

Mayer Rafael Alhalel

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Vidin

Bulgaria

Interviewer: Patricia Nikolova

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Mayer Alhalel is a very emotional person. He could tell a story for hours, viewing it from different angles and including all sorts of details. He can't mention any fact without expressing his opinion about it. His personality fits his comfortable and cozy home near the nice 'blue Danube' perfectly. His apartment is in an old building very close to the river and to the dilapidated remains of the former impressive Vidin synagogue. The apartment is in the middle of the old Jewish residential district in Vidin: Kaleto, where he was born and raised. Thus, it's not just an ordinary home, preserving the memories of a surviving Jewish family, but also a kind of a milestone reminding of the past and symbolizing the belief in the present of the Vidin Jewish community.



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Family background

My ancestors came from Spain [see Expulsion of the Jews from Spain] [1](#). They were Sephardi Jews [2](#) persecuted by the Inquisition five centuries ago. They spoke Ladino. My paternal kin came from Silistra. Unfortunately, I don't remember my father's parents. My grandfather's name was Mayer Rafael Alhalel, and my grandmother was Lia Rafael Alhalel. I know nothing about their personalities, habits or how they dressed, and neither do I have any photos. I only know that they were retailers.

As far as I know, my mother's parents were of Romanian origin. Honestly, I don't know why they settled in Vidin at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. All I know is that at that time Jews were looking for a better place to earn their living. My maternal grandparents were neither rich, nor poor. My maternal grandfather's name was Naftali Pinkas, and that of my maternal grandmother was Mazal Pinkas. I don't remember them well either.

I only clearly remember Grandfather Naftali. I loved him very much. My grandfather was a confectioner. He had a confectionery in Kaleto, the old Jewish residential district in Vidin. He owned

the confectionery and sold ice-cream and Jewish sweets made by Grandmother Mazal, such as masapan [made of sugar and almonds] and burmolikos [see Burmoelos] [3](#). For Pesach she made biskuchicos con lokum [Ladino: pastries with Turkish delight], roskitas [Ladino: ring-shaped buns], petikas de almendra [Ladino: almond sweets], which we loved a lot.

Grandmother Mazal was famous for being one of the most beautiful women in Vidin. Everyone couldn't help looking at her. She commanded much respect in the town. She dressed very nicely and was fashion-oriented. We loved her dearly. She walked with great dignity, because her father had been a chazzan in the synagogue in Vidin. In contrast, my grandfather was a very quiet, unpretentious man, and a craftsman. He was very hard-working and didn't talk much. He displayed a lovely sense of humor sometimes, while my grandmother was more delicate.

My father's name was Rafael Mayer Alhalel, and my mother's was Bulisa Rafael Alhalel [nee Pinkas]. I don't know how they met or if it had been arranged by their friends. I only know that they had been neighbors in Kaleto. My mother had two brothers and four sisters. Their names were Rahamim, Yosef, Duda, Rashel, Sara and Roza. They were seven children altogether. All, except my parents moved to Israel during the Mass Aliyah [4](#) and passed away there. My father had two brothers and three sisters: Rafael, Sinto, Buka, Sara and Sofi. My two paternal aunts Sara and Buka were seamstresses: they were sewing some of the most fashionable clothes in the town. They dressed the high society in Vidin, especially for holidays or occasions such as baptisms. The most distinguished women from the local aristocracy were their clients, including some of the richest Jewish families: Arueti, Pinkas and Arie, and some Bulgarian families whom I don't remember. Since we were a Danubian town, our fashion was strongly influenced by Vienna.

My mother was also a seamstress: she sewed ladies' underwear and men's shirts. My aunts' clients also went to my mother. They were mostly intellectuals, public figures, merchants, or industrialists. Their opinions shaped the Vidin society. I remember that my mother sewed laced and silk ladies' underwear, all kinds of corsets from expensive materials, and fine men's shirts. The materials were mostly from abroad and were transported by salesmen from various parts of Western Europe. At that time the European traveling salesmen came to Bulgaria themselves to sell their expensive merchandise.

My father served the Pinkas family for forty years. They were one of the richest Jewish families in Vidin, famous corn-dealers [they owned grain and traded it]. The Pascin [originally Pinkas] family was an old Jewish family from Ruse. I don't know when they moved to Vidin and why. All I know is that they were a number of brothers. One of them was my father's boss. The father of Jules Pascin [5](#) was his younger brother. They were middlemen: they bought corn, rice, maize and sunflower from the villagers living in the nearby villages and sold it to the mills in Vidin. They also exported barges of corn, but I don't know to where. So, they had a stable business, importing and exporting grain. At that time everyone in town and the nearby villages knew my father, because he could speak fluent Wallachian and Turkish. [Wallachian is a neo-Latin language, closest to Romanian. Wallachians are scattered around in South-Eastern Europe, many of them live in the villages by the Danube, near Vidin.] He was something like a distributor of food products. He bought corn, maize, millet from the villagers and sold it in town.

After 9th September 1944 [6](#) my father was hardly able to retire. It turned out that Moreno Pinkas had lied to my father for 30 years that he had been paying the social security benefits for my

father's pension. When my father had to retire in 1950, I was the chairman of the District Committee of the Komsomol [7](#). I did my best to help him, but all I could arrange for him was to receive half his pension on the basis of the number of years he had worked after 9th September, while in fact, he had 50 years of working experience. Initially, only twelve of his working years were officially recognized. My father received such a meager pension that it was only enough for cigarettes. He had worked so hard. When his employer died, I refused to go to his funeral, although my father went.

Growing up

I was born in 1924 in Vidin. I spent my childhood, and I grew old, here in Kaleto. My family lived in a small Turkish-style adobe house: made of straw and mud. My parents' houses were the same. They were next to each other. Grandmother Mazal also lived in the house I was born in and where we lived. It had two rooms and a yard. After all, we weren't very rich, but we didn't complain about that.

I remember that when I was a child I would take a hen from home to the synagogue for the rabbi to slaughter. We called the rabbi Avramiko. He was both a rabbi and a shochet. Like most of my friends I studied both in junior high school and high school: Marko Primov, Haim Paparo, Jacques Kohen, Isak Benaroy, and Avram Levi. Rabbi Avramiko had the following habit: when he received money from memorial services or weddings, he gathered us and took us to a confectionery. In our free time we played games: mostly hide-and-seek and tip-cat. Tip-cat was played in the following way: you used a big board to hit the raised corner of a smaller one, which flew away and we measured that distance by steps. The person who sent the smaller board the furthest, won. At that time I was already a member of Maccabi [World Union] [8](#). In Maccabi we had our own sports hall with a vaulting horse, hoops, a beam, etc. which was close to the Jewish school near the Baba Vida Fortress [9](#) in Kaleto. The school doesn't exist any more.

I wasn't a member of Hashomer Hatzair [in Bulgaria] [10](#) although I had friends there. I was a member of a strong Zionist organization for older children for some time. Its name was Betar [11](#). In fact, all my friends were also members.

I remember that in the Jewish school we were taught Ivrit by Haim Levi from Vidin. At first we read fairy tales in Ivrit and then we learned both Ivrit and the Torah at the same time: we learnt how Ivrit was used in the Torah. I loved mathematics, history, geography and literature. I was a great fan of Meyne Reid, Jack London, Jules Verne, Gorky [12](#) and Marxist literature. I also love classical music, especially the Italian and Russian composers: Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, Borodin, Khachaturian, Shostakovich, and Prokofiev. We were five Jews and 20 Bulgarians in our class. But we were very united. This was probably because most of us were UYW [13](#) members and we shared the same ideology. There were some Legionaries [see Bulgarian Legions] [14](#) in our class, but they were isolated from the rest. At that time we had to choose a class board. I was usually elected the chairman of the board: probably because I was an active UYW member.

I remember an anti-Semitic case from my school. I had a friend, a Bulgarian, his name was Tsanko Urmanov, and his family was rich. He had a Jewish girlfriend. One evening, I went out with him and my best friend Haim Paparo for a walk. Haim's grandfather was a rabbi in our synagogue. Haim and I were neighbors and we often went for a walk together. That evening a Legionnaire approached Haim and I, and ordered us to make the sign of the cross. Tsanko defended us and they started a

fight. In the end the Legionnaire ran away, because Tsanko was a big boy. The next evening the three of us went for a walk again and Tsanko opened his coat and said, 'Look at what I bought today!' And he showed us a dagger. He said, 'If someone tries to threaten you again, I'll kill him, I won't think twice!'

I have always worked as a polygraphic printer. That was my first and last job. My uncle, the younger brother of my father, had his own printing house in Vidin. He took me as a child to learn the craft. At that time I was a student at the Vidin high school and I needed the money for the fees, which wasn't little for those times. It didn't matter if you had good grades or not. If you studied in high school, no matter how poor you were, you had to pay a fee. After 9th September 1944 the situation changed. That is why I had to work for my uncle.

Friday was the typical market day in Vidin, though, in fact, every day was a market day here. No servants were hired at our market, although in other Bulgarian towns they were. I remember that we also had a maid for a short time, because my mother was a seamstress and didn't have much free time for anything else. We hired some village girl. She helped mostly with the cleaning. My mother always did the cooking. We observed the kashrut, because my parents were religious. We also followed the traditions during the Jewish holidays. We didn't go to the synagogue often, only on holidays and sometimes on Sabbath. My maternal grandfather took me to the synagogue on Sabbath. When I grew up, we went there more rarely.

Between 12,000 and 13,000 Bulgarians, Turks, Wallachians, Armenians and Jews [see Bulgarian Minorities] [15](#), all lived in Vidin. Each of those had their own neighborhood. The Jews were only 1,200 and lived in the Jewish neighborhood Kaleto ['kale' means fortress in Turkish and 'to' is the Bulgarian definite article, so it means 'the fortress']. In the past Kaleto had been surrounded by a ditch and that was the whole town. But at the beginning of the 20th century, the town expanded and only Jews remained in Kaleto. During the Law for the Protection of the Nation [16](#) it was turned into a Jewish ghetto. That's why only a few Bulgarians lived there and we got along well with them. During the Holocaust Colonel Marko Borandjiev, the head of the Vidin garrison, lived here. He was also nice to us. His daughter was a classmate of ours. Although she was a Legionnaire, she sympathized with us. I don't know why, probably because of the social environment here, which is friendly to minorities.

During the war

During the Law for the Protection of the Nation police officer Savov lived in Kaleto. He was killed either by the partisans or by the People's Court, I don't remember by whom, after 9th September 1944. Another police officer, Gromkov, who also lived in Kaleto, was killed in Dimovo. In fact, the people who were most cruel to us during the Holocaust were just simple-minded people. There was a tailor, who made me a great fur coat, and his mother was a police informer. She did nothing against us. I remember some people who were from 'Social Power' [pro-fascist organization during the Law for the Protection of the Nation]. They helped the police, and came to the Jewish neighborhood: they were informers, but they didn't treat us badly. Their head was Shotilov. In the evening, they walked along the Jewish streets to check if anybody was outside after the curfew.

During the Holocaust the Bulgarians always helped us, although our closest neighbor was a fascist. His name was Dimitar Chomorev. He had a son and a daughter. His wife had died. Dimitar Chomorev believed in Hitler's ideas. His son was an admirer of English culture. His daughter was a

Legionnaire. But we respected each other as neighbors. We always helped each other, and we never discussed our different ideologies. During the Law for the Protection of the Nation in 1942, the radio sets owned by Jews were confiscated and the others in the town sealed. We would invite Dimitar and the other neighbors to play tablanet [a card game] at home, while a Jewish boy, interned from Sofia to Vidin [see Internment of Jews in Bulgaria] [17](#), and I went to Dimitar's home to listen to the news on the radio. His radio hadn't been confiscated or sealed because he worked in the police force.

If we wanted his daughter out of the house, we asked a Jewish boy to invite her on a date. His son was away most of the time, because he was an incorrigible gambler. So Jozko [short for Joseph], who lived in our house, and I, listened to Radio Free Europe [18](#), Radio London, Voice of America [19](#) and Radio Hristo Botev [20](#). He knew English, because he had studied in the American College in Sofia and he interpreted to me in detail the flash news on Radio Free Europe and The Voice of America. [Editor's note: Radio Free Europe was established during the cold war, so they may have listened only to the other three stations.] Then we would return home, where the men were still playing cards. As if on command, one of them would immediately say that he was tired, another would say that he had some work at home and they would cut short the game. The aim was to get Dimitar out of his house so that we could get some information from his radio and share it. I can't say for sure if he knew about our little tricks. I only know that he had always been a great neighbor.

One night, when the whole family was in the house and I had just returned from one of my labor camps [see Forced labor camps in Bulgaria] [21](#), I don't remember which one, and we had just fallen asleep, suddenly there was a knock on the door. I was 18 or 20 at that time and went to see who that was which was very foolish of me. When I went outside the house, I saw a German soldier holding a knife. He was drunk. He asked me in German: 'Jude? Jude?' That is, if Jews lived here. I started shouting at him and he raised the knife to stab me. But I was strong then and very fit from my work in the printing house before the Holocaust. So, I caught him and took away his knife. I remember that I was wearing a gold ring on my right hand, a present from my mother. I had squeezed the drunk German so hard that the ring stuck deeply into the flesh of my finger. The German ran away, but I immediately went to Dimitar. He was an influential man and lived next to us. I woke him and his children up at 2am. He immediately sent his son to the police station. The police came and took away the German who was still wandering in Kaleto. The story had a happy ending, but it could have been much worse.

During the Law for the Protection of the Nation I was also sent to Jewish labor camps. I was forced to go to three camps, in which I worked, with some short breaks, more than 20 months in all. Firstly, I worked in the village of Zhelezartsi near the town of Strazhitsa. Then I was sent to a camp near the town of Sveti Vrach. Lastly, I was sent to a third camp near the village of Mikre, Lovech region. I escaped from there on 7th or 8th September 1944. But before telling you about my escape from that camp, I will tell you two more interesting stories from the time of my second labor camp near Sveti Vrach.

I remember that we were around 300-400 people in the first and second camp. We were divided into groups: a Vidin one, a Vratsa one and a more general one including workers of Jewish origin born in Northwest Bulgaria. Of course, each group had its platoon commander, something like a supervisor. Our group, the Vidin one, had a very vicious and cruel supervisor. In the first days of spring 1942, he humiliated us a lot: he hit us, shouted at us, swore at us, called us anti-Semitic

names like 'chifuti' [22](#). He always punished someone who had stolen the bread of a fellow worker. The psychological attack discontinued after a month. We worked there for around ten months. He made us sweat our guts out, we were his slaves. We had to haul 15 wagons of stones from the excavation site we were digging. It was only after we made it so deep that we couldn't be seen from outside when the strange supervisor gathered us all and said, 'Guys, the sweating was up to here. I trust you now. From now on I will protect you and you will protect me.'

So now we worked very slowly and leisurely at the big excavation site because no one from the outside could see what we were doing. When one of us noticed that the head of our supervisor was approaching, he would make a signal and we would all start working very hard, while our supervisor started swearing at us and calling us names. When his boss would leave, we would stop working and start playing belote with the supervisor. But that story doesn't have a happy ending. In summer 1942 we were given five to six days of leave to visit our families.

During that time the camp was moved from Sveti Vrach to the nearby village called Belitsa. Many of us were absent and there weren't enough Jews to carry the baggage of the others as well as the common tents. So, our 'rude' supervisor also helped them move the camp. Naturally, at that time his action was more than strange and unforgivable. His chiefs started suspecting him and fired him. He had incidentally revealed his sympathies towards us. That was the end of our holiday. It was only after 9th September that we learnt that our strict supervisor was also a UYW member, just like us. But he became a supervisor in a Jewish labor camp, because he was very poor and needed the money.

I will also tell you a funny story from my labor years. I will never forget the performance organized by some of the Jews in the labor camps during the breaks from our hard physical labor. In one of the three camps I had been to, I don't remember which one, a number of men performed the operetta 'The Beautiful Helen' [by Jacques Offenbach (1819-1880)]. That was a great event for the camp. In fact there were five to six camps working in the same area and located next to each other, but were divided into groups. I was in group five, which was the last one. There were Jewish musicians among us: violinists, accordionists, singers, etc. I only remember one name: Bitsko Eliezer. In the other groups there were also some Jewish musicians. Sometimes they would gather near one of the camps and perform something like a concert. Our camps were about two or three kilometers away from each other.

Once, the musicians in the labor camp gathered near the third camp and started rehearsing the operetta 'The Beautiful Helen' in front of the supervisors, who didn't object. After all it was our free time. Their conductor was Bitsko Eliezer. Some of the men played the female parts in the performance: Helen, Venus, etc. They made an improvised stage with canvas, poles, trees, and used cloths as props, made some costumes from their working shirts and acted out a very nice and funny performance. And we, the public, the laborers from the five camps watched from a hill a bit above them. Below us was the orchestra, which included an accordionist, violinists, trumpeters, etc. It was magnificent. I must admit that there were some very good singers among the laborers. The future famous artist of Israel Bitush Davidov [23](#) was also among them. All I know about this very talented Vidin singer and artist of Jewish origin is that he immigrated to Israel during the Mass Aliyah in 1948 and became one of the most famous Israeli artists there. Their interpretation of 'The Beautiful Helen' was a bit like a parody, but it was performed professionally and in Bulgarian, the way it was performed by musicians in the Stephan Makedonski [24](#) State Musical Theater in the

capital. We had a great time that evening. Then we returned to the camps in a formation together with the supervisors who made sure that no one would escape.

I remember 23rd August 1944 clearly, because it was just before my escape from the last labor camp. On that day partisans from the Lovech squad 'Vasil Levski' [25](#) came to our camp. I knew some of them, who were from Lovech, like my cousin Albert Vaida. He died in the first stage [of the Bulgarian participation] of World War II, in Stracin [today Macedonia], as a political dissident. We met the partisans and gave them our food. We had a very evil and cruel supervisor, whom we complained about to the partisans. They sentenced him to death immediately. At that time the partisan squad had its own jury. They shot him. But 9th September 1944 was approaching and our stay in the camp was becoming just a formality. So, all the people from the camp and the partisans held a meeting, at which some of us decided to escape.

Later on, the military police came and surrounded the camp and appointed another supervisor, who was much more liberal than the previous one. But before that took place, since we slept in tents made of canvas, 100 people in each, we tore the canvas of two tents to pieces and gave it to the partisans to make their own tents. There was a poet among them, Tsvetan Spassov. He wrote poems and songs, which we all sang. A famous poem of his was: 'Polyubi narodat poroben i pazi zaveta velik – da doide pri nazi voinik' [Our enslaved people love and keep the great message – may our soldier come]. We often sang that song, even in the camps. When the partisans from the Lovech squad came and went, they also sang that song.

Around 29th August, all of us, around 300 laborers, already felt that our freedom was approaching. In other words we anticipated the coming of 9th September 1944. And that feeling strengthened when we saw the German troops withdrawing from Bulgaria along the road near our camp. They were going to Yugoslavia to take part in the fighting there. When we saw them, we stopped working right away. What's more, a group of 30-40 people, mostly from Vidin, decided to escape from the labor camp. We were Jews, members of UYW, from various cities: Sofia, Plovdiv, Vidin, Ruse, Pleven, etc. From them I remember my friend Marko Primov, Simcho Kohenov, also from Vidin, but I don't remember any other names. At that time I wasn't a UYW member yet, but I was a follower of their ideas, unlike Marko Primov, who was a member.

Those of us who escaped went first to the village of Sokolovo, which was near the camp. We weren't afraid of getting caught, so we weren't hiding, and we didn't move only at night. We hired five to six men with carts to drive us through the mountain roads to Lovech. We paid them with the money we had collected, which had been sent to us by our relatives. The food in the camp was never enough and we had to buy more food from the people in the nearby villages. We usually bought hominy, potatoes and cheese. Thanks to some of those villagers, who sold us food, we received news on the political changes in the country. We moved fast across the forest and reached Lovech. From there we couldn't get on a train so we hired a truck to get us to places close to our hometowns. I personally wanted to go back to Vidin.

The idea was for the truck to drive us from Lovech to Pleven. But it so happened that the truck transported us to Pleven on 8th September 1944, right in front of the prison, just when the political prisoners were being freed. Then our Vidin group decided that we all should go to Vidin and only I should stay in Cherven Bryag. My sister Lea was married in Cherven Bryag. Her husband's name was Yosef Helfon. I had to stay at their place, because the military command was in Pleven and I

could go there if we needed some documents legalizing the release of those of us who had escaped. Marko Primov returned to Vidin with the group. Also in that group were my friends Haim Paparo, Isak Benaroy and some of my other classmates. We all studied in the same class in the only high school in Vidin at that time: 'Tsar Simeon Veliki' [Tsar Simeon the Great]. So, we had been together since childhood. We had also been sent to the same labor camps, so we had always been friends. We equally shared all the food and clothes we had received from our relatives.

I'm convinced that the Bulgarian Jews are alive now because of the Bulgarian people and the Soviet army, who entered Bulgaria in September 1944. It's interesting to note that as young Bulgarians, we welcomed the Soviet troops in Cherven Bryag. That happened shortly after my escape from the last camp, when I stayed with my sister in Cherven Bryag. I remember clearly that everything happened spontaneously. There were no groups organizing demonstrations like nowadays. All the young people just went to the station and stopped the trains with Russian troops coming from Ruse for a while. I was in a group of young people who stood at the station waiting for the trains all the time. When we heard that a train with Russian troops was coming, we would run to meet them. The locals also ran with us. I must note that those were the hungry post-war years. Yet, everyone was carrying bread with cheese to give to the soldiers. Although their trains stopped at the station for 15-20 minutes only, we were very happy to see them and welcomed them as liberators.

Post-war

I didn't immigrate to Israel for a number of reasons. Firstly, as I already said, I had to stay in Cherven Bryag after my escape from the camp to help my sister in her work, because her husband was an ailing man. He had his own factory for paper products and I could be useful to him as a printer. I lived and worked for them from 1944 until 1949, when my sister immigrated to Ramat Gan in Israel. She asked me to go with her, but now I had another reason to stay in Bulgaria. When I settled in Cherven Bryag, I was immediately made a member of the local UYW organization, where I gladly took part in their social activities. Naturally, I soon joined the Party [the Communist Party, who took the power in the former kingdom of Bulgaria after 9th September 1944]. I became a member of the Bulgarian Communist Party [26](#) in 1950.

Immediately after that I was elected chairman of the Komsomol there. Later, I became chairman of the Party Committee. I was also head of the organizational department. After that I was chairman of the Fatherland Front [27](#). Then I was appointed representative of the Central Council of the Trade Unions. Those were very prestigious positions, which earned me the respect of my fellow citizens and provided a peaceful life. Besides, my family was financially well-off, which isn't to be underestimated. But the most important thing for me was the respect of my fellow Bulgarians. During the whole totalitarian period and especially when I lived in Cherven Bryag, I was always treated with much respect and warmth. I have never had problems because of my origin. There were no other Jews in Cherven Bryag but me. I returned to Vidin in 1949.

I married my wife Gitli Alhalel on 9th July 1949 in Cherven Bryag. Before that we lived together for a year. We got married before the registrar on a working day. We didn't wear any wedding attire, because we couldn't afford it yet. After our wedding we returned to Vidin, where we looked after our parents. To be honest, there was a moment when we thought about going to Israel too. But our parents, hers and mine, didn't want to immigrate, because of old age. Yet, there were many Jews older than them, who had left Bulgaria for Israel. I didn't have any financial problems. My wife also

had a job. She was an accountant in a meat processing plant and in a construction company in Vidin. In fact, she retired from those two positions.

In Vidin my mother was still working as a seamstress and my father was still in the mill working as scales operator: he weighed the corn on the scales. So, we were financially stable. I had to work for one year as a supervisor in the printing house: I was in charge of a group of workers, some of whom were even better at the job than me. Soon after that the printing house was nationalized. I, personally, was never able to understand that part of the legislation of Bulgaria. I mean that not everyone was convinced that such nationalization was necessary. I think that only the big companies should have been nationalized, but the small private ones should have been left to function. To enter the workshop and take the instruments of a tailor or a shoemaker is just not acceptable, in my opinion. I don't understand that.

I have two children, whom I love very much. The elder one, Strelia [Mayer Puncheva], was born in 1949. She graduated from the Chemical Technical School in Vidin. She has been working as a chemist in the local meat processing plant for a number of years. My younger daughter Sheli was born in 1954 and is a construction engineer. Unfortunately, she doesn't have children. But I have grandchildren from Strelia, who also worked for a long time in the municipality in Vidin. Her children are Lyubomir Punchev and Yanita Slavcheva [nee Puncheva]. Yanita now lives in a kibbutz. She has a daughter, Viara [nee Slavcheva]. She has a family in Northern Israel. My grandson Lyubomir, who is the director of Bulbank in Sofia, also has children. They are Konstantin Punchev and Mihaela Puncheva.

I have been to Israel three times. The first two times were before 10th November 1989 [28](#). The first time was in 1964, the second time in 1973 and the third time in 1993. The first two times I was with my wife and the last time I was alone. Of course, I noticed the big difference between the early and late Israel, I liked it there more and more each time. But that doesn't mean that I have something against Bulgaria, to the contrary. The totalitarian times weren't dark times, although young people nowadays are raised to believe so. I remember that I felt good and respected. We lived a normal life.

At first, when the changes in the former socialist countries were introduced, after 10th November 1989, all Bulgarian Jews reacted very positively, although most of us were communists. I think it happened so, because it was obvious that the country needed some change for its development. By the way, those changes were started at the July Plenary Session [of the Bulgarian Communist Party] in the 1980s. We felt them even then, although nothing significant happened at that time. The important thing is that at the beginning of the changes we felt that they would bring greater freedom in Bulgaria. For example, we, the people in the printing business, felt the censorship and the fear. Naturally, we wanted that to change. I remember that censorship was covert, not open at that time. The journalists in Vidin regularly wrote lofty, enthusiastic, positive articles regardless of their subject. In other words, they were afraid to criticize, they didn't want to be reproached or fired for their words. That situation grew quite intense before the changes and the people clearly realized that we all needed greater freedom. But the changes didn't bring real freedom. In fact, after 10th November we received freedom of press, but everything else remained censored.

At the time of the political and social changes in Bulgaria, I was already retired. I retired in 1985 and so did my wife. But after that I worked for one more year. Our pensions were neither small, nor

big. But they were enough so that we could afford to go on holiday twice a year. Usually in the fall we went to the seaside in Varna, and in spring we went to the mountains in Bansko. But now the situation is different. We have very little money, and despite the help of our grandson, we can't afford to go on holiday even once a year.

Unfortunately, the Jewish community in Vidin is comprised of only 26 people, counting the mixed marriages. The truth is that only nine to ten Jews of pure blood live in Vidin. The rest are either children of mixed marriages or they had immigrated to Israel a long time ago: with the Mass Aliyah at the end of the 1940s or at the beginning of the 1990s. Some of the Jews of pure blood are my wife and I, our two daughters Streya and Sheli, our long-time family friend Marko Primov, his son Jacques Moshe, the chairman of the Regional Organization of Jews, Shalom, his brother and sister, and Lili Stambolieva who married a Bulgarian. From the 26 people we usually have a get-together of no more than ten to twelve people, because all the others are either ill, or at work.

We meet once a month and I like those meetings. I'm happy that they exist, considering how small our community is. We celebrate most Jewish holidays: Pesach, Rosh Hashanah, Purim, Chanukkah, Yom Hashoah and Yom Hatsmaut [Editor's note: The last two aren't Jewish religious holidays but modern remembrance days: Holocaust Remembrance Day and the Independence Day in Israel]. We organize the meetings in our newly-built club because we don't have our own real estates. What's left of our Jewish buildings is a crumpled synagogue, a former Jewish school, which is now destroyed, and a cemetery plundered by thieves. A heap of stones from the life we had which are still here around the Baba Vida fortress, in the old Jewish neighborhood Kaletto, where I still live with my family.

Glossary

1 Expulsion of the Jews from Spain

The Sephardi population of the Balkans originates from the Jews who were expelled from the Iberian peninsula, as a result of the 'Reconquista' in the late 15th century (Spain 1492, and Portugal 1495). The majority of the Sephardim subsequently settled in the territory of the Ottoman Empire, mainly in maritime cities (Salonika, Istanbul, Izmir, etc.) and also in the ones situated on significant overland trading routes to Central Europe (Bitola, Skopje, and Sarajevo) and to the Danube (Edirne, Plovdiv, Sofia, and Vidin).

2 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.

3 Burmoelos (or burmolikos, burlikus)

A sweetmeat made from matzah, typical for Pesach. First, the matzah is put into water, then squashed and mixed with eggs. Balls are made from the mixture, they are fried and the result is something like donuts.

4 Mass Aliyah

Between September 1944 and October 1948, 7,000 Bulgarian Jews left for Palestine. The exodus was due to deep-rooted Zionist sentiments, relative alienation from Bulgarian intellectual and political life, and depressed economic conditions. Bulgarian policies toward national minorities were also a factor that motivated emigration. In the late 1940s Bulgaria was anxious to rid itself of national minority groups, such as Armenians and Turks, and thus make its population more homogeneous. More people were allowed to depart in the winter of 1948 and the spring of 1949. The mass exodus continued between 1949 and 1951: 44,267 Jews immigrated to Israel until only a few thousand Jews remained in the country.

5 Pascin, Jules (1885-1930)

Born Julius Pinkas into a Jewish family in Vidin, Bulgaria and became world-famous as Jules Pascin. He was a painter, aquarellist, engraver, and a distinguished representative of the Paris school from the beginning of the century. He worked in Germany, France, the UK, and the USA and traveled around Europe, Central America, Northern Africa and Palestine. His works present fresh, ethereal, and soft in tonality people from the valleys – street vendors, dancers, prostitutes etc. He committed suicide in 1930 in Paris. Paintings by Pascin are preserved in the Museum of Arts in Paris, in Grenoble and in many private collections in the world.

6 9th September 1944

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

7 Komsomol: The communist youth organization in Bulgaria during socialist times. The task of the Komsomol was to spread of the ideas of communism among worker and the peasant youth. The Komsomol also aimed at providing a communist upbringing by involving the youth in the political struggle, supplemented by theoretical education.

8 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.

9 Baba Vida fortress

The only medieval Bulgarian castle entirely preserved to this day. Its construction began in the second half of the 10th century on the foundation of a former Roman fortress. Most of it was built between the end of the 12th century and the late 14th century. Today, the Baba Vida fortress is a national cultural memorial.

10 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.

11 Betar

(abbreviation of Berit Trumpeldor) A right-wing Zionist youth movement founded in 1923 in Riga, Latvia. Betar played an important role in Zionist education, in teaching the Hebrew language and culture, and methods of self-defense. It also inculcated the ideals of aliyah to Erez Israel by any means, legal and illegal, and the creation of a Jewish state on both sides of the Jordan. Its members supported the idea to create a Jewish legion in order to liberate Palestine. In Bulgaria the organization started publishing its newspaper in 1934.

12 Gorky, Maxim (born Alexei Peshkov) (1868-1936)

Russian writer, publicist and revolutionary.

13 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.

14 Bulgarian Legions

Union of the Bulgarian National Legions. Bulgarian fascist movement, established in 1930. Following the Italian model it aimed at building a corporate totalitarian state on the basis of military centralism. It was dismissed in 1944 after the communist take-over.

15 Bulgarian Minorities

Some of the larger Bulgarian minorities are Turkish (800,000), Roma (300,000), Armenian (13,500), Tatar (4,500), Jewish (3,500). These are rough figures, based on a 1994 census. Further minority groups are the following: Gagauz (1,500), Orthodox Christians who speak a Turkish dialect, and have a home territory in Gagauzia, Moldova. Karakachan (5,000) are a Greek speaking ethnic group. There is also special minority going by the name of Pomak. These are Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, who are not properly identified in the national Census, but who are said to number between 150,000 and 200,000.

16 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.

17 Internment of Jews in Bulgaria

Although Jews living in Bulgaria were not deported to concentration camps abroad or to death camps, many were interned to different locations within Bulgaria. In accordance with the Law for the Protection of the Nation, the comprehensive anti-Jewish legislation initiated after the outbreak of WWII, males were sent to forced labor battalions in different locations of the country, and had to engage in hard work. There were plans to deport Bulgarian Jews to Nazi Death Camps, but these plans were not realized. Preparations had been made at certain points along the Danube, such as at Somovit and Lom. In fact, in 1943 the port at Lom was used to deport Jews from Aegean Thrace and from Macedonia, but in the end, the Jews from Bulgaria proper were spared.

18 Radio Free Europe

Established in 1949 as a nonprofit, private corporation to broadcast news and current affair programs alongside with anti-communist propaganda to Eastern European countries behind the Iron Curtain. Radio Free Europe broadcasted from Munich, Western Germany in national languages and grew increasingly popular in Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe. It was funded principally by the U.S. Congress, through the Central Intelligence Agency, but received supplemental private

donations as well. During the 1990s the radio headquarters were moved to Prague, Czech Republic, and many of the national programs were closed with the growing democratization of the region (Czech, Slovak, Polish, Hungarian and Bulgarian). Currently they still broadcast in Serbian, Romanian, Ukrainian and Russian, as well as in various languages of the Former Soviet Union, Central Asia and the Middle East.

19 Voice of America

International broadcasting service funded by the U.S. government through the Broadcasting Board of Governors. Voice of America has been broadcasting since 1942, initially to Europe on various European languages from the US on short wave. During the cold war it grew increasingly popular in Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe as an information source.

20 Radio Hristo Botev

Before the communist takeover it was an illegal radio station broadcasting in Bulgarian from Moscow. After 9th September 1944 the Bulgarian National Radio was renamed as Hristo Botev. Today it is a program of the Bulgarian National Radio.

21 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.

22 Chifuti

Derogatory nickname for Jews in Bulgarian.

23 Davidov, Bitush (1905-1976)

One of the most well-known Bulgarian operetta singers of Jewish origin. In his early age he was a piano player in a youth orchestra. After he graduated from high school his father send him to Krefeld, Germany, to study textile engineering. There he also enrolled to study singing: in 1931 he joined the cast of the Dusseldorf City Theater, where he played until Hitler came to power (1933). After returning to Bulgaria he became a leading singer in the Musical Theater in Sofia. He was the best interpreter of Austro-Hungarian operetta in Bulgaria; his most memorable plays were: 'The Czardas Princess', 'Countess Maritza' by Emmerich Kalman, 'The Merry Widow' and 'Land of Smiles' by Franz Lehar and 'Flower of Hawaii' by Pal Abraham. Later Davidov also became a playwright and the director of the first Jewish theater in Bulgaria. He wrote seven librettos that were all a great success. Davidov immigrated to Israel during the Mass Aliyah in 1947 where he continued to play operettas in Tel Aviv.

24 Makedonski, Stephan (1885-1952)

Bulgarian opera singer (tenor) and founder and patron of the Bulgarian State Musical Theater. Makedonski studied in Moscow and Paris and sang in the Sofia National Opera, as well as in Berlin, Hannover, Coburg and Kassel in Germany. He was the director of the Sofia State Musical Theater

from 1948 to 1952. After Stephan Makedonski's death the State Musical Theater was named after him.

25 Levski, Vasil (1837-1873)

Bulgarian national hero. Vasil Levski was the principal architect of the campaign to free Bulgaria from the oppression of the Ottoman Empire. Beginning in 1868, Levski founded the first secret revolutionary committees in Bulgaria for the liberation of the country from the Turkish rule. Betrayed by a traitor, he was hanged in 1873 as the Turks feared strong public resentment and a possible attempt by the Bulgarians to free him. Today, a stone monument in Sofia marks the spot where the 'Apostle of Freedom' was hanged.

26 Bulgarian Communist Party

a new party founded in April 1990 and initially named Party of the Working People. At an internal party referendum in the spring of 1990 the name of the ruling Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) was changed to Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). The more hard-line Party of the Working People then took over the name Bulgarian Communist Party. The majority of the members are Marxist-oriented old time BCP members.

27 Fatherland Front

A broad left wing umbrella organization, created in 1942, with the purpose to lead the Communist Party to power.

28 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.