

Eshua Aron Almalech

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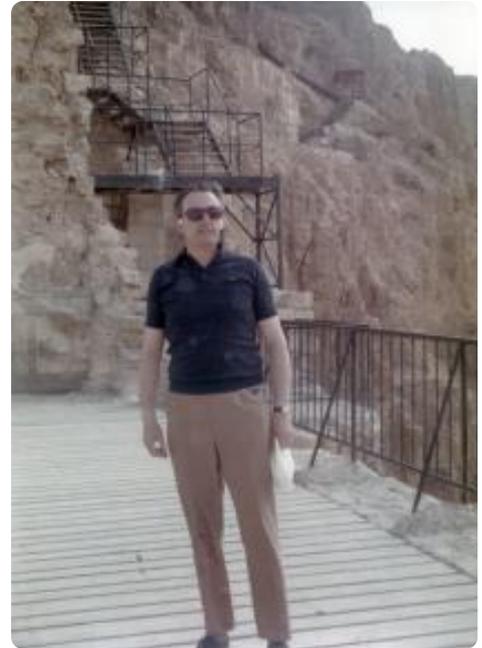
Bulgaria

Sofia

Interviewer: Zelma Almalech

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Eshua Almalech is a handsome man of 79. He is one of the most prominent Bulgarian sports journalists, although he has already retired. He is also known in the international sports circles. He has many friends, not only among the Jews. He still reads very much and takes an active interest in the problems around the world. He loves classical music and art. Now he lives alone, but his children and grandchildren visit him very often. At the moment he is experiencing a very difficult period, because his wife, Nedyalka, passed away while this interview was being prepared. Every week he meets with his retired sports colleagues. He still keeps in touch with his classmates from the French College and they meet in Plovdiv every June.



[Family background](#)

[Growing up](#)

[During the war](#)

[Post-war](#)

[Glossary](#)

Family background

The Almalech kin, my paternal ancestors, is a famous family name, not only in Bulgaria, but also in Turkey and France. There is a legend that is handed down from generation to generation that they originate from the Jews who were banished by the Romans more than 2,000 years ago, after the Temple in Jerusalem was burned down. Most of them settled on the Mediterranean lands in the Roman colonies. The Almalechs do not originate from the so-called Spanish Jews, who were banished by the Spanish King in the end of the 15th century and who settled in Southeast Europe. The Almalechs lived on these lands even before Bulgaria was founded in 681. These Jews are also known as Romaniots (the name comes from Rome). My hometown Stara Zagora existed even in the Thracian times and in the time of the Roman Empire. It was called Augusta Trayana then. The many archeological sites, which are still being researched, prove this. Some ancient Roman buildings were discovered in the small town of Nikopol on the Danube. And, interestingly, there was a synagogue among them in which the Almalech family name could be seen among the Hebrew inscriptions. During the Turkish rule and in present-day Turkey you can come across our family name as Azmanoglu, and they were also famous Jews, working mostly in trading. On the other

hand, my mother's family name, Behar, is very typical of the Jews who came to the Balkan Peninsula after they were driven out of Spain. They were mostly craftsmen – leather-workers. Both families were religious, but not to the extreme. They observed the Jewish traditions and rites and valued very highly the holidays and the family. They did not live in a closed Jewish community, but were also in contact with the Bulgarians and the Turks.

My paternal grandfather, Eshua Avram Almalech, was born in the first part of the 19th century. He was a relatively well-off merchant. He was a well-known figure in Stara Zagora even before the Russian-Turkish War, which liberated Bulgaria (1877-1878). During the April Rebellion ¹ in 1876 he hid one of its leaders Stephan Stambolov in his home. After the liberation of Bulgaria Stambolov came to Stara Zagora a number of times, firstly as Speaker of the Bulgarian Parliament, later as Bulgarian Prime Minister and he stayed at my grandfather's house. Although my grandfather was a Jew, he took an active part in Bulgarian politics. My paternal grandmother was illiterate and she just looked after the children. My father, Aron Almalech, told me that she was a very nice woman, but he only had some childhood memories of her. Their house was visited by many people, not only Jews.

My grandfather had four sons and two daughters. My father Aron Eshua Almalech was the youngest. My uncles were all very easy-going and traveled a lot. And my grandfather, after whom I am named, used to tell my father, his youngest son, 'Aroncho, Aroncho, you are the youngest and the smartest, but your brothers spent all our money throughout Europe. What am I going to leave you?'

The eldest was Avram, born before the Russian-Turkish Liberation War, that is, before 1878 and he died in 1924. His two daughters moved to Palestine before the Holocaust. The second one, Solomon, left for France very young and lived in Avignon, and he married a French Jew. He was killed during the Nazi occupation of France. His children managed to escape. My father's third brother Mordu married a Jew from Sarajevo during one of his travels. He had two sons and two daughters. They lived in Stara Zagora, but during the Holocaust were interned to Byala Slatina. His elder son left for Palestine in 1938. My uncle died in 1945 on a ship on his way to Haifa. His younger son Iosif and two daughters Roza and Luna took an active part in the movement against the fascist government in Bulgaria and were sent to prison. Because of the harsh conditions there Roza developed a serious illness and died in 1948. Iosif left for Israel in 1948 and Luna remained in Plovdiv. All except Roza have children living in Israel, but all my four cousins have already passed away. My father's sister Ester also left early for Palestine with her family – two sons and four daughters -- to build the new Jewish state. They all died already, but their children and grandchildren are still living. My father's youngest sister Marie lived in Plovdiv and had one son Mois. They left Bulgaria in 1948 and shortly after that Marie died. Mois married and became one of the founders of the agricultural cooperative movement in Israel. He also died, but he has two daughters, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

My maternal grandmother was Bohora Behar. She married twice and both times widowers, who had children from their previous marriages. So I had a lot of aunts and uncles. From her first marriage my grandmother had a daughter Hana. Her second marriage was with my grandfather Michael Behar, who had one son Isak from his first marriage. Later Hana and Isak got married. So, my mother was a sister to them both. From her second marriage my grandmother gave birth to my

mother, my aunt Marie and my uncles Mushon and Solomon. Their families moved to Israel and they have children and grandchildren. But the most interesting story is that of my aunt Marie. She became a widow during World War I and she had two little girls Sola and Ester. She didn't receive any news from her husband Haim Almor for a very long time. It was 20 years after the war ended that she was told that he had been killed and buried in the soldiers' cemetery in Skopje, where he probably died as a prisoner of war. But there was no evidence proving that. My cousins, Marie's daughters, moved to Palestine in 1932 and were among the founders of one of the kibbutzim, Miselot, and helped build contemporary Israel. Marie moved to Israel in 1948.

In the family we, the children, called my grandmother Manacheto. Bulgarian was difficult for her and we picked up Spanish (i.e. Ladino) being around her. From all my grandparents I knew only her; all the others had died long before I was born. When I was a little child I used to go to her place, she lived with one of my mother's sisters, Marie. When I went back home, I always found a clove of garlic in my pocket. Every time she hid some garlic in our pockets, mine and my sister's and cousins', against evil eyes and to keep us healthy. I remember vividly taking her to see 'Ben-Hur' in the 1930s, an American movie about the legendary Jewish hero who rebelled against the Roman Empire. She was much excited by the story and by the mystery of the moving pictures. During the Holocaust she lived with us, she didn't go out at all, but she wore the yellow star and was always worrying about us. She was very old when she left to Israel with my aunt Marie, my mother's sister. Marie's daughters left for Israel in the 1930s and lived in the Miselot kibbutz, near the town of Beth Shan. My grandmother lived with them and passed away in the mid-1950s at the age of 102. She was buried in the kibbutz cemetery. My grandfather died very young and my grandmother Bohora had to rely only on herself. I only know that he was a very skilled leather-worker.

My father was born in 1885. He was orphaned very young. His father died in 1898 and his mother Roza Almalech soon after him (in 1901). At the age of 16 he started working as an accountant in a Bulgarian company in Stara Zagora and was attracted to the socialist ideas. The Bulgarian Socialist Party was set up in 1892. But there was a congress in 1903, at which one part of the party proclaimed itself left-wing socialists [these were the future communists] and the other right-wing socialists [these were the future social democrats]. My father was present at that congress and joined the latter group. He took part in the two Balkan wars and in the First World War as an infantryman in the 12th Stara Zagora infantry regiment of the Bulgarian army. He told me that he used to shoot in the air, thinking that if he didn't kill anybody, he would not be killed either. He married my mother Zelma Michael, nee Behar, in 1919 after he returned from the war.

My mother was born in Stara Zagora and graduated the junior high school in her hometown. It is interesting to note that she was in the same class with Marina, the mother of my wife Nedyalka, and they were friends from childhood. But my mother did not get to know my wife because she died while I was still in college. She was a very nice and beautiful woman. She was a housewife and took very good care of us. She was also deeply attached to the families of her sisters and their children. Everybody, our neighbors, Bulgarians, Jews or Turks (many Turks lived in Stara Zagora then) loved her. She dressed very elegantly and paid a lot of attention to her appearance. I was very naughty as a child and I remember that when I used to go out on a walk with her, dressed in my new clothes, I would spoil them playing outside in the very first minutes. Then she would start to laugh and quickly changed my clothes. My father was the stricter one at home.

My father had a shop for textile and tailoring materials. It was one of the most visited shops in Stara Zagora. His partner was Angel Dikov, a Bulgarian. They were very good friends. When the Law for the Protection of the Nation [2](#) was passed, our property was confiscated and his partner became the sole owner of the shop. But he did not forget us and helped us financially. Later his daughter Stefka Dikova married a Jew. I also helped sometimes in the work in the shop together with some other children, but it was mainly my father and Angel who worked there. At that time the trade union of the railway workers was very strong and my father had a good connection with its branch in Stara Zagora – they bought the textile for their working clothes from him.

My father was a well-read man. I remember from my childhood that he subscribed to a number of newspapers. There were always a lot of books at home, including books from private libraries [big home libraries]. Stara Zagora was a cultural center – it had the first opera in Bulgaria, many poets, writers, artists... I continued this tradition in my family.

Growing up

My elder sister Roza Aron Natan was born in 1920. She completed her secondary education in Stara Zagora. I was born in 1924. My sister Joana was born in 1932. She was a sick and mentally undeveloped child and died in 1939 in Stara Zagora. It was very difficult for my mother to get over the death of my little sister. She was a very quiet child, who loved us all very much.

My parents respected the Jewish religion and, most of all, the Jewish nation. But we had an atheistic upbringing. [The duality of not being religious yet observing the religious traditions is typical of the whole Bulgarian population regardless of their ethnicity. There are many explanations for this. The main one is that during the Turkish rule people who were not muslim were forbidden many things, including the observance of the religious rites. Thus, the rites gradually lost their religious meaning and took on a more secular meaning.] I was a member of the Hashomer Hatzair, a leftist Zionist organization, since my childhood. My father was a distinguished social democrat ever since his youth and read lots of scholarly work and political literature, mostly Plehanov and Kautsky, but he admired most the French Jean Jaures. Yet, my father was a Jew before all and observed the traditions. But he was not a believer. My mother Zelma Almalech was more religious in that she observed very strictly all religious rules. She never ate pork and the rare times the family went to a restaurant, she never ate, because the food was not kosher. At home she insisted most on observing the traditions for each holiday.

My father often took me to the synagogue for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Pesach. On Noche di Shabbat [the eve of Sabbath in Ladino] the whole family gathered at home and my father read the prayer. On Saturday morning he went to the synagogue, but after that, since he was a merchant, he went to work. All his life he chaired the board of the Jewish school in Stara Zagora. At that time there were around 30,000 people in the town, of which 400 were Jews from different organizations – Maccabi, the Zionist sports organization, Hashomer Hatzair, Zionists and more right-wing predecessor to the present-day Likud organization. There was a rabbi, who was also a shochet. His name was Tovia and everybody loved him. One of my most vivid memories is my Bar Mitzvah, which brought together almost the whole Jewish community in town. In the synagogue they gave me a tallit to put on, I went up to the kebat and gave a speech. [The kebat is the place in the synagogue where only the rabbis and the men were allowed to stand, this is a Sephardi tradition.]

I hadn't started school yet, when, around 1929, the first car appeared in town. There were only carriages until then. In the following years we often went to a restaurant where we could listen to the radio and in 1936 my father bought a Phillips radio set, which was confiscated during the Holocaust. From my first until my fourth grade I studied in the Jewish school in Stara Zagora. The building also housed the synagogue and a canteen for the poorer Jewish families. Then I started studying in the First Junior High School in town. Every year we had to get enrolled in the school and when I was going to enroll for my third year there, the director, Mr. Ilkov, refused to accept my application, because I was a Jew. This happened in 1936. Then I enrolled in the Second Junior High School. Hitler had already taken the power in Germany and anti-Semitism was beginning to spread in Bulgaria. In 1937 my uncle Solomon, who lived in France with his family, visited us in Stara Zagora. He told my father that they should send me to the French College [3](#) and that he would pay for my education. So, I went to study in Plovdiv.

During the war

There was a Jewish bank in Stara Zagora. Its director was Buco Assa, the father of my friend Berto Assa and all its employees were Jews. In 1940 the anti-Semitic [Law for the Protection of the Nation] was passed, which seriously violated the rights of the Jews. The Jews holding shares in the Jewish bank were forced to sell their shares to Bulgarians almost for free. As a distinguished social democrat my father was against Stalin's policy of terror in the Soviet Union and despised the Nazi ideology. So, he started to fight actively against that law. That same year a representative of the government came from Sofia to give a speech against Jews in the Stara Zagora community center and there he proclaimed the ideas of Hitler and Mussolini. My father took the stage and publicly criticized the law and the government official in a very heated way. He was arrested, but since he was a very popular public figure in Stara Zagora, a social democrat and the chairman of the Jewish community, he was set free. Yet, he was forbidden to make public appearances. My little sister's illness and the rising anti-Semitism seriously affected my mother's health. Her health deteriorated considerably within the course of a week.

We had our own house with a yard, we had hens and a village girl came to help our mother. But with the adoption of the law we were allowed to have only one room and a kitchen. We were not allowed to have larger houses and we had to live in only one of the rooms. The rest of the house was confiscated by the municipality and other people were accommodated there. My sister and I, when I returned from Plovdiv for the vacations, slept in the kitchen, and my parents in the room.

Very often the members of the youth fascist organizations Brannik [4](#), Ratnik [5](#) and the Bulgarian Legions [6](#) broke our windows and wrote anti-Semitic slogans on our walls. In 1941 the authorities forbade my father to have his own shop and work in trade. In fact, he was not allowed to work at all any more. My mother's health deteriorated even more and she died on 31st July 1942 in Stara Zagora.

After the adoption of the [Law for the Protection of the Nation] our rights were severely limited. All Jews had to wear the distinctive yellow star, we were not allowed to go out before 9 o'clock in the morning and after 8 o'clock in the evening and there were times when we were allowed to go out only for 3 hours a day. We were banned from working, except if they mobilized us for some heavy physical labor. My father's shop was taken away, but his Bulgarian business partner continued to help us. We often gathered in the Jewish school, where we were not allowed to study, but still we

met there, because it was dangerous for us to stay on the streets. It was our second home. But I returned to Stara Zagora only on my vacations because I was still studying in the [French College] in Plovdiv. My father and I had to put boards on the windows, because they broke them very often.

In March 1943 we learned that we were to be sent to the Nazi death camps, and more specifically to Treblinka. (We had information about the Nazi death camps, because at that time Bulgarians could listen secretly to foreign radio stations, such as the BBC. There was also an illegal Bulgarian radio station, 'Hristo Botev', which broadcast from Moscow. Some of the Jews had relatives, who lived in other European countries and who informed them of the latest news.) At that time I was still a student in Plovdiv. My father called me at the college immediately to tell me to go back to Stara Zagora, because our family was among the first 12 families to be deported. My father had friends, railway workers, many of whom visited regularly our shop, and they had warned him that they were ordered by the government to prepare a cargo wagon for 55 people or 8 horses with two barrels inside - one full of water, the other empty... The railway workers had been ordered to lead the Jews into the wagon and seal it, but they themselves did not know its destination [The workers did not know the concrete final stop, but they knew to what place the people would be transported. The Bulgarian Jews had many Bulgarian friends, who had information and who warned them. At that time even the deputy Speaker of Parliament Dimitar Peshev and the leadership of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, knowing what was happening to the Jews in the other countries occupied by Germany, informed the people and defended the Jews before the Bulgarian government.] When I heard this, I went to the Jewish school in Plovdiv, in the Jewish quarter called 'Ota Mezar', where I had many friends. They told me that 100 families from Plovdiv had been listed to be deported to Treblinka.

I want to clarify something at this point. The Bulgarian government at that time, which was an ally to fascist Germany, signed an agreement with Germany to send 20,000 Jewish families to the death camps. After Germany occupied Yugoslavia and Greece, their governments 'returned' Macedonia (which was part of Yugoslavia) and parts of Greek Macedonia to Bulgaria - territories, which Bulgaria lost under the Neuilly treaty after World War I. 12,000 Jews from these territories were deported to the Treblinka death camp, of whom no more than ten survived. But in order to make them 20,000 the fascist government decided to add 8,000 more families from the country, choosing the most elite and distinguished Jewish families. In accordance with that decision around a hundred Jewish families were locked in the Jewish school to prepare themselves for the road to Death. Just when I went there, the local Bishop Kiril [7](#) also came and declared that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church led by the Holy Synod would not allow the Bulgarian Jews to be deported. He added that he would shelter the Plovdiv Jews in the Bishop's Residence (the town residence of the Orthodox Church in Plovdiv), but that he would never allow the trains of death to leave.

I returned to the college intending to go back to Stara Zagora the next day. Then my class teacher Père Gotie Damper, who was a French Catholic priest, called me to his room. He told me that the college director Père Ozon and he would not allow the Jewish students in the college to be sent to death. He offered me to stay in the college and said that I should not worry about food, accommodation and clothes. But there was one condition: I had to adopt the Catholic faith. He said that they had spoken with our parents and that they would issue us a document that this had happened when I enrolled in the school in 1937 so that the authorities would not be suspicious. I do not know what would have happened if I had accepted their proposal or if I would have accepted it

at all. But the same day shortly before leaving for Stara Zagora the message came that the deportation of the Jews was postponed and they could go back to their homes. The Jews in Bulgaria were defended by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, large groups of Bulgarian intellectuals, Macedonian organizations, including deputies from the ruling party in parliament.

After that the government adopted another strategy. All Jews from Sofia, who were around 30,000, were to be interned from the capital to other parts of the country. Around 100 families came to Stara Zagora; most of them were put up with local Jewish families, the others in a school. The Mevorah family came to live with us together with another young family, whose name I have forgotten. We lived together for a month, when a new governmental order came that all Jews from Stara Zagora had to be interned to other towns. This was also applied to all bigger cities in the country, but there was one more reason why it was also enforced in Stara Zagora -the headquarters of a Nazi General named List, the Commander-in-Chief of the German army for the Balkans were in our town.

In the beginning of July 1943 all Jews from Stara Zagora together with the ones who came from Sofia were dispersed to the small towns of northern Bulgaria. We were allowed only to take a few clothes. Our family was interned to the little town of Lukovit [located in northern Bulgaria, near Pleven] where we lived until September 1944. There the younger Jews, me included, were mobilized to do hard physical labor. We built roads, sometimes we were sent to do field work or to fell trees. When the people at whose place we lived found out that I had graduated from the commercial faculty of the [French College], they recommended me to the local co-operative as an accountant and I started to work there for almost no money. We lived together with my childhood friend Mony Dekalo, born in 1923. He lived with his mother, Luna Dekalo, who was widowed when he was only six years old. We felt as close as brothers and with our blessing my father and his mother married shortly after we were interned from Stara Zagora. His mother was a well-known tailor in our hometown. Mony was an active member of the UYW [8](#). He introduced me to the organization and I regarded my participation in it as my contribution to the fight against fascism. We all lived together - my father, my stepmother, my sister Roza, who did not accept easily the second marriage of our father and shortly after that she went to live with our aunt Marie (my father's sister) and Mony.

Mony asked me to go to some acquaintances of ours interned in the town of Targovishte [a town near Varna] and take a gun from them. He wanted very much to have a weapon, because he wanted to join the partisans, who were led by the Communist Party. I went illegally to Targovishte, because we were not allowed to leave the town, where we were interned. I met our acquaintances, but I was not able to take the gun. I managed to get back in the same way - going from wagon to wagon to hide from the police. My friend, now my brother, found himself a gun anyway, but he never used it. His main activity was collecting clothes, food and money for the partisans. Mony had already been a famous [UYW] member back in Stara Zagora and as early as 1943 he was taken back to Stara Zagora where the police tortured him. When he came back, he was all scarred from the tortures and only said that now that he had endured all this pain, he could endure anything.

Mony firmly decided to join the partisans. He was supposed to join a group on 1st May 1944, but there was some misunderstanding about the meeting, maybe because suddenly the weather got very cold and heavy snow started falling. He came back home, but the police identified him by the

rucksack with his baggage, which he had prepared and hid in the mountain before and which he could not find on that day. They recognized his initials embroidered on his clothes, from the time when he was working in the labor camps. The police started searching for him and one night they arrested him. We never saw him again. On 23rd May 1944 somewhere near Lukovit he was shot without trial and sentence together with two more men and a girl, who was still a student. We tried to collect money to have his case reviewed in court, so that he would win some more time, but we failed. After that I was forbidden to work in the co-operative and they fired me without paying me anything. This went on until September 1944 when our civil rights were restored.

In August 1944 a lawyer from Sofia told my father, who was chairman of the Jewish municipality in Lukovit too, that the badges would be removed soon and that we would no longer be forbidden to travel, we would be able to work in other areas than only hard physical labor in the Jewish labor camps. But we would not have the right to return to our homes in the bigger towns. On 20th September 1944 we were all already back in Stara Zagora. I am sure that if it were not for this nightmare, my mother would not have died so young; my brother-in-law would be alive now, as well as many of my Jewish friends from Plovdiv who had joined the Communist Party, because it was against Nazi Germany.

While we were still interned to Lukovit, in August 1943, I received two call-up orders from the army – one from the region of this town and the other from the Stara Zagora garrison. But I ignored them both. I did not want to serve in the army of a country, which was persecuting Jews. They wanted to put me on trial in August 1944, but I did not show up in court. The Soviet armies had almost reached the Bulgarian borders and the end of the fascist rule in Bulgaria was near. After 9th September 1944 [9](#) when we returned to Stara Zagora, I received once again a summons to appear in court, because I had not responded to the call-up orders. I explained why I did not go, that this was not a normal army and we Jews were tortured enough in the hard military labor camps. In the end I was not convicted. After two months, in December 1944 I received a call-up order from the Bulgarian National Army and I served two months in the anti-tank brigade of the Stara Zagora garrison. Then the War Ministry, as it was called then, decided that all people who had suffered during the previous regime, who had been interned, sent to labor camps or to prison because of political reasons, were exempt from the army for one year to restore their health. I used that time to enroll as a student in the Higher Institute of Economics in Sofia. In this way I put off my military service for five years. But in 1950 I could put it off no longer. I served 10 months in the labor corps, only 10, because my previous two months served were also recognized. I also served one year less, because I had a family.

Post-war

I married Nedyalka Nikolova, nee Dineva, in 1948. She was born in 1928 in Stara Zagora. She is Bulgarian. Her parents and she herself were from Stara Zagora too. Our families knew each other; they had even done shopping in our shop sometimes. Her mother Marinka and my mother Zelma had been classmates as children. But I got acquainted to Nedyalka in the end of 1944 when she came to study in Sofia. We were inseparable after that and later we married. Our daughter Zelma Eshua Almalech was born in 1950 and our son Mony Eshua Almalech in 1954. My wife has a degree in history. We are both journalists. While I was still studying at the university in 1945, I started working as a journalist for the 'Sotsialisticheska Mladej' ['Socialist Youth'] newspaper, then for the

'Narod' ['Nation'] newspaper, published by the social democratic party and when it stopped appearing in 1947, I started working for the newly founded 'Narodna Mladej' ['National Youth']. I headed the Interior Affairs department and the Sports department there and worked there until 1958. From 1958 until 1971 I worked at 'Naroden Sport' ['National Sport'] and then, until my retirement in 1986 at the illustrated sports weekly 'Start'. I was one of its founders and headed the International Affairs department. Later I became its secretary-in-chief.

My father Aron Almalech was always an ardent Zionist. He was the chief secretary of the Mapai. [Before it became an Israeli party, Mapai was a Jewish social democratic party. It was represented in international bodies such as the Socialist International, for example.] He accompanied Ben Gurion when he came to Bulgaria for the first time in the middle of the 1940s. When the Israel state was founded in 1948, my father received an invitation by the Israeli government to become a 'sheliach', that is, the chairman of the Sochnut in Bulgaria. One of the first diplomats, Ben Zur, ambassador in Vienna and responsible for the whole of Eastern Europe, came to Bulgaria to hand him the invitation. My father exercised this duty until he left for Israel in 1954. My father was a distinguished social democrat, and as early as 1946 in Stara Zagora he was invited to run for MP from this party. But then came the heated division between the parties, which formed the coalition Fatherland Front [10](#) against the fascist government. After the 9th September victory the communists started following closely the Soviet and pro-Stalinist policy, while their other allies did not agree with it and formed an opposition, which my father joined. He did not manage to become an MP because many social democrats were sent to the communist jails. He was also sent to jail for a couple of days because he had spoken against the dictatorship in Stara Zagora. But I was able to have him released with the help of some friends of mine and of my friend Mony Dekalo. I took him to Sofia where he worked for the Jewish organization and no longer took part in politics. My father's second wife, Luna Almalech, lived in Sofia with us until 1954. Then my parents left for Israel and lived in Tel Aviv until my father died in 1977. Luna settled in an old people's home in Rishon Letzion near Tel Aviv where she died in 1981.

When the first Bulgarian Jews started leaving for Israel, my father was most eager, he even organized groups. All my relatives and friends started leaving. I was already working as a journalist and I liked my job very much. I knew that I could not work as a journalist in Israel because I did not know the language and I was not sure if I could learn it well enough to be able to write articles in it as well as I can write in Bulgarian. This was the main reason, but I was also deeply attached to the Bulgarian nation – after [9th September 1944] the attitude towards Jews was wonderful. I also love Bulgarian nature. Unlike my father I joined the left wing of the social democratic party, which united with the communists. I became a member of the Communist Party. I married a Bulgarian woman. So, I decided not to leave for Israel, but I believe that everybody has the right to make his or her own choice where to live. I have always kept in touch with (my relatives) – through letters, visits. I went to Israel for the first time in 1957. I have visited them many times since then. We even sent our daughter Zelma, when she was 8 years old, to her grandparents and my sister Roza for the whole summer in 1958. In 1960 my wife and my son also spent the summer with them. Roza, her husband, Izidor Natan and their son Amnon, left for Israel in 1948. They lived in Ramle together with her husband's parents. In 1970 they moved to Tel Aviv. Her husband died in 1971. She still lives in Tel Aviv.

When we learned about the process against the Jewish doctors in the Soviet Union [the Doctors' Plot [11](#)] from the newspapers, my father had not left for Bulgaria yet. My wife Nedyalka and he thought that this was some kind of provocation by the Stalinist regime. I admit I was in two minds. The communist regime forbade listening to foreign radio stations such as the BBC, Deutsche Welle, Free Europe, the Voice of America. But my wife and I were journalists and we listened to them. In 1956 after the events in Hungary, I started having doubts about socialism, all the more when most of Stalin's atrocities became public. [Eshua is referring to the Hungarian revolution against the Soviet type communist regime in Hungary.] But in 1968 after the Soviet armies [i.e. the armies of the Warsaw Pact] occupied Prague, I just could not accept it despite my leftist orientation.

My children grew up in a democratic atmosphere at home. In the old passports issued to all Bulgarian citizens when they become 16 years old, there was a column 'nationality'. When they were old enough to be issued passports, they both wrote 'Jew' in it. Although my wife Nedyalka is a Bulgarian, after she spent a couple of years with my stepmother Luna, she learned the Jewish cuisine. Later when we lived with her parents, they also got to like our cuisine. Both the Jewish and the Christian holidays have been observed in our family. We lived together with Nedyalka's parents in Sofia until they passed away. My wife's mother died in 1973 and her father died in 1980. At that time our children Zelma and Mony had already married and Nedyalka and I lived alone. We often get together with their families, especially on the Jewish and personal holidays. We have almost never observed the Christian holidays since the death of my wife's parents.

After the Israeli-Arab war in 1967 and the events in Czechoslovakia, my wife Nedyalka was fired from Sofia radio, where she worked as a journalist, because as they told her, she was married to a Jew and had a Jewish family name. During that time the director of the National Radio was the Jew Albert Cohen, a distinguished journalist and writer. He was also fired. I often traveled abroad as a sports journalist. I loved my job, but every time there was some possibility for promotion, they hinted to me, sometimes delicately, sometimes directly, that I was a Jew and this was impossible. But the most significant case was with my daughter. She completed her university degree in journalism with excellent marks at the Sofia University in 1974. While she studied at the university, she often worked for the Bulgarian National Television and the documentaries department wanted her to start working for them full-time. During that time there was a personnel department in every company, which researched every potential employee in order to find out if he or she was suitable. The research was done mainly for political reasons and for a media such as the Bulgarian National Television the selection was even stricter. They told my daughter that she could not work in the television as an editor unless she changed her name. She flatly refused, saying that she would find another job. But her colleagues and immediate editors-in-chief were very angry when they heard about that and after much insistence on their part, she was given the job. After some time it became known that there was an unwritten order that the recruitment of people with non-Bulgarian names was not advisable, even though they were Bulgarian citizens.

Both my son and my daughter feel Jews. My son is one of the best experts in Hebrew in Bulgaria. He completed a degree in Bulgarian philology at Sofia University and specialized in the area of linguistics. He is a Doctor of Philology and he studied for three years at the Jerusalem University. Now he works in the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. He is preparing for print a Hebrew-Bulgarian and Bulgarian-Hebrew dictionary. He is also the author of a Bulgarian-Hebrew phrase book and scholarly articles on Judaism and Hebrew. Although he lives in Bulgaria now, he is an Israeli citizen.

He is married. His wife Tanya has two daughters from her first marriage.

My daughter worked for more than 27 years in the Bulgarian National Television first as an editor and later as editor-in-chief of the cultural programs and as a member of the board of the directors of the national television. From the beginning of this year, she works in the 'Marketing and Public Relations' department of the Anubis Publishing House. Being a journalist, my daughter also writes regularly on the issues related to Judaism and more particularly, to Bulgarian Jews. She completed the course 'The Role of Media in Civil Society' offered by the Israeli Foreign Affairs Ministry and she has many publications related to Israel and the problems of anti-Semitism. She is a member of the board of directors of the 'Bulgarian-Jewish Cultural Relations' foundation.

She has two children – a son, David Djambazov, who completed his university education in the USA and now works there, and a daughter Irina Djambazova, who is now in the 11th grade of the trade and banking high school in Sofia. Zelma's husband, Stephan Djambazov is also a journalist. Let me tell you an interesting story. The parents of my son-in-law Stephan divorced when he was 2-3 years old. He lived with his mother when he married my daughter in 1977. When he told his parents that he wanted to marry a Jew, his father was against it. Stephan's mother told me that. She was present at this conversation and reacted very angrily. She was a Bulgarian, but had cousins, who had adopted Judaism and now live in Israel. I shared with you this story, because although Bulgarians are tolerant as a whole, there are always some prejudiced people, who are not only against Jews, but also against other minorities in Bulgaria.

I think that one of the most important events of the 20th century is the fall of the Berlin Wall. But the road to democracy after so many years of stagnation is not easy. What's more, people living under hard conditions start blaming the minorities for their hardships. Even in Bulgaria some translations of Nazi and anti-Jewish books have appeared. Skinheads also appeared, although not on such a big scale as in other European countries. These tendencies are a bit dangerous and although they are not very popular, they remind me of the ideas of the fascist organizations during the Holocaust in Bulgaria. Some of their leaders emigrated from Bulgaria in the past, but now although they are very old, they have started to come back. They claim to be victims of the communist regime, although they in fact have fascist orientation, in particular their former ideologist Ivan Dochev. I am worried by all these things...

Now I often go to the Jewish Center, I do not miss the holidays in the synagogue and I often go there. My children also visit us during the holidays and we celebrate them together. Few Jews have remained in Bulgaria, maybe around 5,000, because after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, many young and not so young people left for Israel. I have visited Israel many times. Especially since 1989 I have been going there almost every year. I take an active interest in what is happening in Israel and feel for the Israeli people, but I prefer to live in Bulgaria. This split is very typical for the Bulgarian Jews, because we have always lived in understanding with the Bulgarians and the exceptions due to political reasons or individual actions have not spoilt our relations. This split is also nostalgia for the relatives and for Israel, but when I am there, I feel the same for Bulgaria, which is after all my home country. I am a Jew from Bulgaria.

Translated by Ivelina Karcheva

1. April Rebellion: The biggest uprising in Bulgaria against five-centuries of Ottoman rule. It took place in 1876 and failed.
2. Law for the Protection of the Nation: Law adopted by the National Assembly in December 1940 and promulgated on 23rd January 1941, according to which Jews did not have the right to own shops and factories. Jews living in the center of Sofia were forced to move to the outskirts of the town. The internment of Jews in certain designated towns was legalized, in preparation for their deportation to concentration camps.
3. French College: An elite Catholic college teaching French language and culture and subsidized by the French Carmelites. It was closed in 1944.
4. Brannik: Pro-fascist youth organization. It was founded 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.
5. Ratniks: The Ratniks, like the Branniks, were also members of a nationalist organization. They advocated a return to national values. The word 'rat' comes from the Old Bulgarian root meaning 'battle', i.e. 'Ratniks' fighters, soldiers.
6. Bulgarian Legions: Union of the Bulgarian National Legions. The UBNL was a pro-fascist non-governmental organization, established in 1930. It aimed at building a corporate totalitarian state on the basis of military centralism, following the model of Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy. It existed until 1944.
7. Bishop Kiril: In 2002 Bishop Kiril was recognized as one of the Righteous Among the Nations by the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem.
8. UYW: The Union of Young Workers. A communist youth organization, which was legally established in 1928 as a sub-organization of the Bulgarian Communist Youth Union. After the coup d'état in 1934, when the 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.
9. 9th September 1944: The day the communists officially took power in Bulgaria.
10. Fatherland Front: After 1945 in Bulgaria the so-called Fatherland Front was created. It was a broad left-wing political coalition, including the social-democratic party, etc., which meant to lead communists to absolute power.
11. Doctors' Plot: The so-called Doctors' Plot was a set of accusations deliberately forged by Stalin's government and the KGB against Jewish doctors in the Kremlin hospital charging them with the murder of outstanding Bolsheviks. The Plot was started in 1952, but was never finished because Stalin died in 1953.