

# Victor Baruh

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## Family background

My paternal grandfather was Nisim Baruh. He was from the town of Kjustendil, situated near the border with what is now the Republic of Macedonia. There were some stories about him - how he went to Vienna to do some business before the liberation from the Turkish [Ottoman] yoke. My maternal grandfather Nisim Gheron was from Pazardjik. I am the youngest child in my family and I don't remember my grandparents - they died long before I was born so I don't know anything about them.

My father, Sabat Baruh, was born in Kjustendil in 1878. He graduated in Pedagogy and he worked as a teacher in elementary school subjects such as writing, reading and arithmetic in Kjustendil before he came to Sofia in 1907. At this time in Sofia, as a capital it began to attract people from the countryside because there were lots of opportunities for work and a better life. He knew French and Spanish and worked as a teacher and translator in Sofia. I know that he was a translator at the headquarters of the Bulgarian army in Kjustendil during the First World War [During the First World War (1914-1918) Bulgaria was an ally with Germany and Austria- Hungary]. My father wasn't religious - we celebrated the Jewish holidays but it was due to paying respect to the tradition and it wasn't a matter of piety. I remember that my father brought home matzah - there were special stores where it was sold. He never prayed as far as I remember, nor did he ever wear a kippah. In 1934 my father fell ill and we went to live in Kjustendil where he died in 1936.

He had eight brothers - Benyamin, Ruben, Rahamin, Naim, Avram, Pinkas and Solomon and one sister - Yafa. Most of them were tradesmen and Avram was a physician. I still maintain a relationship with Avram's son Nir Baruh, who lives in Israel, as well as with other relatives. Most of them are sons and daughters of my cousins who have already died, for example Emi Baruh, the granddaughter of Pinkas. Nir Baruh left for Israel before 9th September 1944 [1](#). As a representative of Israel he was a diplomat in Bulgaria, Cuba and the USA.

My maternal grandfather, Nisim Gheron, was from Pazardjik. I don't remember my grandparents - they had died long before I was born. My mother, Rashel Gheron was born in 1882 in the town of



Pazardjik. She graduated from the Alliance Israelite Universelle [2](#) - something very unusual for that time because women weren't supposed to study. She was a housewife like her sisters Roza, Beya and Victoria. They lived in Pazardjik. When we were interned to Pazardjik, we lived in Victoria's house. Her brother Avram was a businessman. Roza married Yosif Astrug, who was a bank manager, but the bank went bankrupt. Their son Anri graduated in dentistry in Bordeaux, as Beya's son did too, and they came back to work here. My mother died in Pazardjik at the age of 62 during our internment. She had a heart attack from all these events.

I don't know how my parents met but their marriage was an ordinary Jewish one - they were Sephardi Jews, moderately religious. At the end of the 19th century they used to speak Ladino at home and they attended Bulgarian schools in order to learn Bulgarian and be able to communicate. I have written memoirs with a documentary character, and there's a lot of information about the Jewish life in the past - a part of it arose from some family stories. My book *Beyond the Law* is dedicated to the participation of the Jewish Youth in the Resistance. My family and I suffered the consequences of the Law for the Protection of the Nation [3](#) and probably it is due to my desire for writing that I wrote this book.

## Growing up

I was born on 2nd June 1921 in Sofia. I have two brothers, Armand and Emil, who are quite older than me. Armand, born in 1908, was a communist. He thought that the victory of the social revolution would efface the contradictions between the separate nationalities so that men would be brothers, which in fact turned out to be a false conception. Before the war he was a dental mechanic; afterwards he was a writer. In September 1941, after the declaration of war by Germany on the Soviet Union, he was sent to Enikiy [town in present day northern Greece.], to a concentration camp, as he had received a political sentence in the 1930s. In 1933 he married a Jewish woman, Roza Hershkovich, but they divorced before 1944. She was an actress; she became a guerilla during the war and was killed near Pazardjik. Then Armand married Matilda, or Mati, Pinkas, an opera singer, and they have one daughter, Klery. Emil, my second brother, born in 1911, became a tradesman. He was interned to Plevna with his family in 1943-1944. He has two sons, Sabat and Yakov.

We lived in an ordinary home on Sofronii Street in the quarter of Luchbunar [4](#). The neighborhood was poor; refugees from Armenia, Aegean Thrace and Macedonia lived there together with Bulgarians from the countryside. Despite the different background of the residents we lived peacefully. The house where we were tenants was situated in a yard surrounded by other buildings. Our lodging was on the second floor, there was running water. It had two rooms - there was a hall in the middle, a small kitchen and a ceiling. In my childhood there was a mezuzah in every Jewish home - a small metal or plastic tube with a special part from the Torah inside. Each time you enter the flat you should reach for it and kiss it. We had a wall stove at home. My brothers and I lived in one room; Armand was reading till very late at night, he already had a big library. A great part of it consisted of socialist writings - mostly in Russian translation. I had a little bed that my parents moved next to the stove in their room because I fell sick very often. In the yard in front of our house there was a big chestnut tree and a washbasin. Our neighbors were Turks. The father was a wealthy man but his son was a bit of a rascal - he had a sports car. A Russian family, who had come after the Russian Revolution of 1917 [5](#), lived downstairs. I remember the woman - a very beautiful Russian lady who used to stand at the window staring out. It was like a picture - she stood

behind the curtain with this very typical veil over her beautiful face - I will never forget it although I was nine or ten at the time.

When I think back, we lived very poorly - my father had a salary but he fell ill so we lived rather below the average. We could hardly make ends meet. In my childhood we have never gone on holidays, but there was one very beautiful girl on our street, Smaragda, whose parents were wealthy so they could afford to go the seaside, and she told us about it. The Jews lived very united - we went to the synagogue on holidays but we've never had any close relationships with other Jews. It was the relatives who came to our place more often - Roza and her husband Yosif came to visit us and drink coffee.

In our mahala there were a lot of refugees from Macedonia and Armenia, and many Jews. [Mahala comes from the Turkish word mahalle meaning neighborhood] Children of all nationalities were friends - we played and wandered everywhere together - to Bashkov chiflik, to Batalova vodenica [in the suburbs of Sofia at the time - literally Bashkov's farm and Batalov's water mill]. At the corner of Sofronii and Vladayska reka [a water channel that passes through Sofia] there was a police squadron - its commander was Salabashev. When I published some memoirs from the years in Septemvri [meaning September, a monthly magazine edited by the Union of the Bulgarian Writers from 1948 to 1990], the writer Stoyan Zagorchinov [1889-1969] was deeply interested in that story about Salabashev as they had been colleagues at the Military School.

On every Todorovden [the Eastern Orthodox holiday St. Theodore on 15th March], the Horse Easter, horse races were organized on the right bank of the river and many children came there even from the other bank, from Banishora [a district neighboring Luchbunar]. Fires were lit and jumped over and awards were given to the winners. The fire brigade of Zahartchuk came as well.

We had a football team in the neighborhood. It was called Pirin because of the numerous refugees from Macedonia; we paid membership fees and we had a rag ball. [Editor's note: Pirin is a mountain range located in southwestern Bulgaria near the present day border of the Republic of Macedonia] Nikushev, who came from Rouse, grew up with us - later he became a famous football player. We nailed a box for announcements on an acacia tree on our street. The Slaviya playing field was next to our district and we needed an adult to get inside free - we didn't have money to buy tickets.

We went in groups to the recently opened swimming pool, Dianabad - I remember a barrack full of building materials where we took our clothes off and went inside. One day when we looked for our clothes we found that they had disappeared. A man came and said, 'Oh, are these yours? Now you'll get it!' He slapped us before he gave our clothes back. Sometimes on Sundays we went to the quarter where the Dunovists dwelt - I live next to this place now, close to the grave of Petar Dunov [6](#). We went there because they used to organize concerts - there was a hall where now the Russian Embassy is. There were many artists and musicians among them; they were vegetarians and cooked soups - bean soup for example. Now the garden next to Dunov's grave is kept clean and nice - I think that it is under the supervision of UNESCO; when Paco Raban [Spanish fashion designer] visited Bulgaria he went there - he is a follower of Dunov.

I have very good and festive memories from the synagogue. The Jewish holidays always begin at sundown - with the rise of the first star. At the festal dinner on Saturday evening there was a chicken meal. I went to buy one at Zhenskiya Pazar [the biggest market place in Sofia; the name means Women's Marketplace. It is also simply called Pazara -The Marketplace.] and then I took it to

the synagogue to be slaughtered by a shochet - the special person who is in charge of killing the ritual animals. There is another one, mohel, who does the ritual circumcision of boys. I had my brit milah but I didn't have a bar mitzvah.

I remember the celebration of different holidays - for example Chanukkah, the Holiday of the Lights that is connected with the Jewish Rebellion against the Syrians and the liberation of the Temple. In the Temple there was a little jar full of lighting oil that by miracle turned out to be enough for a long time. Hence there is a very beautiful set made for Chanukkah called chanukkiyah - it has eight little vessels and the ninth is at the top as a lamp. Now I have one at home and I light it as a family tradition, usually in December. I remember that my father read something and we all stayed at home on that evening.

Another holiday I remember clearly is Simchat Torah, Torah's Joy, when the scripts are solemnly taken out; they are carried round the synagogue and everyone stretches out and kisses them. At this holiday the reading of the last text of the Torah ends and then continues from the beginning. It is a very joyous holiday - there are many songs and dances, especially among the Ashkenazi Jews. I have never attended their celebrations but I know that among the Sephardi Jews in Bulgaria there have never been such dances. Now there are some attempts for introducing these dances into the Sephardi ceremonies.

The family dinner on Pesach is called seder. We gathered at home and we left the entrance door open: 'He who is hungry, let him come in and eat.' We ate the unsalted and unleavened bread that we took from the synagogue, matzah. There was bread called boyo - it was very thick and hard and it was round compared to matzah that is rather a plain pancake. As the youngest member of the family I was given a white towel with some unleavened bread wrapped in it and I walked three times round the table - to commemorate our ancestors' exodus from Egypt. We didn't strictly observe Sabbath - we have never asked somebody to do the housework on Saturday. Usually we lit candles when we gathered at the table for dinner on Sabbath.

The Jewish community in Sofia was always very well organized - there were newspapers, different organizations - charities, for example. There were different political trends - the strongest one was Zionism. They were called the General Zionists - they had newspapers, there were meetings for founding a Jewish state. I was never present at such meetings because I wasn't a Zionist - I was a communist. After 9th September 1944 a great part of the Bulgarian Jews left for Israel because they were influenced by Zionism. My father was a moderate Zionist and my brother Armand was a communist. Although my father wasn't alien to the social idea he said of communism that no change could come from it, that it was in vain.

The communists thought that the Jewish problem couldn't be resolved by founding a separate state. They believed that the victory of the social revolution would solve the principle conflict. The Zionists and the communists represented the main trends among the Bulgarian Jewish community. The relations between them became strained at times, but sometimes the contradictions ceased - for example during the war. There was a youth organization called Hashomer Hatzair [7](#) whose members were socialists but they supported the idea of founding a Jewish state. They left for Israel after the war and became founders of the kibbutzim. I remember that a younger friend of mine, Izi Mezan, left for Palestine with a group of young people in 1943. He worked there at a fishing farm. After 1944 he came back to Bulgaria and he graduated in medicine. Now he is a famous

neurologist. His father, the intellectual Shaul Mezan, left for Albania in 1944 as a guerilla and he was killed there. Before 1944 many of them became partisans and died. Apart from the youth organizations there were some women's organizations.

The Jewish quarter Iuchbunar was where the poorer Jews lived, those who were wealthy lived on Exarch Yosif Street, on Iskar Street; their shops were on Leghe Street. When the Law for the Protection of the Nation was voted for in 1940, the rich Jews who lived east of Maria Luiza Boulevard were ordered to move to the west and then Iuchbunar became something like a Jewish ghetto.

The Jews, especially those who were wealthy, strove to give their children good education - they wanted them to become lawyers, physicians, dentists; those who were poorer became craftsmen - tinsmiths, shoemakers, fabric workers. There were porters - the opportunities of each family determined what progress someone could make.

Zhenskiya Pazar was close to our street and we often went there to look at the goods - there were pigeons in cages and I wanted very much to have one. I was about seven when I bought a pigeon, I made a cage for it in the attic; I fed it on the dormer window and I wanted to let it fly and come back but it flew away and didn't come back. The pigeon trainers who sold them taught them to come back. There were street traders with carts who walked along the streets at dusk and sold vegetables - cucumbers, lettuce; it was cheaper to buy things from them at sundown. Now there are no carts such as these.

There were saleptchii [street traders who used to sell salep; comes from a Turkish word meaning orchid] - Albanians with cans like the boza [8](#) sellers who sold a drink made from the roots of salep - a hot, dense and wonderful drink especially when your throat is infected. They walked along the streets and cried, 'Salep, scalds the throat, gets the cough out'. Sometimes the grinders passed - they whetted and stropped knives and scissors.

We loved going to the movies; there were two cinemas in the neighborhood - Ufa and Exelsior. And we shicked [a slang word used at the time for entering a public place without paying the required fee]. I remember that I saw Ben Hur in Exelsior - the film about the war against the Romans, including chariots. There is a scene when many rocks began rolling and I guarded myself as if from the screen. One of the first Bulgarian films was shot on our street - its director was Ghendov [Vasil Ghendov (1891-1970) - the first Bulgarian film-maker]. I remember how they got our street paved. We were playing with lemonade marbles in the street. Everyone had to place them at their own house, and when they began erect the flagstone, one of our neighbors said, 'Well, I have no money for bread, they want me to make the pavement'.

From among my childhood friends, I still have contact with Dimitar Panov, with Vasko and Mitko Palazovi. I remember the social life as the kids see it - the policemen on horses who passed along our street - there was no pavement at that time, there were cobblestones which made sparks underneath their hooves. I remember the so-called tribunes where communists and anarchists gathered at the street and someone stood up and started to chant slogans. But they were immediately reported to the police and the policemen came to disperse the crowd with lashes and arrest them. They took the arrested on two horses to the First Police Section just behind our school Konstantin Fotinov- I saw the marks on their faces left from being beaten against the wall. [Editor's note: Konstantin Fotinov is the founder of the first Bulgarian magazine in 1841 called Liuboslovie, a

literal translation of the Greek word philology - the love of words].

When I was a child my father subscribed me to the magazine Svetulka [firefly in Bulgarian] - I received it by mail and it was a great [kef 9](#) when the issue arrived with my name on the envelope. My father began to teach us French at home from an old book. As the youngest child I was the most diligent student because my brothers had already grown up - Armand with his ideas and Emil with his own youthful friends. I still remember some French proverbs from this book: 'Ton the a ote ta toux?' - 'Oui, mon the m'a ote ma toux.' I attended a private kindergarten, Naum Dimitrov-Simtcha - it was close to Boris and Simeon Streets. My parents could afford it. Then I studied at the Central Jewish School on Kaloyan Street till the first junior high school grade so I know Ivrit very well. I was called to the higher grades to show them how well I was reading from the Tannakh. The Jewish school had the same curriculum as all Bulgarian schools as well as Hebrew and readings from the Bible. The grades consisted of 25-30 children. I remember my teacher in Hebrew, Iveret, as well as our Bulgarian teacher Izraelova. Then my father enrolled me in the Bulgarian school 'Konstantin Fotinov' on Hristo Botev Boulevard next to our home. My favorite subjects were writing and reading.

At the junior high school I had a teacher in Bulgarian, Dimitrova, she was one of my most favorite teachers. In 1934 we went to Kjustendil where I attended the Junior High School No. 2; and later the Kjustendil Boy's High School where my class supervisor was Pena Slaveykova - Pencho Slaveykov's niece [Pencho Slaveykov (1866-1912) is one of the classics of Bulgarian literature, the founder of the modernist movement]. She had graduated in Switzerland and she taught us French. Once she gave us a composition assignment in drama and my father helped me write it. She got my writing published in a newspaper for children, called Gradinka [little garden in Bulgarian] under the name of Victor Baruhov. Later I found it at the National Library - this was my first 'publication'.

Our teacher in Bulgarian was Batalov - later I found out that he had been Dimitar Talev's colleague [Dimitar Talev (1898-1966) is one of the classic Bulgarian novelists]. Once he gave us a writing topic on Les Miserables so we went to see the movie starring Harry Baur as Jean Valjean. When he returned the notebooks, he asked me to read my essay: 'Can you believe it? Unfortunately a Jewish boy wrote the most wonderful essay.' There was no offense in his words. I have never felt any anti-Semitic moods. When the Law for the Protection of the Nation was adopted there were no outrages but on the contrary - there was sympathy and compassion for us. There were some occasional attacks.

My eldest brother Armand played the violin. It remained with us from the time of my father's studies in Pedagogy. While we lived in Kjustendil in 1934-1936 I was given private lessons in violin by the husband of my Bulgarian teacher Bliznakov. They lived close to us - next to Chifte banya. When we were interned from Sofia in 1943 I sold this violin - we had no money. I still feel pity for it.

When we came back to Sofia from Kjustendil in 1936 I finished the Men's High School No. 3 in 1937 and I enrolled in Sofia University to study law and history, but I didn't graduate.

## During the war

I have many more memories from the time when Hitler came to power in Germany and the persecutions began. In December 1940 the Law for the Protection of the Nation was adopted by the National Assembly and on 23rd January 1941 it was promulgated. Pursuant to the provisions of this

Law, Jews were deprived of all civil rights. One of the articles of the Law for the Protection of the Nation stated that you couldn't write - you had no right to be an author. My first short story during our internment to Parazdjik was published in the newspaper Gorsky Kooperator [literally - 'a forest guard']. I can't remember how I got in touch with the editors but they got it published under the name V. Beshkov. I couldn't be published because I was a Jew. Another article stated that you couldn't be in matrimonial or non-matrimonial relationships with non-Jews. Thus, I couldn't love Bulgarian women.

In 1941, apart from the yellow star, we had to put a note on our front door - a Jewish Dwelling - which consisted of a white sheet of paper with black writing and the star of David. At the time when the Law for the Protection of the Nation was enforced I worked at a Jewish commercial company called Bratya Mizrahi [Mizrahi Brothers] but they had to decrease the number of Jewish employees because the law required that Jews employed by such companies should not exceed 50% of the total work force. I was employed in a company that was engaged in fabric trading when I went to work for the first time with the star. When my boss, Boris Zhelev, who was one of the republican officers fired from the army as a republican, saw it, he said, 'Take it off, I'll vouch for you!' There was sympathy for us everywhere.

On 24th May 1943 [10](#) the Jews from Sofia were given notice to leave Sofia in three days on the decree of the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs [11](#). This Committee was founded under the special jurisdiction of the Minister of Interior [Petar Gabrovski] [12](#). Its headquarter was on Dondukov Boulevard in the confiscated building of Samuel Patak [a Jewish merchant], the owner of Sampatak - a well-known stationery company. The Jewish property had to be confiscated. A number of young lawyers from the pro- fascist organization, the Ratniks [13](#) co-operated in the Committee. They benefited from the confiscation and liquidation of the Jewish shops and other property. We had to leave with no more than 20 kilograms of luggage; it was said where, when and with which train we had to leave. They deliberately chose the holidays because they wanted to keep the whole affair a secret. Emil and his family received instructions to go to Pleven and my mother and I were to be sent to Pazardjik.

At that time my brother Armand was a prisoner at the concentration camp in Enikioy. The Enikioy concentration camp was established in September 1941 as a preventive measure against the communists because of their alliance with Germany. Its official name was 'State Security Settlement'. The prisoners had to build the fences themselves. The Communist Party, which was banned by the Protection of the State Act at the time, organized fund- raising for the prisoners, but only their relatives were allowed to send them parcels with food and other supplies. The authorities had to grant a special permission for each parcel to be sent. At the camp my brother began to translate War and Peace by Tolstoy [14](#)- I received parts of it hidden in damadjani [demijohn]. Later this translation was published. In fact, it wasn't very good but it was the first one in Bulgarian. My brother Armand was released from Enikioy camp in November 1943.

On 24th May [15](#) there was a spontaneous Jewish protest and the Laborers' Party came to help us [UYW] [16](#). But in fact everything was spontaneous. Rabbi Daniel Zion wasn't liked by the other rabbis, went to Exarch Stefan [17](#) and explained everything to him. At the official public prayer on the occasion of 24th May where the tsar was present, the exarch told him, or is reported to have said, 'Boris, thou shall not chase, in order to be left unchased.' These words are from the Bible. Thousands of people gathered in the yard of the Iuchbunar synagogue [a Sephardi synagogue at

the corner of Klementina boulevard and Osogovo street, demolished during the Communist rule; the Central Synagogue is located at the corner of Exarch Yosif and George Washington streets]. The Rabbi came, made a speech to calm down the crowd and the people went on a march along Osogovo Street and Klementina [now Alexandar Stamboliiski boulevard] and finally stopped at Vazrazhdane Square. The policemen encountered us there and began to run after the protesters and beat them.

I remember that a young man took a flag off a green wooden fence and walked with it at the head of the procession. When the writer Dragomir Assenov [pen name of Jacques Nisim Melamed - a famous Bulgarian writer (1926-1981)] read this in my novel 'Beyond the Law', he said, 'That was me'. A great number of protesters were arrested. We were hiding for a couple of hours next to St. Peter and Paul church and all the people who were arrested on that day were driven to a camp in Somovit on the bank of the Danube. This camp was established as a direct response to this incident. The plan was to disperse the compact Jewish population, to drive them to the Danube and then to send them to Poland and Germany. This demonstration compelled the Committee to put off the internment of the Jews from Sofia till the beginning of June. It was said that the tsar interfered.

In June my mother and I were interned to Pazardjik. From there I was taken to the forced labor groups in Kurtovo Konare [a village southwest of Plovdiv]. We worked under extremely hard conditions on the correction of Vucha's riverbed - the river swelled there and caused floods. We lived in small and dirty sheds. When we were on our way to the camp with our luggage the policeman who was accompanying us made us stop, drew his gun and said, 'Look, here you are under my command, you are not leaving the camp. I have the right to shoot.' Our rooms were separated by planks; several ex- prisoners lived here. They worked on the same site as diggers but they were paid and free - at the weekends they went to Plovdiv and when they came back they told us about their adventures in the big city - craps [the dice game] and prostitutes. We stayed there till 11th November 1943. In Pazardjik I met my brother Armand who was released from Enikioy.

In the following summer Armand and I were mobilized in the Jewish labor group in Verinsko [a village between the towns of Ihtiman and Vakarel]. We lived in tents next to some petrol tanks. In August 1944 after the Yash- Kishinev Operation at the Eastern Front some defeated German units withdrew, passing through Bulgaria. I remember that trucks full of German soldiers passed nearby. There was a Bulgarian unit in the neighborhood and they were commanded to disarm the passing German soldiers. We asked them why they didn't disarm them. 'Why don't you disarm them!', they answered. And how exactly could we do it - with spades? Afterwards they really did take captives and sent them to the yard of the Vakarel church. The Germans knew that their soldiers were there and one day an airplane flew past very close to the ground - as a final salute and in a few days they bombarded the tanks.

The government changed. But we had already removed the yellow stars beforehand. In July Slaveiko Vasilev, a famous military officer who had taken part in the coup d'état in 1923 [see events of 1923] [18](#), passed through. He stopped his car and said, 'You don't have stars anymore.' On 6th-7th September 1944 I was in Pazardjik; there was an ex-priest, 'the red priest', who held a meeting where he spoke a satirical and symbolic public prayer to bury fascism.

My brother Armand was called to Sofia on 9th September 1944 and I joined him at the end of 1944. My brother Emil came from Pleven to Sofia right after 1944. My brother and I lived together for a



while until we found separate lodgings.

I met my future wife in Pazardjik, where she had also been interned. She was very young, 16, a high-school student. Her maiden name was Ester Leon Asher. Her father, Leon Moshe Asher, was born in the town of Samokov. He was a leatherworker. Her mother, Berta Asher, nee Illel, was from the town of Vidin. They married in 1918 and came to live in Sofia. My wife has one brother, Mois Asher, born in 1920, who was a construction engineer and married a Bulgarian, Elena. They had one son. Mois died in 1995.

### Post-war

Immediately after the wedding in 1948 my wife went to the village of Nedelino [a village in the Rhodope Mountains in the Zlatograd district, close to the Greek border] as a temporary freelance teacher at an elementary school. I visited her there and I remember how we were riding horses along the borderline with a frontier officer and looking at the Aegean Sea. I wrote a story of a woman-teacher at the border, 'At the Front Post' that was published as a serial in the newspaper Narodna Mladezh [People's Youth] in 1949 but now I see it as a bit of a conjuncture. In fact, we celebrated our wedding when she came back for the Easter vacation in the spring of 1949 in the house of my brother Armand who had already married Mati Pinkas - a lot of people gathered; it was a great fun.

When we came back to Sofia from Pazardjik, we didn't find anything - everything had disappeared: the furniture, the books, everything. We found ourselves 'at a bare meadow' [Bulgarian idiom for 'down and out']. I joined the II Guards Regiment in Radomir but I didn't leave for the front, I worked as a journalist with the Narodna Gvardiya [National Guard]. After the demobilization I worked at Partizdat publishing house as a technical editor; we produced two very good editions - one of them was a volume of poetry by Nikola Vaptsarov [19](#) with Radevsky as editor and Shmirgela as illustrator [Hristo Radevsky (1903-1997) is a famous Bulgarian poet; Shmirgela a famous Bulgarian artist]. Afterwards I worked at Narodna Mladezh, then at their publishing house and finally at the publishing house of Bulgarski Pisatel [Bulgarian Writer] where I was editor-in-chief at the time when I retired. Meanwhile I was also engaged in literature. I wrote ten or eleven books for adults and three books for children. My novel Beyond the Law was a success - it has six editions and it has been translated into French [under the title 'Hors-la-loi'] and English. I don't know if it's still available.

After 9th September 1944 almost all my friends left for Israel, where I have visited them several times. I have very fond memories of this; we looked at some photographs together and they even gave me a few - I had studied with some of them till the 4th grade. They warmly welcomed my wife and me. Yet I stayed in Bulgaria because at that time I was a leftist like my elder brother Armand and I thought that the Jewish question would be resolved along with the social problems. But political differences did not trouble our friendship.

Before the war I had a lot of Jewish friends - the poet Edi Arueti, Yosif Beraha, Zhak Danon. They all left for Israel after the war. Among my friends who left for Israel there were twin brothers, Haim and Solomon Mevorah, who used to live in my quarter, at the corner of Simeon Street and Antim I Street. They had Spanish citizenship. When one of them came from Israel as my guest, he wanted to see his father's shop along Pirotska Street and a dead-end street - I think it's called Bulgaria - and the Commercial High School in Lozenetz. I brought him there and he burst into tears - there

was a balcony at the back of the building and he said, 'Our headmaster talked to us here.' And when the other one came to Sofia we went to see the place where they had lived - we went upstairs, we rang the bell, but the current owners weren't very kind and we didn't go inside. But they felt a great nostalgia - they were very excited when they came back to Bulgaria. In Israel they have an organization, some dance clubs, they sew traditional costumes, they dance the horo [traditional Bulgarian dances], sing Bulgarian songs and cry.

Bulgaria was the only country from the Eastern Block that permitted the free emigration of Jews to Israel - Georgi Dimitrov [20](#) had a role in this. 90% of the Bulgarian Jews left by 1949. In 1967 under the pressure of the Soviet Union Bulgaria broke diplomatic ties with Israel. Only Romania kept them. But the contacts with Israel never ceased, I went to Israel five times in those years. I liked the country very much - it experienced rapid development and an excellent welfare system. The Bulgarian Jews in Israel are highly regarded for their honesty and diligence, thus the breakdown in diplomatic ties didn't change much.

I was a member of the Bulgarian Communist Party but this has never influenced my attitude toward Israel. The anti-Semitism among the Bulgarian communists was due to the position of the Soviet Union. Although I was a member of the Party I experienced things that caused me to think. I wasn't a blind follower, for example in 1970 I was discharged from the magazine Plamak [flame in Bulgarian]. I saw a lot of things that I didn't approve of. The official attitude of the state toward the wars in Israel wasn't the only thing.

The Eichmann case was in 1961. I called in the UBW [The Union of the Bulgarian Writers] and they said, 'Go!' They gave me some money to cover my travel expenses. Probably I'm the only one from Eastern Europe who was present at the trial. I could send some correspondence, take notes, etc. In my books there are some recollections from the trial. It was very well guarded, there were many searches. They kept Eichmann because they were afraid of some mob law on the part of his men as well as on the part of the relatives of the victims. I was in Jerusalem in July and August during the interrogations. He was always very well dressed, he used two pairs of glasses. He was standing in a booth made of fireproof glass where he was given some documents to inspect. His line was, 'I had orders, I have never taken part in a murder.' There were many questions concerning the role of the oath, of the duty and so on.

Eichmann was the person who organized the deportations of the Jews. In Bulgaria his representative was Theodor Daneker, who in February 1943 signed the contract for the internment of the Jews with the commissioner of the Jewish Affairs Alexander Belev, [21](#) when 20,000 Jews from the 'new lands' had to be interned [from the Aegean Thrace and Macedonia]. On 4th March 1943 a blockade began in which not only the police but unfortunately also the Bulgarian army took part - all the members of the Committee were there with Belev and they began gathering the Jews from Aegean Thrace and bringing them to the railway stations. They were transported by the narrow-gauge railway of Demir-Hisar, which passed next to the Jewish labor camps and the people squeezed in the wagons were given bread by the people from outside - a tragic picture.

I remember a meeting with the academician Mikhail Arnaudov [Bulgarian ethnographer and literary historian (1878-1978)] who was taken to court and imprisoned after 9th September 1944 because he was Minister of Education in Bagrianov's government. He was given a library in jail in order to work there. When the academician Derzhavin from the former USSR came to Bulgaria he asked for

Arnaudov and when he was told that the latter was in prison they immediately ordered his release. When the new restaurant of the UBW was opened - Djagarov made it - before the official opening we were waiting for Todor Zhivkov's arrival. Petar Pondev, the editor-in-chief of 'Bulgarski Pisatel' at the time, came in and said to me, 'Let me introduce you to Prof. Mikhail Arnaudov'. When he heard my name he said, 'Oh, Mr. Baruh, did you know that we put the stars away.' 'I know', I answered and I remembered how Slaveiko Vasilev tried to ascribe this merit to himself when he passed by the labor camp in August 1944. The merit of this government was that they tried to make an attempt to remove Bulgaria from the pro- German course even in the midst of the pressures of the day. Later I met Mikhail Arnaudov at the publishing house when we put together the second edition of Dimitar Shishmanov's book on Ivan Vazov, a book that was prepared by him.

On 39 Sveti Naum Street, where nowadays my son Valeri lives, my neighbor was Chavdar Kiuranov [Bulgarian politician, member of BCP and its successor, the Bulgarian Socialist Party] and we were both members of the Klub za Glasnost i Preustroistvo [22](#). We built the apartment house together with his brother Todor Kiuranov and the artist Marko Behar. When the Berlin Wall fell down we lived with expectations but now after 10th November 1989 [23](#) a second great disappointment came - after the disappointment of the years following 9th September 1944. A miserable situation - you can't even buy a book. The life of old people is very hard: I mean the current financial situation.

My wife Ester was a teacher in Biology. Both my children, Valeri and Shelly grew up without being educated in the Jewish traditions - it's a pity that I didn't instill them in my family. Maybe my ideas from those times had influenced this decision. Valeri graduated from Sofia Technical University with a degree in refrigerator engineering, and Shelly graduated from Sofia University in Bulgarian philology. My wife died in 1997 and now I live with Shelly and her daughter, Ada Evtimova. She is 21 and is now a student at the University of National and World Economy. They accept the Jewish traditions willingly and with great interest. I attend some activities at the Jewish Community Center in Sofia.

My children don't speak Ladino and I'm sorry for that because in my family as well as in my wife's family they used to talk in Ladino and many people knew Ivrit at that time. I know Ladino from the conversations that I listened to as a child in my family - my parents took me to weddings, to requiems, to visit some friends of theirs and gradually I learned it. It's a conserved Spanish similar to the Bulgarian in the speech of the people in the Rhodope mountains where some ancient Bulgarian words are preserved. Once in the holiday house of the UBW near Varna I came across a Spanish writer who had come to Bulgaria for an international meeting of writers. One day he was standing by the sea and I said to him, 'Espanoles en la mar' [Spaniards by the sea] - it is a radio program for fishermen in Spain. Then we met in the bar and had a talk and after he went back to Spain he wrote an anecdote of our conversations in ABC newspaper and in the meanwhile he also wrote, 'That man talked to me in Cervantes's language'. The reason for this is that while we were talking about my youth I said, 'Mi mansevez'. 'Mansevez', he said, is a word out of use nowadays. Now they say juventud."

## Glossary

### **1 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.

## **2 Alliance Israelite Universelle**

founded in 1860 in Paris, this was the main organization that provided Ottoman and Balkan Jewry with western style modern education. Between 1870 and 1900 it established numerous schools in Bulgaria, providing, especially the elite, with comprehensive education in French. After 1891 the Jewish schools, which had adopted the teaching of the Bulgarian language, were recognized by the Bulgarian state.

## **3 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.

## **4 Iuchbunar**

The poorest residential district in Sofia; the word is of Turkish origin and means 'the three wells'.

## **5 Russian Revolution of 1917**

Revolution in which the tsarist regime was overthrown in the Russian Empire and, under Lenin, was replaced by the Bolshevik rule. The two phases of the Revolution were: February Revolution, which came about due to food and fuel shortages during WWI, and during which the tsar abdicated and a provisional government took over. The second phase took place in the form of a coup led by Lenin in October/November (October Revolution) and saw the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks.

## **6 Dunov, Petar (1864-1945)**

founder of the Dunovist movement. From the 1920s on he and his followers had a settlement on the outskirts of Sofia called Izgrev (Sunrise in Bulgarian). Later on he was to become a world-

known spiritual leader with followers everywhere. Dunov preached for the supreme task of man on earth to be the intimate interrelation with the original cause of existence, with the divine, with the infinity. This was a religious doctrine that tended to turn into mysticism and thoroughly repudiated the church; it proclaimed a lifestyle in the open air, amidst the elements. Dunov's numerous followers lived outside society and as simply as possible: their sacred ritual became the daily meeting of the sunrise.

## **7 Hashomer Hatzair**

'The Young Watchman'; A Zionist-socialist pioneering movement founded in Eastern Europe, 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.

## **8 Boza**

a weak alcohol drink typical for the Balkans.

## **9 Kef**

comes from the Turkish word keyif meaning delight, great pleasure akin to Arab kayif - well-being. The word is very common in Bulgarian and it is used more often than its synonyms in Bulgarian meaning the same.

## **10 24th May 1943**

Protest by a group of members of parliament led by the deputy chairman of the National Assembly, Dimitar Peshev, as well as a large section of Bulgarian society. They protested against the deportation of the Jews, which culminated in a great demonstration on 24th May 1943. Thousands of people led by members of parliament, the Eastern Orthodox Church, political parties and non-governmental organizations stood out against the deportation of Bulgarian Jews. Although there was no official document banning deportation, Bulgarian Jews were saved, unlike those from Aegean Thrace and Macedonia.

## **11 Commissariat for Jewish Affairs**

an institution set up in September 1942 at the Ministry of Interior and People's Health that was in charge of the execution of the Law for the Protection of the Nation. It was headed by Alexander Belev, a German-trained anti-Semite.

## **12 Gabrovski, Petar (1898-1945)**

Lawyer, one of the leaders of the 'Ratnik' pro-fascist organization. As Minister of the Interior and People's Health in Bogdan Filov's government, he was the architect of the anti-Jewish legislation. In February 1943, Gabrovski agreed with the Germans that all Jews living in Greek and Yugoslav Macedonia and in Aegean Thrace, administered by Bulgaria, would be surrendered to the Germans for deportation.

### **13 Ratniks**

The Ratniks, like the Branniks, were also members of a nationalist organization. They advocated a return to national values. The word 'rat' comes from the Old Bulgarian root meaning 'battle', i.e. 'Ratniks' fighters, soldiers.

### **14 Tolstoy, Lev Nikolayevich (1828-1910)**

Russian novelist and moral philosopher, who holds an important place in his country's cultural history as an ethical philosopher and religious reformer. Tolstoy, alongside Dostoyevsky, made the realistic novel a literary genre, ranking in importance with classical Greek tragedy and Elizabethan drama. He is best known for his novels, including War and Peace, Anna Karenina and The Death of Ivan Ilyich, but also wrote short stories and essays and plays. Tolstoy took part in the Crimean War and his stories based on the defense of Sevastopol, known as Sevastopol Sketches, made him famous and opened St. Petersburg's literary circles to him. His main interest lay in working out his religious and philosophical ideas. He condemned capitalism and private property and was a fearless critic, which finally resulted in his excommunication from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1901. His views regarding the evil of private property gradually estranged him from his wife, Yasnaya Polyana, and children, except for his daughter Alexandra, and he finally left them in 1910. He died on his way to a monastery at the railway junction of Astapovo.

### **15 24th May**

The day of Slavic script and culture, a national holiday on which Bulgarian culture and writing is celebrated and St. Kiril and Metodii, the creators of the Slavic alphabet, are honored.

### **16 UYW**

The Union of Young Workers. A communist youth organization, which was legally established in 1928 as a sub-organization of the Bulgarian Communist Youth Union. After the coup d'état in 1934, when the parties in Bulgaria were banned, it went underground and became the strongest wing of the BCYU. Some 70% of the partisans in Bulgaria were members of it. In 1947 it was renamed Dimitrov's Communist Youth Union, after Georgi Dimitrov, the leader of the Bulgarian Communist Party at the time.

### **17 Exarch Stefan (1878-1957)**

Exarch of Bulgaria (Head of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, subordinated nominally only to the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople) and Metropolitan of Sofia. He played an important role in saving the Bulgarian Jews from deportation to death camps. In 2002 his efforts were recognized by Yad Vashem and he was awarded the title 'Righteous among the Nations'.

### **18 Events of 1923**

By a coup d'état on 9th June 1923 the government of Alexander Stamboliiski, leader of the Bulgarian Agrarian Union, was overthrown and the power was assumed by the rightist Alexander Tsankov. This provoked riots that were quickly suppressed. The events of 1923 culminated in an

uprising initiated by the communists in September 1923, which was also suppressed.

### **19 Vaptsarov, Nikola (1909-1942)**

born in the town of Bansko, Vaptsarov ranks among Bulgaria's most prominent proletarian poets of the interwar period. His most well-known volume of poetry is 'Motoring Verses'. Vaptsarov was shot in Sofia on 23rd July 1942.

### **20 Georgi Dimitrov, Georgi (1882-1949)**

A Bulgarian revolutionary, who was the head of the Comintern from 1936 through its dissolution in 1943, secretary general of the Bulgarian Communist Party from 1945 to 1949, and prime minister of Bulgaria from 1946 to 1949. He rose to international fame as the principal defendant in the Leipzig Fire Trial in 1933. Dimitrov put up such a consummate defense that the judicial authorities had to release him.

### **21 Belev, Alexandar (1900-1944)**

first commissar for Jewish affairs in Bulgaria (1942-43). He was one of the founders of the anti-Semitic organization Ratnik. He was sent to Germany in 1941 to study methods of enforcing anti-Jewish legislation and, in September 1942, he became head of the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs. Belev implemented the anti-Semitic 'Law for the Protection of the Nation'. He succeeded only in deporting the Jews from the Yugoslav (Macedonia) and Greek (Aegean Thrace) territories under Bulgarian military occupation.

### **22 Klub za Glasnost i Preustroistvo**

Club for Publicity and Restructuring. A reformist organization founded on 3rd November 1988. In 1990 it was renamed the Federation of the Clubs for Publicity and Restructuring, and since 1992 it is called the National Club for Democracy.

### **23 10th November 1989**

After 35 years of rule, Communist Party leader Todor Zhivkov was replaced by 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 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.