

## Leon Levi With His Relatives



This picture was taken at the central railway station in Sofia. Here are my sister Victoria (the first person from the left) and her husband Marko (the first person from the right) who were leaving for his native town Bucharest and afterwards for Israel. I am the third from the right and the other people are some relatives. I was a young boy when my relatives left for Israel. I was enthusiastic. In 1948-49 I was about 22 years old and I believed that I belonged to the place where I was born and that I had to stay and live here. Israel was a chimera for me, at least at that time. I thought I wouldn't be able to make it there. I thought that I was rooted in Bulgaria. Of course, I am a Jew but I am also a Bulgarian citizen and I love the country I have lived in. I don't know if it was the wisest decision because my life would have been completely different if I had gone there. But it's a choice I made. I didn't blame the people who left. I was very sorry that my family was separated. They all left because my elder brothers, my father and my mother had suffered a lot from the monarchy reign in Bulgaria. They thought that if they went there, they would live in their own country and nobody would point a finger at them because of the fact that they were Jews - 'second hand' people. My friends who left are still my friends. In 1959, the first time I was allowed to go to Israel and see my family, I met many of my friends and they treated me just like they used to before. Many of them had succeeded in making a good life for themselves there. I've never had a negative opinion of Israel as a country yet I was keen on living in Bulgaria. There was a period of broken off diplomatic relations between Bulgaria and Israel. Until 1959 no trips were allowed because there was a resolution of the National Assembly saying that Jews who had left for Israel automatically lost their Bulgarian citizenship. So we could neither go there nor could they come as they were declared 'persona non grata'. In 1959, as a result of my insistence, I was allowed to go and see my relatives. So from 1948 till 1959 - for such a long period of time - I wasn't able to see neither my father, nor my mother. Then, during the wars in 1967 and in 1973 we couldn't go there either, but later on things slightly improved and now, whenever we want and as long as we have the money, we can visit [Israel].