later, my uncle suffered from ulcer and he had to undergo a surgery, which caused his death.

My father's other brother Albert Pinkas (Avram), who was the youngest, studied to become a rabbi in Germany. There he started singing in operettas and made records of evergreens translated into Bulgarian for the 'Columbia' records studio. That happened in the 1930s. When he came back to

Bulgaria he found a business partner (because he didn't have the money - he was poor) and they opened a factory for production of record disks. All the records were made in Germany. Even during the Hitler's ruling he used to take whole orchestras to Germany to make records. In Bulgaria, the records made by 'Simonavia' company were somewhat dull. In 1939-1940 he went to Bucharest and left the company to his partner here, who robbed him. From Bucharest he moved to Belgrade where he opened another factory. When the German troops entered Serbia he was given 48 hours to leave the country. He had Iranian passport and was stopped at the border, because Bulgarians didn't give him a transit visa. However he had a friend in Sofia - she was a designer and used to sew designer's clothes for the ministers' wives - she had a nice apartment in Sofia. So, when he called her she managed to take the Interior Minister Gabrovsky out of a session of the Council of Ministers and got a transit visa for Albert. He was let in, but at the station he was given a place with the transit passengers so he couldn't get out of the departure lounge. Aunt Klara (my father's sister) was then living in Sofia and went to see him, and she called my father. He immediately took the train in the evening, and got in Sofia in the morning where the two brothers saw each other for the last time. Albert went to Persia and after that - to Palestine. But he was captured by Englishmen and sent to a camp. After that he lived for a while in Israel, but he was not satisfied with the fact that he was not given the permission to export and import goods. Later he used to come to Bulgaria often - he had many friends here. Then he moved to Italy and spent his last years in Milan - he traveled around Europe as a trade intermediary. He used to offer everything - from diamond powder for polishing to women's stockings.

In my mother's high school diploma it was written that she was born in 1904. But it is dubious, however, if this was her actual year of birth. It is ridiculous that my mother [Rashel Avram Pinkas (nee Geron)] couldn't speak Bulgarian, but she had a diploma from a Bulgarian high school showing very good scores. She did have high school education, though, after which she worked in several offices, but she soon left them. I have asked her 'Why?' and she would say: 'They wanted to take advantage of me.' That was before she got married, and after it she became a housewife.

My mother's brother Yosif died of throat cancer. He used to smoke a lot. They were one brother and three sisters in the family. The eldest was Rebeca, who was a dressmaker. She married a Jew from Varna who later moved to Ruse where they lived. She was ill and stayed in bed, but always knew all the gossip from the neighborhood. Their father was a good man, but he also used to smoke much. He was a very professional accountant, though. The other sister, Ester, also married a widower with two children (a boy and a girl). His name was Zimmermann. She gave birth to her own child - Yosif who lived in Ruse. Her husband bought four shops in the town center and would always say that he would give each nephew a shop. But he died early. Yosif's wife was not satisfied with her life because she had graduated from the Pedagogical Institute in Dupnitsa, but he never allowed her to become a teacher. They didn't have children and my grandmother lived with them. She died shortly after my uncle. He was a very religious person - he had a luxurious prayer book - with incrustation and silk clothe for wrapping the book. We were always together with him on the high holidays. He used to come and collect all the nephews when there was a fair in Ruse and take us there. He would always buy something for each of us. After which we used to take a photograph of us all at the fair. When he got ill, he could no longer run his trade business and at the end - the cancer suffocated him. At that time our house had already been transformed into something like a store for the goods.

I have always wondered how my mother decided to marry a widower with two kids and my aunt told me: 'She was in love with him.' My mother was staying at the door when once my father came to negotiate something with her brother, and then he kissed her. My mother's knees gave way beneath her. They had already known each other because they were some kind of distant relatives. My mother fell in love - Dad was a handsome man. However he was by 15 years older than her. And my mother married him in spite of the protests of her relatives. When my father died in 1945 he was 56, while Mum was 41, alone and with three children. They didn't make difference between the children from his first marriage and us - we were equal and we felt each other as real brothers. The younger son [Mayer Moisey Pinkas] from his first wife died of cancer - he was a very good technician, he had golden hands as we say. For a long period of time he was denied his request to start working for the military complex in Israel, because he had been a member of the Union of Young Workers in Bulgaria [6](#). Finally they accepted him. After that, I remember him showing me some magazines where they praised him for something. The elder brother [Yakov Moisey Pinkas] did not have any profession. In 1948 he started working something in the accountancy department of ZHITI factory (for iron and wire). His wife was economist and in 1949 they decided to move to Israel.

My mother and father had a religious marriage in 1925 most probably. In Ruse we lived in my paternal grandfather's house. It was situated in the Jewish neighborhood. The house my grandfather Mair had bought was large, but it was an abode - it was built directly on the floor. There was a narrow entrance hall with doors on the both sides of it. At the end of it - two steps lead to the so-called living room. The floor was wooden, but the basement was beneath the living room and the room was cool in Ruse's summer heaths. There was a nice windowpane that overlooked a beautiful large garden with many trees - it was green and shady. We had a big walnut tree, peach trees, apricot trees, morello-trees, plum trees and pear trees. My father used to make us dig beds so that we could grow vegetables, but this happened seldom. I remember that my parents' bedroom was on the left, and there was another room behind it - narrow and long where housemaids were accommodated. Mum and Dad, however, decided to enlarge their bedroom and removed that room. We had four rooms together with the living room. The furniture was ordinary. My parents' bedroom was however nice - white veneer with black edges. The beds for the children were metal with bedsprings. In one of the rooms there was a couch under the window where we had meals in winters. There was an armchair in my mother's room, while in the living room there were some Vienna chairs on high slim legs. There was also a sofa with mirrors. There were many silver souvenirs, sideboards and other stuff. There was also running water in the house. The toilet was inside the house - in the room where the fireplace for the washing machine was located. However, there was no heating in the toilet and it was cold. There was a septic pit in the yard.

We lived in this house, and my grandmother Simha with my uncle [Yosif Avram Geron] lived in another one - he always lived in rented houses. The houses he lived in were all nice because he was a tradesman of establishment. We lived with my paternal grandmother, because my grandfather had already died. I remember both my grandfathers very vaguely, because I was very young when they died. I remember the funeral of my grandfather Avram with the religious figures. I don't remember the funeral of my other grandfather, though. Bulgarian Jews from the generation of my grandfathers were not so religious. Before that, they were a lot more religious. My grandfather had only a small beard, but it was quite standard. I can recall my grandmothers because I was nine or ten years old when they were still alive. When my sister [Elana (Suzana) Ben Yosef (nee Pinkas)]

was born we were already five kids, and my grandmother lived alone in one room. My mother pressed dad to send his mother to live with his eldest son in Sofia. And her son did receive her but not in his house, because he had married a younger wife from a prominent Sofia family; he sent her to live with the mother of one cousin of theirs in Tsar Boris Street in a huge building with a yard called 'Moskowitz Palace' – it was built to be let to tenants.

We weren't poor, but we weren't rich either. I was wondering how Dad managed to pay the rent for his shop. He had a shop in the town center – in the main street. The house was a building, I had only read in the novels of – it was huge with stores in the second and the third floors. We used to sell haberdashery, clothes for curtains and curtain rods. My father was the first to import curtain rods from Germany – in the 1930s a tradesman from there came to Ruse and he ordered them. After that, almost every second household in the town had such curtain rods fixed – my brother was fixing them at the beginning, after that I joined them, too. Dad was also selling buttons and other things of the kind. Dad and uncle were working together at the beginning, but then they separated. I think this happened because Dad had a huge family, while my uncle lived alone with our grandmother – he didn't have children. Dad needed more money because of the huge family – and he remained in the shop, where he devoted himself to retail sales, while my uncle opened a new one.

My mother always had a housemaid at home. I remember that when I got the scarlet fever, my mother made all my brothers stay with relatives and at home we were only three of us – my mother, the housemaid and I. Once I had a terrible nightmare – in my dream somebody wanted to cover me up with a big glass – there was a hand stretching through the window above my bed. I startled and began crying 'Mum, I have a pee.' She was sleeping then but she woke up and sent the housemaid to see what was wrong with me. She woke up on her turn, came to me and started shouting – 'Misses, fire in the house!' The chimney was burning – so we got up and began screaming: 'Help!' The fire brigade was just round the corner, they came quickly and put out the fire. After 1941 Jewish families were no longer allowed to have Bulgarians for servants. So my mother started hiring Gypsy women instead. On St. Dimitar's day five to six girls would come with a negotiator to discuss their accommodation and wage. My grandfathers and grandmothers may have had servants, too, but I can't say it for sure. In the Jewish neighborhood where we lived, there were predominantly Jews, but some Bulgarians and Turks lived there, too. We never had quarrels with them. Next to us lived a military doctor's assistant – a Bulgarian, we used to call him uncle Ivan. It was he who would take care of us when some of us was ill – he carried out blood-letting or cupped us when some of us had got the flu. I don't know if any of my grandfathers had served in the army. Next to us, there was a Turkish family living also, who sent me a huge pumpkin and baklava [Turkish sweet] as a gift for my bar mitzvah.

I was born on 24th March in Ruse in 1927. My father's first wife got ill and died in hospital in Bucharest. Her sons, Yakov and Mayer, were five and six years old when dad married my mother. I am my mother's eldest son; a year and a half after me my brother Marko was born and much later, in 1934, - my sister Suzana, as we used to call her, but her birth name was Sultana. When she married in Israel her mother-in-law and father-in-law changed her name to Elana – so that she would have a Jewish name.

I attended a kindergarten a year before I became a schoolboy – the kindergarten was at the Jewish school. I started studying Ivrit there. We had a teacher who couldn't speak Bulgarian, because she

had come from abroad. At home, my mother and the maidservant looked after us. We had a big yard where we used to play. The 'Maccabi' organization [7](#) also had a big yard and we used to play football there. On Sundays, we used to go the gym hall. We had a sports community and we had plans for building a gym hall. It was almost constructed, but never finished, so it had neither baths nor changing rooms. However, the gym hall had all the required equipment – parallel bars, horizontal bars, wall bars and we used to go there to play from an early age.

There was an Itzko Aizner who later made of us members of the Union of Young Workers – he was in charge of looking after children at the gym hall on Sundays. He had an amateur cine-projector, and managed to find from somewhere silent films and showed them to us. He explained them and as a whole he made fabulous performances. I liked Ivrit at the Jewish school, although I didn't understand everything. I also liked Bulgarian language, grammar and the novels from the readers. I got an especially strong impression from the novels about Levski [8](#). We used to study Ivrit and Jewish history, which was called Toldot. There are some people who think that the name of the Spanish town of Toledo comes from Toldot - and that it had been a Jewish town. We used to study the Old Testament in Ivrit, and we studied Ivrit from the Old Testament. There was a teacher who had taught my uncle, too. His name was Bucco Delarubisa and he used many Turkish and Ladino sayings while speaking. There was one Jewish school in the town – with between 20 and 25 pupils in a class. It was a four-year primary school and a three-year junior high school, after which the pupils had to attend the Bulgarian high school.

In my childhood years, Ruse had around 3,000 Jews out of some 50,000 inhabitants. But now I remember a lot of Jewish shops in the town's main street. Next to my father's one was the shop of the brothers Aladjem, next to which was the bookstore Beniesh. It was very special because the owner was receiving German and Italian editions. During the Abyssinian War there were illustrated books with pictures of Abyssinia there. Next to it there were also some other Jewish shops - Khalef who was selling hats, opposite to it there was a glassware shop, another Jew was selling shoes in the same street – and I remember his sons continued their studies in the German school even after all other Jews withdrew their children from there after 1933.

The Jewish community was very united. There was a Jewish municipality that collected certain taxes according to the financial status of the respective family. There was a rich Jew who was probably the only one to have a private steamship – tugboat as well as barges. His name was Lazar B. Aron. He was a big shot and didn't want to pay taxes to the Jewish municipality. He even bribed journalists to write articles against our municipality. He used to wear an exquisite, nicely designed light grey suit with a black belt and a bowler hat.

In Ruse there was a big synagogue, and another one, smaller, midrash. There was another one – Ashkenazi synagogue - it is a club of the Shalom organization now [9](#); it had been transformed into a sports hall after 9th September 1944 [10](#). The walls of the old synagogue were one meter wide, there was also a huge chandelier – brought perhaps from Austria – it was a luxurious one. I don't know if the synagogue is still functioning now because it is all laths and plaster already. The small one was destroyed so that a street to the river might pass – it was before 1944. The club Bnai Brith was next to this synagogue – it was a very elegant house where weddings, balls and other celebrations were organized – it had a nice huge ballroom. Opposite to it, there was another big house, whose ground floor was hired by 'Malbish Arumim' organization (which means 'provides clothes to the poor'). Middle class people – traders for example – used to gather there on Sundays

to play cards; they entertained themselves. In the yard of the Jewish school there was a small building made of bricks – we used to hang the birds for Yom Kippur that had been stuck with a thin knife by the shochet. He hung them on these hooks so that the blood may drain off them. The school was destroyed in 1940 or in 1941 during the earthquake in Vranca, Romania, and no access to these buildings was allowed for a certain period. The ‘Hashomer Hatzair’ organization [11](#) was also situated there.

My parents were relatively religious. We marked the holidays. On Chanukkah I would kindle the chanukkiyahs and read a prayer in Ivrit – I was good at Ivrit and when I first went to Israel, the people were surprised I could speak it. When I became 13 I was asked to say my prayer in the synagogue, because I was good at it. So I was reading: ‘A present for the school canteen, a present for somebody else...’, while the rabbi was whispering in my ear: ‘Ten eggs for the rabbi’ and I said it aloud: ‘Ten eggs for the rabbi’. After which, at noon, Dad asked me: ‘What have you said: What ten eggs for the rabbi? He came immediately to take them!?’ On the high holidays, all the family used to go to synagogue.

Bar mitzvah was a great holiday. My elder brother had his bar mitzvah in the club for the middle-class people – he had many guests and received many presents. At that day, I was introduced to a maritime captain who had saved my brother’s life in a trip to the isle, when my brother had dropped in the water and could have drowned. On bar mitzvah the boy who was celebrating had to read something as a promise.

As a young boy, I didn’t feel any anti-Semitism. There were several jokes of course – you go to the cinema and somebody would banter with you. Among the Jewish organizations, ‘Hashomer Hatzair’ was very active and every year they used to organize ‘hashara’ – they went camping, where they were marching and getting prepared for emigration to Israel, to cultivate the land there. They would usually go to Obratzov Chiflik [‘model farm’] near Ruse. Some of the poorest people and more educated intellectuals used to attend their gatherings. Most of us, however, were members of ‘Maccabi’. On 6th May, St George’s day, [12](#) the day celebrated by the Bulgarian Army, every time we had representatives of the Jewish school, or ‘Maccabi’. We marched in white shirts and blue trousers. Everybody marched this day – Ukrainians, scouts, Armenian organizations, even legionnaires [13](#) in their brown uniforms. We were all together on St George’s day. There was also a Spanish ambassador, Aftalion was his name, who appeared in a three-angle hat, white feathers and a rapier. The Italian one also attended the ceremony. The teacher in gymnastics at school used to start a patriotic song and he made us marching while singing. I was seven years old during the putsch of 1934 [[14](#) (see: Georgiev, Kimon)]. Ruse was all blocked – that I remember very clearly.

I had some books at home, but not many. My elder brother Yakov (Jacques) had more books because he had got influenced by the leftist ideas during his study at the high school. I remember he had books by Maxim Gorky [15](#). I had looked through Yakov’s ‘Brown Book’ for the persecution of Jews when I was still a teenager. He used to receive the newspaper of the Youth’s Union. When he graduated from the high school, Dad sent him to Romania to study industrial chemistry, because my uncle (my father’s brother Chelebi) lived in Constanta, Romania. I remember that my father used to read something before going to bed, but I can’t remember what exactly. Our family received the ‘Utro’ daily and some other newspapers. I learnt to read and write from the newspapers – I loved reading them. When once I found newspapers from 1927, the year I was born, I read them to see what had happened this year.

When I was a child, once we went to Varna – we were all of us together with my brothers. My sister had not been born yet. Once the whole family went to Varshets, near Oryahovo – we went by train and a car. We took a taxi from Varshets back to Oryahovo where we took the steamship to Ruse. I remember the automobile stinking of petrol and rubber. When we grew up a bit, Mum took us (my brothers and me) to Dryanovo where we stayed with a tradesman who was a friend of my father's. We visited Dryanovo Monastery and stayed for the night there – it was very pleasant. In 1941, if I remember rightly, my mother went to Kyustendil's mineral baths. We accompanied her, of course. But before that we had visited Bankya, near Sofia, with my parents. It must have been in 1936.

In Ruse people were very musical. There was a Jewish musical group 'David', that possessed all the needed instruments to form a philharmonic orchestra. In the 1930s some rich Jewish boys formed a jazz band and they ordered the instruments directly from America together with the parts. Every year or at least once in two years this band performed an operetta. There was one operetta 'Karmuzinella' – directed by the then-famous Bulgarian actor Matyu Makedonski. He directed also 'Sunny Boy' by the American singer Al Johnson. Matyu staged the play and the whole town was singing 'Sunny Boy' that season.

There were various traders in Ruse – they were in the cloths business, haberdashery, ironware – there was even a tradesman who had put a sign 'Industrial Store'. There were many craftsmen – four or five tinsmiths. One of them was an Ashkenazi Jew – he was an expert in covering roofs with tin sheets. Perhaps he had been in the town since the period of the Russian-Turkish War because Russians used to cover their roofs with tin sheets. One of his sons was a glazier. Some younger men who had graduated from the technical school had opened their own workshops with one or two lathes, too. There was also a brush maker. One of the best dressmakers and tailors in the town was a Jew again. There was also a man who had a private bank, but he closed it and started selling cloths. There were also two or three Jewish lawyers. We had five doctors. Everywhere in the neighborhood, we had running water in the houses and electricity as well, but there was no sewerage system.

Friday was the market day. My father used to go shopping to the central market; there was another one – smaller. My mother had to cook for seven people these days. We had meat to our meals as much as two times a week. Once a week it was beef, the other time it was chicken or some poultry. The rest of the time we had Lenten fare. However, Mum knew dozens of different vegetable meals – for example she could make balls of spinach, unions and potatoes. The meat was only kosher. The rabbi used to go to the slaughterhouse and put his seal. So when you go to the butcher's and see this seal, you can simply say 'I want from this'. We would buy from different tradesmen – it depended on which way would Dad come home after he closed his shop at 12 o'clock on Friday. He could not pass through the butcher's, he could pop in the grocer's. There were several such grocers – Jews whom we used to buy from. When he was to buy something, he could decide to buy us a whole cart with watermelons for example - he hires a cart, selects the watermelons and we all go home to unload it. The same happened when we had to buy logs for the winter. Turks from Deliorman [a region in Northeastern Bulgaria, around the town of Shumen, with a significant Turkish population] came to Ruse to sell their wood. We used logs and coal for heating. There was one wood stove in the wall between the two children rooms. My mother and father had another one in their room.

My father was a broad Zionist and every time voted for the broad socialists. But he was never a member of a party – he was just a broad Zionist. My parents' relationships with the neighbors were good. Their friends were mostly Jews. However, there was a period when they used to gather with another group of friends including the head of the State Security Service in Ruse – Savakov was his name. Every Sunday my parents would go somewhere – they used to play cards when visiting somebody in the afternoons. They used to gossip – it was a group of seven or eight Jewish families. They played a game with cards called 'remi'. They played poker, too. They played on money bets, but very small sums – stotinki [Bulgarian equivalent of cents]. A man from that group had some relatives in Paris, while another one, who was a money-changer, had some money to be exchanged and the exchange rate in Paris was very favorable, so he gave the money to the first man. The latter, however, gambled them away in a casino in Monte Carlo and he lost the courage to come back to Bulgaria. Because he had to give the money back. His family – three kids and a wife – lived in very poor conditions here, but all their Jewish friends helped them while he was in France. And after a year or so, they decided they should bring him back from France. They did not remit his debt, but they bought a kiosk for him, where seamen – Czechs, Hungarians, Germans used to exchange their money. So he bound himself to return the money step by step taking care of his family in the meantime. It was a kind of friendship that deserves mentioning.

I was never a victim of anti-Semitic reactions from the part of my teachers, but from pupils – yes. When I was at the high school there was a small legionnaire that tried to banter with me, but we had a Bulgarian friend – strong and well-built member of the Union of Young Workers – he just took him by the armpits and lifted him up after which the boy ran away. Later we became very close friends with this Bulgarian boy who helped me then. In the third grade of the junior high school I took private lessons in Bulgarian grammar. I was not good at all at this subject and we had a very refined teacher in grammar, a Bulgarian woman, who agreed to give private lessons to me. When I studied at the Jewish school, my friends were Jews. Even in our group of UYW we were Jews only. But at the high school I had one or two Bulgarians for friends. We still meet with them now. Apart from our school responsibilities, we regularly went to the cinema. There was a cinema in the neighborhood, called 'Odeon'. We often watched films there. There was a total of four cinemas in the town. We used to watch American films, but I liked the French ones, too. There was an American sequel series 'Andy Hardy'. Mickey Rooney [a popular American actor] was playing Andy Hardy and he was starring in each of the films in the series: 'Andy Hardy in New York', 'Andy Hardy...' - God knows where... He was a very good actor.

We used to gather sometimes on birthdays – we were both girls and boys. We also used to dance – we had a record disk with dance music and we used to listen to it all day long. The gramophone was a mechanic one. During the war a café was opened in a shop and it became something like the Jewish café. We used to gather there. The Maccabi organization had a cultural section, too. We had a group leader there and he used to make us play 'court sessions' – we had to write our speeches in advance. It was interesting. Once a boy from Haskovo came to lecture on the sex subject.

I started swimming in the Danube River when I was 9 – before that I was weak and often ill. After the age of nine I started getting stronger. But we never visited beaches. There was a wooden building with two wooden swimming pools next to it – the first was for men, the second one – for women. The river water flowed into these pools. It was not until we became 15 or 16 when we started swimming in another place – it was outside Ruse and it had sand and the riverbed was

flatter. It was after 1944 when they opened a beach with a big opened swimming pool for both men and women. The river then was already dirty. Swollen corpses of animals floated on it and tree trunks were carried perhaps by some floods.

In summers, together with my parents we used to go to Obratzsov Chiflik or to Lipnik, where there is a park now. These days, however, there was only a spring and a forest. We would wake up at 3 o'clock in the morning and walk the 12-kilometer distance to Lipnik. Sometimes we used to go only teenagers there. When the economy started to recover in 1933-1934, the whole group of friends around my father used to hire a bus to go there. Then they could afford it to go by bus to Obratzsov Chiflik, too. There was also an Austrian steamship agency that used to organize various celebrations and offered river cruises for 24th May [16](#). And then we, the children, received Vienna ice-cream with two biscuits into it. We also visited the hunter's park in Ruse - we used to have diner on Sundays there. There was a bus line to that place. We didn't go there regularly - just sometimes. There was also a train that had a stop at Obratzsov Chiflik - it was the train for Varna. My friends and I were on our way to Obratzsov Chiflik on 22nd June 1941, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Some students from the Agricultural School broke the news for us when we came to Obratzsov Chiflik. I was 15 then.

The anti-Semitism in Bulgaria came from the institutions and the laws that were adopted. The Law for Protection of the Nation [17](#) put restrictions for us. My father as a trader had to pay a one-off tax that swallowed his capital. He had to close his shop, because no Jews were allowed to run stores in the main street. However, the students who were studying at the high school were not expelled from there. But the Sofia students who were interned [18](#) to Ruse from Sofia were not let to study in the high school. We were not allowed to walk in the town's main street, we could only stay in our neighborhood. We used to go for walks in David Street which was the central one in our neighborhood. Our group of friends had chosen another street where to walk - it was a smaller one. We were around ten of us and the writer Dragomir Asenov was one of us [The real name of Dragomir Asenov is Jacques Melamed (1926-1981): a writer and playwright. Dragomir Asenov is a literary pseudonym and not a changed name. He spent six years in an orphanage. He graduated university after World War II. In the early period of his work he wrote a lot of pamphlets, articles and features for the press. The late works of the writer are devoted to Bulgaria's history and the modern times. His most famous works are his plays 'Birthday' (1964), 'Roses for Doctor Shomov' (1966), 'Hot nights in Arcadia' (1970), which were staged in Bulgaria and abroad] - he used to lecture us; there were other interesting people, too. We used to gather at somebody's home, mainly at the houses of two of the girls. At our gatherings we didn't only have mere talks. Our parents approved of these meetings because they could see we were serious people. We had to wear those yellow stars. The curfew hour was set to 9 p.m. By that time in the evening we had to be back home and we couldn't go out after that. The so-called legionnaire boys came to our neighborhood to have fights with us. Some more strict nationalists used to curse us at school. We continued studying at the high school, but in 1942 the high school was dismissed and we were sent to our houses to hide from the bombardments. I had then only two years before graduation. And we resumed our studies yet in 1944. They didn't change our names - we had, however, four names. Instead of Avram Moisey Pinkas I became Avram Moisey Mayer Pinkas. They just added our grandfather's names to the three we already had. We had yellow identity cards, where the four names were written.

In 1942-1943 I started working for a young Jewish man – his father had a cardboard workshop. He was making dressing-cases of cardboard and leather. There were mirrors in them and room for combs. I worked for him for several months until one day I came back home and told Dad we could make such things alone. He had long been despaired – no jobs for us, Mum had let all the rooms in the house – some relatives had come to live there because they had been interned from Sofia, as well as a man from Ruse together with his wife from Romania. And when my father heard what I had said he uttered: ‘Let’s see.’ So my brother and I made some of these dressing-cases, he took them and he went out to the bazaar. When he came back he was fluttering with excitement: ‘We are starting, we are starting’ he shouted. After that, he bought mirrors, cut them into smaller ones and we started producing these cases. He came back to life – he was a tradesman. And it was this way that we managed to patch up the situation somehow because Dad had to take loans before that - my uncle Chelebi had helped him for a certain period.

In 1943 I was involved in the so-called Cherven Conspiracy. There was a group of Jews who went underground and the members of the Union of Young Workers gave me money to buy them windproof torches, medications and other useful stuff. We collected also some clothes and put them into a suitcase or two. One of us took a suitcase to the baker’s where someone had to come and take it, but nobody came and the baker called the police. They took the suitcase and asked the parents of those who had gone underground to identify the clothes. I had put three or four of my father’s winter undershirts in that suitcase. At noon my aunt came (her son Mois was among the arrested underground revolutionaries) and said: ‘When I saw these undershirts I was about to lose consciousness’ – she had immediately got aware of whose that clothes were, but she had said nothing. After that, more than one hundred people were detained, because the underground revolutionaries who had been arrested, were forced to give away all the people who had helped them in the region.

We were arrested, too. Of course, we were of no interest to the police, but we were set free after we spent some time under custody and we got a lot of hiding. We were arrested seven or eight people among whom was Moil Levi, the surgeon who later made the by-pass operation of Lyuben Berov in Israel [Lyuben Berov was Prime Minister of Bulgaria in 1992-1994]. We were arrested together with him one morning and we were set free together, after they made a speech for us. However, we were released on recognizance not to leave. One day they called our parents and told them to show up the next day at the port at seven in the evening. It was June 1943 and we thought we were to be deported. However, we were interned to the school in Somovit, where they had organized a camp – it was my father, my mother, my younger brother and sister, and I, because my elder brothers were sent to forced labor camps [19](#). It was such a starvation then! We thought the barges were waiting for us to deport us. Besides – all the Jews from the inland were interned to places near the Danube River. It looked like as if this was the goal – convenient places for future deportation. We stayed there for a while after which we were set free – only several families were released, though. There was an officer there who was beating even old women, he was slapping us in an effort to scare us. He was replaced by a lawyer in a police uniform – who was milder – and then we got a permission to go to the Danube under escort to have a bath now and then. Later they moved the camp to Kailuka [20](#) near Pleven – where the arson of the bungalows happened and several old people were burnt in the fire. Authorities said it was an unintended fire and after that everybody was set free.

When the Bagryanov's cabinet came into office shortly before 9th September 1944 [Ivan Bagryanov was Prime Minister from 1st June 1944 till 2nd September 1944] and the ban for traveling was cancelled, I set off for Shumen. My brother was working in the forced labor camp on the road to Veselinovo. So I went to Shumen, and from there I got to Smyadovo by train, where from I walked to Veselinovo. My brother was so excited when he saw me. I stayed there for the night and the next day I set off back to Shumen, where I stayed for a while. On 8th September 1944 in the afternoon we went to the building of the town's jail when the political prisoners were set free. Some friends of mine and I decided to go to Gorna Oryahovitsa by train where we expected to meet some other friends who were set free from the Pleven's prison. On 9th September 1944 we met some acquaintances and we were off to Ruse together with them. A spontaneous meeting happened at every station. However - the train stopped at a point 30 kilometers away from Ruse - the Russians had entered the country and had blocked the railway line. So we set off on foot - in Dve Mogili [Two Hills] village some communists found a cart for our luggage - and we walked to Ruse where we got back in the evening.

I was a police officer after 9th September 1944, I guarded the building of the regional government - I stayed there for the night too, I had a gun. It was for a month or so. After which I took up my high school education again - the secretary of the regional government had called for us and had said: 'Now, go to study!' We were paid a monthly policeman's wage and we took up our high school education again. I had been in some amateur artist activities under the guidance of theater actors yet from the period of my high school. I used to hold performances for the workmen - I was reciting verses and such things. We formed up the Mayakovsky [21](#) club there and the club continued its existence in Sofia at the House of Bulgarian-Soviet Friendship organization when we moved to study at universities in the capital. Before that my father had formed twice joint-venture companies with partners, and his partners cheated him twice. Dad opened a small haberdashery shop after 9th September 1944 and when he died in 1945 the shop was to be run by my elder brother, but he found a job in Ruse's ZHITI ('Iron and Wire Industry' - a plant for barbed wire and nails) and so my mother had to take care of the shop. But she couldn't manage it. Finally, she closed the shop and started selling all kinds of things from home. At a time she was letting some parts of the house - to a motorist from Navigation Maritime Bulgaria and his wife - they were living in two of the house's rooms. Even so, my mother lived in poor conditions.

When I graduated from the high school I tried to start working something, but I was an amateur. I changed many jobs when I finally decided to apply for the theater school in Sofia - there was still no VITIZ (Higher Institute of Theatrical Art) these days. [In 1947 The Theater School, following a decree of the National Assembly, was transformed into DVTU (Public Higher School of Theater), later known as VITIZ (Higher Institute of Theatrical Art) during the communist regime and as NATFIZ (National Academy of Theater and Film Arts) after 10th November 1989.]. I used to prepare myself for admission together with Leon Daniel with whom we were friends from Ruse - we had lived in neighboring houses there. I applied for the school in 1947 and I was admitted to enroll in the first master class of Philip Philipov [a famous Bulgarian theater director]. I did not receive scholarship, because D.B. Mitov (journalist and intellectualist) had called the Jewish boys and told us (we were 12 of us) 'Turn your scholarships down, so that more students may get scholarships, the Consistory will give you money anyway.' So we agreed with him, but later the Consistory stopped our money - the other students could afford to buy watches and we lived in poverty - I have had tea with bread for supper. My friends and I were living in a nice rented flat - but we

couldn't pay the rent – actually we bilked the owners with the rent for three or four months. After that, I failed my exams and I had to go back to Ruse, because there were no make-up exams these days. I took up amateur artistic activities with a company in Ruse. After a while, it became a paid position with the Dimitrov's Youth's Union [22 (see: Komsomol)].

That's how I spent 1948 and in 1949 I applied anew, this time to study staging. I was admitted again. And I failed my first-year exams again. The class tutor was Georgi Kostov. One day I met Philip Philipov in the street in Sofia and he told me: 'Oh, Mois – that's how he used to call me - you have 'poor' (2) [out of 6] in staging, but you have 'good' (4) in acting. You know, I will let you in the acting class again.' The same day I met Georgi Kostov: 'Oh, Pinkas, he said, the first year in staging is really difficult – sketches, things. I will write 'satisfactory' (3) to you – next we'll have parts from plays – it's easier.' I told him of what Philipov had told me just before minutes, and Kostov seemed satisfied: 'Oh, really, very good, very, very good.' So I continued my studies in the class taught by Philipov. The last year of my studies Radoi Ralin [Radoi Ralin (1923-2004), penname of Dimitar Stoyanov, was one of the greatest Bulgarian satirists during the totalitarian period] came to VITIZ to search for young students. I turned up immediately at the editorial office of the 'Starshel' ['Hornet'] satiric weekly where he was working then. Then he told me that the newspaper celebrated its anniversary every year – in the form of public reading usually – but he asked if we could think of something more theatrical. 'Of course, we could', I said. Then Zahari Petrov and Vasil Aprilov joined us with the question: 'Where should we start from?' I told them they already had it in the newspaper and suggested to start from the foreign policy articles. The newspaper then had a regular Friday material 'Ridgeway in Europe' – Ridgeway was the General Secretary of NATO then. So we made up several sketches – Ridgeway in the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Turkey. And that was how we started.

We did create a play – every evening after the usual study exercises at VITIZ we gathered to rehearse the new performance – it was late in the evening after 10.30 p.m. – the authors watched us, corrected the text and on the other day we would rehearse again at the editorial offices of 'Starshel'. I invited some colleagues, because Radoi wanted more actors – he wanted it to be a theater. I created the roles myself – I used to read the newspaper and pick up characters. A bit later Philip told my colleagues at VITIZ I had passed the final state exam because I had managed to create a performance out of nothing. The first night came out in 1953, after Stalin's death – after that we played it in many theaters and we were paid some money from the entrance tickets. We had a very good manager. We made a total of 16 performances, but then someone complained about certain passages in the text and Valko Chervenkov [Prime Minister and General Secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party at the time (1950-1956)] called for Chelkash [Starshel's editor-in-chief] and told him: 'You'd better occupy yourselves with the newspaper, there are people who will do the theater.' That is how the performances were stopped – but it was a brilliant show – the theaters were overcrowded.

We graduated in 1953 and we had to fulfill our military duty as candidate-officers at the military school in Kyustendil. When we came back in August, we were called by Slavcho Vasev [a journalist and one of the people in charge of the cultural issues at the Ministry of Culture] – and he sent us to Dimitrovgrad to form a theater there. So I set off for Dimitrovgrad. I married in the summer of 1954. My wife was then studying industrial chemistry in Sofia. We knew each other yet from the Sofia period of the Mayakovsky club. She, Lilyana Kirilova Mandicheva, was one of the singers at

the club. In the middle of the theater season (1954-1955) I left Dimitrovgrad and came back to Sofia where I couldn't find a job. Ivan Bashev, who was then Minister of Culture, did not allow Albert Angel to hire me at the Selski [Village] Theater, situated in the Sofia town center opposite the Sofia University [23](#), because I had left the Dimitrovgrad Theater.

So I stayed unemployed for a year. After that I was employed with the Selski Theater – we were traveling around the country and I could send money to my wife. It was like that until 1959 when I told her I was not going to play again for the Selski Theater. It happened that Vili Tsankov [famous Bulgarian stage director; at that time director of the Burgas Theater] let me join the Burgas Theater company, where my friend Leon Daniel was the stage director. Leon had assigned me a nice role in 'The Death of Sisyphus', but I came late from Israel where I had gone to visit my mother and brothers. My mother, sister and one of my brothers moved to live there in 1948 [24 (see: Mass Alliyah)]. In 1949 my eldest brother (who was married and had a child) emigrated there together with my younger brother who was studying here mechanical engineering. He continued his education in Israel.

I myself didn't want to go to Israel because I wanted to become an actor. I couldn't even imagine to go there and be an actor, although later I found in some of the largest Israeli theaters some Bulgarian actors who had been interns in Bulgarian amateur companies. They had neither graduated from a theater academy as I, nor spoke Ivrit. So most probably I would have been in those theaters, if I had gone there. So be it. I didn't want to go, because all my friends were here, in Bulgaria – Leon Daniel, Dragomir Asenov, some others. We were inseparable yet from our childhood years. Leon was born in Ruse, while Dragomir had been interned to Ruse together with his family.

I visited Israel for the first time in 1959. We were let to go, but my daughter, Adriana Pinkas, had to stay here with her grandmother. She was born in 1958. It was a hard year for my wife – she was pregnant – but she did her state exams. My wife and I stayed in Israel for a month and a half. She had to meet my mother, my brothers and relatives. We visited Israel once more in 1990.

So, I came late because of my visit to Israel and Leon Daniel had given the part to Leda Tasseva [a famous Bulgarian actress], and I almost didn't play this season. But at the end of it the theater had some problems on ideological reasons and 16 of the actors were hired by other theaters. Nobody took me, though. So one evening we were out to a restaurant in Burgas with the cinema director Nikola Korabov and I asked him: 'Why don't you take me in the cinema?' He said they really needed assistant directors, but the candidates were asked to pass a test. I asked him if he could help me with the preparation for the test, he said 'yes' and did his best after that. I applied for the position and passed the test. I asked the commission to write me a certificate that I had passed the test – and I brought it to Karalambov, the newly appointed director of the Burgas Theater. I needed to show it to him, because as a member of the Bulgarian Communist Party, they were not allowed to let me leave the theater. But the new position was an open one and the test I had passed was a reason enough to let me go.

Well, I had my leave and I stayed in Sofia for four or so months when I was in the variety show until Sharleto [the cinema director Lyubomir Sharlandjiev] invited me as an assistant director for his first film 'Chronicles of the Feelings'. So I worked there for five months and after that I found myself jobless again. After that I was an assistant to the director Georgi Alurkov. Then I got a permanent

job with the film center as an assistant director. The Piskov family [cinema directors Irina Aktasheva and Hristo Piskov] invited me as a second director for 'Monday Morning'. After that I became a man of age - over 40 years - and I said to myself: is the assistant director's job something I would like to do - to co-ordinate actors, to find people, to organize mass scenes. No, it wasn't for me. So I started searching for topics for shorts and popular science films. And I found my place in the Sofia Studio for Popular Science Films where I worked until retirement. I worked there although one of the directors there, Chukovski, was a kind of an anti-Semite. I made between 20 and 30 films and I retired in 1987.

My Jewish origin was not an obstacle, because I haven't put much emphasis on it. When Bulgaria cancelled its diplomatic relationships with Israel I attended a gathering where a lot of bullshit was said - but what could one do - you had to listen. My daughter was not allowed to go to Israel when she graduated from the high school - they were afraid she was to marry there. But when she got married in Bulgaria she was allowed to go there together with her husband. It happened before 1989. We hardly brought her up in accordance with the Jewish traditions. Now she lives in America together with her two daughters. Her ex-husband is in Sofia and works as a tradesman. They got divorced. She is now looking after her children and he is looking after me. We haven't observed the Jewish traditions. We may have eaten matzah from time to time. I have occasionally visited the synagogue.

My life hasn't changed much after the democratization process that started in 1989 [25](#) - I don't work any more, so I can't feel the unemployed man's worries. Now I read books and I have a group of friends - we meet with the brother of Dragomir Asenov - he is an expert at the oncology institute in Sofia - we have been friends with him yet from our childhood years in Ruse. Every Friday I have dinner with Leon Daniel, we just have a sip and talk. There is another Jewish family I visit. My wife died at home of cancer. The 'Joint' [26](#) association used to pay some money for the medicines. My pension is 160 leva [around 80 USD]. I rarely go to the synagogue and Bet Am [27](#). I have received aid from the German 'Claims Conference' - they paid around 7,000 EUR in three installments. I still have from this money and I don't waste it - I bought the land lot of the summer house in Staro Selo village, and I went to America to visit my daughter - and I think I can still count on some of this money for two or three years.

Translated by Alexander Manuiloff

Glossary

1 Ottoman Rule in Bulgaria

The territory of today's Bulgaria and most of South Eastern Europe was an integral part of the Ottoman Empire for about five hundred years, from the 14th century until 1878. During the 1877-78 Russian-Turkish War the Russians occupied the Bulgarian lands and brought about the independent Bulgarian state, which however left many Bulgarians outside its boundaries, mostly in areas still under Ottoman rule. The autonomous Ottoman province of Eastern Rumelia united with Bulgaria in 1885, and Bulgaria gained a small part of Macedonia (Pirin Macedonia) in the Balkan Wars (1912-13). However complete Bulgarian national unity was never achieved as many of the Bulgarians remained within the neighboring countries, such as in Greece (Aegean Thrace and Makedonia), Serbia (Macedonia and Eastern Serbia) and Romania (Dobrudzha).

2 Pascin, Jules (1885-1930)

Born Julius Pinkas into a Jewish family in Vidin, Bulgaria and became world-famous as Jules Pascin. He was a painter, aquarellist, engraver, and a distinguished representative of the Paris school from the beginning of the century. He worked in Germany, France, the UK, and the USA and traveled around Europe, Central America, Northern Africa and Palestine. His works present fresh, ethereal, and soft in tonality people from the valleys – street vendors, dancers, prostitutes etc. He committed suicide in 1930 in Paris. Paintings by Pascin are preserved in the Museum of Arts in Paris, in Grenoble and in many private collections in the world.

3 Russian-Turkish War (1877-78)

After the loss of the Crimean War (1856) the Russian Empire made a second attempt in 1877 to secure its outlet from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean by conquering the strategic straits (Bosporus and Dardanelles) and strengthening its position in the Balkans. The pretext of the war declaration was pan-Slavism: protecting the fellow Christian Orthodox and Slavic speaking population of the Ottoman controlled South Eastern Europe. From the Russian controlled Bessarabia the Russian army entered Romania and attacked the Ottomans south of the Danube. With enthusiastic Bulgarian support the Russians won the decisive battles at Plevna (Pleven) and the Shipka straight in the Balkan Mountains. They took Adrianople (Edirne) in 1878 and reached San Stefano (Yesilkoy), an Istanbul suburb, where they signed a treaty with the Porte. This provided for an autonomous Bulgarian state, under Russian protection, bordering the Black and the Aegean seas, including also most of historic Thrace and Macedonia. Britain (safeguarding status quo on the European continent) and Austria-Hungary (having strategic interests in the region) initiated a joint Great Power decision to limit Russian dominance in the Balkans. Their diplomatic efforts were successful and resulted in the Treaty of Berlin in 1878. According to this Bulgaria was made much smaller and large populations of Bulgarians remained outside the new frontiers. Eastern Rumelia as an autonomous Ottoman province was created. In Berlin the Romanian, the Serbian and the Montenegrin states were internationally recognized and Austria-Hungary was given the right to occupy Bosnia and Herzegovina to restore order.

4 Liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman rule

Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire in early 1877 in order to secure the Mediterranean trade routes. The Russian troops, with enthusiastic and massive participation of the Bulgarians, soon occupied all of Bulgaria and reached Istanbul, and Russia dictated the Treaty of San Stefano in 1878. This provided for an autonomous Bulgarian state, under Russian protection, bordering the Black and Aegean seas. Britain and Austria-Hungary, fearing that the new state would extend Russian influence too far into the Balkans, exerted strong diplomatic pressure, which resulted in the Treaty of Berlin in the same year. According to this treaty, the newly established Bulgaria became much smaller than what was decreed by the Treaty of San Stefano, and large populations of Bulgarians remained outside the new frontiers (in Macedonia, Eastern Rumelia, and Thrace), which caused resentment that endured well into the 20th century

5 Bulgaria in World War I

Bulgaria entered the war in October 1915 on the side of the Central Powers. Its main aim was the revision of the Treaty of Bucharest: the acquisition of Macedonia. Bulgaria quickly overran most of Serbian Macedonia as well as parts of Serbia; in 1916 with German backing it entered Greece (Western Thrace and the hinterlands of Salonika). After Romania surrendered to the Central Powers Bulgaria also recovered Southern Dobrudzha, which had been lost to Romania after the First Balkan War. The Bulgarian advance to Greece was halted after British, French and Serbian troops landed in Salonika, while in the north Romania joined the Allies in 1916. Conditions at the front deteriorated rapidly and political support for the war eroded. The agrarians and socialist workers intensified their antiwar campaigns, and soldier committees were formed in the army. A battle at Dobro Pole brought total retreat, and in ten days the Allies entered Bulgaria. On 29th September 1918 Bulgaria signed an armistice and withdrew from the war. The Treaty of Neuilly (November 1919) imposed by the Allies on Bulgaria, deprived the country of its World War I gains as well as its outlet to the Aegean Sea (Eastern Thrace).

6 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'état 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.

7 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.

8 Levski, Vasil (1837-1873)

Bulgarian national hero. Vasil Levski was the principal architect of the campaign to free Bulgaria from the oppression of the Ottoman Empire. Beginning in 1868, Levski founded the first secret revolutionary committees in Bulgaria for the liberation of the country from the Turkish rule. Betrayed by a traitor, he was hanged in 1873 as the Turks feared strong public resentment and a possible attempt by the Bulgarians to free him. Today, a stone monument in Sofia marks the spot where the 'Apostle of Freedom' was hanged.

9 Shalom Organization

Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria. It is an umbrella organization uniting 8,000 Jews in Bulgaria

and has 19 regional branches. Shalom supports all forms of Jewish activities in the country and organizes various programs.

10 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.

11 Hashomer Hatzair in Bulgaria

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

12 St

George Day: The 6th of May, the day of the Orthodox saint St. George the Victorious, a public holiday in Bulgaria. According to Bulgarian tradition the old cattle-breeding year finishes and the new one starts on St. George's Day. This is the greatest spring holiday and it is also the official holiday of the Bulgarian Army. In all Bulgarian towns with military garrisons, a parade is organized and a blessing is bestowed on the army.

13 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.

14 Georgiev, Kimon (Stoyanov) (1882-1969)

Bulgarian prime minister. In the 1930s he was a member of the right-wing military movement 'Zveno' (Link). Together with fellow officers he carried out a coup d'etat in June 1934 and became prime minister. He abolished all political parties and trade unions. Imitating the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, he introduced a corporative economic system. In 1935 King Boris III, an enemy of 'Zveno's' politics committed another coup and Georgiev went in exile. Later he returned to Bulgaria but was arrested and put in jail. During WWII he joined the anti-Axis pro-communist Fatherland Front. In September 1944 the Fatherland Front carried out another coup and Georgiev became prime minister again. In 1946 he was succeeded by the communist leader Georgi Dimitrov and became minister of defence. Later he resigned and withdrew from politics.

15 Gorky, Maxim (born Alexei Peshkov) (1868-1936)

Russian writer, publicist and revolutionary.

16 24th May

The day of Slavic script and culture, a national holiday on which Bulgarian culture and writing is celebrated, paying special tribute to Cyril and Methodius, the creators of the first Slavic alphabet, the forerunner of the Cyrillic script.

17 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.

18 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.

19 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.

20 Kailuka camp

Following protests against the deportation of Bulgarian Jews in Kiustendil (8th March 1943) and Sofia (24th May 1943), Jewish activists, who had taken part in the demonstrations, and their families, several hundred people, were sent to the Somovit camp. The camp had been established

on the banks of the Danube, and they were deported there in preparation for their further deportation to the Nazi death camps. About 110 of them, mostly politically active people with predominantly Zionist and left-wing convictions and their relatives, were later redirected to the Kailuka camp. The camp burned down on 10th July 1944 and 10 people died in the fire. It never became clear whether it was an accident or a deliberate sabotage.

21 Mayakovsky, Vladimir Vladimirovich (1893-1930)

Russian poet and dramatist. Mayakovsky joined the Social Democratic Party in 1908 and spent much time in prison for his political activities for the next two years. Mayakovsky triumphantly greeted the Revolution of 1917 and later he composed propaganda verse and read it before crowds of workers throughout the country. He became gradually disillusioned with Soviet life after the Revolution and grew more critical of it. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1924) ranks among Mayakovsky's best-known longer poems. However, his struggle with literary opponents and unhappy romantic experiences resulted in him committing suicide in 1930.

22 Komsomol

The communist youth organization in Bulgaria during socialist times. The task of the Komsomol was to spread of the ideas of communism among worker and the peasant youth. The Komsomol also aimed at providing a communist upbringing by involving the youth in the political struggle, supplemented by theoretical education.

23 St

Kliment Ohridski University: The St. Kliment Ohridski university in Sofia was the first school of higher education in Bulgaria. It was founded on 1st October 1888 and this date is considered the birthday of Bulgarian university education. The school is named after St. Kliment, who was a student of Cyril and Methodius, to whom we owe the existence of the Cyrillic alphabet. Kliment and his associate Naum founded several public schools in Ohrid and Preslav in the late 9th century with the full support of King Boris I.

24 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.

25 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.

26 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.

27 Bet Am

The Jewish center in Sofia today, housing all Jewish organizations.