

# Sultana Yulzari

**Interviewer: Patricia Nikolova**

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*Sultana Sinto Yulzari is a calm and caring talker. Despite her age – she is 88 years old – she never lost her sense of humor, nor did she lose the analytical attitude to the events that happened in her life. Few people of her age in Bulgaria are grateful and satisfied with the pensioners' way of life. However, she enjoys the incessant cares and the patient attitude of her dedicated relatives. Sultana in return – as far as she is in a position to, of course – pays them like for like. The door of her modest apartment in Ruse is always open for her friends from the Jewish community, who have always been around, especially since the period of the Law for the Protection of the Nation [1](#) and the Holocaust.*

My ancestors came from Spain. Like the other Sephardim [2](#) in Bulgaria and the neighboring countries, they were expelled by the Spanish Queen Isabel in 1492 [3](#). I don't know where exactly they passed through, but they decided to permanently settle in Bulgaria. They led a calm life, absolutely in conformity with the Bulgarian nation during the Turkish Yoke as well as after the Liberation of Bulgaria [1877-1878] [4](#). Of course they spoke with each other in Ladino [5](#), and outside their houses – Bulgarian and Turkish.

I can't tell exactly how my ancestors earned their living, nor what precisely their style of dressing was, nor what customs they had and how they were tempered. In any case, what I know for sure is that my paternal grandfather, Samuel Beniesh, was a rabbi and a chazzan in the Sephardic synagogue in the town of Ruse. My grandmother, Sultana Beniesh – unfortunately I don't know her maiden name –, like all other women of that time, was a housewife and was dedicated to the upbringing of the children.

One of Sultana and Samuel Beniesh's four children was my father, Sinto Samuel Beniesh. He had three sisters – Chorsi, Mazal and a third, whose name I can't remember. As a matter of fact, I don't know anything about them. I have no information on my paternal grandparents' sisters or brothers either.

The names of my maternal grandfather and grandmother were Maier and Matilda Farchi. I don't know the maiden name of my maternal granny. My mother's family were Romanian Jews, born in Giurgevo. I am not familiar with the reason why they came to live in Ruse. They immigrated to Bulgaria at the beginning of the last century. I have no information how religious they were or if they were religious at all.

My granny didn't have much education and was, as most of the women those days, a housewife, a mother of three children and a widow. Her daughters were called Rashel – my mother –, Malvina and Clara. I have no information about Malvina and Clara's life stories.

Granny Matilda died in Ruse in the period of the Law for the Protection of the Nation – in 1943. The cause of her death had nothing to do with the fascism of the time. I remember she was very old, 73 years old, ill, as she had some infection in her mouth, and exhausted. I remember that at the moment of her death, Dr. Chuhovski was by her side. A very good doctor, a Bulgarian. Unfortunately he couldn't save her.

Her husband had died three or four decades before her in Giurgevo. Why he had returned there, I don't know. It is just that it didn't occur to me to ask my parents such questions when I was young. They didn't tell me anything about their brothers and sisters.

I know, however, that Grandpa Maier had a very well-known brother in Bucharest, the owner of the famous retail chain 'Parrot.' My father was a worker at one of his brother's shops. And he offended him somehow. I would give anything to learn the name of this brother, but, unfortunately, I can't.

My father was a tradesman and a craftsman – he manufactured umbrellas in his own workshop, which he sold in a shop he owned. He was a great Zionist, but he was not a member of any Zionist society and did not participate in any political party. I remember he was eager for our family to immigrate to Palestine, yet before Israel was constituted as a country. That is, his dream dates back to about 1920.

Then word got around in the Jewish community in Ruse that land lots were being offered for sale in Karmel. And my father let himself be duped. He sold out our hut, renounced his right over the lot, and gave all the money to a certain Robert Levi, who was promising he would buy land lots in Karmel for us, and we would go there, of course, we would immigrate. But this didn't happen.

There were 'feudal lords' in what was then Palestine, who sold land to Bulgarian Jews, and probably to Jews from other parts of Europe, too. The offer was placed through an intermediary. And this intermediary represented an enterprise popular at the time. I don't remember where it was headquartered or its name. In any case, this enterprise extended credits to the people here for buying land lots there.

Thus we moved to live in the house of my maternal grandmother and grandfather – Matilda and Maier Farchi. As a child, I used to live for a long period of time with the thought of Israel in my mind, and every year I was convinced when saying, 'Leshana Habaa Beyerushalaim' [Hebrew for 'Next Year in Jerusalem'].

My father studied law, but unfortunately never completed his studies. He studied in Brasov, Romania. He studied there at the beginning of the last century, most probably in 1919, although I am not absolutely sure about the date. [Editor's note: The Transylvanian city has been a part of Romania since 1920, when it was detached from Hungary. During the studies of the interviewee's father the city belonged to Austria-Hungary; it became part of Romania only later.]

I remember dad as a very good and considerate father and husband. He was, however, of a very strict nature. This characteristic feature was directed especially toward us, the children. We were afraid of him a lot. When my mother used to say, 'Your father's coming' – we, the two sisters, rushed and straight away laid the table. Before his arrival everything had to be ready. And when he sat at the table the bread and the water-jug were at his side. He used to take the bread, slice and ration it. After that he would take the water-jug and pour every one of us a glass. Then he would

say a prayer. And it was not before that that we could start eating.

My father was a very religious man, following the example of his father, Samuil Beniesh, who was a rabbi and a chazzan of the local synagogue, as I've already mentioned. My father not only observed strictly all Jewish traditions and celebrated all religious holidays such as Pesach, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, Sukkot, Lag ba-Omer, and Tu bi-Shevat. There was more. He had put aside some dishes for kosher food and separate dishes for the rest of the food. [Editor's note: The interviewee probably refers to the separation of dishes for dairy and meat products, and not to kosher and non-kosher ones. In a religious family non-kosher food is, of course, not tolerated.] We had separate forks and plates for cheese [dairy] and for meat.

The fact that we had separate dishes for kosher and non-kosher food does not exclude the idea that our family wasn't very religious. This means that the dishes for kosher food were used only on Pesach, while we used the other dishes for non-kosher food throughout the year, as all the religious Jewish families used to do at that time. [Editor's note: Sultana probably means the separation of dishes for Passover from the ordinary dishes. Religious families, of course, ate only kosher all the time.]

Pesach was a very important holiday for our family, although in certain cases my mum and dad stepped away from the norms of the tradition as they didn't always observe the kashrut on Pesach – but this was not an exception from the way the things are in a Jewish family, especially nowadays. [Editor's note: The family was probably moderately religious, not strictly following the kashrut.]

Therefore the secret breaking of the ritual does not put a cast on my mother's religiosity. It just means a less degree of self-control and self-discipline as compared to the high, I would say, fanatic religiosity of my father. This weakness of my mother does not exclude the idea for good religious upbringing of the children, including my upbringing.

Only we, the kids, knew of this 'vicious' habit of hers. In our house the kashrut was observed. When Pesach was nearing we started a clean-up of the whole house, and everything for everyday use was taken into the basement wherefrom clean dishes were fetched.

Besides, my dad had a separate room, jam-packed with prayer books and other religious books, where he used to seclude himself to read at ease, uninterrupted by us, the children. Quite frankly, we were afraid to enter this room.

My mother, Rashel Maier Beniesh, nee Farchi, was also religious but with some exceptions. In other words, she was not as fanatic as my father. I should mention that my mom used to eat secretly pork at home. But as a whole my mother was a freedom-loving woman. She had graduated from the 'Santa Maria' French Girls' High School in Ruse, which was financially supported by the Catholics.

To a certain extent my mother was conservative, because she insisted that women knew how to sew and clean, rather than know as much as men do. Mum was a member of the Ruse women organization WIZO [6](#), but in spite of that she was conservative to a great extent.

I was born in 1916 in Ruse. I grew up in a family of five. We were three children. I am the eldest. After me came my brother Samuel Sinto Beniesh [1919-1992] and my sister Matilda Sinto Beniesh,

nee Melnik. My brother was three years younger than me; my sister was younger by ten years; she was born in 1926. We were a united family.

I had a nice and worriless childhood in Ruse. I enjoyed having a lot of friends, especially in my early years, when I studied up to the fourth grade in the Jewish school in Ruse. At that time my friends were mainly Jews. After that, when I had to continue my education at a high school, my friends were chiefly Bulgarians.

I am glad we kept our friendly relationships even after finishing school, although we were already married women and had our own children. Good friends of mine were the Bulgarian Atina Georgieva, who is not alive any longer, the Jew Viki Mashiah, and especially the Armenian Madlen Sholaen, who now lives in Budapest. I have unforgettable memories from this place, because she kindly invited me to visit her many years ago, she took me to all the fascinating sights of the wonderful Budapest.

As a child I participated in Maccabi [7](#). I was never a member of Hashomer Hatzair [8](#). As a matter of fact, Maccabi and Hashomer Hatzair had great ideological arguments then in Ruse. Hashomer Hatzair was a very leftist, strongly Zionist Jewish youth organization. Whereas Maccabi was also Zionist, but above all – a Jewish youth physical training organization.

There was another youth's organization, 'Nikra,' which focused on culture. I participated in it also. We often gathered and speeches were given on various issues connected with culture. In its essence it was a Zionist organization, without supporting the leftist views, for example, of Hashomer Hatzair. From this viewpoint I was a Zionist since my earliest years, and even – a revisionist. It was later that I started to share the leftist political views.

Besides, in this organization they educated us by letting us know about popular Jewish persons, such as Theodor Herzl [9](#), for example. They developed in us a feeling of patriotism and unity. However, I cannot remember who in particular held the lectures and who entertained us. I clearly remember, though, that we regularly attended interesting discussions on Israel and on the activity of our organization, 'Nikra.'

In 1935 I graduated from the French Girls' High School in Ruse. Before that I had studied at the local Jewish junior high school. After finishing high school I was sent to Varna, where those days lived one of my aunts, childless. I had to stay there for two years to learn to sew, studying at the business school. At the end of 1930s I returned to Ruse.

In fact, my dream was to study medicine, but my parents were strongly against it. The reason was that they were conservative with regards to the place a woman should occupy in society and, especially, in the family.

My brother studied in a polytechnic high school in Varna. But he didn't manage to receive higher education. He was a tradesman in Bulgaria. He immigrated to Israel in 1949 and had two families there. As a matter of fact, he married in Bulgaria and from his native Ruse he moved for a while to Sofia, where his first wife was from. Unfortunately I have no idea what my brother did for a living in Sofia. The only thing I remember is that in Ruse he helped out in our dad's shop and produced small jewelry items, such as small mirrors, for example, which he sold. His first wife died in a car crash.

He remarried but his second wife also died, of leukemia. He had two daughters, both are from his second marriage, I think. The first – is married, with three children, already grown up. The second one didn't marry, but she has a child. An adopted girl. My brother's elder daughter is called Shelly and her husband – Freddy. Their three children are Nelly, Shay and Roman. The second daughter, Michal, works as a teacher at the University in Jerusalem, but I don't know her subject.

In Israel, my brother Sami worked as an employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He was in charge of the people repatriated back to Israel, but I don't know what exactly his occupation was. In any case, I think he mastered Arabic. He died in 1992 in an old people's home, but I can't say where exactly. Before that, however, he lived with his family in Bat Yam.

My sister's fate is interesting. She carried through her plan of studying medicine in Bulgaria, although my parents were against it because, as I mentioned before, their views on a woman's place in society and in family were rather conservative.

Mati managed to complete her medical education in Bulgaria, and in 1949 she immigrated to Israel. She continued studying medicine there for three more years, after that she graduated as a doctor, served in the army, and then she immigrated to the USA where she lives with her family down to the present day. Now she is a widow but has an own psychiatric cabinet in Houston and is satisfied. From time to time Mati sends me some money, which helps us make both ends meet in Ruse.

The town was then divided into quarters. Jews were not allowed to live in the center. A little bit farther from the center was the Jewish neighborhood. Even the local Jewish Community Center, Bet Am [10](#) was there, on Dondukov Street. Next to the Jewish neighborhood was the Armenian neighborhood, and next to it the Turkish one. It was typical for every ethnic quarter to have its own school and own cultural center, where the respective community gathered. There were two markets in the town – a big and a small one.

The market day in Ruse was a great event for my family and me, especially when I was a child. We always used to go to the big market with my mother and my father. There were our favorite sellers there. We used to buy products for our winter supplies, took them home and stored them in our basement, and we had a big basement, too. I was very glad when we bought water-melons or pumpkins. We also put them in the basement, which served us as a fridge.

We lived in the house of my maternal grandparents which was situated in the Jewish neighborhood in Ruse, on Klementina Street. It was a big house. It consisted of three large and cold rooms with high ceilings and two kitchens, one of which was a summer kitchen. We didn't have a garden with fruits, but instead we had a yard with a small hut. We had even running water.

In the period of the Law for the Protection of the Nation, in 1943, when some Jewish families from Sofia were interned to Ruse, we were nine people living in that house. The Primo family was then accommodated with us; a father, a mother, a son, and a daughter. Besides, one of my aunts from Varna, Malvina Geron, also lived there. Her husband, Salomon Geron, was a tradesman and owned a large shop in Varna. She was a housewife. They moved to Ruse only during the Law for the Protection of the Nation.

After 1944 they returned to Varna and from there, in a year or two, they immigrated to Israel. In those days all my relatives had already immigrated to Israel. Mainly because of the fear that fascism might arise again Bulgaria. And because of the worry that socialism might take everything from them, so that they would be deprived of their property.

When I was small I made friends only with Jews. Later most of my friends were Bulgarian. From my early years I remember a boy, Mashiakh, and another boy, whose name I can't recall. And a girl, Malta. Then Beraha, Levi. In our free time we often played with dolls, we collected the clothes from the hangers of our parents wardrobes and made dolls of them.

In the girls high school I already had Bulgarians for friends. I knew Bulgarian as early as a child, because I communicated with Bulgarian children in the street, where we played together. We were 15 girls in our class, three of which were Jews. The last of them died in Israel. We had nuns for teachers. However they didn't divide us in 'Jews' and 'Bulgarians.' But when they taught us the gospel we, the Jews, had to go out. We didn't have separate Jewish religious classes.

The other two Jewish girls from our class were Viki Meshiakh and Frida Eshkenazi. I still keep in touch with Viki. She is the one who calls me on the phone from Israel, because it is cheaper for her. She tells me how she goes playing bridge in Tel Aviv, at a place where women gather. We communicated only in Bulgarian. Viki has a daughter, married in Ramah Hasharon. She often tells me stories of her life. But I know nothing else about what happened to my friend in Israel.

Generally speaking, I was a polyglot: Ladino, Bulgarian, Spanish – which I learned because of Ladino – French, Turkish, Romanian, Ivrit. I say 'I was' because it has been a long time now that I haven't had anybody with whom to practice the languages I learned as a child.

Ladino was my mother tongue. I learned Spanish in my family, as my parents spoke both Ladino and Spanish; Romanian – as I've already mentioned my maternal grandmother came from Giurgevo in Romania. When a secret had to be told at home they spoke Romanian, so we learned it by ourselves out of childish curiosity, probably because we wanted to know by all means what they were talking about.

We also learned German out of curiosity. Moreover I studied German, French and Bulgarian at the high school. I learned English many years after that when I attended courses. Otherwise, mom and dad used to speak only Spaniol, as Bulgarian Jews usually call Ladino, at home.

Turkish I learned from the gypsy women that came home to help with the household. They spoke between each other in Turkish. I learned it from them.

Ivrit I learned in the Jewish school. I was taught by adon ['Mister' in Ivrit] Goldschmidt and Lea, who had come from Israel specially to teach us. I have no idea if they were a family.

Subsequently, in the high school, my favorite subjects were chemistry and Latin. We are speaking of the French girls' high school 'Santa Maria' which was half-classical. My dream was then to become a pharmacist. Well, I didn't become one. My mother, who was conservative, used to say, 'A woman must know how to cook and to bring up children rather than study.' When I finished high school I was sent to Varna to my childless aunt. I was already between 19 and 20 years old then. I studied for two years in Varna. After that I got married.



My husband's name is Mois Eliezer Yulzari. He was born and grew up in Pleven. The truth is that I didn't know him long before our wedding. We hadn't been friends beforehand. We didn't have common things from our past, nor did we have common friends.

Our marriage was arranged. Our matchmaker was one of my cousins from Pleven, who understood he was a good boy and decided to recommend him to my parents. It was not for me to say then. So we got engaged. And we married four months later. That happened in 1940.

We had a religious wedding; there were no civil marriages then. [Civil marriages were introduced after 9th September 1944]. My husband was a communist, but despite that he entered a synagogue in order to marry me. The wedding was nice. But the things got worse after that; my husband was mobilized 75 days after our marriage as a frontier guard at the south border, near the village of Lyubimets. Thank Goodness he came back alive and well.

After Mois came back from the frontier we set off for Pleven because he was from Pleven and I had to follow him there being his wife. We lived there two years, but these were war years, you know. In the period when we lived in Pleven, our house was situated at the highest spot in the town and it was the highest building. In Musala Street.

In these days I gave birth to my daughter, Buena - in 1941. The children then were born at home. We didn't go to hospitals as they do today. And I remember us staying at the windows on 1st March 1941 watching the Germans arriving. It was not a pleasant vision.

Then came the period of the Holocaust which in Bulgaria took the form of the infamous Law for the Protection of the Nation. We came back to Ruse upon our own decision. And my husband was at forced labor camps [11](#) for three years. Our men went to forced labor camps in March and came back in November. He was taken to five camps. And I was afraid and I was awaiting his return as soon as possible. Husbands usually returned to their wives in an awful condition - infested with lice and overstrained. But at least they hadn't been beaten.

My husband was sent to the village of Rebrovo, then Mikre, Lovech region, then Lakatnik and Ugarchin, where roads were built. I remember that 1943 was our toughest year. Because they were dismissed from a camp, but subsequently were given instruments to start work again. And he was sent to Veselinovo, Shumen region, where 1944 found him. But he was impatient to get free and escaped from the camp. Then he came to me. I told him to go back to Veselinovo because I was afraid. 'It doesn't make sense,' he said, 'the war is over.'

In this period - during the Law for the Protection of the Nation - they often sounded the alarm for air-raids in Ruse. Then in the Jewish neighborhood we were surrounded by Bulgarians who were accommodated in the expropriated apartments of Jews. They used to run to hide in the air-raid shelters and we used to go home, gather in the garden and wait. Even my father ran home from the shop. There we gathered all shivering: my aunt from Varna, the children, my mum and dad, and my daughter [Buena], who was already born. It was very hard.

As a matter of fact, I have to specify a detail. In the period of the Law for the Protection of the Nation neither our furniture, nor even my father's shop got broken by the authorities, nor were they touched by whomever else at all. The reason was that my father had a military cross for bravery, which granted him special rights, despite being a Jew. This cross was either from the First

Balkan War [12](#) or from the Second Balkan War [13](#). I don't know why he had participated in both the wars. But when I was born he was still a soldier.

In fact there was an anti-Semitic reaction well before 1940. The so-called 'National Defense.' Against me personally there were no such things. But against the Jewish community there were some outbursts of anti-Semitism. For example we gathered to celebrate a certain Jewish holiday always fearing that we can get attacked, but it didn't happen. The Jews then gathered ready to protect themselves.

After 9th September 1944 [14](#) a great joy set in. But it didn't last for long because in 1947 my nearest and dearest immigrated to Israel. We remained only my husband, our two children and I. My father's house was sold out and we had to find another home.

The brightest day in my life was 9th September 1944. Yet in 1944 I applied and was accepted as a member of the communist party. I have maintained my leftist views ever since and even now I keep them by paying my membership dues regularly.

As a matter of fact 9th September 1944 is also the reason for our decision not to immigrate. Because my husband and I thought that after this bright date good times for Jews, for Bulgarians and for all people had to come by all means. As it turned out we weren't disappointed in our hopes. We remained in Ruse, together with three or four more families that completely shared our views, such as the Beracha family, for example.

I had promised to myself that my children wouldn't live in poverty as I did once. I remember it clearly that we didn't have money for clothing when I was to finish high school and when I was a school-leaver. At that time my dad asked one of my cousins, who was better-off than we were, to sew for me new clothes. And finally I had to go to her and thank her. And it was a severe slap on my human dignity. I wanted my children never to feel such lack and humiliation.

My life after 9th September 1944 was calm. We weren't well-off, but we had everything we needed. My husband was a director of 'Toplivo' [a big state-owned company for coal and timber] for twenty years. I want to emphasize that my husband and I never had any problems at work because of our origin.

In 1946 I gave birth to my son, Shemuel Sinto Yulzari, and my daughter, Buena, was then already six years old. We brought them up as Jews and because of that they have had Jewish identity since their early years.

At present my son is an associate professor in child pedagogy at the Veliko Turnovo University. He had been a teacher at the Institute of Pedagogy for a long time, after that he became a Ph.D., later – an associate professor. His wife worked as an engineer in a plant in Ruse, but she got dismissed and now works in a grocer's shop.

I am proud of my three grandchildren: Irena, Mois and Stela. Irena Cestnik, born in 1962, is the daughter of my daughter Buena Mois Cestnik, nee Yulzari, whereas Mois Yulzari, born in 1973, and Stela Dimitrova, born in 1976, are the children of my son Sinto Mois Yulzari. All of my grandchildren are, as people say, 'pure-blooded' Jews.



The wife of my son Sinto Mois Yulzari is called Sima Nissim Mayer. The family name of my daughter's husband is Cestnik. Their daughter, Irena Cestnik, is a teacher of Ivrit in the Jewish school in Sofia. She is 42 years old, not married.

Two of my grandchildren, however, already have mixed marriages. They are my son's children: Stela Dimitrova and Mois Yulzari. Stela married Nikolay Dimitrov, who is from Yambol, in 2003. Now they live and work in Varna and she is expecting a baby. Mois married Nevena – I know next to nothing about her – in 2000. Now they live and work in Ruse and are also expecting a baby.

My first occupation after 1944 was that of an ordinary statistician. After that I became a planner – in charge of the plans in the Ruse state-owned enterprise for transport and cargo vehicles 'DATA' [state-owned automobile enterprise]. I started working there in 1950. I was a planner in the cargo department. Apart from the cargo department there was also a passenger department. The cargo department was engaged only in goods, transportation of some materials for other enterprises. The passenger department focused on transportation of passengers out of the town, the town buses.

I planned what we loaded and what we unloaded in accordance with different conditions. At the beginning everything was measured in tons/kilometers. After that everything got dependant on the indices of the revenue.

I worked there for 21 years. I retired in 1971. Even after my retirement they used to invite me to work for three or four months a year. They used to give big bonuses. In fact I worked this way from 1971 to 1983. I made the plan in accordance with various indices – average and technical speed or average and trade speed. These are the factors that influence the fulfillment of the plan.

I felt very well as a working pensioner. Something more: I stopped receiving my pension for one year and an additional year was added to my length of service. It happened in 1973. I decided to increase my length of service because I had started working very late – I was 30 years old after I had brought up my children.

As a pensioner I traveled a lot in the country and abroad. I visited the West – Stockholm and places in the Soviet Union – many of the towns, three or four times. I saw Istanbul, Athens and others. We are speaking of tourist trips here, of course.

My father, my mother, my sister and my brother all immigrated to Israel in 1949. I didn't immigrate to Israel for ideological reasons. My husband was a member of the Bulgarian Communist Party [BCP]. I stayed in Bulgaria because of him. I shared his views. I am still a member of the Bulgarian Socialist Party [BSP]. I don't go to party meetings any more, but I regularly pay my duties.

At present both my brother's daughters live in Israel together with their families. We still keep in touch. They came to visit us and I visited them twice: in 1959 and in 1960. I have never had any problems concerning political matters or any other problems connected with my trips to Israel or my keeping the relationship with the nearest and dearest.

When I was back from Israel I was always carrying presents for my colleagues – Bulgarians. I used to bring them ball-point pens, because in Bulgaria at that time people wrote with pens, that is, penholders dipped in ink, and the modern ball-point pens were still unknown. Before my departures it was these friends who saw me off.

Nobody has ever said anything bad to me. Something more – in 1963 the director of the enterprise where I worked invited my sister together with her husband to have a look at our modernized enterprise during their visit to Bulgaria.

I knew they were leading terrible wars in Israel. The brother of my brother's wife was killed in 1948 [15](#). Was it the first war? I remember that I monitored the events of 1967 [16](#) but only from afar. It was only the echo that reached us here.

When I visited Israel in 1957 the situation there resembled that in which Bulgaria finds itself today. For example, there were elections there during my first visit. My brother had a job at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and he had to participate in the holding of the elections. He was asked, 'How many parties do you have?' And he answered, '57.. I couldn't believe my ears because there was only one party in Bulgaria then – the communist one, BCP. And now we have even more.

In Israel I was astonished that there were a lot of beggars. Whereas we, in Bulgaria, did not have beggars beforehand. And now it is the opposite. I couldn't explain it to myself – was it a hidden unemployment in Israel? There was neither unemployment nor deficit in Bulgaria in those days. As a whole, before 10th November 1989 [17](#) everybody had a job. It is true – low salaries and low pensions, but we had enough for everything.

For example I participated for 20 years in a physical training group in Ruse, part of the sports club 'Lokomotiv' [Locomotive]. I had a lot of friends, who were also members, and we often met apart from our activity in that group. Two times a year we used to go on a 14-day holiday to some picturesque place in Bulgaria. And our pensions were enough for that.

The events of 10th November 1989 did not turn into a disaster for my family and me since my pension is not small. Besides, my sister from Houston sends something from time to time and this also helps. But I am very pitiful towards the sick and unemployed people, towards my friends who receive small pensions and hardly manage to make ends meet.

As far as the Jewish community in Ruse is concerned, if there are still Jews in Ruse who haven't immigrated to Israel, the situation is almost the same. True, they gave us back the estates that were expropriated from us during the communist period. And in contrast to the past, the members of the community now gather to celebrate the important Jewish holidays as religious ones. Before 1989 we always used to celebrate them as a sort of national, historical holidays. Such as Pesach, Chanukkah, Purim. This is the basic difference for me – the shift of perception.

Glossary

## **[1](#) 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.

## **2 Sephardi Jewry**

(Hebrew for 'Spanish') 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.

## **3 Expulsion of the Jews from Spain**

In the 13th century, after a period of stimulating spiritual and cultural life, the economic development and wide-range internal autonomy obtained by the Jewish communities in the previous centuries was curtailed by anti-Jewish repression emerging from under the aegis of the Dominican and the Franciscan orders. There were more and more false blood libels, and the polemics, which were opportunities for interchange of views between the Christian and the Jewish intellectuals before, gradually condemned the Jews more and more, and the middle class in the rising started to be hostile with the competitor. The Jews were gradually marginalized. Following the pogrom of Seville in 1391, thousands of Jews were massacred throughout Spain, women and children were sold as slaves, and synagogues were transformed into churches. Many Jews were forced to leave their faith. About 100,000 Jews were forcibly converted between 1391 and 1412. The Spanish Inquisition began to operate in 1481 with the aim of exterminating the supposed heresy of new Christians, who were accused of secretly practicing the Jewish faith. In 1492 a royal order was issued to expel resisting Jews in the hope that if old co-religionists would be removed new Christians would be strengthened in their faith. At the end of July 1492 even the last Jews left Spain, who openly professed their faith. The number of the displaced is estimated to lie between 100,000-150,000. (Source: Jean-Christophe Attias - Esther Benbassa: Dictionnaire de civilisation juive, Paris, 1997)

## **4 Liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman rule**

Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire in early 1877 in order to secure the Mediterranean trade routes. The Russian troops, with enthusiastic and massive participation of the Bulgarians, soon occupied all of Bulgaria and reached Istanbul, and Russia dictated the Treaty of San Stefano in 1878. This provided for an autonomous Bulgarian state, under Russian protection, bordering the Black and Aegean seas. Britain and Austria-Hungary, fearing that the new state would extend

Russian influence too far into the Balkans, exerted strong diplomatic pressure, which resulted in the Treaty of Berlin in the same year. According to this treaty, the newly established Bulgaria became much smaller than what was decreed by the Treaty of San Stefano, and large populations of Bulgarians remained outside the new frontiers (in Macedonia, Eastern Rumelia, and Thrace), which caused resentment that endured well into the 20th century.

## **5 Ladino**

Also known as Judeo-Spanish, it is the spoken and written Hispanic language of Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin. Ladino did not become a specifically Jewish language until after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 (and Portugal in 1495) - it was merely the language of their province. It is also known as Judezmo, Dzhudezmo, or Spaniolit. When the Jews were expelled from Spain and Portugal they were cut off from the further development of the language, but they continued to speak it in the communities and countries to which they emigrated. Ladino therefore reflects the grammar and vocabulary of 15th-century Spanish. In Amsterdam, England and Italy, those Jews who continued to speak 'Ladino' were in constant contact with Spain and therefore they basically continued to speak the Castilian Spanish of the time. Ladino was nowhere near as diverse as the various forms of Yiddish, but there were still two different dialects, which corresponded to the different origins of the speakers: 'Oriental' Ladino was spoken in Turkey and Rhodes and reflected Castilian Spanish, whereas 'Western' Ladino was spoken in Greece, Macedonia, Bosnia, Serbia and Romania, and preserved the characteristics of northern Spanish and Portuguese. The vocabulary of Ladino includes hundreds of archaic Spanish words, and also includes many words from different languages: mainly from Hebrew, Arabic, Turkish, Greek, French, and to a lesser extent from Italian. In the Ladino spoken in Israel, several words have been borrowed from Yiddish. For most of its lifetime, Ladino was written in the Hebrew alphabet, in Rashi script, or in Solitreo. It was only in the late 19th century that Ladino was ever written using the Latin alphabet. At various times Ladino has been spoken in North Africa, Egypt, Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, France, Israel, and, to a lesser extent, in the United States and Latin America.

## **6 WIZO**

Women's International Zionist Organization, founded in London in 1920 with humanitarian purposes aiming at supporting Jewish women all over the world in the field of education, economics, science and culture. A network of health, social and educational institutions was created in Palestine between 1921 and 1933, along with numerous local groups worldwide. After WWII its office was moved to Tel Aviv. WIZO became an advisory organ to the UN after WWII (similar to UNICEF or ECOSOC). Today it operates on a voluntary basis, as a party-neutral, non-profit organization, with about 250,000 members in 50 countries (2003).

## **7 Maccabi World Union**

International Jewish sports organization whose origins go back to the end of the 19th century. A growing number of young Eastern European Jews involved in Zionism felt that one essential prerequisite of the establishment of a national home in Palestine was the improvement of the physical condition and training of ghetto youth. In order to achieve this, gymnastics clubs were founded in many Eastern and Central European countries, which later came to be called Maccabi. The movement soon spread to more countries in Europe and to Palestine. The World Maccabi Union

was formed in 1921. In less than two decades its membership was estimated at 200,000 with branches located in most countries of Europe and in Palestine, Australia, South America, South Africa, etc.

### **8 Hashomer Hatzair ('The Young Watchman')**

Left-wing Zionist youth organization, which started in Poland in 1912 and managed to gather supporters from all over Europe. Their goal was to educate the youth in the Zionist mentality and to prepare them to immigrate to Palestine. To achieve this goal they paid special attention to the so-called shomer-movement (boy scout education) and supported the re-stratification of the Jewish society. They operated several agricultural and industrial training grounds (the so-called chalutz grounds) to train those who wanted to immigrate. In Transylvania the first Hashomer Hatzair groups were established in the 1920s. During World War II, members of the Hashomer Hatzair were leading active resistance against German forces, in ghettos and concentration camps. After the war, Hashomer Hatzair was active in 'illegal' immigration to Palestine.

### **9 Herzl, Theodor (1860-1904)**

Hungarian-born Jewish playwright, journalist and founder of the World Zionist Organization (WZO). His thought of realizing the idea of political Zionism was inspired by among other things the so-called Dreyfus affair. In the polemical essay The Jewish State (Der Judenstaat, 1896) he declares that Jews aren't only a community of believers, but also a nation with the right to its own territory and state. He was of the opinion that in the anti-Jewish mood extant in Europe, it was not possible to solve the Jewish question via either civic emancipation or cultural assimilation. After a significant diplomatic effort he succeeded in the calling of the 1st International Jewish Congress in Basel on 29-31st August 1897. The congress accepted the "Basel Program" and elected Herzl as its first president. Herzl wasn't the first to long for the return of the Jews to Palestine. He was, however, able to not only support the idea, but also to promote it politically; without his efforts the creation of the new state of Israel in the Palestine on 14th May 1948 would not have been possible. Theodor Herzl died in 1904 at the age of 44 and was buried in a Jewish cemetery in Vienna. In 1949 his remains were transported to Jerusalem, where they were laid to rest on a mountain that today carries his name (Mount Herzl).

### **10 Bet Am**

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

### **11 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.

### **12 First Balkan War (1912-1913)**

Started by an alliance made up of Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, and Montenegro against the Ottoman Empire. It was a response to the Turkish nationalistic policy maintained by the Young Turks in

Istanbul. The Balkan League aimed at the liberation of the rest of the Balkans still under Ottoman rule. In October, 1912 the allies declared war on the Ottoman Empire and were soon successful: the Ottomans retreated to defend Istanbul and Albania, Epirus, Macedonia and Thrace fell into the hands of the allies. The war ended on 30th May 1913 with the Treaty of London, which gave most of European Turkey to the allies and also created the Albanian state.

### **13 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.

### **14 9th September 1944**

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

### **15 1948 War of Independence in Israel (First Arab-Israeli War; May 15, 1948 - January 1949)**

The UN resolution of 1947, which divided Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state, was rejected by the Arabs. After the British withdrawal and the proclamation of the State of Israel (14th May 1947), Arab forces from Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Transjordan (later Jordan) invaded Palestine's southern and eastern regions inhabited chiefly by Arabs. On the initiative of the USA and Great Britain, since they were not interested in the formation of a strong Jewish state, peace talks resulted in armistice agreements between the hostile parties by February-July 1949, but no formal peace. A sovereign Palestinian state was not established. Israel had increased its territory by about one-half. Jordan annexed the Arab-held area adjoining its territory (West Bank) and Egypt occupied a coastal strip in the SW including Gaza. In addition, about 750,000 Arabs had fled from Israel and were settled in refugee camps near in the neighboring countries.

### **16 Six-Day-War**

(Hebrew: Milhemet Sheshet Hayamim), also known as the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Six Days War, or June War, was fought between Israel and its Arab neighbors Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. It began when Israel launched a preemptive war on its Arab neighbors; by its end Israel controlled the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. The results of the war affect the geopolitics of the region to this day.



## **17 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.