

Elza Rizova

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Sofia

Bulgaria

Interviewer: Maiya Nikolova

I remember my grand-grandmother. She was a very beautiful, big woman who wore a nice bonnet. She lived with her younger daughter, who looked after her. She was disabled. She herself wasn't well-to-do, but her sons supported her; they took care so that she could live in luxury. I remember she used to draw small surprises like sweets and fruits out of her pocket every time I visited her. There was always something in her pocket for me.

My grandfather Samuel Baruh was a hazan. He maintained the temple in the town of Vidin. His whole family was very religious; so was my mother. My grandfather used to wear something like a dress coat, black clothing and an ordinary black hat. He dressed very well at those times.

There was a water pump in their house and the whole neighborhood used the pump because the water was sweet. They had a wonderful yard with marvelous quince trees. The house was old but very well-kept. They had some hens and a dog. They didn't have any domestic help for the garden and the household. Their younger daughter looked after them till the end of their lives. They were a model family for the whole town. My grandfather was strongly religious, but he didn't have any political views. He was a modest person; he didn't take part in the town's political life.

We used to play in the temple's yard. My other grandfather, Alfred Aladjem, was a more-modern person. He used to stand on the stairs in front of the temple and threw sweets to the children. I was the youngest, and I could never reach for the sweets. He would watch to see who had taken a sweet and who hadn't, and the next time he would throw it so high that it would fall right beside me. And the elder children would scuffle for the sweets, but he would throw it to me again.

He had a talent for medicine. He was sort of a medicine man - he fixed broken legs, hands, and he also treated ailments with herbs. Once a cart arrived with a child, wrapped up in a rag. The child was half-dead. My grandfather saw that she hadn't eaten for a couple of days. Little by little, my grandfather fed her with a teaspoon. She fell asleep and, perhaps, in an hour or two she said she was very hungry, and my mother prepared a big slice of buttered bread for her. She ate it and it seemed that her temperature had fallen. That is how the child recovered and her family returned to their village. After a few days, her father brought two

white chickens. He wanted to feed us in return, showing his gratitude in this way. My grandfather treated not only broken bones, but used herbs to treat venereal diseases. He was very popular in the town.

I don't remember my grandmother on my father's side. She wasn't alive when I was born. On my mother's side, my grandmother, Vida Baruh, was a very clever woman. She loved to knit and embroider. There was a wooden bench in front of their house and she used to sit there, sewing, knitting and embroidering.

My grandfathers both took part in the Russian-Turkish War for the liberation of Bulgaria. My father was born at that time.

My best memories are from my hometown. It is still in my heart and many times my husband and I have been to Vidin, we have traveled with the steamboat to Lom and Rousse, and back to Sofia. When I was a child, Vidin had a European look, because of the river and the harbor, and because of the customs, as well. It was a large frontier town. All foreigners used to stop there before they began traveling around Bulgaria. It is a lovely town. Its garden is magnificent. The Baba Vida's towers are also well-preserved. All the time, they maintain them, so they won't collapse. And the Jewish synagogue has the sound of an opera; the acoustics are opera-like.

The Jews in Vidin used to live in Kaleto; it was a famous Jewish quarter. There was a cinema hall in Kaleto. There were always dances there. There was only one synagogue, but there was a Jewish community with administrative officials and a chairman of the consistory. I remember they did circumcisions on the boys as well as celebrations of the 13th year - a very special birthday party in the temple in the presence of almost the whole community. And it was very beautiful. They put the tallit on them and they gave them the Ten Commandments to carry around the temple.

There wasn't any anti-Semitism in Vidin, even in deportation times; we felt no difference at all in the attitude. The military band used to pass through the town and we ran after it. And in the center, there was a monument for the soldiers who perished in the war. The band was escorted to that monument, both by the children and the adults. I remember it very clearly, yet I don't remember any patriotic songs.

Friday was the market day and all the people from the villages around Vidin came to sell their products. My mother used to buy large baskets with cherries, apples, etc. I remember very well the cherries because after she had given the basket back to the man who was helping her, she would spread a rag in a very cool room. Then she would raise part of the carpet and spread the cherries over that rag, so that they wouldn't rot.

My father, Mosko Aladjem, wasn't strict. He was a very good man. He has never hit me; neither my brothers nor sisters ever were punished. He wasn't very religious. He kept the official holidays from time to time. He visited the synagogue and used to wear a silk tallit, a very sheer one.

My father was a radical in his political affiliations. He traveled to Sofia quite often and here, in Sofia, a minister named Kostourkov met him. Recently I was at a neighbor's place. I saw the minister's portrait there and I was introduced to his daughter. This happened after all these years.

My father was elected deputy mayor of the town, and for several years he was in that position. I remember that when they wanted to oust him, they broke all the windows of our house and my father left a notice: "Please, my children would get ill. I want my windows repaired." And in two days a workman came and fixed the windows without a single coin paid by my parents. My mother covered the windows with rags and quilts because it was winter and we were very young.

My mother, Buka Aladjem, spoke Ladino. She used to speak in Ladino to us, but we always answered in Bulgarian. My father didn't allow us to speak Ladino at home. He was a politician and wanted his children to keep abreast of the times. I have no memory of my parents talking about where they have come from. I know that at those times his education was of average level. He was a certified public accountant. I don't know what it means but I know they asked him very often to the court for consultations.

My father spoke Hebrew, and so did my grandfathers and my mother. They all graduated from the Jewish school. My parents met in a very interesting way. He liked her. She had been very beautiful girl, and a friend of theirs would advise him not to fish for that girl because they wouldn't let her marry him. But he popped the question. She must have liked him. Until the end of her life she was very neat and elegant. She sewed. She often said humorously that she didn't need an education, because she knew the centimeter well. And from the oldest dress she would make me the most beautiful one. They always bought me patent leather shoes, because I couldn't use the ones that had belonged to my elder sisters.

In my father's house, we didn't have water pump, and we took water from a neighboring house. When my father became deputy mayor, they placed a pump and an electric lamp in front of our house. The day after he was overthrown from the town council, they removed the pump. The fact that a Jew had become a deputy mayor was a great success.

Our house was a very old, small house, although it had four rooms. It wasn't made of brick, but built of adobe. We had a really very nice yard where my siblings and I actually spent our childhood. My mother was a housewife, and she had never worked in her life. She was the one who took

of the cooking, shopping, cleaning and any kind of domestic work. We didn't have any servants.

My grandparents and my parents associated with the town's elite. My father kept company with Bulgarians. He met with them often. We lived in a Turkish neighborhood. Next to us lived the director of a bank in Vidin. He had two children I used to play with. His wife had trained in the food-processing industry in Germany. They were very intelligent people.

My parents always got together with their relatives. Men used to visit each other during the holidays. And the women with their handiwork - my mother would take her knitting and go, for example, to one of my father's sisters.

My father was an administrative secretary of the Jewish community. We kept all the Jewish holidays. Special cooking was done for each holiday; the proper kind of sweetmeats was prepared. We weren't very rich, but we had enough.

We observed Shabbat very strictly, and every Friday evening we went to the synagogue. My mother was a hazan's daughter; she was strongly religious and she particularly insisted on that. My father was a worldly person, but in spite of his modern views, he regularly attended the synagogue on Friday.

We absolutely kept the Friday meal. We ate vegetable soup and meat-filled peppers. At Pesach, we had boios. On the first night, we used to gather at my grandfather's, the hazan, and sing very beautiful and inspiring songs. We made Kiddush at home, although my father didn't drink alcohol at all.

We celebrated the new year. As she was a rabbi's daughter, my mother used to keep holidays such as Yom Kippur and she insisted on her family keeping them, too. We were supposed to fast on that holiday as long as we could, even if it was for several hours only. Even now, not for the whole day, for several hours only, I still keep it. The bar mitzvah of my eldest brother was like a wedding, but they didn't do one for Asher. He used to say that he hadn't celebrated that day, therefore he couldn't grow up. That was his usual excuse when he got a poor mark at school.

All my brothers and my sisters attended the Jewish school until the fourth class. At the age of 12, they sent my brother Alfred to Germany to an art school. After graduating, he continued with the academy. He had a girlfriend who was a musician. His voice was a beautiful tenor. She strongly insisted, so he graduated from the conservatory as well. Unfortunately, at those times a Jew could not perform at the opera. He didn't have the right. My brother often had concerts here and there, yet he never became a real opera artist.

My brother Asher graduated from a high school in the evening class. My sister graduated from an economics school. She worked for the government,

as did my brother. He was chief of personnel in the geological research department.

I attended the Bulgarian school "Naicho Tsanov." My teacher was Zora Neeva. She was one of the best teachers; she was a radical, with the same political affiliations as my father, and they were friends. She was a spinster; she never married. She taught general subjects. There weren't any anti-Semitic acts from teachers or students. I've never taken private lessons; my father was cultured enough to help his children. I graduated from a Bulgarian school. It was quite common in the past to study first at a Jewish school, and after that, the secondary and the higher education in Bulgarian schools. I personally haven't studied Hebrew or religion, but my siblings have. My parents didn't teach me anything special in the religious sense.

It wasn't easy during the Holocaust; it was almost devastating. First of all, we didn't have the material base to provide our living without being permitted to work. My brothers were in the forced labor camps. I was only 19 and my sister was 21, and we had to work. A friend of my father, Atanas Minkov, a famous lawyer in Vidin, found us jobs. It was very hard physical labor in a brickyard. The director respected us, helped us. There was quite a distance between Vidin and the brickyard. He would pass in a cabriolet, pick us up on his route and drop us right before the brickyard so that they wouldn't see him and blame him for supporting Jews. I will never forget him. His name was Zdravkov.

We weren't allowed to go out in the street. We had a curfew. At that time we lived on Timok Street, and our landlord was a military officer. I can hardly explain how big his heart was and how good he was. He helped us in every way. We couldn't buy bread, because as soon as we went out during the hours permitted, there was no longer any bread. He supplied us with bread. And when they were about to intern us from Vidin, my mother made for each one of her children a small dowry. In those times, you were supposed to put something aside for the time of your marriage. She arranged all these things in a chest, listed them and left everything with that Bulgarian officer, along with her jewels. Later on, he became a minister plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia or in Poland. He was a very intelligent man. He had studied in Turkey. His name was Vladimir Panov. He did us a really very big favor. Bulgarians weren't bad people, not at all.

My father was moved from Vidin to work in the Sofia municipality. In the years of the Holocaust, we were sent to Pleven first. But that lawyer, Minkov, came from Vidin to Sofia. My mother told him that they were interning us in Pleven and he came here, in the Jewish commissariat and arranged for us to go back to Vidin. It was because my father was a famous person and he had a lot of friends who helped my mother and us survive,

otherwise we couldn't have made it. The internment - I think it lasted for 2 years - ended when the war was over.

During the internment, I came to Sofia wearing a badge. My colleagues from the "Rila" factory invited me to come to a celebration and they paid my travel expenses. I didn't have any money. I was allowed to come for one evening to Sofia and return within 24 hours. A colleague invited me to sleep at her place. I objected that her husband was a cop. In the end, in spite of the fact that he was a cop, he walked me to the station next evening. He bought me a ticket and entrusted me to a man he knew and I traveled in safety.

When we came home after the end of the war, we didn't find anything - not a single spoon, not a single fork. We didn't have a knife. My brother found one. Some very poor people had moved into the house we used to live in. They had cut even the wardrobes to use as firewood in the stove. Those were three most beautiful wardrobes; they were made of walnut. I used to look at my reflection in the doors of the wardrobes when I passed by. Everything was ruined, the whole house. People thought that we wouldn't return and let such poor people in our house. We couldn't go back, and my brother found us another house.

When I returned to work after internment, it was as though someone from high society had entered the factory. Almost the whole weaving workshop came out to greet me. It was like a celebration. I felt almost like a queen. During the internment, my colleagues supported me all the time in every possible way, by constantly sending me parcels, money.

Since the end of the war, I worked as a weaver. I never had any problems because I am a Jew. I have always been well accepted both by the Bulgarians and the Jews at work, the Bulgarian silk factory. After the war, I returned to the same work in production, only not in the weaving shop but in the dyer's department.

We stayed in Bulgaria because my mother didn't want to leave my father's grave. My elder sister and my brother left. Meanwhile, I married a Bulgarian, Anani Rizov. We first met in a very odd way. There was a tram in Poduene, a quarter in Sofia. One was coming up the hill, and the other was coming down. There on the crossroad we met - my husband waved his hand from his tram. When I came back from deportation, he had become a chief of a department in the factory. We married on January 18, 1946, and we have lived together for 52 years. I had a very good life and a happy marriage. We helped our children study and buy houses. They both have apartments. We also bought a house.

My father-in-law was an old communist from 1923. His views were more modern. But my mother-in-law wanted me to convert to Christianity. He

jumped to his feet from the chair and told her not to interfere in our private family matters. We never spoke again of converting to Christianity.

We were all members of the Bulgarian Socialist Party; at that time, of the Bulgarian Communist Party. We didn't share our fathers' political affiliations. We had our own beliefs. I am still a member of the party.

We didn't keep the Jewish traditions at our home. We celebrated Christmas and Easter, the Bulgarian holidays. Now, at 80, I bought a cookbook with Jewish recipes. It is now that I showed such interest. Once my husband got ill with a very high temperature, and I didn't know even how to prepare soup for him. I had no idea at all, because I went to work and I wasn't interested in the household tasks. So I asked my elder sister to come and cook something for him because I couldn't leave him hungry at home. She came and she forced me to do it myself, while she stood next to me. Since then, I have learned to cook.

My daughter, Sonia Doneva, was born on October 13, 1946. She graduated from the Machine and Electrotechnical University, textile engineering - her father's profession. She is interested in any information concerning Jewry; she has Jewish friends and constantly keeps in touch with them. My son, Georgi Rizov, is less involved in these things. He was born on November 8, 1955. He is a military doctor and doesn't have relationships with Jews to such a great extent. He does with the relatives - with my nephews, my sister's children.

I have been a member of "Shalom" organization for many years, but since the Jewish organization began. I attend the "Health" club together with elderly Jewish women. I also participate in the "Elderly" club. My circle of friends is not only Jewish. I have friends here in the neighborhood. We sit on a bench every afternoon, we share things and we are inseparable.

I visited Israel twice before 1989, before the fall of the Berlin Wall. The first time was in 1958. There was a war. It was very frightening. The second trip to Israel was in 1988. My nephew paid for my ticket. I resembled his mother, and he wanted to see me. He had emigrated when he was very young and we didn't keep in touch. My brother and my sister also got tickets. I was there for 3 months.

It was good that the Berlin Wall fell. It was good that roads were open so that people could travel and live a different life - not only in Bulgaria. People have the opportunity to study abroad, to move, to change their lives.

Democracy did not bring very many good turns. My son-in-law, for example - Sonia's husband - has been unemployed for four years, and he is a man with two higher education specialties. He has graduated in "internal-combustion

engines" and from the Economics University in Moscow, but he couldn't use his education. This fills me with indignation - that there are so many unemployed people. It is true that we have lived in a more modest manner, with very small salaries, yet we were able to see our children through their studies and to build a home. We had small salaries to live on; probably life was cheaper. Now life is very expensive and, with that poor pension I have, I couldn't make it if it were not for my children. They are not obliged to help me.

I don't see any difference between the Jews before and after the war. They have always supported each other. This exists initially in the commitments of Moses to help each other, both materially and spiritually.