

## Eshua Almalech As A Sportsman At The French College In Plovdiv



Here I am at the French College in 1942. This is the volleyball college team. I am the fourth from right to left - kneeling. The old bearded man is the college director Pere Ozon.

In 1937 my uncle Solomon, who lived in France with his family, visited us in Stara Zagora. He told my father that they should send me to the French College and that he would pay for my education. So, I went to study in Plovdiv.

After the adoption of the Law for the Protection of the Nation our rights were severely limited. All Jews had to wear the distinctive yellow star, we were not allowed to go out before 9 o'clock in the morning and after 8 o'clock in the evening and there were times when we were allowed to go out only for 3 hours a day. We were banned from working, except if they mobilized us for some heavy physical labor. My father's shop was taken away, but his Bulgarian business partner continued to help us. We often gathered in the Jewish school, where we were not allowed to study, but still we met there, because it was dangerous for us to stay on the streets. It was our second home. But I returned to Stara Zagora only on my vacations because I was still studying in the French College in Plovdiv. My father and I had to put boards on the windows, because [members of the youth fascist organizations Brannik , Ratnik and the Bulgarian Legions] broke them very often.

In March 1943 we learned that we were to be sent to the Nazi death camps, and more specifically to Treblinka. The Bulgarian Jews had many Bulgarian friends, who had information and who warned them. At that time even the deputy Speaker of Parliament Dimitar Peshev and the leadership of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, knowing what was happening to the Jews in the other countries occupied by Germany, informed the people and defended the Jews before the Bulgarian government. When I heard this, I went to the Jewish school in Plovdiv, in the Jewish quarter called

'Ota Mezar', where I had many friends. They told me that 100 families from Plovdiv had been listed to be deported to Treblinka. In accordance with that decision around a hundred Jewish families were locked in the Jewish school to prepare themselves for the road to Death. Just when I went there, the local Bishop Kiril also came and declared that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church led by the Holy Synod would not allow the Bulgarian Jews to be deported. He added that he would shelter the Plovdiv Jews in the Bishop's Residence [the town residence of the Orthodox Church in Plovdiv], but that he would never allow the trains of death to leave.

I returned to the college intending to go back to Stara Zagora the next day. Then my class teacher Pere Gotie Damper, who was a French Catholic priest, called me to his room. He told me that the college director Pere Ozon and he would not allow the Jewish students in the college to be sent to death. He offered me to stay in the college and said that I should not worry about food, accommodation and clothes. But there was one condition: I had to adopt the Catholic faith. He said that they had spoken with our parents and that they would issue us a document that this had happened when I enrolled in the school in 1937 so that the authorities would not be suspicious. I do not know what would have happened if I had accepted their proposal or if I would have accepted it at all. But the same day shortly before leaving for Stara Zagora the message came that the deportation of the Jews was postponed and they could go back to their homes. The Jews in Bulgaria were defended by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, large groups of Bulgarian intellectuals, Macedonian organizations, including deputies from the ruling party in parliament.