

# Margarita Kohen

Margarita Yakova Kohen (nee Selanikyo)

Plovdiv

Bulgaria

Interviewer: Svetlana Avdala

Date of interview: April 1996

Margarita can most precisely be described as a kind person. While talking to her, a person feels eager to touch her, to caress her. If you look at the pictures carefully, you'll notice her seducing buxom forms, chubby cheeks which still look the same on her face. When she was young she was wooed a lot – she had received tens of letters from young men who were in love with her. Today, in spite of her being ill and despite the fact that she is ninety years old, she is constantly visited by people who look for her company... And for that there is a reason much more serious. Margarita isn't selfish. She doesn't place herself or her sufferings into the center of the world – that was the case in the past and that is the case now, more than ever. The twists of fortune hadn't changed her for the worse. She is looking at you docilely, wisely, understandingly. Sclerosis has been merciful to her brain, but age is already gnawing at her flesh. When I was calling on the phone to make clarifications, she, no matter how difficult the previous night had been, was always patient enough to tell stories and to make matters clear. She never showed irritation or impatience.

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### **Family Background**

My name is Margarita Yakova Kohen, nee Selanikyo. I was born on 12th April 1917 in the town of Gorna Dzhumaya [present-day Blagoevgrad, southwestern Bulgaria]. I live in Plovdiv [1](#). My husband's name is Shemuel Samuil Kohen (1906 – 1988). We have two children – Samuil (1940) and Solomon (1950).

I have finished a secondary school and have worked as an assistant dental mechanic, librarian, receptionist in hospital. My mother tongue is Spaniol [Ladino]. I have a brother Bouko (1912 – 1948) and a sister – Matilda Albalakh (nee Selanikyo). I am an orphan. My father Yakuti Liyachi Selanikyo (1885 – 1917) died during the Second Balkan War [2](#) in a military hospital due to pneumonia.

I am a Sephardi Jew [3](#) both on mother's and on father's side. My maiden name Selanikyo shows that my father's kin came from Solun [Salonika]. In Spanish Solun was called Selanik and that's

why the people who were from the town were called selanikis – the people from Solun. This is the etymology of my surname.

My mother's maiden name is Kohen. I don't know where her ancestors came from but I want to tell you that the people from her kin were very dark-skinned and black-eyed. That was what my mother looked like and her brothers and sisters too. They looked like Jews from Yemen and my uncle Eshua even looked like a black man.

I don't remember my father Yakuti Liyachi Selanikyo because when he died I was six months old but his mother, my granny Ouroucha's complexion was a little fairer so we the children – her grandchildren – I, my brother and my sister – were dark-skinned, but not that much.

In Gorna Dzhumaya, where I was born, I lived until the age of eight. Afterwards I went to study at a school in Sofia and lived in an orphanage there. Later, my family moved to Plovdiv and I've been living in that town since then.

Now, when I come to think of it, Gorna Dzhumaya from my childhood was a big village – houses with gardens. In most houses the toilets and the fountains were outside, in the gardens. The streets were paved or not paved at all. In most of the houses gas lamps were used. The most important natural site, which I remember even now, was the river. [The name of the river is the Blagoevgradska Bistritsa]. Not long ago, three years ago, I visited Gorna Dzhumaya and expected to hear the babble of the river, an invariable part of the background noises, but the noises of the town were completely different. I wrote a letter to Israel, to tell them [i.e. her relatives there] about my visit. I told them that neither the hill was the same, nor the babble of the river... And you know, in those times we were even able to understand when the river was swelling – all the ducks, which were swimming in it, started quacking and we immediately moved away from the banks. That happened because the water was coming from the mounts in the Rila Mountain with great force. [Rila National Park – highest mount – Mousala – altitude of 2925m, lowest point – Blagoevgrad – altitude of 800m] It was even said that once the water dragged a house with a mother and a baby inside. The mother died but the baby survived... We used to spend our time in the garden, or in the streets all the time and along the river. Yes, the river – there we were playing different games, leaping from stone to stone... Good fun... great pleasure...

Both my mother's kin and my father's kin used to have their own houses in Gorna Dzhumaya. Initially all my mother's kin Kohen – my great-grandfather, great-grandmother, my grandparents and their children together with a servant, my mother's brothers and sisters were living in a big house belonging to a Turkish administrator in the past. The house was at the foot of the Gornodzhumaisky Hill, near the bridge and the trade center. It was surrounded by a small garden in which there was a fountain and a plum tree. It was a two-storey house. There were also some cellars. On the first floor there were three rooms with a closet and a parlor. On the second floor there were two smaller rooms and a very big parlor with nine windows. There were two entrances to the house – one of them central, the other one leading to the hill and that's why a lot of revolutionaries, Macedonian rebels, 'komiti' [4](#) used to hide in the house of my grandfather and great-grandfather. I recall there was a tiny room, something like a stock room. And when we were trying to go there, granny would chase us away, so that we wouldn't hear a noise and betray somebody. Later my mother told me that Todor Alexandrov [5](#) used to hide there but I haven't seen him personally. I remember that the house was richly furnished – there were a lot of window sofas and a gramophone that belonged to my aunts.

Opposite that former Turkish house lived my father's kin - Selanikyo. My parents saw each other and met - being neighbors. Later, the Selanikyo family built a new house - in the center of Gorna Dzhumaya - opposite the military club in the town - near Macedonia Square and moved to live there. The Kohen family also built a new house, surrounded by a big garden of four decares. The house was next to the railway station. In the garden there was another small house in which the four of us used to live - I, my mother, my brother and sister. I recall that in the garden there was a tobacco storeroom, mulberry trees - white and black, a nice vegetable and flower garden. In our house, the small house, we used to have hens. Yes, mum was looking after hens and even in Plovdiv she used to have hens in a house which had a cellar. Whereas my grandmothers were not used to look after any animals in their houses - neither the one, nor the other.

Before that, until I turned five, my mother, brother, sister and I lived in a place that belonged to the state which my mother received being the widow of a soldier who had died in the Second Balkan War. It was near the mosque and the spa, next to the Turkish quarter and after that we started living with the Kohen family because it was impossible for my mother to take care of three children on her own.

My mother's family - Kohen - was very religious and wealthy. I remember my maternal great-grandfather. His name was Bentsion Kohen and he was one of the honorary citizens of the community in Gorna Dzhumaya. He was the chairman of the Israelite Spiritual Council. He was a 'sarafin' by profession [a merchant of securities; a stock-broker]. He used to have a black beard and was constantly playing with some coins in his hand - he was tossing them so that everybody would know what his job was and would go to use his services. And everybody in the town knew him and called him grandpa Bentsion. My great-grandmother's name was Dounoucha. She used to give birth every seven years, which was something rare at the time [the practice at the time was to have children every two or three years and to have a big family]. That's why she had only three children - grandpa Bokhor, his sister Reyna and his brother Haim.

My maternal grandfather's name was Bokhor Kohen (1871 - 1923). He had studied at Alliance Francaise [6](#) and was a merchant, money-exchanger, shareholder at 'Pirin' Mines by profession. He used to deal with dairy products and skins. He used to export and sell them in Greece, in Salonika. As a man who had finished the Alliance in the town of Samokov he was well-educated and showed enterprise in his work. He used to even have shares at 'Pirin' Mines. My grandpa, my mother's father, was wealthy, from a wealthy family, they were far from poor. I don't know how my grandparents had met, who engaged them and how and why they got married. They had thirteen children out of which nine survived - three sons and six daughters - Bouka, Ester, Victoria, Roza, Matilda, Rebeka. The three sons had names from the Bible - Mois or Moshe, Eshua ...and Yakov/Zhak, which is another proof that the family was very religious. Mum was the first-born child - the oldest of them all and that's why her name was Bouka - Bekhora, which means 'First'. Grandpa was a very religious man. Until recently I was keeping here some books which my mother had given to my father on the day of their wedding. They were brought to her by her father - my grandfather and they were bought during his commercial trips. They were very beautifully decorated with metal and ivory. They were in Ivrit about the Jewish holidays - Haggadah for Pesach, for Rosh Hashanah and for [Yom] Kippur. Later I gave them to my grandchildren. I also had a bible in Spaniol and Ivrit. It was very old - from about 1870. It was bought in Vienna probably by my grandfather again. And additionally it served my mother as a textbook in Spaniol.

Grandpa Bokhor was an intelligent man, he was thinking about the future and was quite practical, he was in pace with the times. He realized that every man and every woman should have a vocation. He sent my mother to Dupnitsa [in southwest Bulgaria, 49 km from Sofia], beyond the border. The border was in Kocherinovo village and Boboshevo village. Dupnitsa was in Bulgaria whereas Blagoevgrad or Gorna Dzhumaya was still within the Ottoman Empire [Status of Macedonia] [7](#) and grandpa sent her to Dupnitsa to learn sewing. The second and the third daughters were sent to learn knitting, the fourth one became an embroider and he bought her an embroidery machine; the fifth one became a seamstress too; the sixth one – she even had a secondary education – learned to make fillet-works... the fashionable networks which were becoming popular everywhere. I mean that all the daughters had learned a craft. And not all of them, as he used to say, to stay only with a bracelet in hand. But he gave his children not only these crafts, but education as well. My mother was the oldest and she remained illiterate but with time each one of the children was getting a higher and higher degree of education. Ester and Victoria had primary education, Roza and Eshua – junior high school education, that means a finished third grade and the youngest even received high school education. In that way, depending on the times and their age, the education was better and better.

My maternal grandmother's name was Tamar Kohen (? - 1950s) My grandma is from Dupnitsa. She had seven sisters and several brothers but I don't know all their names. I remember the names only of the ones who lived in Gorna Dzhumaya. Three sisters got married in Dupnitsa but lived in Gorna Dzhumaya and that's why I remember their names – Masal, Linda and granny Tamara. My granny was religious too and that's how she was bringing up her daughters and grandchildren. I recall something that had turned into a law in the family. Yes, if I tell you what it was you'll be astonished – when the daughters or the granddaughters were in menstruation, granny wouldn't allow us to touch anything in which food was stored – plates, pots, water decanters. We weren't allowed to touch and she said that everything had to be clean enough and we were 'ikoniada' – which means we were not entirely clean at that moment, so touching was banned – that deep was granny's faith. She was not only a believer but a house-proud woman as well. I recall that before Pesach all the cutlery was disinfected through boiling. And not only was she very house-proud but she was a great gourmet, too. She was cooking for sixteen people. My mother's brothers and sisters also lived in the big house of the Kohen family. We were often visited by relatives from Salonika. We were also visited by acquaintances of my grandfather who was selling them dairy products and in those cases cooking was even a greater adventure. My mother told me that when there were guests the children, I mean the younger brothers and sisters – 9 in total, were gathered in a separate room so that they wouldn't make noise. My mother was in charge because she was the oldest. She entertained them by telling them stories. And all the guests used to say – so many children and it is so quiet... Usually the guests were entertained in a parlor on the first floor. A lot of different people were visiting – my grandpa's customers and respected people from the town, I had also visited that home often because mum used to go there often with her three children in order not to be sad and bored all the time – she was a widow after all. In my granny's house kosher was a must. There were separate dishes and plates for the different foods. The animals were slaughtered by a shochet in a special place in the yard of the synagogue.

Apart from her children, husband and wife, mother and father-in-law there were always guests and a servant who helped with the farm work and who was carrying the products from the shops to the house. There were no other servants. I recall that the daughters – mum and her sisters helped

granny. She used to get up at 3 a.m. and at 4 a.m. she would say: 'Come on, daughter, come and help me with kneading this bread, to cook something for the family.' In the evening the whole family used to gather. I remember that grandpa Bokhor used to put me in his lap and asked me to sing. 'Come on, Marga, come on, sing a little...' Grandpa used to always pat me on the head, he used to be very kind with us all. He was more... in the evenings, the evenings, when we were around the table. He was very kind but he was grieving so much about the loss of my father that he caught heart tuberculosis and at the age of fifty-two he left this world.

My paternal grandfather Liyachi Selanikyo (1855 - 1940) was a shoemaker by profession and a merchant of weaving yarn, which he used to sell in a tiny shop. His kin were from Salonika, afterwards they lived in Sofia for a while and then they settled in Gorna Dzhumaya. He was illiterate and very religious. He attended the synagogue regularly and kept all the rituals. I knew that he liked helping my granny with the cooking, he was always around her. I remember he was a good and soft chap.

People from the whole district would come to buy from him. I recall that every morning he took there a can of milk and boiled it and whenever one of his grandchildren entered the shop, he would pour milk on some bread morsels and wouldn't let us go until we had eaten everything. That was a habit of his. He liked to give his grandchildren little balls of sugar. He would even get up in the middle of the night and while we were sleeping would place a little sugar in our mouths while we were still half-asleep: 'Eat sugar, little children!' He was a good and soft chap. He wasn't particularly jovial, he was more serious but otherwise he loved his grandchildren immensely and we used to have very good time together. My granny and grandpa loved each other very much and were living in utmost agreement. Grandpa had been a prisoner of war during the Serbian - Bulgarian War [8](#). When granny found out about that she decided to make them release him. At that time she was pregnant with her second child, she took her son and started for the camp. When the officers saw her they took pity on her and released my grandpa. My granny was a woman of character.

My paternal grandmother Ouroucha (? - 1948) was a healer and a midwife. She assisted at the child-birth of all the women in the town. Not a single woman would give birth without her. She was a healer too, she was able to heal lots of wounds, to fix twisted bones, to treat bruises... Her yard was always full of people from the whole district - from the town of Gotse Delchev or Nevrokop at that time, from the Balkan, from Petrich district, people from all kinds of places were coming for treatment from granny Ouroucha. I don't know who taught her to heal, I can't say that, but she was unique in that respect. She didn't take money from her patients but when they returned after having fully recovered one would bring a chicken, another - eggs, whatever they had... In contrast to the other women granny didn't like housework very much, she preferred to deal with social activities instead.

Although she wasn't sparing her efforts she used to find some time for us as well. That was usually in the evening. Then, in our grandparents' room she used to tell us fairy-tales and sing. And we, her grandchildren, liked to sleep there very much, we would lay mattresses on the floor and she would stand in the middle, imitating the fairy-tale characters while we were gaping at her. She was very artistic - much more open-minded in comparison with my other granny...

I remember one of the tales but I can't quote the name. It was about a little girl who went by the well to take some water and there she was seen by a man with a drum. He stole her and hid her inside the drum but that cunning girl in order to let her parents know that she was in the drum started singing, 'I went into your drum when I was at the fountain and there I left something - two little bracelets, on the fountain I hanged them.' That was a child song. Granny was singing but her brother Bokhor was singing better. It was said my father used to sing a lot of songs. Only Spaniol was spoken in the houses of my grandparents. In Bulgarian, to be more precise - in Macedonian dialect they used to speak with their neighbors and acquaintances.

My first cousin in Israel Zhak Salan also has a wonderful voice and when they moved to Israel the first thing he did was to go to the old people institutions and to sing songs to the old people. You can see how he inherited from his grandmother not only the beautiful voice, but also the attitude towards the people. In return granny Ouroucha was a highly respected woman and when going to the synagogue, as she was living on the opposite bank of the river, until reaching the bridge, she would probably nod to a hundred people. 'Good morning! Good morning!'... Everybody greeted her and she greeted them in return.

As you can see from the locations of the houses of my grandfathers and grandmothers the Jews were living everywhere in Gorna Dzhumaya but most of them were in Varosha. ['Varosh' means a town, a town with a fortress; the word comes from the proto-Bulgarian word 'var' - to keep safe. At the moment the word is used in Bulgaria as a name of the renascence quarters in the center of certain towns]. There was the synagogue, the church, the Jewish quarter, well, that's why we could say that the Jewish quarter was there.

There were Turks, Tsintsars, Wallachians [9](#). Well, now, Tsintsars and Wallachians, I don't know what the difference is - some are of Greek origin, some - of Romanian or not, I don't know exactly but all I can say that we all lived well.

I recall that at granny Ouroucha's new house my cousin Zhak Salan was being circumcised. I was probably four or five at the time. There was everybody present - I had the feeling all the inhabitants of Gorna Dzhumaya were there, Bulgarians included. I remember, for example, that there were those very nice people - grandpa Angel and grandma Sevda who liked children very much and were our neighbors. And as their house was surrounded by a big garden all the children would often play there together. They were wonderful, kind people. The Jews in town were most often merchants and craftsmen, there were also quilt makers and most of all tobacco merchants.

In Gorna Dzhumaya there were mineral springs. I recall that I know a story in relation to that. I was always crying that my sister was going to school and I wasn't yet. And one day, absolutely on purpose, I fell in a puddle out of anger that she wouldn't take me to school with her. I went back home and then mum, since we used to have warm mineral sources in town, in the end nicely 'scalded' me in the fountain, which was in front of our house, so that I would never forget falling in puddles was not a nice thing to do.

I also remember the mineral public baths. It was out of the question to skip bath on Friday. We were all washed, combed, to meet Sabbath. We used to put a white table-cloth for Erevsabbath and everything was according to the tradition. The little glass of rakia [10](#) was a must for the grandparents but the one we are used to drinking - anise-flavored rakia, eggs were always on the table, and meat obligatorily for Erevsabbath and Yom Sabbath [the day of Sabbath]. On the other



days we could eat dishes without meat. Traditions were of utmost importance.

The men – my relatives would go to the synagogue for Sabbath. We, the children would go there only on holidays – for Rosh Hashanah, for weddings... The children went there separately from the adults – with the friends, with the cousins. My sister was two years older than me and my other cousin was her age whereas I and the other Marga – a cousin who was my age, used to go behind the older girls. They didn't like us around very much, the fact that we were tagging at their heels but we were not supposed to go anywhere alone – so we were always running after them.

I remember the synagogue too. The main hall was big according to my childhood memories. It had two floors. The women were always on the upper floor. It was wonderfully lit. The windows, if I remember correctly, were all on one side. There was a nice yard, very neat and tidy and very green. There were some wooden benches on which the old people were sitting and talking in summer. I remember there was a woman who was cleaning the synagogue. Her name was Tamar. She used to live in the building of the school, which was also in the yard of the synagogue.

How solemnly were all the people dressed! – in their best clothes. The women with veils on their heads. They were standing in another place – that's how it is with us... And how the men were singing. Uncle Bokhor was singing, he liked singing very much... And so, I was looking at the women who were dressed up, nicely dressed, one – with an interesting scarf, with all the jewels, with decorations...

On the holidays in Gorna Dzhumaya like Purim, Rosh Hashanah, Pesach we used to gather with my grandparents, more often with the Kohen family. I recall that for Purim we used to sing a lot of songs.

And as I wanted to start school as soon as possible, after grandpa insisted on that, I started school earlier – at first I was only a listener but afterwards I directly enrolled in the second grade. There was no need to repeat the year because I knew more than the students in the first grade. And that's how I spared a year. I remember that the Jewish school, which doesn't exist now, was near the trade center and Varosha, near the hill. The students were distributed into two rooms – the first and second grades in one of them, the third and fourth grades – in the other. We were learning Ivrit and Bulgarian; we were singing lots of songs. I recall some of my teachers – Miss Douba Perets in Ivrit, Mrs Kashtanova in Bulgarian, Mrs Vasilka.

My mother Bouka Bokhor Kohen (1892 – 1961) was a strong woman and an exceptional person, a heroine. She was swarthy with long black hair and big black eyes. She remained a widow at the age of 25 – alone with three children. She didn't have education, she was self-educated and learned alone to write in Spaniol. Later, when we moved to Plovdiv she used to write letters to our relatives in Gorna Dzhumaya in Spaniol. I can't write in Spaniol, I can only speak. My mother could write – I don't know how she had learned. I remember that at home we had an old bible in Spaniol and Ivrit. That was probably mama's textbook. Probably grandpa – her father helped her with her studies. I had even asked her to teach me to write but I memorized only a few phrases with which I could inform her I was OK in my letters. When she remained alone she started sewing in order to make a living. That formed her behavior to a great extent. But for her cleaning was never that crucial as it was later for my mother-in-law. We were cleaning together – my mum and us – the children – once a week. For her the main concern were the children. In order to be near us all the time and look after us she invited all the friends, acquaintances and classmates here at home. She

created good atmosphere and mood. Our house was always full of people. But I can't say she had a lot of friends, she just didn't have enough time, to keep her own contacts, conversations and visits. She was able to sew and to do manual labor but not for the fun of it – she used to scrape a living. She sewed our clothes too. She was cooking very well. I learned recipes from her that I later prepared for my husband.

My grandparents used to help us a lot but the main burden was falling on her. Although she had taken the full responsibility for us she had never put restrictions or forbidden us to do one thing or another so that she could feel not so worried about us. I remember that later in Plovdiv when I wanted to go to conferences in different towns along the Jewish organization lines she never stopped me. She always understood the young people and always gave us wonderful advice but at the same time she was holding the reins with a firm hand. She never cried - just the opposite – she was always ready for action. She wouldn't shed tears in vain... When she saw that we were sad because of something or we were suffering she would take out the playing cards and we started playing. There was a prize for the winner – boza [11](#)...

My brother, as he was a boy and heir of the family, was in danger of being spoilt by our grandparents on both sides. Mum realized that and decided to send him to Sofia in 1922, to an orphanage, a Jewish boarding house that existed there at the time, which I joined three years later.

She separated with him and when he finished his primary education in 1926 or 1927 she made him learn a craft – dental mechanics. And he became an exquisite dental mechanic. Her life wasn't easy because she had to bury not only her husband but her son as well because he died at the age of 35, before getting married and then mum was 56.

## **Growing Up**

Mum wanted to send my sister to a Jewish boarding house as well but she didn't want to and was crying all the time and once while watching her I told mum: 'Mum, if my sister doesn't want to go, send me.' So mum decided to send me to a Jewish boarding house in Sofia. I was 8 years old at the time and had already finished the second grade at the Jewish school in Gorna Dzhumaya...

So I lived in a boarding house in Sofia for four years. The old orphanage was in 'Patriarkh Evtimii' on the way to Aleksandrovska Hospital and then it moved opposite 'Slavia' Playfield, in the building where later ORT [12](#) was situated. We went to classes in the Jewish school, where now is the Rila Hotel. [In the past next to the tiny church 'St. Nikolay' in the center of Sofia was situated the Jewish school but around 1909 it was moved to some other place.] Every morning a teacher would take us there and we walked in lines. I remember some of the teachers from the school. For example, Miss Gertsova who was teaching us History and Geography, Miss Petkova – in Literature and Bulgarian. She was extremely strict but we learned the language well because of that. My favorite subject was Literature. I went there when I was eight and a half years old. I wasn't nostalgic. I was a calm child, much calmer than my sister. I used to be a good student and the teachers were surrounding me with love so I wasn't in need of love and affection.

We had spare-time regime too. We were allowed to go out for an hour or two for a walk, to the shops or to visit relatives, if there were such. That's how I visited my aunt Roza Ninyo. My aunt's family – my father's sister – used to live in Sofia at the time. That was the way to be in a cozy, homely atmosphere for a while.



At the junior high school trips were organized. They used to take us there, for some holiday like 1st May, for example, where now is Ivan Vazov quarter. There were lots of brooks and we would go to the first brook, then – to the second, to the third and so on. I managed to make some friends – with Sara Betsarel, she went to live in Israel later, with Victor Mandil.

While at the boarding school and the orphanage I managed to attend an anniversary, the 70-year anniversary of Ekaterina Karavelova [13](#), the wife of Petko Karavelov [14](#). I was supposed to give her a bunch of flowers on behalf of the boarding house. I moved closer to her and I was already on the stage I looked at her face and she was only blinking, blinking, blinking... I saw something I wasn't supposed to see. And what do you think that was – she was blind. She had had a lot of worries with her two daughters. You're already familiar with the tragedy of Lora Karavelova – Yavorov's wife [she committed suicide in 1913; the other daughter Viola Karavelova was married to the famous journalist and writer of Jewish origin Josif Herbst, killed in the political repressions in 1925] [Peyo Yavorov] [15](#). Ekaterina Karavelova went blind but she was said to be the neck, which says which direction the head will turn... She was the most intelligent of them all.

I watched the opera 'Gergana' by Maestro Georgi Atanasov [(1882-1931) - a conductor, a composer, a pioneer of Bulgarian opera creative work, Pietro Mascani's student] in the military club. I saw what opera was for the first time, until that time my favorite place for entertainment in Gorna Dzhumaya had been the river and now, all of a sudden, a river on stage and I went nearer and saw that the fountain they had been talking about was trembling a little. So I moved quickly to ask what that fountain was and the people around me started laughing...

We celebrated the Jewish holidays both at the orphanage and at school. For Purim we learned a lot of songs. For Pesach rich Jewish families would come and would take us to spend the whole eight days at their homes – for Pesach and then they returned us. I used to have relatives in Sofia but that was the organization. Each family would choose one of us. I remember the Baroukh family. The father was a representative of 'Berakha' Chocolate Factory in Sofia. I ate heaps of chocolates in that house. And not only at Pesach. They had a daughter who was as old as me. Her name was Nedka. In their house I saw a dressing table in the bedroom for the first time in my life and there were also chandeliers, splendid furniture. Once there was something of a misunderstanding. A first cousin of my mother's whose name was Mari Chelebi Leveya wanted me to go to them for the holidays but by mistake I was taken to another family with the same name in Konyovitsa. [One of the oldest quarters in Sofia nowadays is Dras Mahala – near the freight depot and the other old poor quarter is Konyovitsa.] They were two nice old people, so kind, so cordial and dedicated to me although they were living rather poorly. They had a one-storey house in the middle of a big garden and there were houses in a line in the yard and every family lived in a separate house – like the gypsies. The old man would bring me a chocolate bar every day and said to me: 'You're such a midget, eat, eat.' Such good people was this old couple, they were taking pity on me. So, after that, my mother's cousin went to the principal and asked: 'What happened to our girl, why didn't she come to us?' 'What are you saying, I sent her to you!' 'Very far from the truth, she didn't come to us...'

When I was in my second year at the orphanage my brother was already learning his craft in Sofia. They found a master for him whose name was uncle Boyan [a Bulgarian] with whom he studied dental mechanics. That master didn't have children and they accepted him as their own child. He was taking my brother everywhere with his family – to the mountain or to the seaside. Whenever

there was work for dental mechanics – there was my brother, together with uncle Boyan.

When we were in the third grade a lady from Plovdiv, a Jew, came to us, I can't remember her name and she came to propagate, to instill in us the idea that we had to enroll in the Hashomer Hatzair organization [16](#). That was my first meeting with Zionism, for the first time we found out what this and that meant.

When I finished the third grade I returned to mummy in Plovdiv. I didn't have the right to stay in the boarding house anymore. My mother had moved to Plovdiv with my sister as early as 1926. An aunt of mine whose name was Ester had asked her to do that so that she wouldn't be alone anymore. 'Let me have a sister at last, you don't have a husband to be in your way, come if you want, Plovdiv is a bigger town, the children will feel better.' After that in 1926 -1927 my brother went to her and continued with the dental mechanics. And that was how our migration took place. I finally moved to Plovdiv in 1930.

I don't know but I underwent the change of the climate and water in Plovdiv. In Sofia and in Gorna Dzhumaya the climate is more mountainous. I was staying in Plovdiv while I was still at junior high school in the summer holiday and I remember that I was ill all the time. I was feeling so bad that the illness changed my body and when I came back the housekeeper asked me: 'Are you a new girl?' 'No, madam, it's me – Marga.' 'But I send you to your mother, not to an evil stepmother...'. Such were her words. I was so changed from the weakness and exhaustion, from the disease. Afterwards, I got used to the climate little by little.

Plovdiv in 1930s was a small town. There was no traffic. The streets were covered with stones. This street, in which now is the Jewish center, was a center for the children in winter. They were making slopes and used sledges. There was a Jewish quarter and there lived mainly poor Jews who had come from Odrin [Edirne, Turkey]. They didn't know Bulgarian well and the dialect they used was extremely ugly. Otherwise, they were hard-working. Some of them were carrying baskets full of different foods and would sell them in the streets, others would sell tomatoes on stalls. They used to make pastry themselves and sold them, but culture was a concept unknown to them.

At first our rich relatives from Gorna Dzhumaya helped us financially but eventually my mother was forced to start work as a worker on wage. She started work at Haim Adroke's factory 'Akte' and was making stripes for the military uniforms, silk chevrons and ribbons. The accountant of the factory was Aladzhemov who had visited the Kohen family in Blagoevgrad. He had visited the rich house and when he saw mum he got startled. 'You, madam, aren't you from Gorna Dzhumaya? What are you doing here?' In other words – you don't belong here as an ordinary worker. And mum told him: 'Look, now, I'm not in Gorna Dzhumaya, I'm here now and that's different?'

At first our family was living near the Jewish quarter, near the church St. George. My mother had hired a room and a parlor, which was just next to the staircase. My sister and I used to sleep in the parlor and we could hear and see how the people from the upper floors were passing by but that didn't bother us. Little by little we stepped on our feet. Mum was working, my brother in 1930 or 1931 started his own business as a dental mechanic and had regular customers and employees in his dental workshop. My sister left us because she got married in 1932 to the Jew Leon Albalakh and left for Chirpan. [The town of Chirpan is situated in the Upper-Thracian Lowland, in the southwestern part of Stara Zagora Region]. At that time about twenty Jewish families lived in Chirpan. Their houses were near the synagogue in the center of the town. I haven't been to the

synagogue and have no personal impressions of it. It seems to me there was a Jewish school but I'm not sure. Jews were also living in the village of Gradina, Purvomay Region. There lived a family that was attending the synagogue at Erev Sabbath and the other holidays. Most of the Jews from Chirpan were merchants. There was a family I knew - Basan - who were knitters. The Jews in Chirpan were very united. They were always in touch and helped each other. My sister was very much loved by them. The house that my sister and her husband Leon built was near the synagogue too. They had two children - Isak and Zhak. The Jewish children were different from the Bulgarian children. My sister's children and the other Jewish children were always dressed up to the fashion in town. They regularly came to Plovdiv to buy or have clothes tailored for them in the big city. We could afford to rent a much better flat in 'St. Kliment' street and that's what we did.

I started studying at high school. At that time the rules were as follows - there weren't any grants for orphans no matter that I had good marks and an excellent diploma. If the orphans wanted to receive a grant they had to enroll in the Commercial High School or the vocational schools because you were an orphan and you had to become good at a certain craft for three years so that you wouldn't burden the state. But I told mummy: 'I'm not going anywhere, I want to study at the high school.' And on top of that I had passed the entrance exam in Sofia for the Girls' First High School. But mum turned out to be very practical. She went to the directorate - I don't know which one, the one that this depended on and said: 'You know, Mr. Director, my child will commit suicide if I don't let her study at the high school.' She gave a very serious reason and they made everything possible so that I could get a grant. I got the grant in the end. Can you see what one lonely widow can do? So I got the grant. There were 900 schoolgirls in the school and only four of us had received grants - two Jews and two Bulgarians. The grants were paid monthly for clothes and books.

Until that moment I had studied only in a Jewish environment and now I had to be in a mixed environment every day but that period wasn't difficult for me from an emotional point of view, there weren't consequences, I didn't feel that. There were 30 schoolgirls in my class, five of which were Jews. I didn't have any problems at high school connected to my origin, I didn't feel any different. Just the opposite - I was immediately appointed chairperson of the class. As such I was responsible when the teachers were away. When we were left alone I was dealing with my classmates by telling them stories or singing songs. I was often an arbiter in different disputes and participated in the successful solution of some conflicts.

There was such a thing at the time. I was the chairperson for two years in a row. For the third I asked them to change me but I was chosen again. 'Nothing like that, Margarita - you're going to be chairperson again.' I recall that in 1932 - 1933 a classmate whose name I can't remember came to our class and started delivering speeches in which she was talking against the tsar. That was unacceptable then. The teachers found out about that and we were interrogated afterwards. I was the first because I was the chairperson of the class. 'Tell us, Margarita, what did you hear and did you do as a chairperson?' But I was very happy with the things the girl had said. I wasn't very much against these things I should say. But I told them that at school we shouldn't talk about politics, that wasn't the right place. I wasn't punished. As a whole, I succeeded in coping with my schoolmates.

I used to love Literature and History. I respected the teachers of these subjects. At first my teacher in History was Mrs. Stefanova. She wasn't young at all but her lessons were extremely interesting.

In the last grade she was replaced by another teacher but there was nothing in common between them. All of a sudden things became so schematic. The new teacher was dictating some plans all the time and we were only supposed to write them down in our notebooks – first point, second point... I stopped studying, I lost my interest completely. And do you know what she told me? ‘I saw in the register book that you, Margarita, had always had excellent marks in History. I know why you don’t study and are not an excellent student. Because you don’t want to study Bulgarian History.’ She was, how shall I put it, unnoticeable, plain... She couldn’t be compared to my other teacher. I didn’t get an A in the end, I got a B.

Apart from going to school every day we also visited Hashomer Hatzair. At the beginning we didn’t have uniforms but later we got them. Hashomer Hatzair was instilling a different culture in us and was introducing the spirit of Zionism. And I became a Zionist, I was always telling mum: ‘Do you know mum, I’m going to leave for Israel?’ and she replied ‘I have been looking after you since you were a piece of meat. Are you going to leave me now?’ and I was thinking of going to Israel - to do what the organization was lecturing us to do.

In the summer during the holidays Hashomer Hatzair organized camps. In the evening by the bonfire we would recite poems by Smirnenski [17](#), poems in Ivrit. The people from Sofia were very distinguished with their culture... The people from Ruse were different and they were even nicer. We were all women, you know the girls from Plovdiv and we did what we could in those performances. I remember a Bentsion from Ruse who was singing so nicely, opera arias. I wouldn’t have become a part of all that, if I had remained in Gorna Dzhumaya. All this could happen only in a big city.

I remember an evening in Tsigov Chark – an area between Rakitovo and Batak – we went out for a walk but we got separated from the main group and couldn’t find our way back. So what were we going to do now? There were some shepherds whom we met on our way, if they had been bad people they would have attacked us or at least start mocking us. There wasn’t anything like that. We lost the way – suddenly Rashka, a friend of mine, with whom we were classmates from the boarding school said: ‘Marga, those electric poles pass by the camp as well. And we started following the poles finding our way like that. And there was such alarm because of us being missing.

Once I poured gas into the salad instead of oil. And we had to eat salad with gas. In Plovdiv in our spare time we were again together with the other members of Hashomer Hatzair. I had two very good friends from the organization – Meriam and Debora. Both of them left the school because they wanted to learn a craft because they would need that later in the kibbutz in Palestine. Meriam became a seamstress, Debora – a shoemaker. I wanted to become a midwife and asked mum to let me enroll in the courses in Sofia but she didn’t agree because she wanted her children to be around. That’s why I had to finish the high school but my mother asked me for forgiveness at the end of her life because she hadn’t let me make that wish come true. We were particularly close with Meriam. I remember that when my brother caught typhus in 1932 I lived at her place for six months. We were together all the time, we were going to school. Meriam left for Israel and I visited her just before her death. Debora on the other hand was living in Bounardzhik [a quarter in Plovdiv, which is situated on one of the seven hills (tepeti), a symbol of the city]. I used to go to her house and call her, she showed on the window and I remained downstairs. So we used the Morse code to talk. She left for Israel too but I can’t say what happened to her. We didn’t keep in touch.

Additionally, in Hashomer Hatzair there were both boys and girls and we started looking at each other and started some relationships. It was a habit of ours after the activities to walk home with my friend Meriam. And one and the same young man was accompanying us every time. 'I'll take you home, I'll walk home with you.' Meriam and I were wondering who he was actually interested in - me or her. It turned out it was me... And little by little a friendship began that continued for two or three years. In the end when we turned 19 the people started asking: 'Haven't you got engaged?' And one day I decided to ask him: 'Tell me what I should tell them. Should I go on accepting their congratulations or not?' He only told me: 'Well, now... my sister is at home.' And when I heard that I put an end - that was it. In fact that meant that he couldn't take a girlfriend or a bride, whatever, home, he couldn't... Later I found out that his mother was against because I was an orphan. May be she was dreaming of having a wealthy daughter-in-law. This way or another, afterwards a classmate from Sofia visited me and asked me: 'What are your intentions? Do you plan to continue your relationship?' I told her - no, that was the end. I went home and said: 'You're not going to accept him anymore, because...' My brother, sweet thing, immediately suggested 'You'll come to me, to my company, don't you worry...' And that was what happened. The year was 1935.

I finished high school in 1935 and had matriculation exams only in two subjects; I didn't have to sit for an exam in the other five subjects. My brother and my future husband knew each other because they were working for the Jewish conspiracy but in that same year there was a failure and my brother, Sharlo and 14 or 15 other people were arrested after a manifestation, I don't know what that manifestation had been. At that time I was preparing for my matriculation but I was very upset indeed and was thinking about that all the time because I was bringing food to the arrested and I could see they were pale, tortured, beaten. I passed my exams with the lowest possible marks which, of course, influenced my final results but didn't have any significance in my future life.

I had seen my future husband Sharlo [Shemuel Samuel Kohen, 1906-1988] with my brother. First they released him together with two or three other guys, on bail, but my brother was still in custody. They kept him there for six months and during the trial the prosecutor wanted many years prison for him but my mother intervened - through a cousin of hers she influenced the prosecutor's wife, she influenced the prosecutor and my brother was released. Meanwhile, I bumped into Sharlo and a friend of his and told him that it was not fair that they were walking about like that and be free while there were others who are still in prison. They obviously realized what I was trying to tell them and came to take me from home and accompany me on a walk so that I wouldn't be alone and sad. Afterwards I left for Chirpan to visit my sister. I recall that they came there to visit me and we came back home together by train. When I was getting off the train he reached out his hand to help me and embraced me so that I could feel his masculine strength.

So step by step we started dating and were getting to know and like each other more and more. My future husband Sharlo had finished the Jewish junior high school. After that he had enrolled the high school and had started studying there but his parents couldn't afford it and he couldn't finish it, he dropped out. He started work first as a carpenter, then he became a clerk and in the end, just before getting engaged, he started helping his parents. It was very nice to be with him, he was good company. He wasn't picking on people, he was very tolerant and later, in marriage, he remained the same - very open-minded, easy-going and with great sense of humor - man with spirit. In fact, the choice was mutual but it seems to me his father liked me very much too. His parents were in the grain trade. When we met they were building the third floor of the house in



which we are now. They were forced to mortgage it in order to complete it and they invested all their savings. We had already decided to get married, we had decided on the day for the wedding. My brother wanted his little sister to be happy so he paid the whole mortgage. And what did my brother ask me one day before my wedding – he caught my cheeks like that: ‘Tell me sister, what else do you want?’ ‘Me – to want anything!?! I think I got more than I deserve.’

We first got engaged. So many guests came! The grandmothers, my brother-in-law, all of them came to visit us in ‘St. Kliment’ Street. After that the wedding took place in their house, not in the synagogue because my mother-in-law had apoplexy and couldn’t move. So the wedding was in the presence of a rabbi here on the third floor in 1939.

After the wedding we were living in my husband’s house with my mother-in-law, father-in-law, my brother-in-law Zhak who a year and a half later married the Jew Dora. We, the whole family Kohen, were living on the second floor and the first and the second were rented out. On the ground floor there was a shop which was also rented out. My mother-in-law was quite a dame and very house-proud. As a young bride she used to wake me up at five in the morning: ‘Come on, come on, let’s start cleaning!’ Mum would say: ‘My God, are you wearing aprons on Saturday?’ My mother liked cleanliness too but not as much as my mother-in-law. My mother-in-law’s behavior wasn’t very normal. She liked doing the same things every single day, and that turns into a routine, becomes very boring, but I couldn’t do anything. In fact, that cleaning was mainly my task because she couldn’t do it – she was paralyzed.

My husband Shemuel Samuel Kohen was born in 1906 in Samokov. He was a Sephardi Jew. He had three brothers – Leon, Mois and Zhak. My husband was the youngest – the fourth child. As a young man he studied for a carpenter but later he finished evening courses at the Trade School, he finished some accountancy courses and became an accountant. Afterwards, when the shop needed an accountant, instead of hiring somebody else, he quit the accountancy and started helping his father and brother. After 1944 he finished planner courses and worked as a planner at machine tools enterprises like ‘Balkan’ and ‘Madara’.

My son Samuil Kohen was born in 1940 on my mother’s insistence. We didn’t want children at that time yet but she had written in a letter to my sister that I had to give birth because anything could happen. She used to even come to our house to dare me to get pregnant. ‘Marga, how is the family, dear?’ She was asking about this and that. ‘I’m fine, mama.’ ‘Do you know that there are a lot of childless families? A lot of them bathe in the warm waters.’ And she described the situation to me. ‘And what about you?’ ‘Mama, I say, I’m still very tired of all the arrangements around the wedding, let us have some rest...’ ‘Come on, if you have a child, you’ll have a rest afterwards...’ After that when my son was born in 1940 mum used to help us a lot in his bringing up.

## **During the War**

The war started in 1941. According to the Law for the Protection of the Nation [18](#) the authorities seized our shop and used it for fifteen or twenty years after that. Afterwards they returned it to us. They replaced our tenants with other people. On the first floor started living the judge on the Jewish issues Mr. Morfov and on the third – colonel Stoev and his wife. The colonel was a kind person. Whenever seeing that some of us was carrying a bucket with water, he grabbed it and helped us – a great big colonel, but his wife – ‘God forgive me!’ – was such an evil. She used to take me upstairs to her, to sleep at her place when her husband was absent so she asked me to sleep in her



bedroom because she was afraid that someone would attack her and she didn't want to be alone. And I agreed because when I visited her I could eat as much as I wanted – even cheese, and I could take for the child, and I was hungry too – so there was cheese, and yellow cheese, and sausages, there was everything on her table. So when she called me I would go because of the food and how can a person refuse – I don't want to sleep at your place, I don't know... After all he was chief of staff in the army. During one air-raid when the Americans were bombarding he started throwing me nasty looks: 'Those Americans!' – as if I had made them come.

I remember that the mayor was living opposite us at that time, his name was Velchev, together with his family. I used to go out on the balcony with my sister-in-law's baby in hands and next to me was my little boy. His wife shouted at me: 'Hey, you, Jew! Get out of there! Get inside, you don't have the right to get out on the balconies.' Another case – a milkman who used to bring the milk in the morning. His name was Stoyan. People used to pick on him: 'Hey, you, why do you give milk to the Jews?' But Stoyan replied: 'Are you the master of my fortune! I'll give to whoever I want to give!'

It was a really nasty situation. My husband had to leave for the forced labor camps in Mihalkovo, Ihtiman, Yagodovo [19](#). They were holding them there for eight months and then they were released. I remained alone with a 2,5-year-old child, with the in-laws. The hunger was unimaginable. My husband was away and couldn't earn anything, my father-in-law was in the toilet all the time – to urinate – he was already seventy-something. And there were restrictions for our getting employed. I didn't have anywhere to take money from and our shop had been seized and we didn't get any rent from the tenants. I remember that I sold my wonderful silk nightgown, which I had never worn for food.

I have never been very interested in politics, I've never been a member of UYW [20](#) and never joined the [communist] party. My husband became a member of the party in 1936. I don't understand anything about politics and when people are talking about it, it is as if I had gone deaf but one day I heard what my father-in-law was telling in the café: 'Bad times are approaching-prepare bags with bread.' He was neither speaking about politics a lot at home, nor giving any explanations. We never fully believed that something very bad was going to happen and they had confiscated our radio so that we wouldn't receive any information. We were allowed to go out for only two hours a day. That was an additional factor for limiting our means of finding food and our contact with the world. There was that Bulgarian guy; his name was Spas. He was a very good-willed man – he used to buy curds from the shop and gave it out to the Jews. I couldn't stop thanking him.

In 1943 there came seven people who started banging on the door persistently. Prepare. They took my mother-in-law and father-in-law first. I suggested immediately: 'Let us, the young people, go. Where are you taking them, they can hardly walk.' 'You be quiet, you shouldn't talk that much.' After that they took us as well – me, my husband and my sister-in-law – who was pregnant in the ninth month and my brother-in-law, her husband. They took us to a police department [Plan for deportation of Jews in Bulgaria] [21](#). Then bishop Kiril [22](#) came, who was still metropolitan at the time, and told us: 'Be strong, brothers, we won't let you down.' We were also helped by other organizations and dignitaries such as the Lawyers' Union and Dr. Kableschkov [The most eminent member of the Kableschkov family was Todor Loulchev Kableschkov [23](#)] His grandson Nedyalko Kableschkov – you saw him yesterday – is my physician. He comes every day to check on me and

doesn't want any money. He is such a good chap – you can see. The first present I bought from Israel when I was there for the first time was for him. We were detained for several hours and released afterwards.

When the regular bombardments started the colonel and his wife were evacuated to Peshtera where there were barracks. And the ones who were living downstairs moved to Sofia little by little.

I almost tore my hair out of joy when I heard that the Soviet Army had entered Dobrudzha in 1944. [The Soviet Army crossed the Danube on 5th September 1944]. The families who were occupying our lodgings moved to some other places and we started living there again – my mother- and father-in-law, my brother-in-law, his wife and their children out of which only two had survived. In 1948 there was an epidemic of abdominal typhus. My brother-in-law got infected and died. My brother, who had come to visit us, also caught it. We lost both of them within a month. My brother who was getting ready to get engaged and mama remained alone at the age of 56. We buried them both in the Jewish cemetery following the traditional ritual. In 1950 my sister and her family left for Israel. I didn't forget my plans to go to Israel but I couldn't leave my mother alone here. And, because I knew she was grieving too much, I decided to have a second child – so that she would have what to do, to occupy her thoughts, so that she wouldn't fall down into sad thoughts. That's how in 1950 I gave birth to our second son Solomon. She was of great help with bringing up both children.

### **After the War**

We were raising our kids in a Jewish spirit although my husband was a communist and atheist. They are both circumcised. Sami was an excellent student at school. He had received excellent marks and certificates. Whenever I was at a parents' meeting the teacher didn't miss the opportunity to compliment me that I shouldn't go there at all. Outside school he was playing the piano and had a tutor in French. He even enrolled in the Musical School but he gave up and dropped out. He enrolled in an ordinary school. My husband, who was a very clever and practical man, used the holidays to teach him how to tune pianos so that he would have a vocation. My biggest desire was for him to study medicine because that was my unfulfilled dream. But he chose his own path – he graduated from the Law Department in Sofia. As an award for his graduation I decided to sponsor his move to Israel. So in 1965 he went to his aunt in Israel and lived there for thirty years. In 1968 he got married there – to a sabra. His wife's name is Lea. I couldn't attend the wedding because at the time the relations between Bulgaria and Israel weren't good and the authorities wouldn't even let us travel to there [Severing the diplomatic ties between the Eastern Bloc and Israel] [24](#). In Israel he had worked as a piano tuner. He has two twin sisters – Margarit and Tamar and a son – Eran – who committed suicide. He returned to Bulgaria in 1993 and now he is unemployed here.

My younger son Ouri has only primary education. He got meningitis, which the doctors discovered at a late stage, and it transformed into schizophrenia. We did everything possible to deal with the disease. We even sold part of the house – we were all the time spending money on doctors but it was irreversible. Now he is in the mental institution in the village of Petkovo.

Both of my children were raised in Jewish self-awareness. They knew what Pesach was, we celebrated Purim. We weren't meticulous about sticking to the ritual but we celebrate the holidays and still do. I even remember that once I was alone with my younger son at Pesach. My older son

was already a student in Sofia and my husband was in the town of Hisarya because of the mineral baths there. No matter what the circumstances were I had ordered and put everything according to the ritual because of Ouri, so that he would know what that was, and – all of a sudden – my husband came back home and we were very happy and had great fun. We have always kept in touch with the Jewish community although, apart from Hashomer Hatzair, I hadn't been a member of any organizations. The cuisine at home is also typically Jewish. My husband liked indjinarika very much – marrows with sour sauce. First, you cut the marrows in big pieces so that they wouldn't become squashy. They are boiled into oil. You put salt in the end so that they get ready quickly. After that you put lemon juice and a little sugar. It is served cold and it is very delicious. I used to make agristada very often too – flour gruel with a lot of eggs, broth and oil. It is very important to dissolve the flour into cold water or broth. The broth is most often from hen or brains. Afterwards you pour the sauce over the boiled meat. Mum, on the other hand, used to prepare a very delicious meal from aubergine. Firstly, you bake the aubergine. After that you peel them and put them into cold water so that they wouldn't go black. Then they are sieved through a thin piece of cloth, cut into slices, rolled into flour and egg and fried in butter. That dish is called 'imambayaldu'. Some people consider it to be a Turkish dish but I know it from my mother. Another thing I prepare is cabbage with minced meat instead of meat.

As a Jew I had never had problems at my workplace because of my origin. When I was a young girl I worked as a clerk and I was also assisting my brother with the dental mechanics. Until 1952 I was only a housewife. Afterwards I worked for a while as a librarian at 'Balkan' State Company and then, until 1965, as a receptionist in hospital. I have to tell you that in my last job as a receptionist I had a serious conflict with my only colleague who was a Jew. I couldn't get on with her and quit. At that time my younger son fell ill and I didn't want to work anymore. I retired with only 14 years work experience due to illness. I remember only that at one stage I was in danger to be interned because I knew Ivrit (during the cold war with Israel). They believed that if I knew Ivrit it meant we were Zionists. Somebody had whispered this information to the authorities. I know Ivrit from the Jewish school and I think that this is not a sin but, this way or another, that story is already a part of the past.

Otherwise, I have always been and will remain a Zionist. I think that the state of Israel must exist and I have always kept in contact through letters with my relatives there. I remember that during the war for the Suez Canal [she means actually the Six-Day-War] [25](#) my son was already there. In order not to think, not to go crazy I unknitted all the socks that I had and knitted the counterpanes and the pillows which you can see here. My husband was ill at the time and I was sitting next to him – knitting and listening to the little radio to find out where the military actions were and I was thinking about Sami all the time, about what was happening to him. I visited Israel twice - in 1961 and in 1989.

My mother died in 1961. We buried her according to the Jewish ritual in the Jewish cemetery. My husband died in 1988 but we didn't bury him in the Jewish cemetery but in the Bulgarian one because they were building a highway, which was supposed to pass through the Jewish cemetery.

I met the changes since 1989 [26](#) with mixed feelings. I wanted for the transition period to pass to see what will happen but it turned out to be really long. I thought it would last for only five or six years. My son returned in 1993. Now my life is hard. We gave up the comfort at home. Some of the premises of the houses we rented out and now everybody is living in their own den. I and my son

live in two tiny rooms. That was what happened during the Holocaust but now it is somewhat different because we opted for that situation. And in the past we were forced to do things.

I used to visit Shalom [27](#) regularly. I met a lot of friends there. But not anymore because my feet hurt. I am a member of the club for disabled people. I am very grateful that they help us financially and in any other possible way. They give us a free lunch every day. Well, they actually give us 24 levs, which I spend on food. I am grateful that I have a pension and I am not fully dependent on my son.

## Glossary

### **1 Plovdiv**

a town in Bulgaria situated in the Upper-Thracian Lowlands, along the two banks of the Maritsa River and on six unique syenite hills or as everybody calls them – tepeta. On about three of those hills the Thracians founded the ancient Thracian settlement called Evmolpias, later renamed to Poulpoudeva. In 342 BC the town was conquered by Philip II of Macedonia and renamed to Philipopol. During the Roman rule it turned into a major economic, cultural and political center of Thrace. The three hills around which the town was founded were called Trimontsium. After the downfall of the Roman Empire in VI century the town was conquered by the Slavs. Two centuries later it was included within the boundaries of Bulgaria and was called Puldin. In XIV century it was conquered by the Turks and its name was changed again – to Phelibe. At the time of the Russian-Turkish Liberation War Plovdiv was the biggest town in Bulgaria. Following the decisions of the Berlin Congress and the separation of Bulgarian Principality and Eastern Rumelia, the town became the administrative center of Eastern Rumelia. Here, in Plovdiv, on 6th September 1885 was announced the Union of the Bulgarian Principality and Eastern Rourmelia. The town is famous for the peaceful life of a mixture of Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Bulgarians and Jews.

### **2 Second Balkan War (1913)**

The victorious countries of the First Balkan War (Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia) were unable to settle their territorial claims over the newly acquired Macedonia by peaceful means. Serbia and Greece formed an alliance against Bulgaria and the war began on 29th June 1913 with a Bulgarian attack on Serbian and Greek troops in Macedonia. Bulgaria's northern neighbor, Romania, also joined the allies and Bulgaria was defeated. The Treaty of Bucharest was signed on 10th August 1913. As a result, most of Macedonia was divided up between Greece and Serbia, leaving only a small part to Bulgaria (Pirin Macedonia). Romania also acquired the previously Bulgarian region of southern Dobrudzha.

### **3 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.

#### **4 Komiti**

After the end of the Russian-Turkish war of 1878 an agreement was signed in San Stefano, a suburb of Istanbul, according to which all the areas with ethnic Bulgarian inhabitants, like Macedonia and Dobroudzha, were to be within the Bulgarian territories. That agreement, however, was revised by the Berlin Congress on 13th July 1878. After the revision Bulgaria was separated into two parts – Eastern Roumelia and Bulgarian Principality. Macedonia was not included into the Bulgarian territories and its incorporation into Bulgaria turned into a cherished dream for the population of that area. In the autumn of the same year the Kresna-Razlog uprising broke out. Its aim was to achieve incorporation with the Principality. In 1885 the Union of Eastern Roumelia with the Bulgarian Principality was declared. The plan of the union included the incorporation of Macedonia, which didn't take place after all. Macedonia was left within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire. All the circumstances around Macedonia's incorporation gave the beginning of the Macedonian national-liberation movement and explained the existence of a lot of revolution bands (whose members were called 'komiti'). The different uprisings in the region exemplified their activities.

#### **5 Alexandrov Poporoushev, Todor (1881-1924)**

a Bulgarian revolutionary, a member of the Central Committee of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization which was working on the territory of Macedonia and Bulgaria (established on 23rd October 1893 in the town of Salonika) at the end of 19th and in the first half of 20th century. In 1990 several organizations with the same name were re-established both in Macedonia and in Bulgaria.

#### **6 Alliance Fraçaise - a cultural and educational association founded in 1904 in Sofia as a branch of the French cultural and educational association Alliance Francaise in Paris**

Its goal is to popularize French language and culture in Bulgaria.

#### **7 Status of Macedonia**

The incorporation of Macedonia into Bulgaria became a national dream. After the signing of the Bucharest Peace Treaty from 1913 after the end of the Second Balkan War the boundaries of Bulgaria were changed – Macedonia was left outside Bulgaria again and this time Southern Dobroudzha was severed in accordance to the agreement. The reinstatement of those territories took place just before the beginning of World War II – on 5th September 1940 Southern Dobroudzha was returned to Bulgaria by force of the Krayova Treaty, which was accepted internationally by France, England, Germany and the USSR. In the following 1941, on 19th April Bulgarian military forces entered Macedonia. However, that was not envisaged by any internationally accepted treaty but only on the basis of the Vienna Agreement made by Dr. Claudius and the Bulgarian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivan Popov. According to that agreement the

incorporation of Macedonia into Bulgaria would take place after the war. Until then, however, Bulgaria was supposed only to govern Macedonia administratively. At the same time Bulgaria was only a source of raw materials for Germany.

## **8 The Serbian-Bulgarian War**

it broke out in November 1885 as protest on the part of Serbia against the Union of Eastern Roumelia and the Bulgarian Principality. Bulgaria was victorious in the war and that was the first victory for the young Bulgarian army. Apart from that, it was the first step towards an international acceptance of the Union.

## **9 Tsintsars and Wallachians**

Romanian ethnic minorities. The names date back to the late Middle Ages when after an uprising in Romania a significant part of the population left the country. Wallachians are actually Romanians from the Wallach region. Those were mainly stock-breeders. Part of them settled in Macedonia.

## **10 Rakia**

strong liquor, typical in the Balkan region. It is made from different kinds of fruit (grape, plum, apricot etc.) by distillation.

## **11 Boza**

A sweet wheat-based mildly alcoholic drink popular in Bulgaria, Turkey and other places in the Balkans.

## **12 Organisation for the Distribution of Artisanal and Agricultural Skills among the Jews in Russia ORT**

On 22nd March 1880, by order of the Minister of Interior Affairs of Russia, the Organisation for the Distribution of Artisanal and Agricultural Skills among the Jews in Russia - ORT - was established. A small group of prominent Russian Jews petitioned Tzar Alexander II for permission to start a fund to help lift Russia's five million Jews out of crushing poverty. ORT, Obschestvo Remeslenovo i zemledelcheskovo Trouda (the Society for Trades and Agricultural Labour) was founded. ORT today provides skills-training and self-help projects for some of the world's most impoverished communities, using funds raised by its supporters, and added to by development agencies and national governments, to put people on the path to economic independence.

## **13 Peneva - Karavelova, Ekaterina Velikova (1860-1947)**

born on 21st October 1860 in Rouschouk. Writer of political feuilletons, literary critiques, translations. She was fluent in Russian, French and German. She translated works by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Hugo, Maupassant, Flaubert, Dickens, etc. Petko Karavelov, under the pseudonym Kamen Chernev, founded the St. Kliment Library. Two thirds of the translations there were made by Ekaterina Karavelova. She wrote a detailed historic and literary analysis of Paul Louis Courier's pamphlets. She made a critical analysis of the play 'Egmond' by Goethe and included it in the book. Petko and Ekaterina Karavelovi had three children. Ekaterina Karavelova died on 1st April



1947 and was buried next to Petko Karavelov's grave behind the former Black Mosque in Sofia.

#### **14 Karavelov, Petko (1843-1903)**

a Bulgarian politician, one of the leaders of the Liberal Party and later of the Democratic Party. Petko Karavelov was a member of the Constituent Assembly (1879), of the I Grand National Assembly (1879), of II (1880-1881), of IV (1884-1886), of VIII (1894-1896), of IX (1896-1899), of X (1899-1900) and of XI (1901) National Assembly. He was born in the town of Koprivshtitsa and in 1859 he joined his brother, the famous writer Lyuben Karavelov in Russia where he studied Law. He graduated in Moscow in 1869. After the Liberation of Bulgaria he took active part in the creation of the Turnovo Constitution. He headed the radical wing of the Liberal Party and became Prime Minister of Bulgaria (1880 - 1881). After the establishment of the Regents' Regime he left for Eastern Roumelia and was mayor of Plovdiv (1881 - 1883). After the reinstatement of the Turnovo Constitution Petko Karavelov returned to Sofia and again led the government of the Liberal Party (1884 - 1886). After the Russophile uprisings in 1887 he was arrested for a short time. He was against the choice of Knyaz Ferdinand I. In 1891 he was sentenced to 5 years in prison for being an accomplice in Hristo Belchev's murder but was released in 1894. He founded the Democratic Party in 1896 and led it till his death. Karavelov became Prime Minister for the fourth time with the Progressive Liberal Party. Petko Karavelov died in 1903 in Sofia and was buried in the graveyard of St. Sedmochislenitsi Church.

#### **15 Yavorov, Peyo (1878-1914)**

pseudonym of Peyo Kracholov, one of the greatest Bulgarian poets. He was among the founders of the Symbolist movement in Bulgarian poetry, a dramatist and a revolutionary. Yavorov took part in the preparation of the ill-fated Ilinden uprising against Ottoman hegemony in August 1903, edited revolutionary papers, and crossed twice into Macedonia with partisan bands. He committed suicide at the age of 36.

#### **16 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.

#### **17 Smirnenski, Hristo Dimitrov Izmirliiev (17**

09.1898-18.06.1923): a classical Bulgarian poet and writer. Lived and worked in the Jewish neighbourhood Luchbunar. He made his literary debut in 1915 during his second year at college in the satirical newspaper 'K'vo da e' ('Anything Goes'). Hristo first called himself 'Smirnenski' in the magazine 'Smyah I sulzi' ('Laughter and Tears'). His hard tireless work and deprivations undermined the 25 year-old poet's health and he died on 18 June 1923 from tuberculosis, 'the yellow visitor', as he called the disease in one of his poems. In the eight brief years of his prolific career Hristo Smirnenski penned thousands of pieces of poetry and prose in various genres using more than 70 pseudonyms.

## **18 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.

## **19 Forced labor camps in Bulgaria**

Established under the Council of Ministers' Act in 1941. All Jewish men between the ages of 18-50, eligible for military service, were called up. In these labor groups Jewish men were forced to work 7-8 months a year on different road constructions under very hard living and working conditions.

## **20 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.

## **21 Plan for deportation of Jews in Bulgaria**

In accordance with the agreement signed on 22nd February 1943 by the Commissar for Jewish Affairs Alexander Belev on the Bulgarian side and Teodor Daneker on the German side, it was decided to deport 20 000 Jews at first. Since the number of the Aegean and Macedonian Jews, or the Jews from the 'new lands', annexed to Bulgaria in WWII, was around 12 000, the other 8 000 Jews had to be selected from the so-called 'old borders', i.e. Bulgaria. A couple of days later, on 26th February Alexander Belev sent an order to the delegates of the Commissariat in all towns with a larger Jewish population to prepare lists of the so-called 'unwanted or anti-state elements'. The 'richer, more distinguished and socially prominent' Jews had to be listed among the first. The deportation started in March 1943 with the transportation of the Aegean and the Thrace Jews from the new lands. The overall number of the deported was 11 342. In order to reach the number 20 000, the Jews from the so-called old borders of Bulgaria had to be deported. But that did not

happen thanks to the active intervention of the citizens of Kyustendil Petar Mihalev, Asen Suichmezov, Vladimir Kurtev, Ivan Momchilov and the deputy chairman of the 25th National Assembly Dimitar Peshev and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Before the deportation was canceled, the Jews in Plovdiv, Pazardzhik, Kyustendil, Dupnitsa, Yambol and Sliven were shut in barracks, tobacco warehouses and schools in order to be ready to be transported to the eastern provinces of The Third Reich. The arrests were made on the eve of 9th March. Thanks to the intervention of the people, the deportation of the Jews from the old borders of Bulgaria did not happen. The Jews in Dupnitsa were also arrested to be ready for deportation.

## **22 Bishop Kiril (1901-1971)**

Metropolitan of Plovdiv during World War II. He vigorously opposed the anti-Jewish policies of the Bulgarian government after 1941 and took active steps against it. In March 1943 the deportation of the 1,500 Plovdiv Jews began and Kiril succeeded in stopping it by sending a protest to King Boris III, threatening the local police chief and also threatening to lay himself on the railway track to prevent the deportation. Since 1953 until his death he was the Patriarch of Bulgaria. In 2002 he was posthumously recognized as one of the Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem.

## **23 Kableshkov, Todor Loulchev (1st January 1851 - about 3rd June 1876)**

a Bulgarian National Revival revolutionary. He studied in Istanbul. He returned to Koprivshtitsa in the beginning of 1876 and became the leader of the local revolutionary committee and assistant-apostle in the Panagiurski Regional Revolutionary District. He was the head of the Military Council. During the April Rebellion in 1876 he was leading the Hvurkovata Cheta (Flying Band) together with Panayot Volov. He committed suicide after the rebellion was suppressed.

## **24 Severing the diplomatic ties between the Eastern Bloc and Israel**

After the 1967 Six-Day War the Soviet Union cut all diplomatic ties with Israel, under the pretext of Israel being the aggressor and the neighbouring Arab states the victims of Israeli imperialism. The Soviet-occupied Eastern European countries (Eastern Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria) conformed to the verdict of the Kremlin and followed the Soviet example. Diplomatic relations between Israel and the ex-Communist countries resumed after the fall of communism.

## **25 Six-Day-War**

The first strikes of the Six-Day-War happened on 5th June 1967 by the Israeli Air Force. The entire war only lasted 132 hours and 30 minutes. The fighting on the Egyptian side only lasted four days, while fighting on the Jordanian side lasted three. Despite the short length of the war, this was one of the most dramatic and devastating wars ever fought between Israel and all of the Arab nations. This war resulted in a depression that lasted for many years after it ended. The Six-Day-War increased tension between the Arab nations and the Western World because of the change in mentalities and political orientations of the Arab nations.

## **26 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.

## **27 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.