

# Matilda Israel

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Sofia

Bulgaria

Interviewer: Leontina Israel

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Matilda Meshulam Israel is a pensioner. She worked as a laboratory assistant. She is a very friendly, hospitable and elegant old lady. She looks much younger for her age. She lives alone in a large apartment with three rooms in the center of Sofia. Sometimes her son who lives in Spain comes to visit her during the holidays and on his vacations. Her other son lives with his family in an apartment in Sofia. There are tapestries on the walls, which she has sewn herself and some pictures of her family - her sons, granddaughters, her late husband. There is always a vase with fresh flowers in front of his photo. In one of the glass cupboards there is a collection of dolls from various parts of the world dressed in folk costumes. She says that it was her husband's collection and he bought most of the dolls during his trips. She is a captivating speaker, and does not even wait to be asked a question. It seems that her most vivid memories are those from her childhood, because she talks about it in such minute details and ever so often returns to this period to tell another story. She also insists on talking in detail about her husband's professional achievements, who appears to have been a distinguished scholar and a remarkable man.



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## Growing up in Karnobat

I was born on 20th October 1921 in the town of Karnobat, where I grew up. It was a small town in southeastern Bulgaria then, a cattle-breeding center with around 10,000 citizens. All the Jewish families - around fifty - lived in the same neighborhood. Now there are no longer Jews living there. We formed this neighborhood ourselves, based on our own initiative and will. It was on the outskirts of town but at the same time it was near the center. We were all very united and perhaps the years of my childhood were the happiest in my life. The yards of our houses weren't

surrounded by tall fences and we could pass from one part of the neighborhood to the other by crossing the backyards instead of walking along the streets. The whole Jewish community was very united and we all helped the poorer families among us. I remember that when I was a child, I played all day from morning until late in the evening, when I went home for dinner, as my father insisted that the whole family should eat together. All of my friends then were Jews, the older and the younger children all played together. Every evening we visited some family or they came to visit us. We didn't arrange the visits beforehand; we just decided to visit someone and went there. We ate cooked corn, popcorn, fruit; the children gathered in one of the rooms and the parents in the other. And we did this every evening! Even when there was a curfew, we could pass through the yards and no one would know that we weren't at home. All children from the Jewish neighborhood played together and got sick together. We quite often passed various viruses to each other - measles, tonsillitis, and mumps. We went through all the children's diseases. If a child went down with an infectious illness, all the other children also caught it and our mothers treated us together.

My father, Meshulam Sabetay Yulzari, was born in Karnobat in 1864. He became an orphan very young and I know nothing about his parents. Probably his kin was from Karnobat. I have no idea if his parents were religious or how they lived. They died when my father was a child and this is the only thing I know about them. My father was the oldest brother in the family and he had to work to support the others - his brother Yako and his sister Duda, who, as far as I remember, moved to Yambol later. Like most of the Jews in Karnobat, my father became a merchant too. He had a textile shop, which was quite big. My brother, Sabetay, also worked in the shop. My father and Sabetay were partners.

I remember that my father was always neatly dressed in a suit, with a bowler hat and a cane. He was very strict, but also a very nice man. All children in the neighborhood loved him, because he always had sweets in his pockets to give them. I was his soft spot, because I was his youngest daughter. When I was born, he was quite old, almost 60 years. He was a widower when he met my mother in Plovdiv on one of his business trips. My father's first wife had passed away. I don't know the exact cause, but I know that she had been bedridden for quite some time, because my sisters used to tell me how they did all the household chores then. From his first wife my father had six children: Sabetay, Jacques, Sophie, Buka, Ana, Albert.

Neither of the women worked, they were all housewives. Jacques was a dentist; he graduated in France and in 1951 moved to Israel with his family. His son, Mihael Bar Zoar, was a deputy in the Knesset. He wrote a book on the salvation of the Bulgarian Jews - 'Outside Hitler's Grasp'. A movie was made based on it two years ago. He often comes to Bulgaria and we always see each other when he is here. Albert died very young, only 17 years old, of typhus. I know from my mother that he was a very good man. Once she noticed that the cheese supply at home ran out very quickly and that Albert would wear one and the same shirt. She asked him about that and he admitted that he had given all his clothes as well as the cheese to a poor family. My other sisters and brothers moved to Israel in 1948 where they settled. Now their families live there. I feel closest to the children of my brother Haim, Yitzhak and Rebecca.

My mother, Rebecca Solomon Yulzari [nee Perets] was born in Asenovgrad [a small town in Southern Bulgaria] in 1887. She was a very beautiful and delicate woman. She was blond, with fair eyes and smooth skin. Later she moved to Plovdiv, because the family was more likely to find work

there, I guess. I know nothing about the school and younger years of my mother. I don't know why, but she never talked about them, probably, because I never asked her. She was the oldest child in the family. She had two brothers - Jacques Perets, who was a leather worker, and Israel Perets - and three sisters, Regina, Sophie and Mazal.

My mother's first husband was killed during the war [WWI] and left her alone with a one-year-old son. My mother and her sisters worked when they were young. I know that they even worked in the factory of my husband's father, Marko Israel, in Plovdiv, where they produced umbrellas and other articles, which I don't remember. Later, when they had their own families they didn't work. My uncle Jacques saved my mother's life once during a big flood in their hometown Asenovgrad. He carried her out of the house, which collapsed soon afterwards. My mother couldn't walk on her own, because she was about to give birth to my brother Haim. This happened before I was born and before my father met my mother.

Jacques got married to a woman called Mary, but only after a tragic event happened. He had a fiancé in Sofia who was extraordinarily beautiful. They were very happy and they loved each other a lot. But she was short-sighted and so once when she lit a gas stove; she didn't see that there was already a flame in there. She continued to feed gas and then a flame jumped so high that it burned her severely. Soon after that she died from her wounds. My uncle never overcame her death. Not long afterwards he got married. He loved his wife, a good woman, but I think that he never forgot the lovely Anushka.

My father met my mother by chance, at the kiosk where she sold cigarettes. Gradually, he persuaded her to marry him and together they moved to Karnobat taking my half-brother Haim with them. I suppose that my mother felt nervous about what she would find there, because she was the age of my father's daughters. At first they treated her quite distantly, but gradually she became part of the family.

I guess the news that my father was about to have both a daughter and a granddaughter at the same time was a big scandal during those times, but it is a fact that Mati, the daughter of my sister Buka, was born almost at the same time that I was. My other niece, Viki, the daughter of my sister Ana is also about the same age as me, and some time after my birth the two sons of my brother Sabetay, Leon and Misho, were born. We all grew up together. In the beginning I was also not accepted very warmly by the family, but gradually they became attached to me and they couldn't stop hugging me. I am named after the first wife of my father. My sisters insisted on that and my mother didn't mind.

## **Our religious life**

We celebrated all Jewish holidays and observed almost all traditions related to them. My father was very religious and was a gabbai in the synagogue. We had a wonderful synagogue in Karnobat and a chazzan, who was in charge of everything there. There was only one rabbi in Bulgaria then, who was in the Sofia synagogue. So, the chazzan in Karnobat had to perform all the rabbi's duties. In the synagogue the women sat on the balcony and the men downstairs. We, the children, had a special bench. I remember that we were always giggling and fussing during the service and my father scolded us or teased us. My favorite holiday, like that of all children, was Purim, when we all dressed in fancy costumes. We were all looking forward to Purim, because we knew that when it was close, spring was also near. There was a family that on occasion of the holidays made various

figures from sugar - such as lambs, scissors and birds. We children always bought some. This is a holiday of the sweets, so people make various desserts out of sugar. We all put on fancy dress clothes; whatever we found at home. It was most fun in the evenings, when our parents also put on masks. They made rounds from house to house and everyone had to try and guess who was hiding behind the mask. We had such a good time! At school we always prepared a play about Ester, Haman and Mordecai.

I also liked Tu bi-Shevat. On Fruits <sup>1</sup> my mother sewed satin purses for all sisters, brothers, cousins and children of our friends, which she filled with different fruits. In fact, this is the New Year of the trees. I remember that on the eve of Tu bi-Shevat my father took me to the yard and made me listen to the whispers of the trees. He told me that they were just about to blossom and were talking to each other, because this was their holiday. At that time there were kinds of fruit, which our children nowadays have never seen. For example, there was a fruit called 'roshkovi'. It looks like the fruit of the acacia - long brown pods with seeds inside. They were dry, but very tasty. There was quite a lot of fruit on the table on that holiday. We also brought out home-preserved fruit in jars, which we had prepared in the fall.

One week before Pesach we cleaned the whole house so that not a single breadcrumb could be found. We even ate in the yard the day before Pesach. We had different dishes for Pesach, which we kept in a separate cabinet, which we took out only on the holiday. Afterwards we washed it and put it back. There was no matzah produced then. We bought special bread from the bakery, made without salt and yeast - boyos [similar to matzah]. It was prepared in small loaves, which were very hard and my mother heated them over steam to make them softer. My sister-in-law, Liza, Sabetay's wife, didn't observe the tradition and ate bread at home during Pesach, which annoyed my father. We celebrated Pesach in the traditional way. We observed all the traditions and read the Haggadah aloud on Pesach. On seder my father and sometimes my brothers read the Haggadah and we sang songs. There was a tradition to dress up for the holiday or buy new clothes. We rarely invited guests on Pesach. This is a family holiday and we gathered only with our closest relatives. On Sabbath my mom lit the candles. We always had supper together. My father went to the synagogue, but the others didn't. Mother rarely went to the synagogue. My father blessed the children. On Saturdays the Turkish girl, who looked after me, helped us with the household work.

On Yom Kippur we all kept 'taanit' [fast in Hebrew], but it wasn't obligatory for us children, because we usually couldn't bear to stay hungry all day. We had dinner early and then we went to the synagogue. When we returned the tradition didn't allow us to light the lamp ourselves and so a Turkish child came to light it for us and later to put it out. Now this sounds strange and even a little funny, but we observed it very strictly. On Yom Kippur all the children were very happy, because we were left without anyone to look after us. All the grown-ups were in the synagogue and we did whatever we wanted to. We were also released from school on that day. We, the Jewish children, were rather privileged, because we celebrated both the Jewish and the Christian holidays, that is, we were let out of school on both holidays. We played all day long! Since the day my father died, I have fasted in his honor on every single Yom Kippur, because he died on Yom Kippur.

On Rosh Hashanah our parents didn't always buy us new clothes. Usually they bought us shoes. We cooked traditional dishes - chicken, a cake with walnuts - tishpishti. Another holiday, which was my favorite, was Sukkot. This is the holiday of the harvest. The yard of the synagogue was large and every year we made a tent out of canvas and small boards. We hung different fruit and vegetables

from its ceiling - grapes, apples, pears, peppers, onion, garlic and everything that the Earth and the trees gave us. It was very beautiful! There were benches inside, on which the men sat and they often read the prayers there. Afterwards they treated themselves to some mastika [2](#), bread, goat cheese, yellow cheese and grapes. We, the children, played outside and very often the more naughty boys pricked their fathers' backs from outside with needles and the men scolded us. Now we also make a sukkah in the yard of the synagogue in Sofia, but this time we, the women, also enter it. It was different when I was a child. There was overgrown grass in the yard in the synagogue in Karnobat and after the prayers each child picked some grass and gave it to his or her father. He took it, sprinkled the head of the child with it and said, 'May you grow up like the grass!'

On Chanukkah the Jews in Karnobat always lit candles and sang songs. Usually we made halva [3](#) then. Here, in Sofia and in Western Bulgaria as a whole, the halva is made from flour, while in southeastern Bulgaria it is made from semolina.

Our house was very comfortable, with one floor. My father didn't build it himself, but bought it when he went to live in Karnobat. We had a large glazed foyer, three rooms, a summer and winter kitchen.

There was always a big baking tin full of fruit on the table in the kitchen. We had a big garden where we grew fruit trees - cherries, morello cherries, peaches and many other things. This garden was the pride of my father. We all worked in it and we liked being in it very much, even if there was a lot of work to be done there. I remember many summer evenings when all the family was gathered at the table under the vine; there was laughter and there were games. There was also a big well in the yard, because there was no water in Karnobat at that time - only later the problem was fixed with water being supplied from the Kamchiya dam. We carried drinking water from a water fountain in the center of the town and this was the most tiresome work that I sometimes had to do.

When I was young, a Turkish girl, Mirem, looked after me. I learned Turkish from her, which I spoke very well, although later I forgot it. She learned Ladino from us - the language in which we spoke at home. My father sheltered her, because she was an orphan and in turn she looked after me, although she was only ten years old. She was like a sister to me and we were together the whole day. My father had even promised her that he would introduce her to some boy and if she liked him, he would marry her and prepare a dowry for her. But one day she eloped.

We knew many Turkish people in Karnobat, because they lived near us. I remember a Turkish woman who was a famous fortune-teller. She was really a phenomenon and was also right many times. My sister-in-law Liza, Sabetay's wife, had a wonderful ring with a diamond but she had the habit of taking it off when washing her hands. But once when she took it off, she forgot it and the ring disappeared. They blamed a Turkish girl, who helped them with the household work, but she denied it. Then my sister went to the fortune-teller and she was told that the ring was in the house and some day they would find it. And they really did find it one day when the roof broke down. When they climbed up to fix it, they found the ring there. It was impossible for a person to throw it up there, because although the house had only one floor it was very tall. We decided that maybe some magpie had stolen it, attracted by its glow. That same woman also told my brother where to find an overcoat he was looking for. She told him that it was a beige coat and that he would find it buried under a lot of things. And this is exactly what happened!

My mother did almost all the household work at home. My sisters, of course, helped her, but most of them were married and lived elsewhere with their families. They didn't call her 'mom', because they were almost the same age as her, so they called her by her name. When she came to my father's house, she couldn't cook at all and my sisters laughed at her, but gradually she became an excellent cook. My sons still remember her dishes. I learned many Jewish dishes from her and passed many Sephardi recipes to my daughter-in-law. Some of them are: 'apio' - an hors d'oeuvre of celery and carrots, 'agristada' - white chicken meat with white sauce and gumbo, 'albondigas con merengena' - veal meatballs with eggplant, 'pastel' - meat pastry, 'borecas' - cheese pastries, 'boicos' - cheese crackers, 'bormoelos' - made of matzah for Pesach, 'roskitas de alhashu' - sweets, 'the ears of Haman' - sweets for Purim, 'leche papeada' - condensed milk, 'friticas de prasa' - leek balls. We ate only kosher in my father's house. The chazzan slaughtered the animals. We all did the shopping from the Hali [covered market]. Everyone had their favorite butcher, from whom they bought meat and the kosher meat was marked with a purple seal. Most shops in Karnobat were small grocer's shops. Meat was sold in the Hali. There were also shops for dairy products, where you could buy yogurt that was so thick that it had to be cut with a knife and everyone went there with a baking dish to put it in.

### My school years

When I was seven years old and it was time for me to go to school, they enrolled me in the Jewish school in the town. There was one class in each grade - from first to fourth grade. We studied in two rooms, two classes in a room. We were around ten children in a class, the boys and the girls studied together, but in high school the boys studied separately from the girls. While the teacher taught one of the classes, the other students did written exercises. Our teacher was a young woman of Jewish origin from Kazanlak. Several years later, I don't remember when exactly, the school was closed because there weren't enough children there. This was also the time when the laws against us were adopted [see Law for the Protection of the Nation] [4](#). All of us, the children who had studied in that school, had excellent marks later in high school. I remember many of my friends then - Sarah Konfino, Nora Konfino, who was my 'milk sister', because my mother suckled her too; Rashelina, Mari Behar, Benji, Miko and many others. Both the girls and the boys played together. We, the girls, played boys' games too. My father would often scold me for that.

In the winter we went sledding and I put on baggy trousers, so that I wouldn't have to wear a skirt - all the girls wore skirts then. We often organized something like 'evening parties' in the schoolyard and I played folk dances until late with my Jewish friends and with my Bulgarian friends too when I was in high school. I know all kinds of Bulgarian folk dances and I love them very much. We also organized plays in an improvised theatre. Once we acted out some script in which the beloved of a young man was shot and was all covered in blood. The man was carrying her in his hands and cursing the murderer. But since I, in the role of the woman, was all covered with red paint, the older women who knew me thought that something bad had happened to me and started crying out loud and lamenting my death: 'Negra dea de Matika la matoron. Esta entera en sangre.' [In Ladino: Poor Matika, she is dead. She is all covered in blood.] And I was saying to them, 'Keep quiet, I'm alright' and couldn't stop laughing. So the play was a comedy for some and a tragedy for others. I also very much loved the celebrations of 24th May [5](#), when we played Bulgarian folk dances on the square until late.

During the holidays we often went to Bankya with Liza, the wife of my brother Sabetay. She went there to have her sick heart treated. I mostly loved the weekends when we went to Bourgas [a port town at the Black Sea coast]. We caught the train which passed through Karnobat at 6am and in an hour we were in Bourgas. It's a very nice town, where we used to go sunbathing. We spent the whole day there and we returned with the last train. Sometimes during the holidays I also went to Sofia to visit my maternal grandmother Ester, who I loved very much, because she indulged my every whim. She lived with her son Jacques in the Krasna Poliana living estate. She was a very lean and small woman with light blue eyes. Her husband, my mother's father, left for Palestine and never returned. We never received any news from him and we don't know what happened to him. My mother, who was the oldest child, had to work to support the family. There was a rumor going around that my grandfather married an Arab woman in Palestine, but we never found out if it was true. I don't know why he left. Since then my grandmother lived at my uncle's home in Sofia. Grandma Ester died in 1942.

My happy and easygoing childhood ended on the day when my father died. He had developed diabetes and after a long and painful battle with it, died of a shock to his brain. I was very close to him and mourned his death deeply. I was only 15 years old and I was left without the man who always protected me. Then my brother Sabetay took up that role. He wanted to send me to a tailoring school. There was no high school in Karnobat then and I had to go to study in Bourgas or in Sliven or in Kotel. However, I stood up against my brother's decision to become a seamstress.

I applied to the high school in Bourgas, but all the classes were already full and I had to go to a high school in Kotel. I gathered my luggage and went there. I was very scared and disappointed when I saw my classmates, because they were children expelled from other schools in Bulgaria and I soon found out that I wouldn't be able to learn much. I wanted to go home very much. Fortunately, soon after that I learned that a high school had been opened in Karnobat and without any hesitation I returned to my hometown. I was the only Jew in the class, but I became friends with the other children very quickly. We wore uniforms, black overalls, white collars or black skirts and white shirts and berets. We also had a number on the sleeve. Even nowadays I keep in touch with some of my high school friends. We were a very united class.

My favorite classes were Bulgarian and French. I had problems only in zoology, or to be more precise, with the zoology teacher. Apparently, he didn't like Jews, because he often insulted me and gave me bad grades. My homeroom teacher advised me to request to be examined in zoology by a commission at the end of the year. In this way I got an excellent grade. The other teachers were very nice and we felt very close to them. Until some years ago one of my teachers was still alive and we telephoned each other from time to time. Even nowadays my friend Vaska and I keep in touch through letters.

At that time I was also a member of Hashomer Hatzair [6](#), the Jewish youth organization. We spoke only in Hebrew during our meetings and I learned the language there. We often went to a hut near Karnobat, where we spent some days playing and having fun. We often played the following game: We had to find an object that had been hidden by someone. The person who hid it directed us by giving us hints, which we tried to figure out. I learned the Morse code then. I suppose that our games were similar to those of the present-day scout organizations.

When I was 19 years old, I graduated from high school and was appointed a teacher in the Jewish elementary school in Karnobat. I taught four classes and ran from room to room. It wasn't easy, but it was very pleasant. However, I didn't teach for long. The school was closed, because there were too few children. I no longer had a job and I realized that there was nothing more for me to do in Karnobat. I decided to go to Sofia and to continue with my studies. I rented an apartment there with the money my mother had put aside for me and enrolled in a six-month course in accounting and typewriting. After I finished it, I started looking for a job by searching the ads in the newspaper. I was turned down in four or five places and realized that it wouldn't be easy for me to find a job. The war [WWII] was about to start and when the employers heard my name they sent me away because of my Jewish origin. I worked for a while in a pharmaceutical laboratory, where I was appointed by my brother Jacque's father-in-law. I lived in Sofia for a few months more, but when the laws against the Jews were adopted as part of the Law for the Protection of the Nation, I realized that it would be better if I was closer to home, and I returned to Karnobat.

The times were very troubled then. People were wondering whether we would be sent to work in Poland. My mother had sewn rucksacks for each of us, so that we could put the most necessary things in them if we had to leave. Some months after that I met my future husband. I met him by accident in Karnobat. He was working in a neighboring village and a mutual friend introduced us. We got engaged three days after we were introduced to each other. He charmed me with his sense of humor, his intellect and his interesting stories about his family and his life.

## **My husband**

My husband, Salvator Marko Israel, was born on 2nd April 1908 in Plovdiv in the family of the respected merchant Marko Israel and the Hungarian Sephardi Jew [Z](#) Leontin Demayo, who had lived in Budapest and Vienna before the marriage. They met in Vienna on one of Marko's business trips, married and Leontin came to Bulgaria.

My husband had five sisters - Rashel, Sarika, Rene, Elizabeth and Hanika, who died very young. The others went to live in Israel after the war and later Elizabeth moved to the USA with her husband, who was a German Jew. Their children Kamea and Mickey also live there. I didn't meet my mother-in-law Leontin, because she died young, but I know that my husband was very attached to her. She was very nice, respected and beautiful woman. I know from my husband that his grandfather, whose name I don't remember, was a very good man. He was very religious and lived some time in Jerusalem, but he returned to Bulgaria, I don't know why. He loved his grandchildren very much. His daughter-in-law Leontin, the mother of my husband, looked after him and tried to please him so much that she often washed his long beard thoroughly.

Rene got married to Iosif Israel, who was a first cousin of hers, the son of her father's brother. Everyone was against their marriage, but they did it at the cost of not having any children, because of the blood relationship between them. My husband's father, Marko Israel, was a very strict man, but he wasn't able to prevent their marriage. When they lived in Bulgaria, Iosif was a very respected lawyer.

After World War II Rene, Iosif and Sarika went to live in Israel. Sarika worked in some kind of ministry but I don't know exactly which. She was very well educated and knew many languages. One year later, after they had moved to Israel, Iosif got paralyzed after a heart attack. Sarika and Rene devoted their lives to look after him. Both sisters and Iosif lived together. Rene had a



pharmacy on the first floor of her house and so she could work and look after Iosif, who was bedridden until the end of his life.

Rashel also went to live in Israel after World War II, in 1948. Rashel's husband is Solomon Perets. They have two daughters, Lunchy and Hanika.

Their family had a wonderful house in the center of Plovdiv, which has been demolished. Salvator went to study in France, Montpellier, and graduated in Paris as a medical doctor. He lived in France for ten years and after he graduated, he became an assistant in the university. Then he had to go back to Bulgaria, because he could not support himself. On his return in 1938, he worked for a while in the state hospital in Plovdiv and then opened his own medical practice where he worked until 1941. That year he was mobilized as a district physician and later as a municipal physician in Karnobat during the war. That is how we met. In 1942 we married in Karnobat.

### **During the war**

During the war [WWII] there were no clothes to be bought in the shops. I was young and wanted to dress as a bride according to the traditions. I borrowed a dress from a friend, and the groom also borrowed a friend's suit. We looked quite funny. Salvator had hemmed the trousers, because they were too long and the bowler hat, which belonged to his father, was also too big for him. Two days before the wedding my brother invited relatives and friends. On the wedding day we left from the house of my sister Ana, which was close to the synagogue and we were accompanied by some Turkish and Roma people from the nearby neighborhood, who knew us. After the ritual in the synagogue we gathered in Sabetay's house. It was summer, June, and we celebrated in the yard. We had a marvelous time.

The next day we went to the village Nevestino where my husband worked as a physician. This was our honeymoon. The people there welcomed us very warmly, but they didn't like me at first. They thought I was ill, because I was very thin and pale and villagers generally think that healthy people should be more plump and ruddy. Gradually, they took to me and loved me very much. We also had a wedding celebration there. There was a Turkish woman who was a very good cook and had prepared two enormous baking tins with baklava and we treated the whole village for the occasion. They gave us a lot of presents. It was a wonderful day, from which I keep some very dear memories. The celebration in the village seemed to me even warmer than that in Karnobat.

My name and my husband's name were changed twice during the war. They wanted to give us names, which sounded different from the Bulgarian ones so that everyone would know that we were Jews. First, on 29th December 1941 I became Meshulam, instead of Meshulamova as I was registered. The second time, on 14th April 1943 I was renamed to Mazaltov Sabetay Meshulam. After the war I regained my real name, Matilda Meshulam Israel [nee Yulzari].

Our life in Nevestino was relatively calm. The village was located at the foot of Stara Planina Mountain. There was a fountain in the center of the village, from which we all collected water. There were no wells in the yards. The streets were covered with gravel and there were no lamps. There was a big school with a yard in the center, in which sometimes the young gathered and danced folk dances. The municipality was in the neighboring village. I remember that once we were invited to the neighboring village, together with our teacher. When it became 9pm, one of the guests stood up and said that my husband and I should leave, in order to keep the curfew. At that

time, in accordance with the Law for the Protection of the Nation, the Jews weren't allowed to go out after 9pm. Then, out of solidarity with us, all the guests left with us. I will never forget this gesture. Such acts kept our spirit up during the hard years, because they convinced us that there were people who sympathized with the Jews and found the laws against us unfair.

My brothers and all Jewish men were sent to labor camps [see forced labor camps in Bulgaria] [8](#) and many people from the capital were interned in 1942 [see Internment of Jews in Bulgaria] [9](#). Even my brother Haim wasn't able to come to our wedding, because he was sent to a labor camp. Some Jews were accommodated in Karnobat. I remember that my sister Ana shared her house in Karnobat with six other families. Three families were living in one of the rooms in Ana's house, hanging sheets from the ceiling to have some privacy. They didn't work and had no money. They had free lunch prepared for them every day. [Editor's note: The Jews interned to small towns throughout Bulgaria usually lived with Bulgarian families, but the authorities in Karnobat decided to accommodate them in Jewish houses, as Karnobat had a higher than average number of Jews.] My husband was also sent to work as a physician in Svishtov [a small town on the Danube]. At first I wasn't allowed to leave with him, but after four months of writing requests to different ministries, they allowed me to accompany him. I didn't feel the humiliating force of the yellow star in Svishtov. The people were very kind to us in Svishtov. We often listened to Radio London at our neighbors' place - the Finance Minister Ivan Stefanov and his wife. Our landlords were also very nice people. I felt absolutely at home there. We lived in Svishtov until 31st December 1942 when my husband was sent to Gorna Oryahovitsa [a small town in central Bulgaria]. We left Svishtov right away.

We arrived in that unfriendly town at nine thirty on the frosty evening, on the eve of the New Year. These were our hardest five months away from home. During the war my husband worked as a physician, replacing various physicians in different towns in Bulgaria, who had been mobilized. My husband's mobilization was civilian. Thus, we were moved to towns where a physician was needed. In every town we found accommodation until we received the next appointment for the next town. But we had to sleep in a hotel, until we found an apartment to rent. On seeing our yellow stars, the hotel managers and landlords in Gorna Oryahovitsa shut their doors in our face. They cursed at us and swore at us. But at last we found a place to spend the night. In the morning we found an apartment to rent; unfortunately the landlord turned out to be an anti-Semite and we had to leave soon. After the end of the war my husband met the hotel manager who refused to let us in the first night, because of our yellow stars. He was in prison, because he had committed many offences during the war and he was ready to fall down on his knees in front of my husband, who was an influential man then, to beg him to save him from prison. Didn't that man have any dignity?

Fortunately, after some time in Gorna Oryahovitsa I met a man by chance, who was also a mobilized Jew. He was a tobacco expert and we went to live in the house of his landlady, an old teacher. The house was on the outskirts of the town. Our landlords were nice people. I remember that we lived on the second floor of the house and to go up we had to climb some wooden stairs. We had only one mattress full of hay and when we turned from side to side, it would rustle noisily. We often went out walking along the road to Arbanasi, a nearby village with a monastery. I didn't go out of town at all, since once a couple of children hit me and threatened me. My landlady did the shopping. I wasn't allowed even to go to the town bath, because I was told that I wouldn't be able to wear my yellow star if I took my clothes off. During those five months I only went out during the evening walks.

In June 1942 we were moved to Strazhitsa [in central Bulgaria], where we lived much more calmly. There we were however harassed by three people, who had united against us - a criminal, who had escaped from a prison in London, the pharmacist and a priest, who rode a motor bicycle. They paid a lot of money to people who hunted partisans and they themselves did everything possible to turn them over to the authorities. When my husband would go to buy something from the chemist's for the clinic, they always confronted him and bothered him without any pretext. Maybe the fact that he was a Jew was enough for them. I advised him to keep silent, because they were just looking for a reason to beat him up.

We were still there when 9th September 1944 [10](#) came around and we were allowed to take off our stars. On 8th September, we waited for the Russian army. On their arrival, they managed to convince the military police force to surrender without a fight. The whole village was at the square. They welcomed the soldiers with fruit and bread. My husband was even mayor of the town for 48 hours. He was a respectable person in Strazhitsa as a doctor who helped the underground antifascist movement between the years 1941-1944. After the antifascists took control he was asked to be the mayor of the town until the official elections could be organized.

During the war my brothers were sent to labor camps and my sisters remained at their homes without any means to earn money. My husband and I observed the Jewish traditions during the war, as far as it was possible during a war. The synagogue in Karnobat was turned into a cattle-shed then.

### **Post-war**

After the war ended, we returned to Karnobat, where my husband worked as head of the district medical center until 1950. Meanwhile, our two sons were born - Marcel, in Plovdiv in 1945 and Michel, in Karnobat in 1948. After Marcel was born, I studied as an assistant pharmacist for two years and right after I graduated, I was appointed to work in the chemist's in Karnobat. In 1950 we moved to Sofia and bought the apartment where my sister lived. My husband started work in the Health Ministry as the director of the epidemic department. He liked his job very much. During the Doctors' Plot [11](#), all Jews in the ministry were fired, Salvator included. This was a very hard blow for him. He started work as a deputy editor-in-charge of the 'Zdraven Front' [Health Front] newspaper. Then he worked in the Social Health department of the ISQMD [Institute for Specialization and Qualification of Medical Doctors]. He became an associate professor in Hebrew studies in the Balkan Studies Institute at the Bulgarian Academy of Science and taught history of medicine. He has more than 500 publications. He created a consulting office for health workers, which still exists today.

In Sofia I started work in the Infectious and Parasitic Diseases Institute as a laboratory assistant, but I had to study more to be eligible for the position, so I studied two years for the necessary qualification. The work was very interesting. We worked in a research lab and ran tests on people from all parts of the country. I very much wanted to study for a university degree, but it was impossible. We already had two children whom I had to look after and we had to pay installments for the apartment, in which I still live today. I worked in the institute as a laboratory assistant until I retired in 1978. In the beginning we had to share the apartment with some other people. It was large, with three rooms, but we were too many people living in it and it wasn't big enough. A family with one child was living in one of the rooms and a woman with tuberculosis in the other. We, the

five of us, including my mother, lived in one room and it was horrible! There was no place to put the beds and we slept on mattresses on the floor. We never felt at home. We lived that way for 13 years - finally, one of the families bought an apartment, the other moved out and we had the whole apartment to ourselves.

After the war ended, our friends were mostly Bulgarians. Although my husband was very busy, we still found some time for our friends. We often went out with Sasha and Vera Popovi. Sasha was a conductor with the Sofia Philharmonic Orchestra. We were also friends with Petko and Jana Drenikovi, who were also musicians, Dr. Konstantinov, Dr. Daskalov - brother of Jana Drenikova, who are also well-known musicians. The Jewish families with which we kept in touch were those of my bosses in the institute, with whom we gradually became friends. They were Dr. Azarya Polikarov and Dr. Roza Cohen - they were both microbiologists. I was also on close terms with my colleagues in the institute.

I mostly regret not moving to Israel. All my relatives and my whole family live there. My mother, who lived with us in Sofia until she died in 1974, also wanted very much to go there, but Salvator believed that his place was here and I couldn't convince him that we would live a better life there. I went there for the first time in 1958 with my younger son. We traveled by the ship 'Georgi Dimitrov' from Varna [the largest port town in Bulgaria]. There was not much fruit in Israel then. My relatives had asked me to bring them some walnuts, almonds, flat sausages. I traveled with four enormous suitcases. There were 120 people aboard the ship. When we arrived in Haifa, I was amazed; I had never expected to see so many people waiting. I was met by my husband's sister Sarika.

I traveled to a lot of towns in Israel then - Rehovot, Ramla, Tel Aviv, Yafo and others. I have traveled to Israel numerous times. When my husband's sisters were alive, I visited them. After that I stayed at the house of my brother Haim. I know Hebrew [Ivrit] well and I feel very comfortable there. I have traveled a lot with my husband; we have been almost everywhere in Europe, we also visited his sister Elizabeth in the USA. She had sent us an invitation and bought us airplane tickets. I often accompanied my husband at conferences on the history of medicine. We also went to Oswiencim [Auschwitz] in Poland, where all the relatives of my husband's mother died.

## **My children**

We tried to educate our children in the spirit of the Jewish traditions. Neither I, nor my husband is religious, but we still chose to observe the traditions. I believe that Jewish traditions are a real treasure to everyone who respects them and observes them, without going to extremes. We celebrated all holidays. Salvator - or Daddy as we all called him, myself included - always read the prayers. We celebrated at home and didn't go to the synagogue. On Sabbath my mother lit the candles and later on I did. My mother cleaned the house on Thursday, cooked on Friday and Saturday was a day for rest. We didn't go to work then.

When the children were little, they loved Tu bi-Shevat very much. I made them purses with various fresh and dry fruits, in which they groped as if they were bottomless and their contents - priceless. Marcel ate everything right away, but Michel preserved his fruits and ate them gradually, until his brother asked him to share them 'like brothers'. Now I make such purses for my granddaughters, who are no longer little children, but are still very happy to receive them. After the death of my husband, Marcel read the prayers. When he was young, in 1975, he went to study in Yeshiva in

Israel for six months, where he learned both Hebrew and many rituals. Our sons learned Ladino. At first Michel refused to speak Ladino, but then they both started speaking it. Unlike my childhood years when many people gathered during the holidays, Salvator and I always celebrated the holidays at home with the children.

After Salvator retired in 1974, he became chairman of the Spiritual Council in the synagogue. He started the process of its restoration. At the Ministry of Culture they told him that they would provide money for the restoration, only if the synagogue was turned into a concert hall. My husband objected and fought very hard to prevent this. In the end, he managed to preserve the original functions of the synagogue. While he held that position, he managed to attract many Jews to the synagogue. All the elderly Jewish men went to the services. He was the first to build a sukkah in its yard on Sukkot. He also used to prepare a short essay explaining the origins of each holiday. He knew the Bible in great detail. This tradition to write a brochure explaining the history of the holiday is still preserved today.

In 1978 my husband received the honorary title 'Honored Doctor' and in 1983 he received the title 'A People's Doctor'. Salvator died on 8th March 1986. He was an exceptional man - well read, wise, with a great sense of humor. He knew seven languages. His mother tongues were Ladino and German; he also spoke Hebrew, French and Russian very well. Now the restoration process is almost completely finished and if he could see it, he would be very happy and proud. We organized a religious funeral for him. There were many people present. First we gathered in the ritual hall, then we buried him in the Jewish cemetery in Sofia. We observed the main traditions - we covered the coffin with a special blanket and my older son Marcel said the prayer. In line with the ritual we served only salty food at the funeral and mastika. At least this is what I remember, because I wasn't myself that day.

Our older son, Marcel, was a very self-willed and silent child. He invested a lot of effort in everything he did and achieved what he set out to do. He read a lot. When he was reading for an exam, we did well not to bother him. My other son, Michel, was very mischievous. He had a lot of poor marks in the first grades, but later he found out what interested him. He also achieved a lot, but more easily than his brother. He took his exams without anyone noticing him studying. Their teachers still remember them. They graduated from School No. 1, which wasn't in the Jewish neighborhood, because there wasn't a Jewish school in Sofia. School No. 1 was a very good school then and was near our home.

As children they quarreled a lot, but now, as adults, they are very good friends and very close to each other. Marcel was so stubborn, that I remember how once he cried for three days because his father didn't allow him to study in a technical school, but wanted to send him to a language high school. Later he sat for an exam to go to study in Germany, he passed the exam and left without even telling us, because his father and I were somewhere abroad at that time. So Marcel graduated as an engineer in Germany. He worked for a while in the Institute for Computing Machinery and then in the Robotics Institute at the Bulgarian Academy of Science. In 1990 he left to work in Spain, in Madrid and he still lives there now. He is not married.

Our other son, Michel, earned a degree in physics, then in biology and now works in the Health Center. He is an associate professor, member of the World Health Organization and teaches medical physics in Sofia University. He has a nice family. He has a wife Sultana, who is not a Jew,

and they have two daughters, Matilda and Leontina. We didn't object to the fact that our daughter-in-law wasn't a Jew. We saw that she was a good girl and they loved each other and have a wonderful family. Our daughter-in-law learned to observe the Jewish traditions together with us. Their older daughter, Matilda has been living in Israel for four years now, which makes me very happy and unfortunately a little worried because of the events taking place there now.

Although our family is small, it is a very moving moment when all the family gathers on Pesach - Marcel comes from Spain and Matilda from Israel. Since Marcel has no children of his own, he is very close to his brother's children and loves them like his own. They are also very attached to him. Both my sons have friends, some of whom are Jews and others who are not.

My only relatives in Bulgaria are the children of Miko (Haim) Israel, the cousin of my husband. He was a teacher of Russian. He has two sons, Berto and Sami. Berto in turn has two sons, Albi and Borko, while Sami has one son, Haim, and both live in the USA. Unfortunately we don't see each other very often, but we do get to meet sometimes during family holidays.

After 1989 life in Bulgaria became very insecure and hard for the young as well as very unfavorable for the retired people. I've never been very interested in politics. This was not true of my husband, however, who was a member of the Communist Party. Before the changes I could afford to travel, to go on holidays, but now it is impossible without the help of my sons and the Jewish organization. Life is very tragic for the old people, who don't receive support or help from anywhere. On the other hand, the events of 1989 [see 10th November 1989] [12](#) gave people the opportunity to be freer and more responsible. Now life in the Jewish community is thriving, while before we were denied of almost everything and we had to invest a lot of efforts and diplomacy in everything we wanted to achieve. Now we receive a lot of financial aid from Jewish organizations and foundations and we have the opportunity to pursue various activities in the Jewish Center, which has been brought back to life.

### **My present-day life**

Nowadays the Jewish community in Bulgaria and especially in Sofia seems to me very united. Every time I go to the Bet Am [13](#), I feel warmth, which cannot be described with words. There is something interesting to do there every day and something to be learned. When I feel well, I always visit the groups teaching Hebrew, Ladino, the health club, 'Golden Age' club and others. In the summer we often go to excursions to different places in Bulgaria. I found many friends in the Jewish home and have a very good time there. My closest friends are Viska Kamhi, Reni Tadjer, Sarah Luna, Mati Asael, Mati Pilosof, but there are many others. Every day we have an organized lunch in the canteen. The food is prepared in the senior Jewish home in Sofia ['Home of the Parent']. The food is kosher and is transported to OJB Shalom [14](#) where we go to eat, paying just a small sum. At noon I go to the Jewish Center, where lunch is organized for the old people. The food there is delicious and I also get to meet my friends. I don't live far from the Jewish Center. There are some Jewish women living in the neighboring apartment blocks with whom I keep in touch.

I live relatively close to the Jewish home and when I feel well I go there. It is very pleasant, because while having lunch, I meet with my best friends. Various actors often come to visit us, especially those performing in a theater called '199', who staged performances for us a couple of times. Twice a week we gather in the mornings in the health club. We do some gymnastics and dance Jewish dances. Sometimes we also dance Bulgarian dances, but I'm no longer young and unfortunately I

cannot dance for long. At the end of each month we celebrate the birthdays of all those who had one during the month. Everybody brings something for a treat and we have a very good time. In the evenings we often go to exhibitions or concerts. They also invite interesting people to hold lectures. We have had the chance to listen to Valeri Petrov [penname of Valeri Nissim Mevorah, one the most renowned contemporary poets of Bulgaria], Angel Vagenshtain [15](#), politicians, musicians, employees in the Israeli Embassy and others.

## Glossary

### **1 Fruitas**

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

### **2 Mastika**

Anise liquor, popular in many places in the Balkans, Anatolia and the Middle East. It is principally the same as Greek Ouzo, Turkish Yeni Raki or Arabic Arak.

### **3 Halva**

A sweet confection of Turkish and Middle Eastern origin and largely enjoyed throughout the Balkans. It is made chiefly of ground sesame seeds and honey.

### **4 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.

### **5 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.

## **6 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.

## **7 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.

## **8 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.

## **9 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.

## **10 9th September 1944**

The day of the communist takeover in Bulgaria. In September 1944 the Soviet Union unexpectedly declared war on Bulgaria. On 9th September 1944 the Fatherland Front, a broad left-wing coalition, deposed the government. Although the communists were in the minority in the Fatherland Front, they were the driving force in forming the coalition, and their position was strengthened by the presence of the Red Army in Bulgaria.

## **11 Doctors' Plot**

The Doctors' Plot was an alleged conspiracy of a group of Moscow doctors to murder leading



government and party officials. In January 1953, the Soviet press reported that nine doctors, six of whom were Jewish, had been arrested and confessed their guilt. As Stalin died in March 1953, the trial never took place. The official paper of the Party, the Pravda, later announced that the charges against the doctors were false and their confessions obtained by torture. This case was one of the worst anti-Semitic incidents during Stalin's reign. In his secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 Khrushchev stated that Stalin wanted to use the Plot to purge the top Soviet leadership.

## **12 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.

## **13 Bet Am**

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

## **14 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.

## **15 Vagenshtain, Angel (1922)**

A classic of Bulgarian cinema. He graduated in cinema dramaturgy from the Russian State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow. Author of some 50 scripts for feature, documentary and animation films, as well as of novels published in Bulgaria, France, Germany, Russia, and the USA. Since 1950 he has worked in Bulgarian and East German cinematography. His 1959 film 'Stars', dedicated to the fate of Jews in WWII, and directed by Konrad Wolf, won the Special Prize of the jury at the 59th Cannes International Film Festival. Among Vagenshtain's most famous films as a scriptwriter are: 'Amendment to the Law for the Defense of the Nation', 'Goya', 'Stars In Her Hair, Tears In Her Eyes', 'Boris I', etc.