

Sabat Pilosof

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Dupnitsa

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Sabat Pilosof lives by himself in a small panel apartment in the suburbs of Dupnitsa, very close to the Rila Mountain [South-Western Bulgaria]. He is very fond of his hometown. Every day at lunchtime he traditionally goes out to meet his friends. He is a man of few words, but with wise judgment and always friendly. He treats the old family photo in a beautiful frame hanging on the wall in his living room with great respect. When he speaks about his life, his sadness can be felt. His two sisters have lived in Israel for decades.

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My family background

In Dupnitsa all Jews are Sephardi [see Sephardi Jewry] [1](#). Our ancestors were chased from Spain in the 15th century [see Expulsion of the Jews from Spain] [2](#). My paternal kin are the Pilosofs. My ancestors on this side settled in Dupnitsa [a town located 50 km south of Sofia]. I know from my paternal grandfather that the Pilosof kin originates from Dupnitsa and is a very large kin. From Dupnitsa it spread to many cities and foreign countries. I have heard that there are many Jews with this name in Bulgaria, Greece and Israel. My father had a cousin called Mois Eliezer Pilosof. He used to be a teacher in the Jewish school in Dupnitsa. Then he moved to Sofia and from there he left for Palestine as early as the 1920s, and later, after the establishment of Israel, he became the mayor of Haifa. Another relative of my father, Benmair Pilosof, took part in the brigades in Spain [during the Spanish Civil War] [3](#) at the time of Franco. After that he settled in France.

My paternal grandfather's name was Sabat Moshe Pilosof. Some of his relatives used to be called 'moskofim' [Moscowians]. I've heard that some of my ancestors went to Russia and later came back. My grandfather was born in Dupnitsa. In his youth he was an associate in a shop in the village of Cherven Briag [Red Coast], which is eight kilometers from Dupnitsa. He worked there for many years. I remember how he regularly sent us milk and fresh cheese, made there. When they couldn't sell the cheese they used to send it to us. Every Saturday my grandfather returned to Dupnitsa. It seems that there weren't many work places in Dupnitsa, and therefore he worked in

other places. When he finally returned to Dupnitsa, as an elderly man, he started to help in a shop in Dupnitsa.

My paternal grandfather's house was in the Jewish neighborhood, which was situated in the area of the Dupnishka [Jerman] River [4](#), which crosses the town. There were various houses there. Both the rich and poor Jews lived there. Most of the houses were one-floor ones with adjoining yards. My grandfather shared a yard with three of his brothers. The houses were either detached from one another, or opposite each other. One of my grandfather's brothers lived next to him, and their sister lived on the opposite side of the street.

My grandfather had five brothers: Eliezer, Yako, Sasson, Haim and Avram. Yako and Sasson were agricultural workers. Avram lived in Sofia. The rest lived and died in Dupnitsa. Eliezer and Yako had vineyards around Dupnitsa. I'm not sure whether they produced wine, but they sold it. Their vineyards, especially Yako's were model ones. They grew different sorts of grapes, both white and red. Yako's vineyard was in the Balanovski Hill area near Dupnitsa. Eliezer Pilosof had three children, all born in Dupnitsa: Leon, who lived in Dupnitsa and had a flour and forage shop, Mois, who was a teacher in the Jewish school, and Linda, who was a housewife. Yako had one son: Mois, about whom I know nothing. The other brother, Sasson, used to raise corn. I remember his wife was called Duda. Sasson had three children: Mordo, who was a pharmacist in Dupnitsa and Varna, Isak, who used to work as a shop assistant in Sofia, and Avram, who was a hatter in Dupnitsa. They all left for Israel.

All I know about Haim is that he was a sandal maker: he used to make flat sandals with leather shoelaces. Haim had one son, Mois, and two daughters, whose names I don't remember. I have no information about Avram's family. Some of the Jews rented houses, others lived in their own. My grandfather lived in his own house. He was accustomed to gathering his children's families every Saturday evening. He had eight children. This was a tradition he kept strictly and even if the youth, like me, wanted to go out somewhere on Saturday evening, we waited for the dinner to end and then went out. My mother was the oldest daughter-in-law and she used to prepare a doughy dish for dinner. The other daughters-in-law cooked rice or something else. Everyone used to bring something in order to help the old people. My mother used to make a big pastry with cheese or leek. I can still remember the old large baking tin, in which my mother used to cook the pastries.

A lot of Jews lived in Dupnitsa's center too. We had a nice and big synagogue. The Jews went to the synagogue mostly on Friday evening and on Saturday. There was a chazzan, who was from Dupnitsa and his name was Haim Mesholam. We had a shochet, who was in a separate building at another place. The synagogue was next to the neighborhood, and the shochet was right next to the Jewish community house, close to the Jewish houses. I don't know exactly how many Jews lived in the town, but they were more than 2,000. Many of them used to work in the tobacco warehouse. A fellow-townsmen of ours was Zhak Aseov, a big tobacco merchant, who had several warehouses in Dupnitsa. A lot of Jews worked for him. [Editor's note: Zhak Aseov was a large scale merchant, owner of tobacco warehouses and the 'Balkantabak' company. Most of his warehouses were in the region of Dupnitsa and Kyustendil. Zhak Aseov left the country after the promulgation of the Law for the Protection of the Nation (1941) and settled in the USA.]

My grandfather didn't like to go to the cinema or theater. He also disliked having his picture taken. He had only one picture with some of his children. My uncles made every possible effort to

persuade him to go to the photo studio. They said they even gave him money, so that he would go there. My grandpa was very impressed by a Russian movie, showing how people went ritually to bathe before their wedding in some Asian countries. He, remembering those rituals, which are also present in the Jewish tradition, wondered where they had been filmed. According to our customs, on the Friday before the wedding, the bride went with her friends to bathe, while the groom went on Saturday, also with friends. After that we gathered somewhere for a drink. In Dupnitsa there was a Turkish bath. This was a bath in which there was no pool, only separate stone troughs in which there was hot water running.

On Pesach all the families used to gather at my grandpa's. Matzah and boyos [small flat loaves] were prepared. From all his siblings, only my grandfather had an oven in the yard. On Pesach there was a special schedule for the whole family to use the oven for baking. All his brothers used to go to bake there.

I know that my grandpa had two wives. The first one was called Lea; Astruk was her maiden name and she was from Sofia. The second one was Luna from the region of Vidin. His first wife had died, so he got married for a second time. I don't remember her. My grandfather had three children with her, and with his second wife he had five. My father was his first wife's eldest son. My grandpa knew many Turkish songs and sometimes we used to make him sing one of them. He wore traditional civic clothes: a coat and a sleeveless jacket. He had a rosary, always wore a hat and he even had a separate sleeping hat. My grandpa's wife was a housewife. She wore long dresses and a kerchief on her head.

My grandpa's children from his first wife were: my father Leon, his brother Mordo and his sister Regina. From his second wife there were: Mois, Avram, Salamon, Ester and Zelma. All the men from my family were craftsmen. My father was a carpenter. For a while he was a worker in a tobacco warehouse. He worked at home and sometimes people asked him to repair woodwork or doors. Yet, he didn't have many projects so he went to work in the tobacco warehouses. He wasn't able to provide for the family, therefore, my mother also went to work in the tobacco warehouses. All my father's siblings used to work there in their youth. The region around Dupnitsa was a strongly developed tobacco growing area.

In those times crafts were learned at old masters' workshops. They started serving as apprentices already as young boys. Uncle Mordo was a tailor. Sometimes he sewed trousers by order, and sometimes he sold them at a stand in the market. He had a small shop together with a shoemaker in the Jewish neighborhood. Uncle Mordo's wife was called Sara and she was born in Dupnitsa. They had three children: Sabat, Lili, and I can't remember anything about the third child. The whole family left for Israel.

Aunt Regina married a barber from Sofia, who I think was called Baruh Mordoch. Their wedding was in Dupnitsa. Then they moved to Palestine, where he continued to work as a barber. However, a couple of years later they returned. Aunt Regina's husband wanted to live at my grandfather's house. Yet, there wasn't enough space there. He had obviously thought that my grandfather would make space for him. Finally, he quarreled with everyone and went to Sofia with my aunt. There was another disagreement also. In the past there were many copper utensils in the house. So there came the time for my grandfather to split them among the family. A lottery was arranged with the names and being the eldest grandson, I drew the lots. Baruh pretended that he had received the

smallest part of it. That wasn't true. My grandfather had equally split the utensils. Then for a while my father and uncles stopped talking to him. My grandpa was an old man already and Uncle Mois used to live with him. He had decided to leave something as a memory for all his kids.

Uncle Mois was a hatter. His wife was called Buka and she was from Dupnitsa. They had three children: Sabat, Rahamim and Lina. The whole family left for Israel. Uncle Avram was a shoemaker. His wife's name was Sofi and she was also from Dupnitsa. They had two children: Mois, who died in Israel and Lina Zhianska, who lives in Sofia. Uncle Salamon was a tinker. He was married to Mara from Dupnitsa. They lived in Sofia. Mara was a kindergarten teacher. They had two children: Sabat and Zinka, who left for Israel. My father's two sisters, Zelma and Ester, were workers in the tobacco warehouses and also housewives. Ester married Buko Davidov, who also used to work in the tobacco warehouses in Dupnitsa. They had two sons: David and Sabat. David Davidov is the chairman of the Jewish community in Dupnitsa. Sabat was an employee of the Bulgarian State Railways. Zelma married in Sofia. I have no information about her family.

My grandfather wasn't religious. He rarely went to the synagogue. He loved eating meat. When I was a child, the food was put on a platter in the middle of the table. Everyone used a ladle to put it on his or her plate. If there was meat, my grandpa hurried to put some on his plate. My grandmother scolded him, as she wanted the kids to take food first. He replied that it wasn't him but actually the fork, which was in a hurry for food. He also loved to make tea in the morning. The room, which he inhabited, was a large one. It had a cupboard and a stove for burning wood and charcoal. He got up early, lit up the stove and put some tea. We had no sugar at home, but he always kept some in his pocket. At that time sugar wasn't bought per kilogram or vegetable oil per litre. The sugar was around a 200-300 gram portion and the oil was sold in small bottles.

My paternal grandparents knew Bulgarian but they spoke to each other in Ladino [5](#). My grandpa also knew Turkish very well. I don't remember whether he had some kind of books. I guess he probably had the Haggadah, but I'm not certain of it. On Pesach everything was cited by heart. My grandparents spoke to us both in Ladino and Bulgarian. As our neighbors were predominantly Bulgarians we spoke mostly Bulgarian with them. At home we didn't speak Ladino but Bulgarian. My father spoke with my grandpa in Ladino, but with us, children, he spoke only in Bulgarian.

Growing up

I was born [in 1920] in a rented house in the Jewish neighborhood. My grandfather's house and most of the other houses were small and there wasn't enough space in them. I remember there was a dark room for the luggage, something like a closet, in which Uncle Mordo used to sleep. Sometimes he took me to sleep there too. We always lived in nearby quarters. We used to live in different neighborhoods of the town. We also lived with Bulgarians. When I was a little child there wasn't electricity in the houses we lived in. We used to light a gas lamp. We used charcoal stoves for heating. We had a separate stove for cooking, and also for burning charcoal. I remember we had a very old cooker. When my mother worked in the tobacco store a lottery was organized there. My mother won a little money from this lottery. Then my father and she decided to buy a new cooker. My father had a friend, a tinker, so he went to him and ordered it. He prepaid a certain amount, and the rest was paid in installments. Thus we obtained a new and nice cooker with an oven.

My maternal kin is also from Dupnitsa. My maternal grandfather's name was Haim Konfort. I don't know what he was dealing with, as he had died before my birth. I remember my maternal grandmother. Her name was Roza Konfort. She was ill and confined to bed and she couldn't get up. The family brought her food and she was taken care of at Uncle Mordechai's place.

My mother had two sisters and four brothers. Her elder sister's name was Busa. She got married in Sofia. She had a lot of children, who left for Israel. Two of them were called Mois and Regina. I can't remember the others. My mother's other sister was Matilda and she got married in Blagoevgrad [then Gorna Dzhumaya]. Her husband was Mordoch. This is his first name. I don't remember his family name. They had two children: Haim and Lora, who live in Israel. My mother's elder brother was called Mordechai, and then came Yosif, Eliezer, and there was another one, who was killed on the front [during WWI]: Mois. Mordechai made quilts. Yosif was a tobacco worker in Dupnitsa. Later he moved to Sofia, where he continued to work in a tobacco warehouse. Eliezer used to sew padded jackets: working winter clothes with padding. I have no information about their families.

My mother died in 1938 of a heart attack. My sisters were high school students then. We were all devastated. She was a very loving mother and in order to provide for the family, apart from sustaining the household, she also used to work in the tobacco warehouses. My sisters and I also worked in these warehouses while we were students. My father remarried a woman from Sofia. Her name was Rashel. I didn't get along with her. She was quite reserved, and she was also jealous of my sisters and me. She made me to repay her the money she had spent on shopping. We had an agreement that I had to do the shopping and she would tell me what she needed. However, she didn't keep her word and she bought whatever she liked. Meanwhile, my father, sisters and I worked in the tobacco warehouse. It was a seasonal job and we were trying to make some money out of it.

My stepmother didn't work. She was religious. She didn't eat pork. My father, sisters and I ate and sometimes I used to lie to her that I had bought veal, so that she would cook and eat it. She wouldn't touch anything on Sabbath either. My father rarely visited the synagogue, only on the high holidays. He had a tallit, which he used to put on when he went to the synagogue. He always wore a hat. In the synagogue women sat on the balcony, while men sat downstairs. The synagogue was very solid. Its walls were very thick. It was built in 1599 following the plan of an Italian engineer.

In Dupnitsa there was a Jewish school with a yeshivah. I started studying there. The school was until fourth grade. After that we continued in the Bulgarian secondary school. At the Jewish school poorer kids received breakfast with milk or tea. We were one class per grade. The pupils' number varied from 25 to 30 children. Our teacher in Ivrit was Monsieur Revakh, who had married in Dupnitsa. He probably had come from Edirne [today Turkey]. We had an Ivrit class every day. We didn't have school-organized visits to the synagogue. Monsieur Revakh taught us some songs in Ivrit. We sang them without actually understanding their meanings. We didn't have any classes in Jewish history and literature at the Jewish school. We only studied the alphabet and some words in Ivrit.

After the Jewish school I finished the Bulgarian secondary school. At that time we used to live in a Bulgarian neighborhood. Upon graduation I was to learn a trade. Already as a schoolboy my father used to send me to some friends of his as a shoemaker apprentice.

I often went on excursions to the Rila Mountain as a young boy. I know every bit of it. My uncles were great tourists and I became enthusiastic about mountaineering because of them. There was a tourist association in Dupnitsa. It was comprised of local citizens, both Jews and Bulgarians, and was called 'The Seven Lakes of Rila Mountain'. As far as I know it still exists. We paid a membership fee and we had a discount for accommodation in huts.

There were Zionist organizations in Dupnitsa but I wasn't a member of any. The youth were members of Maccabi [World Union] [6](#). The Jews in our town had their cultural-educational organization at the 'Saznanie' [Conscience] [7](#) and Chitalishte [8](#). It was a Jewish community club, supervised by the Jewish community and was entirely at the disposal of the Jews in town. It had a big and rich library. We borrowed books from there. [The interviewee doesn't remember what kind of books.] There we received all kinds of periodicals and newly published books. The richer Jews used to support it financially. The premises of the Jewish community club were close to the building which sheltered the Jewish community. There was a very nice choir at the 'Saznanie' community club, which had no name. The songs were Bulgarian. There was also a theater, in which many plays were performed. There was a big hall in the community club, where the library was situated and the theater and choir rehearsals were held. The plays were mainly by Jewish authors. I remember, for example, a play, 'Tevye, the Milkman' by a Russian author [Sholem Aleichem] [9](#).

I used to be an assistant librarian when I was a schoolboy at secondary school. There were two chief librarians: Zhosko Ideal and Adela Chilibonova. They were senior class students at the high school in Dupnitsa and I used to help them. I had a key from the community club and I used to go there with friends in order to read books. In fascist times a barber, Paunov, was appointed commissar for Jewish affairs [in Dupnitsa] [see Commissariat for Jewish Affairs] [10](#). He squatted in the building of the Jewish community. He was in charge of everything. It was then when all the books disappeared from the community club. Unfortunately, all written testimonies of history concerning Jews in Dupnitsa as well as all documents were destroyed in fascist times by the commissar for Jewish affairs.

Bulgarians and Jews got on very well at that time. It was only in 1940 when the Law for the Protection of the Nation [11](#) was promulgated [the law was passed at the beginning of 1941], and that's when a worse attitude could be felt. At the end of 1939 and the beginning of 1940 fascist organizations were set up in Dupnitsa like 'Brannik' [12](#) and 'Otets Paisii' [13](#). Then the 'Legionaries' [see Bulgarian Legions] [14](#) also appeared. A 'Brannik' lived opposite us, and used to torment me a lot. When I went out he used to force me back and swear at me. It was already after 1940. We had a curfew and separate shops, as well as a separate bakery. There were even signs on some shops saying 'Entrance forbidden for Jews'. In the evening we weren't allowed to walk on the main street. We could only walk along the river. Anyone who didn't obey those restrictions was arrested. We were forced to wear yellow stars [see Yellow star in Bulgaria] [15](#). They were made of plastic. No one would hire a Jew for a job. I worked at home: I repaired shoes. My parents worked in the tobacco warehouse, and so did my sisters. Saturday was a working day for the warehouses also. Sunday was the day off. Very often we were obliged to work on Saturday and therefore we didn't observe Sabbath.

Once in 1941, me and a bunch of friends were playing cards in a cafe. There was a police agent there, who was eavesdropping on us while we were discussing a Soviet movie. When we went out of the cafe he followed us. Shortly after that he stopped us and made us follow him to the police

station. One by one, all of us were interrogated in a room there. We were asked what our talk was about and I got a slap in the face because I was wearing a red shirt. A neighbor of mine was also sitting in the room, yet he didn't do anything to help me. Finally we were set free. There was a cinema in Dupnitsa. They screened a variety of films there. It was very difficult to get tickets for the nice movies because they ran out of them very quickly. I remember waiting in line for a long time to buy 10-15 tickets for my friends.

Between 1938 and 1940 we often went on excursions to the Balkan Mountain. These trips were organized by the UYW [16](#) of which I was a member. I wouldn't say we had much of an activity. We had a friend, a tailor, Zhak Alfandari, who lived in the Jewish neighborhood. He had a closet in his atelier. He kept a jacket there with an illegal newspaper from Sofia in its pocket. We were interested in the illegal newspaper. I think it was 'Rabotnichesko delo' [Worker's deed] [The newspaper of the Bulgarian Communist Party [17](#)]. He knew why we visited him and let us in. He was a communist. He was caught and sent to prison. After he was set free from prison in September 1944, he returned to his dressmaking atelier.

During the war

In 1940 I appeared before the recruiting committee. I was approved as an artillerist. However, the Law for the Protection of the Nation was passed and they didn't take me in the army. The Jewish labor groups [see Forced labor camps in Bulgaria] [18](#) were created. I was allocated in the Seventh [forced] labor group in Samokov. In 1941 I was sent to such a [forced] labor group in the village of Rebrovo, Sofia district. In 1942, I was already allocated to the village of Transka Klisura, Breznik district, and in 1943 I was sent to Dupnitsa. In 1944, I went to the village of Isvor, Lovech district. In Dupnitsa I dug tunnels which were meant to be used as shelters during air raids. I worked at road construction sites in the other places. It was very hard work. We dug with our hands using picks and spades, removing the earth and stones in wheelbarrows. All the [forced] labor camps started at the beginning of summer and ended in early November. The rest of the time I spent in Dupnitsa. I used to work at home as a shoemaker. In 1944 I was in the Jewish [forced] labor groups until the beginning of September, when I ran away and returned to Dupnitsa.

In the camp in Rebrovo we dug a highway from Kurilo to Svoge. [Kurilo village, the town of Svoge and Rebrovo village are situated along the Iskar River in the Balkan Mountain. A railway road passes through them as well as highway connections in Northwestern Bulgaria direction.] We lived in tents and were given frugal meals. Thank God some people had friends in Sofia, who supplied them with additional food, which was shared by all of us. There were several tented camps. The Jews from Dupnitsa, including me, were in one camp. Yet, I escaped to another camp several kilometers away, where I had relatives and friends from Sofia. There I met a youth from Pleven, with whom I kept in touch for a long time. His name was Mair Melamed. He has already passed away. He used to work in a textile factory in Pleven. Later he moved to Sofia. In this camp our chief was a kind-hearted man with good manners, who treated us well. We ourselves were camp guards: we had fatigue duty. Every evening there was a roll-call.

I can say that in Rebrovo we were much better off than in the [forced] labor camp in Transka Klisura in 1942. This camp was close to the Bulgarian-Serbian border. We built a road between the Serbian towns Surdolica and Tran. The food there was awful. We lived in tents even during

November when it was snowing. There was no chance for us to receive packages. Only once a parcel from Dupnitsa reached us successfully. We were about to be happy, when we opened it and found out that everything inside was moldy. Because of the insufficient and bad food, we often went to the neighboring villages to buy cheese and potatoes. We were sold even boiled potatoes. The money we had was just all that we could take from home. We didn't have any visitors. Because of the close border, we were guarded by the police.

In 1943, while at the labor camp in Dupnitsa, I was sent to work at a tunnel construction site. I was close to home and could go back there every day. We worked for eight hours every day and after that we had a free period. Paid workers from the town also worked with us.

In the camp in the village of Izvor, Lovech region, where I was until 7th September 1944, we also dug at a road construction site. The work included crushing gravel with hammers and digging a four cubic meter excavation. Those who couldn't fulfill the norm during the day were forced to work at night until they managed with the quota. We were close to the town and people brought us food. Peasants from the nearby villages also helped us with food.

In 1943, Sofia Jews were interned [see Internment of Jews in Bulgaria] [19](#). They arrived by train from Sofia at 10pm. Some of us from the forced labor groups were allowed to help them settle in the town after their arrival. The chairman of the Jewish community, Mois Alkalai, was in charge of their accommodation. He had made a list of the houses and the number of people who could be accommodated with Jewish families. So, in the evening we went to the station, met with them and went to the Jewish community first. The first thing the chairman did was to ask them whether they had relatives or friends in the town. If they did, he checked how many people the house could accommodate and asked someone to take them to the place. Every evening for about a week people came and were accommodated in the Jewish houses. Relatives of my stepmother were staying at our place.

On 7th September 1944 I was in Izvor. At that time the Soviet troops were about to enter Bulgaria [20](#). At that time many Jews ran away from the labor groups. We also prepared for our escape. We didn't get on the train to Lovech because we were warned that there were policemen at the railway station. I and another man got on a train near a village a kilometer away from the town. Thus we went to Pleven. There was a big bustle there. We asked what it was about and were told that the people were attacking the prison in order to set the political prisoners free. An acquaintance of mine, Stefan from Dupnitsa, who had escaped from prison, got on the train. He was hiding from the police. He had been jailed as he was a communist. He asked me whether I had money to give him to buy himself a ticket from Sofia to Dupnitsa. My friend from the labor camp was from a rich family and I told him not to bother. We agreed that I would buy him the ticket and wait for him close to the station. And so that's what happened, I bought him a ticket and found a wagon with fewer people. He got on the train and at the last moment, just before the train departed, he got off one stop before his final destination so that the policemen wouldn't see him. We didn't know yet what the situation in Dupnitsa was. Thus we went home on the 7th in the evening.

The next day I went to the central square near the police station. All of a sudden shooting started. The partisans had come down from the mountain, and had attacked the police station. A policeman and a partisan were killed. The partisans entered the police station and set the political prisoners free.

In September 1944 a squad of volunteers was formed under the command of the partisan commander Zhelyu Demirevski [21](#). I went to the front with this squad. My grandpa passed away while I was at the front. I was in the Third Guards Regiment. There were many Jews who were volunteers in this regiment, also from other towns.

Zhelyu Demirevski was the commander of the 'Kosta Petrov' partisan detachment. Kosta Petrov was a communist, and the mayor of Dupnitsa from 1920 to 1921. He gave poor people places to build houses. He didn't ask for rent from the power station close to Dupnitsa, which produced electricity for Sofia, but he demanded free electricity for the poorer citizens of Dupnitsa. One day, while on his way back from the power station to Dupnitsa, he was shot by Macedonians, who had been bribed by the rich people in the town, because of his activities in support of the poor. When he was buried it became evident that he wasn't wearing a shirt, only a false shirtfront. He was sort of ascetic.

After the war

In December 1945 I got married. When I got married it was a time of great poverty. 'Joint' [22](#) gave out relief funds in the Jewish quarter. Clothes were distributed. For my wedding I was presented with trousers. The coat that matched the trousers was, however, given to another man. Then I went to him and explained to him that I would like to buy the coat as I was getting married. I begged him, and yet he didn't agree. And so, I got married in an old coat.

My wife Berta [Pilosof, nee Konfort] was born in Dupnitsa. We knew each other since our youth. We were friends. She also studied at the Jewish school and later at the vocational school for seamstresses. She worked for a while as a seamstress at home. After that she went into trade and became a trade worker until her retirement.

My wife and I decided to stay here [in Dupnitsa]. My two little sisters left [for Israel]. One of them, Lizka, left as early as 1944. She got married in Sofia to a Jew, whose father was from Pirot, i.e. Serbia. So my brother-in-law's name was Samuil Yakov, and he was considered a foreigner. The authorities were chasing him, but he had already married my sister and they had a child. He didn't have much of a choice and together with my sister and the child they left for Palestine. My brother-in-law worked as a barber there. My other sister, Roza, left in 1951. She was married in Petrich [Southwestern Bulgaria]. She very much wanted to settle in Dupnitsa, but finally they decided to leave for Israel. Her husband's name was Leon Levi and he was a tailor.

After 9th September 1944 [23](#) work became my priority. First I worked in the tobacco warehouse. I also worked as an apprentice-shoemaker. In 1947 a shoemaker's co-operative was set up. I wanted to enroll in it but there weren't enough work materials and not everyone was accepted. Then Uncle Avram, my father's brother, and I opened a workshop. But as there were no materials, we couldn't work. We didn't have enough funds to buy a large amount of shoemaker's materials. Then I started working in a vegetable oil refinery where we produced oil from sunflowers. It was a seasonal job. Then I worked in a tobacco warehouse again for a while. In 1950 I became a shop assistant. Thus I ended up with shoemaking. Until 1980 I was in the trade. Then I retired. The shop was state-run and I couldn't be away from work. I became a supervisor at a large trade store whose staff numbered 14 people. I was obliged to go to work. We rarely gathered with relatives on high holidays. I felt like it was holiday time when there was a delicious meal on my table, as well as

when I was resting.

Life during the 1950s was quite calm. I never encountered problems after 9th September 1944 because of my Jewish origin. It was different in the Soviet Union. In Bulgaria, after 1944 there weren't manifestations of anti-Semitism, or if there were any of the kind, they were isolated cases. Nobody has ever differentiated between Bulgarians and Jews. Life was much calmer than compared to the current situation. Before 1989 [see 10th November 1989] [24](#), I could go out of the house without locking the door, but now it's not safe. When you visit a doctor nobody acknowledges whose turn it is, the ones who pay always go first. My wife and I had a normal life. We went on holidays organized by our workplaces.

When my father died in 1961 my stepmother had her eyes on a man from the town. She wanted to move to his place. I told her that if she would leave our house, I would never let her come back later. Until then I had provided for her entirely. One day that man came with a cart and they loaded her luggage. And off she went with him. Later, we heard the news that her man had started selling her stuff for money. While she lived with us my stepmother had things which we had never dared to touch. However, in her new home her household belongings were gradually being sold. Once she asked me to let her return home but I refused. After she died I took care of all the funeral arrangements. There was a Jewish cemetery in Dupnitsa but due to the town-planning changes it was removed. Now there is a common graveyard.

Our synagogue was demolished at the end of the 1970s. Nobody was informed of this act. The machines were prepared during nighttime and in the morning the demolition began. The Jews immediately telephoned the Ministry [Department] of Ecclesiastical Matters in Sofia in order to stop this act, but it was already too late. Asen Stoyanov was Dupnitsa's mayor at that time. When the synagogue was demolished pitchers were found in the walls, which had improved the acoustics when it was still operating. The Jewish community continued to exist even after the emigration of most of the Jews to Israel [see Mass Aliyah] [25](#).

I used to be chairman of the Jewish community for about ten years starting in the 1970s. At that time the whole Jewish community used to gather in the club during the high holidays. We didn't have any impediments neither regarding celebration of our holidays, nor in terms of gathering in the house of the Jewish community. The synagogue still existed and elderly people used to visit it. We were a greater number then than we are now. Lately many people have left for Israel; others have passed away. For Pesach we used to receive matzah from Sofia, every family ordering a certain quantity in advance. We didn't have a chazzan in the synagogue in the years after 1944 but there were people among us who could read the Haggadah. We also organized excursions in order to meet Jews from other towns, and most often we visited Kyustendil.

In our family, from all the Jewish holidays we observed only Pesach [the interviewee is speaking about the period 1944-1989]. I always bought matzah. However, very often my wife or I were at work and we couldn't celebrate the holiday. I have two children: a boy and a girl. Their names are Leon and Tamara. I haven't brought them up in the spirit of Jewish traditions. They only know the names of the Jewish holidays and some words in Ladino. They have rarely visited the Jewish club. My grandchildren have even less knowledge about the Jewish holidays. I have never spoken in Ladino with my wife.

My son graduated in Electrical Engineering from the Technical School in Dupnitsa and currently he works in a chemical-pharmaceutical plant. He was sent on business trips to Germany for the purpose of importing machines for the plant several times. My daughter works in the Patent Office in Sofia. My children are married to Bulgarians. My son Leon is married to Tanya, who works as a kindergarten teacher. They have two children: Andrey and Beatrica. My daughter Tamara is married to Yordan Simeonov, who is a department chief at a metallurgical plant. They have one son, whose name is Sabin. He works in a bank and meanwhile he continues upgrading his qualification as an economist.

My sisters and I corresponded with each other on a regular basis after they left for Israel. I visited them in 1977. It was my only visit there. I didn't have any major problems in terms of permission to travel to Israel. We couldn't travel freely in those times and I had to submit an application to the militia and to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I visited Israel together with my wife. I was at my sisters'. We hadn't seen each other for ages and it was very moving. One of my sisters lives in a village above the Keneret Lake, and the other one in a suburb in Tel Aviv. Both of them are already widows. Their children don't know Bulgarian. My sisters also visited Bulgaria more than ten years ago.

After the changes [in 1989] we have lived more modestly. The cost of living is much higher and the years are already a burden. Regarding the worldly changes, I think that they are controlled by the big capitalist countries. The economic changes in Bulgaria caused its devastation. Many plants were artificially led to bankruptcy. The foreign markets were closed. And now it's very difficult for them to be restored.

We gather at the Jewish community only at holiday time. There are very few Jews left in our town. Sometimes we receive relief funds from 'Joint.' I eat at a canteen and part of my food costs are covered by 'Joint.' Now I live in an apartment in a panel block. My son has a separate apartment and my daughter lives in Sofia. Both my children live in an entirely Bulgarian environment. Throughout the years my social circle was also predominantly Bulgarian. I remained close with most of the Jews in town and especially with some Jewish families like the Alkalai family, for example. I also meet with the few elderly Jews left, who like me have their lunch in a canteen downtown.

Glossary

1 Sephardi Jewry

Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin. Their ancestors settled down in North Africa, the Ottoman Empire, South America, Italy and the Netherlands after they had been driven out from the Iberian peninsula at the end of the 15th century. About 250,000 Jews left Spain and Portugal on this occasion. A distant group among Sephardi refugees were the Crypto-Jews (Marranos), who converted to Christianity under the pressure of the Inquisition but at the first occasion reassumed their Jewish identity. Sephardi preserved their community identity; they speak Ladino language in their communities up until today. The Jewish nation is formed by two main groups: the Ashkenazi and the Sephardi group which differ in habits, liturgy their relation toward Kabala, pronunciation as well in their philosophy.

2 Expulsion of the Jews from Spain

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

3 Spanish Civil War (1936-39)

A civil war in Spain, which lasted from July 1936 to April 1939, between rebels known as Nacionales and the Spanish Republican government and its supporters. The leftist government of the Spanish Republic was besieged by nationalist forces headed by General Franco, who was backed by Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. Though it had Spanish nationalist ideals as the central cause, the war was closely watched around the world mainly as the first major military contest between left-wing forces and the increasingly powerful and heavily armed fascists. The number of people killed in the war has been long disputed ranging between 500,000 and a million.

4 Jerman River

Dupnitsa is a town in Southwest Bulgaria. It is located at an important crossroads on the way from Sofia to Thessaloniki and Plovdiv – Skopje. The town is 535 m above sea level. It is situated in the Dupnitsa valley at the foot of the western slopes of the Rila Mountain and the southern slopes of Veria. The biggest river which passes through the valley is the Struma. The Jerman River, which originates from the Seven Rila Lakes passes through Dupnitsa. The Jewish neighborhood in Dupnitsa is located near the Jerman River under the Karshia hill near Sharshiiska Street. Jews settled here as early as the 16th century. In fact, the river divides the Jewish neighborhood from the Bulgarian one.

5 Ladino

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

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

6 Maccabi World Union

International Jewish sports organization whose origins go back to the end of the 19th century. A growing number of young Eastern European Jews involved in Zionism felt that one essential prerequisite of the establishment of a national home in Palestine was the improvement of the physical condition and training of ghetto youth. In order to achieve this, gymnastics clubs were founded in many Eastern and Central European countries, which later came to be called Maccabi. The movement soon spread to more countries in Europe and to Palestine. The World Maccabi Union was formed in 1921. In less than two decades its membership was estimated at 200,000 with branches located in most countries of Europe and in Palestine, Australia, South America, South Africa, etc.

7 'Saznanie' [Conscience]

a Jewish self-educational association. It was founded in Dupnitsa on 7th January 1902. Its founders were mostly members of the Bulgarian Workers' Social Democratic Party. They were: Israel Yako Levi – a tobacco worker, Israel Daniel – a tailor, Moshe Alkalai – a tailor, Aron Luna – a merchant, Yako Yusef Komfort – a merchant. The goal of the association was to improve the culture and education of its members, help poor students with books, clothes and money. Another goal of the association was the fight against nationalism and chauvinism of the Zionist organization, 'which poisons the mind of youths and strives to detach them from the class fight of the laborers.' The number of the members of 'Saznanie' reached 150 at one point. The leadership consisted of seven people – a chairman, a secretary, a treasurer, a cultural teacher, and three people as supervisory council. There were different sections in the association – a temperance one, a tourist one, a sports one with their own groups, which educated the members. The association in Dupnitsa had a library with mostly fiction and Marxist literature. There was also a choir, an orchestra and a theater group. The operetta 'Natalka-Poltavka' was staged in Dupnitsa, as well as various plays by Victor Hugo, Sholem Aleichem, and others. Some of the plays were performed in Judeo-Espanol (Ladino), and the others in Bulgarian. The association was closed under the Law for the Protection of the Nation. With its activities it contributed to the development of culture and education and left a permanent trace in the minds of the people of Dupnitsa.

8 Chitalishte

literally 'a place to read'; a community and an institution for public enlightenment carrying a supply of books, holding discussions and lectures, performances etc. The first such organizations were set up during the period of the Bulgarian National Revival (18th-19th centuries) and were gradually transformed into cultural centers in Bulgaria. Unlike in the 1930s, when the chitalishte network could maintain its activities for the most part through its own income, today, as during the communist regime, they are mainly supported by the state. There are over 3,000 chitalishtes in

Bulgaria today, although they have become less popular.

9 Sholem Aleichem (pen name of Shalom Rabinovich (1859-1916))

Yiddish author and humorist, a prolific writer of novels, stories, feuilletons, critical reviews, and poem in Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian. He also contributed regularly to Yiddish dailies and weeklies. In his writings he described the life of Jews in Russia, creating a gallery of bright characters. His creative work is an alloy of humor and lyricism, accurate psychological and details of everyday life. He founded a literary Yiddish annual called Di Yidishe Folksbibliotek (The Popular Jewish Library), with which he wanted to raise the despised Yiddish literature from its mean status and at the same time to fight authors of trash literature, who dragged Yiddish literature to the lowest popular level. The first volume was a turning point in the history of modern Yiddish literature. Sholem Aleichem died in New York in 1916. His popularity increased beyond the Yiddish-speaking public after his death. Some of his writings have been translated into most European languages and his plays and dramatic versions of his stories have been performed in many countries. The dramatic version of Tevye the Dairyman became an international hit as a musical (Fiddler on the Roof) in the 1960s.

10 Commissariat for Jewish Affairs

An institution set up in September 1942 at the Ministry of Interior and People's Health that was in charge of the execution of the Law for the Protection of the Nation. It was headed by Alexander Belev, a German-trained anti-Semite.

11 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.

12 Brannik

Pro-fascist youth organization. It started functioning 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.

13 Otets Paisii All-Bulgarian Union

bearing the name of Otets (Father) Paisii Hilendarski, one of the leaders of the Bulgarian National Revival, the union was established in 1927 in Sofia and existed until 9th September 1944, the communist takeover in Bulgaria. A pro-fascist organization, it advocated the return to national values in a revenge-seeking and chauvinistic way.

14 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.

15 Yellow star in Bulgaria

According to a governmental decree all Bulgarian Jews were forced to wear distinctive yellow stars after 24th September 1942. Contrary to the German-occupied countries the stars in Bulgaria were made of yellow plastic or textile and were also smaller. Volunteers in previous wars, the war-disabled, orphans and widows of victims of wars, and those awarded the military cross were given the privilege to wear the star in the form of a button. Jews who converted to Christianity and their families were totally exempt. The discriminatory measures and persecutions ended with the cancellation of the Law for the Protection of the Nation on 17th August 1944.

16 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.

17 Bulgarian Communist Party

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

18 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.

19 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.

20 Bulgarian Army in World War II

On 5th September 1944 the Soviet government declared war to Bulgaria which was an ally of Hitler Germany. In response to that act on 6th September the government of Konstantin Muraviev took the decision to cut off the diplomatic relations between Bulgaria and Germany and to declare war to Germany. The Ministry Council made it clear in the decision that it came into effect starting on 8th September 1944. On this day the Soviet armies entered Bulgaria and the same evening a coup d'etat was organized in Sofia. The power was taken by the coalition of the Fatherland Front, consisting of communists, agriculturalists, social democrats, the political circle 'Zveno' (a former Bulgarian middleclass party). The participation of the Bulgarian army in the third stage of World War II was divided into two periods. The first one was from September to November 1944. 450,000 people were enlisted under the army flags and three armies were formed out of them, which were deployed on the western Bulgarian border. Those armies took part in the Nis and Kosovo advance operations and defeated a number of enemy units from the Nazi forces, parts of the 'E' group of armies and liberated significant territories from Southeast Serbia and Vardar Macedonia. The second period of the Bulgarian participation in the war was from December 1944 to May 1945. The specially formed First Bulgarian Army, including 130,000 soldiers took part in it. After regrouping the army took part in the fighting at Drava – Subolch. At the end of March the Bulgarian army started advancing and then pursuing the enemy until they reached the foot of the Austrian Alps. The overall Bulgarian losses in the war were 35,000 people.

21 Demirevski, Zhelyu (1914-1944)

real name: Vasil Sotirov, born in Dupnitsa, member of the Bulgarian Communist Party and revolutionary workers' movement. From 1938 to 1941 he was secretary of the district committee of the BCP in Dupnitsa. He organized and led the strike of the tobacco workers in the town in 1940. In 1941 he founded and became the commander of a partisan squad and from 1943 he was the commander of the Rila-Pirin partisan squad. After 9th September 1944 he left for the war front as a commander of the 3rd Guard Infantry Regiment. He died in Yugoslavia.

22 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.

23 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.

24 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.

25 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.