

Leon Levi

Leon Levi

Sofia

Bulgaria

Interviewer: Emil Mashiah

Date of interview: November 2001

[My family history](#)

[Growing up](#)

[Going to school](#)

[During the War](#)

[After the War](#)

[Glossary](#)

My family history

I don't know anything about my ancestors. My parents never talked about them or if they did I don't remember. I only know that my father's family moved to Thessaloniki some time before World War I. My paternal grandmother was widowed quite early. She got married a second time and had two children from that marriage - two boys, my father's and his elder brother Baruh's stepbrothers. Later Baruh went to America and never came back here. My father's younger sister Roza stayed to live in Thessaloniki with her mother and stepbrothers. They were middle-class people and had a number of properties. Each family had its own house. They had a confectionery business and owned a sweet shop in Thessaloniki, which is how they earned their living.

My family is from Bulgaria. My father, Gavriel Shabat Levi, was born in Samokov in 1896 and my mother, Liza Gavriel Levi, nee Burla, in Dupnitsa in 1898. They were an ordinary family. They worked hard throughout their life. My father used to work in the tram transport in Sofia [as a conductor] and later he had many jobs as a laborer. My mother was a tailor at first. She left her job and after that she used to work at various places. She was even a seller of different goods at the Sofia market.

My father was quite a strange person. He wasn't very well-educated but he had traveled a lot. He had learnt French when he was a captive in France during World War I. He had participated in three wars - the Balkan War [see First Balkan War] [1](#), the Inter-Allied War [see Second Balkan War] [2](#) and World War I. In World War I he was taken prisoner. He was wounded quite seriously in the legs during the Balkan War and as a result of that he had difficulties walking. He spoke Greek as well as Turkish, Bulgarian and Spanish [Ladino]. He was a self-educated man. He wasn't much devoted to us. My mother was the mainstay of the family.

We were six siblings. Nonetheless, my mother went to work; she was also the one to take care of our living, our education and our upbringing. Her life was very hard. It was especially difficult when I was sent to prison in Skopje during World War II. My brothers were in forced labor camps [3](#). My



sister was the only one to stay at home, to work and provide a living for the family. My father had no job, neither did my mother, and my other brother was too young to help. They were in a very difficult situation until we returned after the war. When the war was over things gradually changed for the better. Nevertheless, in 1948 my whole family, except my sister Sofka and me, left for Israel. My brothers set up families there. They have children and grandchildren now. So the family grew, and the greater part of it lives in Israel.

Growing up

At the time I was born and at the times I remember, Sofia was much different than it is now. We used to live mainly around the Jewish quarter, the so-called Iuchbunar [4](#) or 'Trite kladenetsa' [the three wells]. Of course, we used to rent houses and very often changed our lodgings but for the greater part we lived in this quarter. There were lots of Jews there, some 50,000 people. The relations between us were very warm and close.

The community center, now called Emil Shekerdzhiski, was built there at those times. That was Bet Am [5](#) - the Jewish house, a very nice house, where we used to gather regularly. A Bulgarian Jewish children's choir was formed there. Life in Sofia was way more different than it is now. I can compare it only to the life in some underdeveloped cities in Asia and, especially, in the Arab countries. There was electricity mostly in the center of Sofia in those days. In the suburbs there was only electricity in several houses, the majority of the houses didn't have any. I remember that we used gas lamps.

We used to live on 121, Positano Street. We rented two rooms there. Once a builder from the town of Trun came and settled in a room in our yard. We already had electricity at that time. One evening the builder came to our place and started wondering at what exactly the bulb was. He even tried to light up his cigarette from the bulb. Of course, he couldn't manage to do so and we had to explain to him that electricity happened to be something completely different. The streets were dusty and dirty then, they weren't even asphalted. You could see electric lamps here and there in the streets, although we - the children - used to break them by throwing stones at them.

We used to live on Bregalnitsa and Positano [Streets]. There was a lemonade and ice cream factory opposite us. There weren't any fridges like now - people used to buy large ice blocks and put different products onto them in order to keep them cold. That way they kept the lemonade and the ice cream cold enough. We, children, used to get up at six in the morning, when the truck with the ice arrived. My brothers and I used to unload the blocks and carry them into the factory, which was actually no more than a small workshop. We did this in order to earn some money.

My father was the so-called shammash - in Bulgarian they call him 'a sexton' - in the synagogue on Positano and Morava [Streets]. Now there is a high chimney there. Actually it was a midrash [a little synagogue]. My father used to go there every morning around 4 to 4.30am; he used to open the midrash, warm up everything and light up the brazier. Then he was ready to make coffee. The elderly Jews used to come at 6am, so as to drink their coffee there. I usually went with my father to assist him in preparing the coffee and serving it to the old men. My father did this to earn some money because people paid for coffee there. The shammash made his living in this way because he didn't get any other salary. Children helped him as best they could.

There wasn't anything like kindergartens or nurseries then. Rich people, who had enough money, used to hire a woman to look after their children. The other kids were self-educated, so to speak. I remember one incident. My mother went to work, my father went to work and my brother cooked instead of them. We lived on Partenii Nishavski and Ibar Streets in an inner courtyard. Once my brother cooked beans. There weren't any hotplates, there wasn't anything but two bricks with logs and a pot on top of it; just like they do the picnics now. My brother, who was about 15-16 years old then, spilled the dish over his legs while stirring it. That was really very bad - no aid, no hospital. We, the kids, cleaned the wound and wrapped it. Back then there was Kupat Holim in Sofia, the former Jewish hospital. They finally helped him there but generally we, the kids, took care of each other. Our parents had to work. Very often we went to work with them.

Going to school

I studied in a Jewish school. I wasn't a bad student. There, when we finished the 4th grade, we usually had a final examination, which was held in the presence of a representative of the ministry of education, our director and two teachers. I remember we had exams in Hebrew, the Talmud and the Torah. I remember I had to talk about Spinoza [6](#). I must have told it well in Hebrew because the ministry's representative gave me a pat on the shoulder and said that I was very well prepared and that I had a future. Later on I went to secondary school and I was good there as well. Then I started studying by myself in order to make my living. I was the most educated person in the family; I was the only one who had graduated from high school and later had a higher education.

As a young boy I was in Hashomer Hatzair [7](#) for a while, but it happened so that at 16 I was already in prison. Generally, the young Jewish people split into Apoel and Maccabi [8](#) members. Others were in Hashomer Hatzair and there were also Betar [9](#) members who were rightists. There were arguments among us but they were of minor significance. Everybody knew that those groups had a very good background and a lot of sports activities were held within them. We used to gather in the large gym of today's 30th school that was then equipped with all the training apparatuses. There was an Albanian sweet shop on Bregalnitsa and Positano. They sold boza [10](#) there and when we had some money we used to go there.

I didn't go on vacations with my family, but there was one very good thing within the Jewish community. I used to study in a Jewish school; actually all the children of the Bulgarian Jews used to study in the Jewish school, the former Ludmila Zhivkova [11](#) school. They used to organize vacations in colonies [school camps] at different places. I was sent to a colony in the village of Soli. Usually our lodging was in the local school of the place we went to. They especially furnished the rooms with beds. We had meals and went on excursions along the Iskar River. As we didn't have enough money for other vacations and this was a free stay, this was my only vacation before 9th September 1944 [12](#).

All the Jewish holidays were observed in my family, such as Rosh Hashanah and Sukkot. We used to keep the fast on Yom Kippur. All these holidays were celebrated in the synagogue. I didn't have a bar mitzvah and I didn't have a favorite holiday as a child either. My sisters loved Tu bi-Shevat.

Before the war civil marriage services didn't exist. At that time people got married only in the church and Jewish people in the synagogue. I personally have vague memories of these things because I was quite young then and I wasn't especially interested in that, moreover I never went to a Jewish wedding before the war.

My sister Sofka and her future husband Mois had been dating for quite a long time. One day my mother came to me and told me that Mois wanted to marry my sister. My mother asked me what I thought of it. I told her not to interfere in their relation, as it was their own business. If they had already decided that they loved each other we couldn't possibly stop them. Moreover I knew Mois - he was a decent man, well brought up. He would take care of her and they would make a good family. They had to take the decision without our 'help'. So it happened.

One day Sofka and Mois came and said they were going to get married and asked me to be their godfather. An odd thing happened then. There was an appointed hour for the ceremony in the synagogue. There was also a football match - as far as I remember, between Levski and CSKA, actually at that time it wasn't called CSKA but CVNA [the most popular Bulgarian football teams - eternal rivals]. So I went to the match and when I came back the ceremony was already over. Mois got very angry with me. I apologized for my absent-mindedness. Anyway, the wedding took place at Mois's sister's place - her name was Matushka - on Positano and Opalchenska Streets. They had a house with a yard where we celebrated the wedding with our friends. There were a lot of people.

On 7th May there was always a military parade. We, the kids, were its regular spectators. As far as political life is concerned, I remember that when Assen Zlatarov [a famous Bulgarian scientist and politician] died, a great meeting took place. His body was exposed on Ibur Street [now Dimitar Petkov] and there were thousands and thousands of people who paid their last respects to him. I remember the fights and persecutions of the political forces in Sofia as well. I remember the coup d' etat of Kimon Georgiev [13](#) in 1934 - the so-called 'pladniari'. They overthrew Prime Minister Ivanov and even forbade the existence of different parties. I was 15-16 years old and I was already aware that things were going to get harder.

I cannot say anything about the demonstration of the Jews in Sofia because I wasn't there, I only know what I've read in the newspapers. I was in prison in Skopje at that time. Yet I have another personal experience. The day of the leaders of the Bulgarian National Revival [14](#) was celebrated on 1st November. We, the young people - Bulgarians and Jews; almost the whole Jewish quarter was there - went to the Park of Freedom in Borisova garden, around the Ariana pond. There a meeting against fascists and terror took place. We were scattered and we moved to the inside of the park. A new meeting started there. Meanwhile policemen came with light motor trucks and took everybody... I was driven to the 5th police station in Sofia. They beat us there, kept us for one night and released us in the morning. We were under age. At that time the majority age was 21. They made it 18 years after 9th September 1944.

There definitely was anti-Semitism because before we went to prison, the so-called legionaries [see Bulgarian Legions] [15](#) and 'Otets Paisievtzi' [Father Paissiy was one of the leading figures of the Bulgarian National Revival] organized raids in the Jewish quarter very often. They beat both young and old people mercilessly. They tormented us very much but in the end we started to organize our own groups in order to strike back those fascist youngsters. I even remember that in 1940 a big group of legionaries turned up in front of the Jewish house and started beating us. Then all of us took part in the fight. We were between 15-20 years old and we managed to chase them away by throwing stones and rods. From then on the fascist raids became considerably less. Great fights happened along Stamboliiski boulevard. Sometimes even chairs were thrown out of windows.

During the War

When Bulgaria entered the war on the side of Hitler's Germany, we - the young people - started to search for a way to prevent our country from getting involved in that war. Of course, at first we started distributing anti-military leaflets. At the age of 16 and a half I was sentenced to seven and a half years imprisonment for the distribution of anti-government and anti-fascist leaflets. Not only Jews did that but Bulgarians also. We got on very well with the Bulgarians as they were workers just like us and we had no reason to fight with them. The trial aiming at convicting us was a completely 'Jewish one'. We were 22 people and the majority of us was sent to prison.

There were anti-Semitic acts in the prison in Skopje as well. I remember a day when a prosecutor came from Skopje. At that time Skopje was under Bulgarian authority. When he realized that there were Jews there, he put us in another room - under special conditions - no fresh air, no letters, no parcels, and no additional food. We only had the right of the prison's ration. I neither had the right to receive nor to send anything to my family. No messages whatsoever, nothing at all. And the reason for that was that we were Jews. He even told us then that the Jews from the Aegean region had already been sent to the gas chambers. I stayed in prison for more than two years. I was tortured for 45 days until a trial was fabricated. I spent more than two years in the prisons in Sofia and in Skopje. Then, at the end of August 1944, we organized an escape.

In prison there were also Macedonians and Serbs although Bulgaria had occupied part of former Yugoslavia and annexed Macedonia to the so-called Great Bulgaria. We got along well with them. There were some 'underground' leaders, who decided that we should organize an escape because free Macedonians had informed us that a mass slaughter of prisoners, including the common criminals, was planned. We were among them.

The prison was in the village of Igrizovo, 17 kilometers from Skopje. We worked in a farm on the prison grounds, where we were cultivating the ground and building up farms, canals etc. Once two Macedonian men didn't come back from work. We hid their absence during the evening roll-call. They went to Skopje and joined the partisan unit. These people told us to prepare an escape from prison. We had to split into groups with leaders and so on. We did so and started waiting for them. They informed us that they would come on the night of 23rd August 1944 and we should leave the prison and run away with them. At that time there was a man among the security guards - they were mostly soldiers - who was on our side. We made an arrangement that in the evening of the day before we would arrest the over- men and leave the doors open. And so we did. Everybody sew himself a rucksack from any kind of material. We took all the food available and put on all our clothes. We had a special sign - a whistling upon which and everybody got out into the yard, absolutely unpunished. The guards were tied up, while the ones who supported us - the soldiers - came with us because otherwise they would have been punished.

We had to pass the river Vardar. The Vardar was some 100 meters away and we could escape to the liberated territories of Macedonia, to the village of Lisiche. The Vardar is a big river, quite deep and perhaps some 500-600 meters wide. Some of us including me couldn't swim. All dressed and holding each other's hands, we made a chain and one by one, perhaps in about half an hour, we all passed. We got completely wet, of course. Then we marched to the liberated territories. We met those two prisoners who had escaped before us. They were in the First Macedonian Liberation Army and their commander-in-chief was General Apostolovski. The authorities had already been informed about our escape and within some 40-50 minutes they began shooting at us on the road. Later on planes began flying above us as well. They were shooting at us but without success.

Slowly, probably in about eight hours, we made it to the village of Lisiche, where the headquarters of the Macedonian brigade were situated. There we had a short rest.

On 23rd-24th August the decision was taken that a separate Bulgarian unit should be formed and act in Macedonia. We were given a task. The 5th Corp of the Bulgarian army was allocated around Skopje. We had to go there and disarm the Bulgarian soldiers or occupiers. Macedonian people considered them occupiers because of the annexation of Macedonia to the so-called Great Bulgaria.

We traveled at night and went there early in the morning. Everyone got his personal task. Trendafil Martinski led the first squad. Later he became an expert of physical education and sports in Bulgaria. He gathered the soldiers. We told them that we were partisans, who had come to disarm their army. Many of the soldiers joined us and started to disarm their officers personally. We were about 130-140 people and they were several thousands. We succeeded in gathering piles of arms, guns, rifles, grenades and horses. We wanted to organize a horse squadron but we weren't allowed to. We also gathered plenty of trophies such as sole-leather, clothes, textiles, and food. The Macedonians, of course, took them for their people. It was a normal thing to do.

Our next task was to go to a village, where the mayor - a Bulgarian - had done great harm. He had sentenced people without any sentence to death; he had raped women. We got the order to eliminate him. Many years have passed since then and I remember neither his name nor the name of the village. Eight of our people went there and besieged the village. They killed the mayor and burned all the community papers in order to avoid the tax payments. They gave food to people. There was a large dairy there and they took away some cows to provide us with food for the march. They were of great use for us as there was nothing else to eat so we slaughtered the cows one by one.

Then a message arrived saying that Bulgarians shouldn't stay there any longer because there was danger that we would get killed. Thus we left for Bulgaria. It was a several kilometer long column of soldiers - armed and disarmed. When we came to a railway station named Raiko Zhiznifov in Macedonia at the Pchinia River, we came close to an ambush of Germans and Bulgarians. We stopped, as we already knew about the ambush from our intelligence officers. Then the whole unit except a few people, who guarded the captured soldiers, attacked and overcame the enemies. They ran away and the road was free. We passed the bridge and marched on to the town of Kratovo.

One night in Kratovo, when we were just about to fall asleep, we heard the sound of drums and tambourines. It was a very loud noise. We thought that someone was attacking us but finally it turned out that it was Ramazan [Turkish religious holiday] and festivities were going on and the Turkish people had started a feast as they hadn't eaten anything during the day. They treated us very well and gave us some food. We ate and drank together and then we continued on our way. We slept on peak Ruen in Osogovo Mountain at the former Bulgarian border. It was rather cold although it was only the end of August.

After the War

In the morning we heard on the radio that the Fatherland Front [16](#) had assumed power and the names of the people in the government were announced. Apart from Kimon Georgiev, we knew

Damian Velchev and Dobri Terpeshev. The man who heard the news on the radio started to shout that Bai [an expression for an elder brother or a very close pal] Dobri had become a minister. In a fast march we reached the village of Dobroslav close to Giueshevo in Kiustendil district. There we freed the Bulgarian soldiers. We stayed in the barracks, which were the property of the 4th guards' regiment.

Then they asked us if there were any volunteers among us to become political officers - they wanted to 'clean up' this guards' regiment from the young tsarist officers. I volunteered along with Nissim Melamed, a friend of mine, also a Jew, and some other friends. We stayed there. Each of us was given a horse. It was the first time I mounted a horse so I asked them to give me a calmer one. We passed through every company. We kept some of the officers and dismissed others. We were preparing ourselves for the front line at Stratsin. At that time I didn't wear my glasses, as a horse had hit me and broken them. I had to return to Sofia because of my strong shortsightedness. I left for Sofia in the carriage of a truck along with three other soldiers. Somewhere near Kiustendil someone started shooting at us and my cap was pierced. I was lucky the bullet didn't hit my head. I arrived in Sofia and my friends insisted that I should stay as a social worker there.

I arrived in Sofia at nighttime. There were no lights at all. The whole city was ruined starting from the railway station to our quarter. Kniaginia Klementina Street [now Stamboliiski Street] had no electricity. The streets were bumpy. I found great misery. The next day, while I was walking through the center, I saw that everything had been ruined. I saw completely or half- destroyed buildings everywhere. The whole quarter around the National Bank was completely demolished. Our house - actually it wasn't our property, we rented it - hadn't been destroyed although it was a frame-built one.

The neighbors reacted in different ways. There were Bulgarian families there with whom we had very good relations and they were very happy to see me again. But there was one - our landlord - who was an anti-Semite and used to threaten us with a gun and repeatedly said that he would deport us if necessary. After 9th September he ran away and we never saw him again.

During the Holocaust all my father's relatives were deported to a concentration camp - I don't remember which one - and were killed there. Not a single person survived. Meanwhile I was in prison.

After the military service I came back and my first thought that I had no education. I wanted to finish high school and continue studying at university. No one could support me. I was alone. I had to work and study at the same time. So I started as a four-year student by correspondence. I used to study for exams during my annual leave. This way I graduated from the Second Male High School [now the 22nd Sofia School]. Then I became an extramural student of the University of Economy, from which I graduated in less than four years in an accelerated course. Simultaneously I worked on a freelance basis in a public organization first and later, on pay-roll, till 1951-52, when I graduated from the institute.

After that I worked with Radio Sofia as an editor-in-chief in the economic editorial department until 1959. Then I took part in a competition of the Institute of Economy and got a degree. I became an assistant in economy and organization of industrial production. In the course of my career I became a senior lecturer. In 1965-1966 I was offered a job in the ministry of mechanical engineering as a chief of the international cooperation department. I stayed there until 1971-72. Then I went to work

in the ministry of standardization, again in the international cooperation department. Later on I became a director of the educational center at the ministry of high-ranking officials' re-qualification in terms of standardization and quality problems. I worked there until my retirement. Then I worked as a lecturer at the scientific-technical union and traveled all over the country.

After the big change [following the events of 10th November 1989] [17](#) I founded my own building company. That was at the beginning of 1991. It still exists. We have constructed living estates, administrative and public houses in Bulgaria and Germany; mostly in Germany, where we have built some 70 objects - houses, administrative buildings, factories and old people's homes. I have reduced my engagement considerably because years have passed, I'm old and I have to deal with diseases now. Therefore, willy-nilly, following nature's laws, I have stopped to work.

I have never had conflicts because of my Jewish origin at my work places. Before 9th September I used to work in a paper factory in Sofia, Pavlik & Georgiev. I was a common worker there and I never had any problems with regard to anti-Semitism. After 9th September I was in such a position that my origin was never an object of discussion. So I personally haven't had any problems concerning my Jewish origin but I know other people who have had trouble. My sister's husband Mois used to work in the labor corps as a dental mechanic. He was fired during Valko Chervenkov's rule because he was a Jew and wasn't allowed to work for the army. When he requested an explanation emphasizing the fact that first of all he was a subject of the Republic of Bulgaria, he was answered that it simply had to be done. His protest had no effect.

My Jewish origin never influenced neither my surrounding nor my marriages. I've always insisted on my own point of view. I'm a Jew and I firmly hold on to this fact. I've never hidden it. For example, most Jews with the family name of Levi have Bulgarianized it to Leviev. I've never thought of doing such a thing because I wanted it to be the way it was. I am Levi and I will remain Levi. Many of my friends and relatives have become Leviev. But apart from being a Jew, I am first of all a human being and this means that I should treat all human beings equally despite their nationality. Both my marriages were with Bulgarian women. It definitely wasn't a deliberate choice.

My first wedding was somehow different. I'm not religious and I didn't want to marry in a temple. Therefore Lilia [Levi, nee Bunjulova] and I went to the district council for the signing, with a limited circle of relatives and friends and after that we organized a great party in a large hall at my work place. The American embassy is situated there now; it's opposite the National Bank. I had an office there. I gathered my friends. There were lots of people. We had a lot of fun. Everybody brought a present, as we didn't have anything for our new household. Till then I didn't even have a room to live in. I used to live at my friend's places. We managed to find a room in an apartment on 6th September Street - it was a three-bedroom apartment - along with four other families. We didn't possess anything. There was no furniture to buy in the shops. Therefore we went to the city hall because newly-weds were given coupons for buying a mattress. In our first night we slept in an almost empty room; there was only a mattress and a blanket. Only slowly we began to furnish our home.

I have a daughter from my first marriage; I don't have any kids from my second one. My daughter's name is Galia. She graduated in electronics in the former German Democratic Republic. Her specialty is bionics. She married her fellow student Rusimir Padalski. He has the same degree. They have two children, Milena and Silvia.

Galia was born in 1951 in Sofia and so was her husband. Milena was born in 1976 and Silvia in 1980, both in Sofia. Milena has a degree in international economic relations. Silvia currently studies Scandinavian philology specializing in Sweden at the time being. Milena is fluent in English and German, while Silvia knows German and now also Norwegian and Swedish. My son-in-law speaks German, English and Russian and so does my daughter. They own a company dealing with electronics. They organize training courses for companies for distribution and trade of electronic equipment in Bulgaria.

I've never hidden from them the fact that they are Jews. When my daughter was eight years old, I told her that her mother was Bulgarian and I was a Jew and that she was a child of a mixed marriage.

Many of my friends were Jews and I'm still in touch with some, but many of them have already passed away. I've always kept my daughter in a Jewish circle, around Jewish families. She knows very well what she is. When she turned twelve in 1964 I sent her, along with her stepmother, my second wife, on a visit to Israel. They were guests of my mother and my father, my sister and my brothers. Both of her children were brought up in the Jewish spirit as well, especially Silvia - she feels more Jewish than a child of a mixed marriage. She was with me in Israel and she liked it very much. Milena even got an emigrant status at her own will; no one has ever made her do that. She now hopes that things will calm down in Israel and she will go there eventually.

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.

My sister stayed here with me because she shared my unwillingness to leave - apart from the fact that her husband Mois was absolutely against it. They were already married at that time and I supported them. They also had their first child already, Emi. They married after 9th September 1944. I was their godfather. I was very close with their family. We helped each other in crucial moments. [The moment when Mois was discharged from the army because of his Jewish origin] They didn't have any money then. My sister didn't work at the time because she had two children. I was taking care of them as best as I could.

The members of my family who live in Israel often come here. My sister, my nephews and my brothers regularly visit Bulgaria. We have always kept normal relationships. My nephews have all been brought up well. Of course, they know everything about my family and me. They know about the pre-war times, about the prisons, my partisan life, the post-war life and so on. They are well

acquainted with the situation in Bulgaria and they have a very realistic view on the political situation and the current developments in Bulgaria. I see my sister at least twice a week. We visit each other.

We support each other. As for the ones who live in Israel, they decide when they visit us according to their financial resources. The most willing ones are my youngest sister Victoria and her husband Marko. Their children, Batia and Baruh, have come here mainly under my support. My elder brother managed to come twice before his death, although he was very ill. I have been there several times. I went a short time before his death because I knew about his health condition. His daughters are very close to my family and to Bulgaria. They came here regularly. One of them died at the age of 36. The other one, Reni, comes here every two years. Now she isn't quite well, but she had the intention to come. My second brother, Haim, has already died. He came here twice. So, you see, we keep in touch. I've always been well informed about the life in Israel and the wars there because my brothers as well as my relatives participated in them.

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 [the Six-Day-War] [18](#) and in 1973 [the Yom Kippur War] [19](#) 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].

Frankly speaking, we were used to the old regime. I thought it changed things for the better and there would be progress. Unlike now, people felt more certain about the next day back then. There was free health service, medicines at the lowest prices, normal pensions, secured life of the working people and many other things. In the last years before the change it was obvious though that things in Bulgaria were getting worse. The economy wasn't stable; the loans increased and many other things got worse as well. And we all felt that the time for a change had come. The government either had to resign or be overthrown; yet I would have never imagined that those people who now represent the authorities would appear. These were nobodies who invaded the [Bulgarian] political scene and messed up everything.

When the Berlin wall fell, I regarded it as a good sign because the barrier for contacts was overcome. I remember the Berlin wall very well as I have passed through it many times because my sister-in-law used to live in West Germany. She was married there and once we decided to go by car to East Berlin. She wanted to see my brother-in-law. We passed through a large corridor from the border to Berlin. There was no turn off the road. It was built in Hitler's days. When we came to Berlin there were so many barbed wire fences giving you the impression you were at the front line. There were watchtowers and guards with pointed big weapons, machine-guns, etc. They met us in a very hostile manner although they realized that I was from Bulgaria. We knew that life couldn't go on like that much longer. I passed from East to West Berlin through West Mannheim because it was cheaper.

Even then, before the big change, I had decided to make my living. I knew that I wouldn't be able to provide for my family with only one poor pension. I had decided to establish a company. Just before the change I met with a few friends and we decided to start up a business. As I had relatives in Germany our idea was to bring workers and build it up there. We were the first company, private and state one, that started activities there. We had lots of building sites there - worth tens of millions of DM. But gradually they began to restrict us and I realized that here, in Bulgaria, I could also run a business and that it wouldn't be worse than in Germany. And we started to build one up here as well. Lately I had to cut down my engagement because of my health condition.

Nowadays the Jewish community in my city [Sofia] consolidates and carries out considerable activities. I personally don't go there often, but we usually arrange our meetings with friends there. I've never asked the community for help nor have I any intention to do so in the future. Yet I think that it is developing in a positive way.

Glossary

1 First Balkan War (1912-1913)

Started by an alliance made up of Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, and Montenegro against the Ottoman Empire. It was a response to the Turkish nationalistic policy maintained by the Young Turks in Istanbul. The Balkan League aimed at the liberation of the rest of the Balkans still under Ottoman rule. In October, 1912 the allies declared war on the Ottoman Empire and were soon successful: the Ottomans retreated to defend Istanbul and Albania, Epirus, Macedonia and Thrace fell into the hands of the allies. The war ended on the 30th May 1913 with the Treaty of London, which gave most of European Turkey to the allies and also created the Albanian state.

2 Second Balkan War (1913)

The victorious countries of the First Balkan War (Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia) were unable to settle their territorial claims over the newly acquired Macedonia by peaceful means. Serbia and Greece formed an alliance against Bulgaria and the war began on 29th June 1913 with a Bulgarian attack on Serbian and Greek troops in Macedonia. Bulgaria's northern neighbor, Romania, also joined the allies and Bulgaria was defeated. The Treaty of Bucharest was signed on 10th August 1913. As a result, most of Macedonia was divided up between Greece and Serbia, leaving only a small part to Bulgaria (Pirin Macedonia). Romania also acquired the previously Bulgarian region of southern Dobrudzha.

3 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.

4 Iuchbunar

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

5 Bet Am

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

6 Spinoza, Baruch (1632-1677)

Dutch philosopher of Portuguese-Jewish origin. An independent thinker, he declined offers of academic posts and pursued his individual philosophical inquiry instead. He read the mathematical and philosophical works of Descartes but unlike Descartes did not see a separation between God, mind and matter. Ethics, considered Spinoza's major work, was published in 1677.

7 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.

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 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.

10 Boza

A sweet wheat-based mildly alcoholic drink popular in Bulgaria, Turkey and other places in the Balkans.

11 Zhivkova, Ludmila (1942-1981)

daughter of the general secretary of the Bulgarian communist party, Todor Zhivkov, and a founder

of the international children's assembly 'Flag of Peace'. In 1980 Todor Zhivkov appointed her a chairwoman of the Commission on science, culture and art. In this powerful position, she became extremely popular by promoting Bulgaria's separate national cultural heritage. She spent large sums of money in a highly visible campaign to support scholars, collect Bulgarian art, and sponsor cultural institutions. Among her policies was closer cultural contact with the West; her most visible project was the spectacular celebration of Bulgaria's 1300 years of nationhood in 1981. When Zhivkova died in 1981, relations with the West had already been chilled by the Afghanistan issue, but her brief administration of Bulgaria's cultural sphere was a successful phase of her father's bid to rely on Bulgarian national traditions to bind the country together.

12 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.

13 Georgiev, Kimon (1882 -1969)

Prime Minister of the first Fatherland Front government after 9th September 1944, lasting until November 1946.

14 The day of the Leaders of the Bulgarian National Revival

Bulgarian national holiday, which is celebrated on 1st November. It is dedicated to the cultural figures, educators, teachers, and representatives of the Eastern Orthodox Church from the age of the Bulgarian National Revival who preserved the Bulgarian national spirit during the Ottoman rule, and lay the groundwork for the liberation of the Bulgarian people.

15 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.

16 Fatherland Front

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

17 10th November 1989

After 35 years of rule, Communist Party leader Todor Zhivkov was replaced by the hitherto Prime Minister Peter Mladenov who changed the Bulgarian Communist Party's name to Socialist Party. On 17th November 1989 Mladenov became head of state, as successor of Zhivkov. Massive opposition demonstrations in Sofia with hundreds of thousands of participants calling for democratic reforms followed from 18th November to December 1989. On 7th December the 'Union of Democratic

Forces' (SDS) was formed consisting of different political organizations and groups.

18 Six-Day-War

The first strikes of the Six-Day-War happened on 5th June 1967 by the Israeli Air Force. The entire war only lasted 132 hours and 30 minutes. The fighting on the Egyptian side only lasted four days, while fighting on the Jordanian side lasted three. Despite the short length of the war, this was one of the most dramatic and devastating wars ever fought between Israel and all of the Arab nations. This war resulted in a depression that lasted for many years after it ended. The Six-Day-War increased tension between the Arab nations and the Western World because of the change in mentalities and political orientations of the Arab nations.

19 Yom Kippur War

The Arab-Israeli War of 1973, also known as the Yom Kippur War or the Ramadan War, was a war between Israel on one side and Egypt and Syria on the other side. It was the fourth major military confrontation between Israel and the Arab states. The war lasted for three weeks: it started on 6th October 1973 and ended on 22nd October on the Syrian front and on 26th October on the Egyptian front.