

Matilda Ninyo

Matilda Mandil Ninyo

Sofia

Bulgaria

Interviewer: Dimitar Bozhilov

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Matilda Ninyo is a small hospitable lady who lives in a tiny but comfortable place downtown. She likes spending time with her friends and her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She follows the social and political events in Bulgaria with great interest and concern in the media and then she discusses them with her friends and acquaintances. She believes in the good fate and she is optimistic about people and the country. She shares her memories of her parents and relatives with true pleasure.

My father Mandil Levi was born in Karnobat [a small town in eastern Bulgaria close to the Black Sea]. He was a wheat trader. Unfortunately, he died very young, when I was five years old and after that we haven't had many contacts with his relatives, because we left Karnobat, where I was born.

My father had a sister called Rashel, who lived in Karnobat with her three children, a son and two daughters – Zhak, Bela and Fortuna. Just like my mother Rashel was a widow. I have never known her husband, because he had died before I was born and I didn't know his name either. I only remember that we all lived in the same house. Her son Zhak became a wheat trader, just like my father and uncle Aron Levi, while he was still living in Karnobat. When he moved to Plovdiv this business was not very profitable and he shifted to shoe business. My uncle went to live in Plovdiv around the time when I was born so I don't remember seeing him in Karnobat. I think he had left for Karnobat before I was born.

We had closer relationship with my uncle Aron Levi. He was married in Plovdiv. He had a strong feeling for responsibility towards our family and especially towards us, the kids, who were half-orphans. After I started school I used to spend part of the summer holiday in Plovdiv with his family. Apart from that, it was a tradition for him to send us new clothes for Pesach and Rosh Hashanah. I remember that clearly, because it continued till our internment in 1943 [1]. My uncle was a very kind and educated man. He kept a shoe store. His wife – aunt Dina was from Plovdiv and they had two daughters and a son. The eldest son was Zhak and then his sisters Rebeka and Lily were born. Unfortunately, Zhak who was a brilliant schoolboy, entered some progressive [i.e. leftist] anti-Fascist circles and was killed as a partisan of the 'Anton Ivanov' squad at the age of 17. [Guerilla squad 'Anton Ivanov' was formed up in October 1942 in the area Longurliy, Batak Mountain, Western Rhodopes through the merger between the guerilla forces active in Batak and the nearby Krichim. The squad operated in a region between the Northern Rhodopes, the banks of the Maritsa River, and the Chaya and Chepinska River. It consisted of five groups with separate areas of operations. In September 1943, the squad, that had attracted many new members, underwent reorganization. On 22th February 1944 the squad's campsite was detected by the

authorities and battles with the governmental forces began. The squad was busted on 1st March in the Suhoto Dere area in Batak Mountain and many partisans died.]. Now there is a memorial plaque in Plovdiv of the killed partisans and his name is engraved there. Rebeka and Lily are younger than me and now they live in Israel. Generally, my uncle's family was very conservative. My uncle was the one earning money for the family, while his wife was taking care of the household.

My maternal grandmother was Mazal Levi and she lived with my uncle Aron in Plovdiv. She could speak only Ladino [2]. She used to wear shamia [from the Turkish word 'şame': kerchief] and she was always dressed in black because she was a widow. My grandfather had died in Karnobat long before I was born, so I don't know what his occupation was. My grandmother used to wear the usual for the old people by that time, long black skirts with a blouse and a jacket. She was a woman of fair complexion with beautiful blue eyes. Sometimes, my cousins and I used to tease her saying things in Bulgarian that we knew she couldn't understand. Her reaction was always very interesting. She used to tell us to stop in Ladino. By that time, we had already become students and had learnt a lot of new things, which were far different from our family traditions and habits. My grandmother was not able to understand us, but she could accept it. My uncle's family moved to Israel in 1949 and my grandmother went with them. One of my cousins became a bank official and the other one was a housewife. Aunt Dina got a mental disease after her son Zhak died. After their departure, I had no contact with them for a long period of time. I managed to meet with them during my first visit to Israel in 1995. By that time, my uncle and aunt had gone very old and my grandmother was dead. My cousins told me she couldn't adapt to the new environment. She couldn't understand the language and she couldn't stand the different climate. The younger cousin Lily graduated from the high school in Tel Aviv and then she worked at the accounting department of the university in the same city. She was very eager to learn new things and she has traveled a lot round the world. The other cousin of mine, Rebeka, graduated from the same high school in Tel Aviv, but her husband had a successful career at one of the local banks, so he didn't want her to work. Practically, all what she's been engaged in was the housework. She has two children and grandchildren.

Before my father died he and his brother Aron took care of their sister Rashel. This was very typical of the Jewish families, especially in this period. It was men who did better and it was they who took care of the women. I remember my aunt was very sad that my uncle left Karnobat; it seemed that he was a great help for her family. When I visited them in 1946, Zhak was already a grown man and he was already married. It was he who took care of the family. All of them moved to Israel in 1949. Unfortunately, I haven't been in touch with them ever since.

Our house in Karnobat was a very big one, with two storeys. As far as I know, it was built by my grandfather Yako Levi. My father was born there. This is the picture I recall: my father sitting on the top of a ladder, trimming the grape vine in the yard. There were many Jewish people in Karnobat and my family was in touch mainly with them. In Karnobat we had the custom to get together on holidays not only with relatives but also with the closest family friends. For example, our frequent guests were widowed and single persons; those who didn't have where to go for the holiday. It was considered a great sin if you didn't share your Pesach holiday with anyone. We would even leave the door open on this day, so the lonely strangers were welcome to come. We would always have a lot of guests at Pesach. I was very little when we left the town, so I don't remember the ordinary

life of the Jews there. My aunt and her children lived in our house. As a whole, I don't remember much of my father's life, because I was told more about my mother's family.

Since my mother was a widow she celebrated all the Jewish holidays together with her father and brother, who lived in Sofia. Because of that, I believe, those holidays were even more strictly worshiped in Karnobat. The Jews there were far more united in comparison to those in Sofia. There was a synagogue in Karnobat.

My mother Solchi Levi (nee Danon) was born in the town of Burgas. This town was considered superior and far more sophisticated than Karnobat those years. She graduated from the high school in the town of Trigrad [in the Rhodopes Mountain]. There she lived in a boarding-house. All her lessons there were taught in French. She spoke French, Turkish and Greek fluently. She could read books in Spanish. Later when she left for Israel, she learnt Ivrit very quickly.

My parents' first meeting was very interesting. Mom was a beautiful thin tall woman. My brother looked like her. One day she went to a fair in Karnobat. This fair must have been arranged for showing the cattle and it must have taken place once a year. As far as I know, she went there with a friend of hers. Karnobat was near Burgas and it was not difficult for them to go there. My mother was not a little girl any more then. She was dressed elegantly, wearing high heels. Accidentally, she tripped on the stone pavement and she broke one of the heels. She got angry, promising herself never to come to the fair in Karnobat again. My father noticed her this very moment and he told himself: 'This woman will be my wife!' Mom was then to get engaged to a German Jew, called Freedman, who was living in Burgas. Dad sent a matchmaker several times asking for her hand. She would refuse every time. Then her father decided to talk to the German and find out more about his intentions. My mother thought it would be very rude if Freedman was treated this way. That is why she took the initiative and told him about the proposal she received from the man from Karnobat, but he did nothing about it. In the mean time my father was persistent in proposing her marriage. Finally, she consented, so did my grandfather. At the end, my mother went back to Karnobat despite the promise she had made. The tradition was the bride's family to give dowry to the groom. It's interesting that my father didn't insist on any dowry from my mother's family.

Mom had four brothers. All in all, there were five children in the family. Her father Pinhas Danon was a tailor. He was famous in Burgas for his work. He earned decently and he had enough money to support his family. Unfortunately, my grandmother Simha Danon, who was a housewife, died at the age of 42. She died quite young and this had negative consequences for the whole family. My grandmother's sister Doretta was of a great support in this moment. She brought up Mom's youngest brother - Israel Danon. Doretta took the little child to live with her. Thanks to my grandfather's good status in Burgas, he was able to provide his children with education. The eldest son Elizer Danon graduated from the high school of trade in Burgas. Now this school is still considered to be very prestigious. After that he became an official in the town's Italian bank. My uncle Elizer died very young. He had an accident and drowned in the sea. Later, his three brothers called after him their first-born sons.

The other brother Albert Danon was a traveling merchant. He married and lived in Plovdiv. I don't know how exactly he happened to live there. His wife was from Plovdiv and her name was Oro. She came from a richer family. He might have met her on one of his journeys when he was selling different goods. He also sold newspapers and magazines. He had two children, a son Eliezer and a

daughter Sima. Uncle Albert's children weren't very fond of studying. He was a traveling merchant and his wife took care of the household. Because of his job, he visited Sofia quite often.

Plovdiv is a place where the Jewish traditions are better kept than in many other towns of the country. I think this is still true nowadays. All the true Jews live there. They all observe strictly the Jewish traditions and they are very united. Their mentality is of people who live in a narrow circle. The assimilation process is inevitable of course, there are mixed marriages and friendships with Bulgarians. However, the people there are different. I think the assimilation process in Sofia is faster. It doesn't mean that those who live here in Sofia are no more Jews. But in comparison with Plovdiv, things here are different, but I just don't know how to put it right.

My mother's third brother is Israel Danon, who also graduated from the same high school of trade in Burgas. He went to Sofia to work as an accountant in a Jewish company for ironware and building materials, called 'Sitovi Bros'. My uncle's wife was Rashel and she came from a wealthy family. Her father was an accountant in a Jewish company for dry cleaning. They had two children - Eliezer and Sonya.

My mother had one more brother - Mishel Danon who left for Palestine in 1933. He was married in Bulgaria. His wife was Elvira. I don't know what his occupation was. I only know he had four children and two of them drowned in the Black Sea. It happened while they were trying to go to Palestine by boat in 1939. [Editor's note: There is an error in the facts. The boat that sank in the Black Sea was called 'Salvador' but the shipwreck took place in December 1940. Some 400 Jews were transported by it. The incident occurred near the Turkish coast. The number of the rescued Jews who were Bulgarian citizens was 72. They were transported back to Bulgaria. The names of the other two boats were 'Rudnichar' and 'Maritsa.'] The other two children managed to reach Palestine. It seems that the children traveled separately, at different times.

My brother Zhak Levi was called after my paternal grandfather Yako. I was named after his wife - Mazal. Usually, the first children in a family were called after the paternal parents, the names of the maternal parents were used only if many children were born in a family - three or four, for example. It's interesting that many families in Israel today observe this tradition.

I was a little girl when my family left Karnobat. I was born in 1928. We moved to Sofia in 1933 or 1934, soon after my father's death. I returned to Karnobat only once when I was still at the high school in Sofia. It was right after our internment to Kyustendil. My aunt Rashel still lives there. We left Karnobat together with my mother's father. Her brother, Israel Danon, was also of a great help for us. When my mother became a widow my grandfather decided to move with us and help earn the family's living. My mother and my grandfather decided that this was the way for them to work together and to help each other. My grandmother Simha died in 1928, which wasn't long before that. My grandfather was left alone and this was one of the reasons for him to come and live with us. I don't know if my father had left any savings. But several years after he died my mother didn't work so I suppose she had some money. After that she started working as a tailor. We didn't live in the Jewish quarter in Sofia. I don't know the precise reason, but I suppose my mother didn't like it there. Many poor people lived in the Jewish quarter called Iuchbunar [3]. There was a great poverty in the Jewish quarter. Of course, there were some very nice people who lived there. My maternal grandmother's brothers lived there: Aron and Vitali Bali, as well as their sister Doreta.

We were lucky to have been accommodated in a nice house. We rented a house on Antim I Street. I suppose my uncle Israel Danon had found the place in advance. He was a rich man and he used to help us very much. The house was very nice. Our landlord was Stoyan Kosturkov, who was a famous politician at that time. [Kosturkov, Stoyan (25.11.1866-17.12.1949): a politician and statesman, born in Panagyurishte. He studied law in Geneva and after that worked as a teacher in various Bulgarian towns. He was one of the founders of the Radical Democratic Party and was its secretary from 1906 until 1934, when the party's existence ended. He took part in the editing of the party's newspaper 'Radical', and 'Demokratcheski Pregled' [Democratic Review']. He was a minister in the cabinet of Alexander Malinov (June-November 1918) and after that from November 1918 until October 1919 in the government led by Teodor Teodorov. In the early 1930s he led one of the wings in the party and joined the Narodn Blok [People's Bloc] coalition. When the coalition formed a government in the period between 1931 and 1934, Kosturkov became Minister of the Railways. After 9th September 1944, the Radical Party, led by him, formed a coalition with the communist 'Otechestven Front' [Fatherland Front]. He became Minister of Education in the first communist government in the period from 1945 to 1946.] He was a Member of the Parliament and a chairman of the Radical Democratic Party. He was a very honorable man. He lived alone and he had a housekeeper. The house had a glass antechamber, three rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom. I don't remember the furnishings, because I was quite little at the time, but I suppose there was everything necessary for us. There was a stove in the kitchen. In fact we lived on a whole floor of the house. There was another house in the backyard. There were no other houses in this part of the street - it was only ours there.

We had very good conditions for life in the house. My brother and grandfather shared one room, the second one was for me and my mother and the third one was occupied by my uncle. But he lived with us for a short period. We had a glass-windowed garden room in the house and there was a large entrance corridor with a table and chairs. We also had a summer kitchen in the yard and we rented it out on our own. There were no disagreements with the landlord Stoyan Kosturkov about that. This kitchen was rented by another Jew, who I didn't know. My uncle lived with us for a short time and as soon as he got married he moved to his wife's home on Benkovski Str. However, he kept helping us financially. I used to visit his family and I recall that his house was large and well-furnished.

We have always had a mezuzah on the door. That was the first thing we would do when we moved to a new home. When a close friend wants to give you a mezuzah he comes to put it on the door personally. Usually these are luxurious mezuzahs with a fine decoration.

I started school after we moved to Sofia. I attended a school on Tsar Simeon Str., which was near the central open market of the city. It was called 'Simcha'. It was a secondary school. When I finished it I moved to the high school called 'Antim I'. A year before graduation we were interned and I couldn't graduate. I didn't study at a Jewish school, because we didn't live in the Jewish quarter. This school was a far cry from home and no one was able to take me there and then see me back home. It was entirely my mother's decision not to attend the Jewish school.

On holidays we used to get together with my mother's uncles, Aron and Vitali Bali. They were brothers of my maternal grandmother Simha Danon. We visited them quite often. They belonged to the Bali family and they were all epicures. They would always serve many dishes at a richly

decorated table; this was particularly true on holidays.

We always celebrated Pesach at home with my grandfather. Mom would always prepare 'boyos'- special unleavened bread without salt. The table was arranged with white, neatly ironed tissues where the pieces of boyos were put. When we were kids, they used to tie these tissues to our necks as if we were on a long journey to Jerusalem. Another typical dish was fried leek balls and chicken soup. If the family is a big one, for example six people or more it should be prepared from a big hen. The whole hen should be boiled and after that it should be rationed to all the members of the family. There should be no vermicelli in the soup, but only chopped matzah. It has to be mixed with raw eggs. My mother used to buy a live hen from the market and then she took it to the shochet at the synagogue to have it killed. There was a special place in the yard of the central synagogue for this kind of things. We never ate pork at home.

My mother used to boil in water all the pottery in the house before Pesach. There were Jewish families, which had special dishware for this holyday and they used it only once a year on Pesach. We didn't have it so my mother used to clean all the pottery until it was all shiny.

At Pesach my grandfather used to read from the Haggadah and we would read passages from the book after him in turns. It was very interesting because we had to read and sing in the same time. Later, when I got married my family used to read the Haggadah only in the first years of our marriage, while we were still living with the parents of my husband.

My grandfather was faithful to the Jewish traditions. He was always present at the synagogue on every holiday. He had a prayer book and a tallit. He was a very kind person. He used to bring large bags full of fruits on the holiday of Frutas [4]. However, we didn't talk with him about anything special, not even religion.

We always had a very rich menu on the holiday of Pesach. One of the compulsory things was the wine, which everyone had to taste. There was a special dish called pastel, which was prepared of thin layers of dough, which were stuffed with meat. The matzah had to be chopped and sprinkled with water so that it could get wet. It was then covered with the seasoned minced meat, which on its turn was covered again with matzah. We used a lot of spices in the meals, especially parsley and pepper. We rarely used mint for example when we cooked beans. We sometimes had meatballs and potatoes. I wouldn't say that our cuisine is very different from the traditional Bulgarian one. Maybe the one dish that truly makes a difference is that we prepare leek balls. We couldn't do without it on holidays like Pesach and Rosh Hashanah. A typical Jewish dish is potato stew. It's interesting that we used to cook beans every Monday. Even when I got married my mother-in-law always cooked beans on Monday. On this day she used to do her laundry, she wanted more time for this task and so she preferred to cook the easiest dish. There is one tradition about the day of Pesach, which I observe until now. We made a dish, called burmoelos [5] and we treated our neighbors with it even if they were Bulgarians. Burmoelos is prepared out of special dough, which firstly needs to be soaked in water. Then it is made into balls, which are fried.

Frutas was a very nice holiday. We had to put seven fruits in a bag. We put inside oranges, dates, tangerines, figs and so on. We used to prepare the same bags for all our close friends, including Bulgarians. We were happy to treat them like that and they were also pleased. In return, our Bulgarian neighbors used to bring home their Easter cake and colored eggs, which they prepared

for Easter.

We would always light candles on the day of Chanukkah. What was typical of this tradition was that the candles had to be lighted by the man in the family. Any other holiday tradition allowed a woman to do this. My family used to observe all the high Jewish holidays. My mother and grandfather didn't eat anything on the day of Yom Kippur, but the kids could have a bite. In the evening the shofar was playing so we used to go to the synagogue. I was told that there was a carnival in the Jewish quarter on the day of Purim, but we didn't do that at home. I knew there was a great celebration in the Jewish quarter in Sofia's Luchbunar, but I had never attended it. Our only visits to this part of the city were when we were guests to Aron and Vitali Bali.

Saturday was the day that we should visit our friends. Sometimes my mother had to work on Sabbath. Every time I went to my friend's house and my mother prepared sweet bread for me to take as a present. In these years it was obligatory to bring presents when you visit somebody at his place. People would never go without a present. Usually, my mother prepared cakes and for the Jewish holidays she made tispishtil. This was baked dough, which was soaked in sugar syrup with walnuts and raisins. When we had guests at home we welcomed them serving jam.

Our family had a very close relationship with grandmother's brothers Aron and Vitali Bali, who were absolute bonvivants. I know that they came from Turkey. There was a kind of proverb in the Jewish quarter about the three so-called 'royal' families. One of them was the Balis, the other one was the Bangos (it was my husband's family name, too) and I can't remember the third one. All these families were known for being bonvivants. Aron worked in a fish store and Vitali had a bakery. Vitali was said to be part of the 'underground world'. The brothers were such an amazing company; they were joyful and lively people who knew how to have fun. The best celebrations were the weddings that took place in the Jewish quarter. There were lots of songs and dancing. My mother was a good singer and she could dance excellently. She knew many Greek songs. Sometimes she sang Bulgarian national songs at home and she could also dance the traditional Bulgarian folk dances. She loved singing and often enjoyed it. Mom insisted that my brother and I should have better education and that we should be raised in a more sophisticated environment. Family friends were only our relatives. Children could have next-door friends.

At the time we lived at Antim I Street we had no problems about the fact we were Jews. Shortly before our internment, however, we already had to wear badges [yellow stars] [6]. I wore a badge while we were living in Kyustendil, where we were interned. However, all my friends were Bulgarian. On the day when I had to leave for Kyustendil, my closest friend from the neighborhood Lily Lazarova came to see me off. She was with her family and they gave us food for the traveling. They were all filled with compassion for us. We were friends as children, later we didn't keep in touch.

We had wonderful relations with the other neighbors, too. Generally, the Jews in Bulgaria have never had major problems. There was one absurd situation at school when there was this so called 'Brannik' organization [7], and Jewish children weren't allowed to participate in it. At first, we didn't know that this kind of organization was against us. So we used to cry, because we didn't understand why we were not accepted as members. There were no other Jews in my class, but I knew there were some at the school. I had very good relationship with all my classmates. My teacher in Bulgarian was Mrs. Tsankova, who was the mother of the famous Bulgarian theater and

film director Vili Tsankov. I will never forget her. In those years, we used the old Bulgarian alphabet. [The Act of 1st July 1921 when Bulgaria introduces simplified spelling upon proposal of a committee led by Linguistics Professor Alexander Teodrov Balan. The writing of 'ь' 'ъ' letters at the end of certain words was cancelled as they were no longer pronounced.] My handwriting was very beautiful and there were lots of exercises on writing and spelling at school. I had difficulty in writing one of the vowels, nevertheless I always had the highest marks in the class. The teacher usually picked me to read aloud my homework in front of the whole class. There were many other good teachers and I never felt discriminated because of my religion.

Until we were forced to move to Kyustendil my family had the support of our relatives. We had that special sense of unity and mutual help. The Balis weren't rich but they always shared everything they had with us. There is one proverb in Ladino: 'The most important thing is the smile on your face; you can deal with the rest.'

Before we left Sofia the whole family used to go on picnics by the riverside outside the city. We took a horse cart and we had a lot of food with us, so it was a great fun. The Balis were the organizers of those little excursions. We could hire the carts with the coachman, it was so enjoyable. We preferred to go to places where we could find fine meadows and water. We never went to the mountains. We did those trips at least once a week during our summer vacation. I remember the carts were very large like a big platform. We used to bring with us tomatoes and cheese for a snack. In those years the streets of Sofia were covered with concrete, so they were clean and smooth. But the streets in the Jewish quarter were dirty and muddy; the toilets were usually outside in the yard. Our family certainly had better than those conditions of life.

There was a Bulgarian family, the Tomovis, who lived on the upper floor of our house in Antim I Street. They were very nice people and they loved us very much. They took care of my brother Zhak and me when we were alone, because my mother worked all day long. She worked from seven o'clock in the morning till nine o'clock in the evening. My grandfather also worked all the day. My brother was three years younger than me, so by the time I was at school the Tomovis took him in their home. He behaved well and never made any troubles. Later he also attended a Bulgarian school. Our neighbors, the Tomovis, were a very important part of our life. They had a store for sewing machines. It was time when people didn't throw anything away, but instead they tried to fix it. Women used to mend the ladders on their stockings themselves. There were even special workshops where one can have either socks or female stockings mended. For example, my mother was very good at resoling socks.

One day Mrs Nadia Tomova called my mother to tell her they had imported a new machine especially designed to mend ladders. She offered Mom to show me how it worked so that I could help them in the store and teach the clients how to use this machine. I could go to work in the store when I was free from school or when I had little homework. They promised to pay me, so my mother agreed. So I went to the store, learnt all the necessary things and started working.

In 1943 I was fifteen years old and I was in the seventh class at school (one year before high-school graduation), when my family was interned. Before we left, our kind neighbors gave us one of those special machines for mending ladders. In fact, this machine turned out to be our salvation in the years of our internment. My family was forced to move to the town of Kyustendil, while the family of my uncle Israel Danon had to go to Stara Zagora. Just before we had to leave my uncle had

given us some money which we locked in tin cans. That was the only way to carry the money secretly. This money was insufficient for the family, though.

At first, we were accommodated in the local Jewish school. After a while, the local Jews came to us and one family invited us to live at their place. That was the family of Baruh Alkalai, who lived in a large, beautiful house. He offered one of the rooms where we could stay. Once again we were lucky to live in a nice house. There was another small building in the backyard, which was meant to be a summer kitchen. There were two more spare rooms, which we were allowed to sleep in. This local family helped my grandfather find a job in a tailor workshop in the town. Although it was forbidden by the law for the interned Jews to work [8], men were frequently hired. I found a job with another sewing workshop. I went to the Bulgarian tailor with my mother and she told him I was able to sew stockings with that special machine. He agreed to have me there and allowed me to take one of the seats in the workshop where I could place my machine. I had to pay a fee for working there on my machine. The Jewish children weren't allowed to go to school so I started working. It was an interesting experience for me, though. There were times when women used to bring six pairs of torn stockings and offered me two of them instead of payment. It was war then and people had no cash.

My mother was an excellent housewife, which helped us survive. She was extremely ingenious. For example, plums were very cheap in Kyustendil. So she prepared jam out of them. She could also make a potato cake. She boiled the potatoes, and then she put them in a tray and spread plum jam on it. She always managed to do something and feed us. She continued to mend socks as well. That was the way we earned our living. I will never forget our kind neighbors from Sofia, who helped us in this ordeal. Along with that, we had left some of our belongings to our landlord in Sofia, Stoyan Kosturkov. He told us to write him where we were accommodated. He wrote us back that he wanted to visit us and bring our stuff as well as some money and food. He was an amazing person. I think after our exile was over my mother went to see him only once and later we never met. Now I have a great desire to find his relatives.

We didn't have many close friends in Kyustendil. Sometimes, I was disturbed by naughty young men in the streets, who were trying to tease me. But it was not because of the fact I was Jewish, just for the sake of joking. Generally, we had no problems with the local people. Near the Alkakai's house there was a bakery. Maybe we didn't have enough space with the Alkalais and my mother talked to the owners of the bakery, who were Bulgarians, and they said we could move to their house. The man from the Bulgarian family was called Simo. He and his wife were very kind to us and they often treated us with muffins. In the house we had a room and a separate summer kitchen. My grandfather had a bed in the kitchen and the other room was for Mom, my brother and me - just next to the bakery. The next-door house belonged to another Bulgarian family and there was another Jewish family living with them. The Jewish children were a brother and a sister, so that girl, Reny, became a friend of mine. Still, our parents weren't close at all. Her family was of a higher establishment. The father had graduated in Germany - he was either an economist or an accountant. They had no baggage, but they had a gramophone and record disks. That was the way I had my first lessons in music.

We didn't keep in touch with the local Jews. I was still very young and my only friends were that girl Reny and Alkalai's son David. He was in contact with people from the Union of Young Workers [9],

so sometimes he asked me to give shelter to his friends, who were hiding from the police. My grandfather was the only one who knew, because those men used to stay with him in the summer kitchen. This was a very risky thing for us to do, because the son of the Bulgarian family was a police agent.

Once we learnt that a young Jewish woman was arrested. So Reny and I walked around the police office to learn something more about her. As soon as the police officers noticed us, we were also arrested. They made us clean the whole police office and then we were set free. I was very scared that they might question me about the men we were hiding at home.

All in all, the time spent in Kyustendil was not so bad. The town was nice and we managed to earn something. Even after 9th September 1944 [10] we stayed there for one more year, when I was back at school to finish it. In the meantime, my uncle Israel Danon returned to Sofia from Stara Zagora. However we decided to stay, because we had no place to live in Sofia. The house we used to live in was hired by another family. Furthermore, my mother had a job in Kyustendil and if we were back to Sofia it could turn difficult for her to find a new one. Nevertheless, one year later we went back to the capital. My uncle found a job for me in the 'Sintovi Bros' company. I was cleaning the rooms in their office. In the evenings I studied at the high school. We renewed the relationship with all our relatives in Sofia, as soon as we came back.

I learnt how to type while I was working for 'Sintovi Bros'. I didn't graduate from the evening school, because there was a rumor that those who graduated it are not accepted in the university. Then my mother gathered all our relatives. She told them I was a good student, but I would not be admitted to university education because I didn't attend a regular high school. She asked them for their support so I could leave the job and move to the regular school to finish the last grade. They all agreed to help and that was the way I completed my high school education.

At the end of the 1940s, when my family was very poor, we received aid from the charity organization 'Joint' [11]. We received clothes, blankets and sheets. I was a high school student at that time. I clearly remember I got a nice pleated skirt with a jacket.

In 1949 Bulgarian Jews were allowed to move to Israel [12]. Most of the people who decided to leave didn't have any special professions. In general, women worked as maidservants. In Israel my mother worked simultaneously at two separate places as a maidservant. She worked until she became 70 years old. She mainly looked after kids. Still she had a good pension afterwards, because the legislation there was very social and people got good social security benefits.

It is interesting that before that, in Bulgaria, my mother met a Russian Jew called Maer, and she married him at the age of 42. They went to Israel and they took my little brother as well. They lived happily for 10 years and then her husband died. Soon she met the German Jew Freedman again and eventually she married him. My mother was unfortunate to outlive all her husbands and my younger brother as well. My brother lived in Bat Yam. He married twice. He had three daughters from his first wife Lea - Silvia, Sarah, and Anat. His second wife gave birth to two boys - Roi and Kvir.

My mother and brother went to Israel with Maer and his son in 1949. At first, they lived in poverty in bungalows. When they left, I had already met my husband. I married him a couple of months

later. There was a tradition for the parents to make sure if their children were going to marry a decent person, so they investigated their children's future husbands or wives and their families. I remember my mother told me once that there was a nice boy who liked me and that she had already checked his family. She said it was a decent one. I married that boy in the same year 1949, soon after my mother had left for Israel.

When we were young we used to gather in the Jewish sport club 'Akoah' every Saturday. It was situated on Opalchenska Street. That was the place where one could meet friends. Stela (Ester), a Jewish friend from the university took me there once and she introduced me to my future husband. Stela lived in the Jewish quarter and that is how she knew my husband and his family. The young people in the club were interested in sports. They went there for training.

I remember I had letters from my relatives in Israel. A couple of years after they moved we were not allowed to visit them, nor could they return. Of course I was very worried if everything was ok about them there. I suffered a lot that I could not have any contact with my mother and brother. This suffering was even greater because my mother-in-law was worried about her elder son. He also had left for Israel together with his wife and child.

My husband, Isak Ninyo, and I had a civil marriage. Our wedding was a humble one with a couple of friends as guests. We lived in the same house with his parents Lenka and Yako for 28 years. My mother-in-law was a very intelligent person and we got along very well. She played a big part in our development as individuals.

My husband's family was a patriarchic one. We lived in the Jewish quarter. They observed all the Jewish traditions. There was a strict hierarchy in the family and we had great respect for each other. My father-in-law was a barber. He worked every day until noon, but we never had lunch before he was home. Along with that, every Friday evening we had a family dinner and my husband and I had to be present by all means. His father used to drink brandy and tell stories about the time he was in the army. Our family was very harmonious and united.

When we got married I was studying chemistry at the university and I was in my third year. My husband was attending the evening technical high school. I received no support from my relatives. At that time, my husband didn't have a job. But my mother-in-law was an amazing woman. She could always give advice and she could point out the best solution for any problem. There were special courses which were very popular at that time, they were called 'rabfak' [Workers' Academy] [12] and they were professional courses taught at high school. My husband graduated from one of those courses and that was how he received a high school certificate. After that he went on studying electrical engineering at the Institute of Machine Electrical Engineering. At first, it was difficult for him to study because he didn't have a good basic knowledge from the high school. Therefore he had to catch up a lot. He had a small scholarship from the Jewish community. It was 200 Bulgarian levs and it was granted only to Jewish students. He also received a special bag and a pair of 'Richter' compasses, because he studied a technical science. I didn't have a job because I was still at the university. The only person from the family to work was my father-in-law, who was a barber. My mother-in-law had had a job before 9th September [1944] when she was a tailor.

When I got my degree from the university I had already given birth to my son. It was a hard time at home because my husband hadn't finished his studies yet and all of us were dependent on the

money that my father-in-law could earn. Every month my mother sent me a small allowance from Israel.

I have been a little bit superstitious ever since I was young, because there were many lovely things that happened to me. I am an optimist and believe that everything will be just fine at the end. I think there is a power that rules everyone's fate. For instance, when I first started looking for a job I relied mainly on the acquaintances I had. There was no success at the beginning. One day, by accident, I met a classmate from the school in Kyustendil. She worked at the human resources department of a Center for ceramics and porcelain research. She told me she could offer me a job there. There was a laboratory so I took the position of a chemist. My task was to make researches in ceramics. At first, my contract was for a limited period because I was supposed to take the place of a person who went abroad for a while. But he didn't come back so I took his place permanently. Later, he decided to return and I was forced to leave. His experience was considered grater than mine because he had worked abroad. Just by a lucky coincidence, one colleague of my husband helped me, so I got the job again after a while.

After 9th September 1944, I have never had any problems related to my origin, regardless of the fact I was the only Jew in the lab. Everybody there did his job well and there was no reason for conflicts.

Later on, this department changed its status and it became an Institute for Glass and Fine Ceramics, part of the Ministry of Light Industry. We moved to another building and I was promoted to a technical assistant. That was the start of my career in science. I took an exam for a science worker. It was around 1960 when I decided to go for higher degree. There were some vacant positions in Czechoslovakia. I was approved for an aspirant in Bratislava.

When I lived in Kyustendil there was an Italian Corps, where one could attend classes in Italian. I finished that course. Later, I studied Italian at the high school again. When I had to take the aspirant's degree, I had to take an additional exam in a foreign language. But there were only exams in English, German and French. So I began studying German - I paid to a teacher. It took me four years to cover the whole Ph.D. course. I was a distant student in Bratislava so I didn't have to be there all the time. I traveled to Bratislava twice a year. My mother-in-law was very supportive so I never worried what was happening at home while I was away.

As part of my thesis I carried out a research of a new bentonyte field, which is a rare kind of clay. It has a vast range of application, especially in producing fine ceramics and porcelain goods. This thesis was of great interest both to the Czechs and the Slovaks. This field was located in Bulgaria. I finished my thesis in Bratislava at the age of 42. Before that I had become a head of department at the Institute. I became a senior scientific worker, second degree. Because of my work, I traveled to many countries. I visited Italy and most of the countries of the Soviet Bloc. I worked as a consultant on production of ceramic materials in Cuba. My knowledge in Ladino helped me a lot in this country. That was why I learnt Spanish very quickly. I studied Spanish for four semesters at the University of Havana. I received a certificate, which allows me to teach the language.

I went to Cuba in 1974 after I had undergone a serious operation. My doctor said that going there was the best thing for me, because I needed to travel and change my lifestyle. I discussed that issue with my husband and we decided that I should go. He joined me one year later. Bulgarian

professionals were much respected in Cuba at that time. We returned to Bulgaria in 1978.

My husband graduated from the Institute of Machine Electrical Engineering. Right after that, he received an invitation to work in the country's Air Forces. He was an engineer there until he retired. He had a successful career. He was promoted to colonel. He had the reputation of a man who initiated many changes and reforms.

We had hard times while both of us were at the university. But soon after that, we graduated and started working – then we could afford to go on holidays twice a year – in the summer and in the winter. We used to go on excursions with our friends. I may not have had the opportunity to travel wherever I wanted like today's young people, but still my husband and I had a beautiful and interesting life.

We even succeed in buying apartments for our children where they could live independently. For me and my generation those were good times, especially having in mind how we started. That was very important. Nowadays there are many young people who cannot cope with the problems and they are afraid of having a family.

We have had a good life and good career realization. My husband had a group of friends that he got on very well with. He was a man of reason. His friendship with some of these guys dated back to the kindergarten. They were all born in 1924 and they were all classmates at the Jewish school. They must have turned 80 now. He regarded them as his family. The last time I was together with my friends was at our wedding, afterwards we didn't keep in touch. I used to see only my husband's friends. They were inseparable. They were away from each other only during the internment. However, I am grateful to my husband because he introduced me to such honorable people. The same was the case with his friends' wives.

We were stricter in keeping the Jewish traditions while my husband's parents were still alive. Before the changes in 1989 [14], I liked to go to the synagogue on the New Year's day. On this day a rabbi from Israel used to come. This man had marvelous voice. Prayers dedicated to Rosh Hashanah contain very nice religious songs.

In the meantime, my children became grown-ups. They both graduated from the University of Economics. My son Zhak Ninyo got a degree in foreign trade. He finished a course in marketing organized by the Ministry of Foreign Trade. He graduated from the English language school in the years when this high school was newly founded. All his teachers were British. Presently, he works with a French company here in Bulgaria. My daughter, Silvia Ninyo, also graduated from the University of Economics. Her professional choice was determined by a chance. She wanted very much to study journalism and Bulgarian literature. One day I met a relative who worked for the national radio. I met him in the street right in front of the place where we lived. He came with me upstairs and told my daughter that she should go for a degree at the University of Economics. That was how she got a diploma in political economy with a profile of sociology.

Both my children are married to Bulgarians. Firstly, my son was engaged to a girl, who couldn't get used to the close relationships that we have in our family. So they split up. My mother-in-law was very ill at the time my husband and I were in Cuba. My son didn't want to leave his grandmother in a condition like that, so that was the reason for his girlfriend to leave him. Later he married to a

Bulgarian girl, Branimira. But they got divorced. They have a son Isak. It is interesting that my father and his brother Aron were wheat traders. Now my son is engaged in the same business. My daughter's husband's name is Tsvetan. They have a daughter, Maya.

I can say that my mother's family was a rich one. But after the death of my father and later, when my grandfather died, I think my family got poorer. Thanks to the changes in the country that took place in 1944, my husband and I managed to build good careers.

It is true that not everything was right in the period of communism, which was the reason for this regime to collapse. I agree that there were a lot of unacceptable things. For example, I worked for a state-owned institute. It happened that some employees would come to work drunken. There was no legal requirement for them to be fined. Besides, there were people who were hired only because they had influential friends. I think those examples were applicable only to some extent. In my field of expertise it wasn't possible to hire someone who was not a professional, because a non-expert simply wouldn't manage with the job.

There used to be many nice holiday hostels. There were companies and factories that were ruined when the new regime kicked off, so that they could be sold out for next to nothing. It is a different story when you improve the old things, rather than simply destroy them. The corruption in the period before 1989 was not so high as it is now.

It is very difficult for me to assess the change of the political course in the country after 1989. I think that people here became very poor all of a sudden, which was a cruel thing to happen. For the sake of having beautiful packages of the goods we buy, many people suffer now. I have a lot of close friends who live in poverty now. I can't tell what the advantages of the changes are. Many people consider this new period good, because they can have more freedom. But I can't understand the freedom of being poor and hungry.

For several years I dedicated all my time to my husband who was ill. He died in 2003. Now I live alone and I often meet with my friends who are both Bulgarians and Jews. I also keep in touch with my husband's friends from the Jewish school.

My family and my children are celebrating both the Jewish holydays and the Christian ones. We prepare both typical Bulgarian Easter cakes along with the burmoelos. I am very happy with my children and grandchildren and I have recently got two grand-grandchildren, too. I rarely go to the synagogue and the Jewish center [Bet Am] [15].

Translated by Alexander Manuiloff

Glossary

[1] 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.

[2] Ladino: also known as Judeo-Spanish, it is the spoken and written Hispanic language of Jews of Spanish and Portuguese 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.

[3] Iuchbunar: The poorest residential district in Sofia; the word is of Turkish origin and means 'the three wells'.

[4] Fruitas: The popular name of the Tu bi-Shevat festival among the Bulgarian Jews.

[5] Burmoelos (or burmolikos, burlikus): A sweetmeat made from matzah, typical for Pesach. First, the matzah is put into water, then squashed and mixed with eggs. Balls are made from the mixture, they are fried and the result is something like donuts.

[6] 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.

[7] 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.

[8] 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.

[9] 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.

[10] 9th September 1944: The day of the communist takeover in Bulgaria. In September 1944 the Soviet Union declared war on Bulgaria. On 9th September 1944 the Fatherland Front, a broad left-wing coalition, deposed the government. Although the communists were in the minority in the Fatherland Front, they were the driving force in forming the coalition, and their position was strengthened by the presence of the Red Army in Bulgaria.

[11] 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.

[12] 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.

[13] Workers' Academy: In socialist times Workers' Schools were organized throughout the entire Eastern Block. Modes of instruction included both evening and correspondence classes and all educational levels were served – from elementary school to higher education.

[14] 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.

[15] Bet Am: The Jewish center in Sofia today, housing all Jewish organizations.