

# Gracia Albuhaire

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Sofia

Bulgaria

Interviewer: Dimitrina Leshtarova

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Gracia Albuhaire is an extraordinary person, a poet and a writer. She is very sensitive and open to all problems common to mankind. She has developed her own point of view and is well acquainted with Jewish history. Gracia is short, thin, elegant, very nice and always full of optimism, in spite of the difficulties of life. She lives in a small apartment in the Mladost quarter of Sofia together with one of her daughters and her grandson. Her room is a 'sacred' place - both intimate and cozy. She lives and works at home. Gracia is very communicative and popular in the Bet Am circles.



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My name is Gracia Nissim Albuhaire - this is my husband's family name. The name, inherited from my father, is Gracia Nissim Yulzari. I belong to the Yulzari family. We are Sephardi [1](#) Jews - both on my father's and my husband's side. My family lived in the town of Karnobat. My grandfather Kemal Yulzari and my grandmother Gracia, whom I was named after, came from Krushevo. They died many years before my birth.

I know almost nothing about my grandfather and my grandmother's families. I know from my aunt Dudu [Kemal Yulzari] that my grandfather died first. My grandmother died due to a fire. Once, my older brother Jack, when he was four or five years old, started playing with a gas lamp in order to catch a butterfly. My grandmother was sitting under the lamp. It fell on her and she caught fire. She died from her wounds a few days after the incident. This happened in our house in Karnobat, where my father and my grandfather lived.

My grandfather Kemal had brothers and sisters as well, but I have no memory of them. I know only that his brothers' children lived in Karnobat and the doyen among them was tiu [uncle in Ladino] Mesholam Yulzari, the eldest one, who was a gabbai.

My grandfather Kemal Yulzari and my grandmother Gracia had six children - three boys and three girls. The boys were Nissim, my father Chelebi and Yako, the youngest one. Their daughters were Anum, whom they used to call Ana, Dudu and Reina.

Anum, the oldest one, was married to a widower in the town of Sliven. My aunt Ana was thin, beautiful, with lovely blue eyes and very good by nature. But it seems that her husband didn't fall in love with her and for six years she stayed a virgin with him. After that she gave birth to four children: Fortune, the eldest one, then Rosa, Jack and Tanchi. Their family name was Ashkenazi, as my aunt's husband was Sadi Ashkenazi. He already had three other children: Buka, Liza and Nissim. But she raised them in the same way as she did her own children, which created a very close relationship among all the kids. When one of them left for Palestine, all the rest followed him. Everyone else obeyed Nissim, the oldest one. He took care of the family after their parents' death. It was a very close-knit family.

Of my aunt Ana's seven children, Fortune, the eldest one, had a boy and a girl, who are now in Israel. The other daughter, Rosa, never married and had no heirs. She lived in a retirement center in Israel. Jack didn't get married either, because of Rosa, and died a bachelor. The youngest daughter Suzana - we used to call her Tanchi - was a wonderful person, loving, kind- hearted and gentle. She spent the rest of her life in Israel. I have such warm feelings for her and I will never forget her. She had one daughter Liza, of whom I have a baby photo, sent by Tanchi. When I was in Israel last year, Liza heard that I was coming and we met. Her soul resembles that of her mother entirely - the same warmth, kindness and sweetness. She currently lives in Beer Sheva.

The eldest of the stepchildren was Buka - her son is a doctor, living in Italy. I have seen him only once, when he was in Bulgaria. He settled in Italy before 9th September 1944 [2](#), but I don't remember exactly when - probably before World War II. The oldest stepbrother Nissim Ashkenazi, who used to take care of the family, married Dona, with whom he had a son, Sadiko - named after grandfather - and a daughter, Mati. When I was in Israel I visited Mati in Jerusalem. She is married to a professor, who is a doctor. His name is Albert Behar. They have two girls, also married - a doctor and a dentist, who have kids of their own. Liza, the third stepchild, had three daughters. All of them died except one.

Dudu, the second of my father's sisters, never married. She had no children. She lived with us. She was like a second mother to me, as she took great care of me. My own mother was jealous of her and used to tell me: 'You love her more than you love me.' Dudu was the person to whom I dedicated my poem written in Judezmo [Ladino] 'Latia Mia'. I don't know how it happened but this poem was published in the Israeli magazine 'Akia Rushalaem', printed in Judezmo. Later on, when my father died, my aunt came to live with my mother and me. She died and we buried her in Sofia.

It was said that my grandfather Kemal's third daughter Reina got sick out of love, but she probably had tuberculosis and they just didn't know it. She died very young, unmarried.

Yako, my father's youngest brother, was a soldier in the army in Bourgas. He was very handsome, they say, but he was found dead - drowned. There was a rumor that some homosexuals had something to do with this. The case was suppressed because an officer was involved in it, yet I don't know if the story is true.

My father's other brother Chelebi was a peddler, a vendor of sweets. He did all kinds of work, whatever he could find. He was even a candy shop assistant. He married Perla, a Haldeyan from Sofia. ['Haldeyan' or 'Tudesk' is how the Sephardi Jews called the German Jews in Bulgaria.] There was a time when they quarreled so much that they were on the verge of getting divorced. Then he came to live with us. He lived in our house for a year and worked as a seller for his cousin Sebata Yulzari. My uncle Chelebi was a tall, strong man with big blue eyes and a good heart. The whole family on my grandfather Kemal and my grandmother Gracia's side are blue-eyed. He had two children, Sami and Regina. Uncle Chelebi left for Israel with his family in 1948, where they stayed until they died. Regina became a well-known journalist in Israel, while Sami was a dental surgeon.

My mother is from Yambol. I have no memories of her parents. I know only that my grandfather's name was Rafael Beraha. A grandson was named after him. My mother's family was a poor family.

My mother had two brothers, David and Bohor, and a sister, Carolina. Her sister was married in Sliven and lived there. She had two children, Stella and Sami. My uncle David, my mother's younger brother, lived in Yambol. He married a very young and beautiful woman, Virginia. I loved her very much and she also loved me. He was a street-vendor, selling textile. They had a son and a daughter, Rofeto and Ida. His wife died very young at the age of 35. He got married a second time to Suzana, who had a son. She raised the three kids together. He is now married to the well-known Bulgarian opera singer Anna Tomova-Sintova and he is her manager. Rofeto lives in Sofia with his wife Valya, a Bulgarian. They have two daughters: one of them, Virginia, named after Rofeto's mother, who died very young, is as beautiful as her grandmother was: tall, thin, elegant, blue-eyed and slightly dark. Lidka, the other daughter, is a slightly underdeveloped child as her mother worked in a printing house and inhaled poisonous substances when she was pregnant. They come to the Jewish cultural center, they eat in the Jewish canteen and I often meet them. Ida Kalderon also lives in Sofia, in a retirement home.

My father Nissim Yulzari first married a woman called Mazal. He had a son with her named Jack. He divorced her and later he married my mother Zyumbyul [or Zimbul; in Bulgarian this word means hyacinth] Beraha from the town of Yambol. When they got married, he was still well off; they owned a shop. My father inherited this shop from his father. My mother, as a poor girl, worked as a servant somewhere. My father offended her very often but she would patiently endure it. I felt sorry for her. Marriages were arranged at that time. My mother's marriage was an arranged one just like the marriage of my aunt Ana and the widower from Sliven. I have no idea how it actually happened. I never asked her. She wasn't happy with her marriage. It wasn't only due to the fact that she had to work to provide for her family. It was also because her husband wasn't always kind and gentle with her; at least that was my impression. In general he wasn't a bad or rude person, but life made him such. He used to swear saying: 'If there was God, he would give bread to my children, but no, they must go hungry'. He was desperate with the unbearable poverty at home.

After the death of my father's first wife, he married my mother, but she was barren for a long time. Her children always died, so she accepted my stepbrother Jack and took care of him. He was very handsome - tall, corpulent, with big blue eyes and fair skin.

My mother had lost seven children. There was no obstetrician at that time. There was only one old woman, a priest's wife, who delivered children. They were usually born half-blue, with their umbilical cord wrapped around their necks, or they were aborted. There were even cases when the

child was born alive but very weak and they would throw it away saying that the kid wouldn't survive. One day my mother told her aunt in Yambol that her children died and were being thrown away still alive, since they didn't think they would survive. She was also pregnant again. Her aunt told her to come to Yambol when the due date approached, so that she could take care of her. And indeed she went to Yambol, to the house of her oldest brother, my uncle Bohor. Thus, I was born there - blue, with my umbilical cord wrapped around my neck. But my aunt was prepared for this and took care of me properly. My mother stayed there for 40 days, until I grew stronger. Therefore it was written in the documents that my birthplace was Yambol. Although I consider Karnobat, where I have grown up and lived, to be my real hometown.

## Growing up

I was born on 15th March 1925. Shortly after I was born, there was a big fire in the neighboring house. The flames came very close to the house, in which my mother was staying. My uncle Bohor was all the time with her, encouraging her and telling her not to get frightened, as he was prepared to evacuate her together with the child. Then the fire was put out and they didn't have to leave. They also told her that she became popular in the whole city, as people knew she was a young mother with a baby girl. Then we came back to Karnobat and there she gave birth to my brother Sami.

We lived in a house that was inherited from my grandfather Kemal, who built it. It was a very solid house for the time. We had two large rooms and a big entrance-hall. Later, in a part of the entrance hall, which was covered from above but opened at the side, another room was built, on a higher level. It belonged to my aunt but I used to sleep there too. By the time that I lived in this house, it was already old. We had only three floorboards in the entrance-hall, the rest were decayed and thrown away. We had no money and we couldn't repair the house. I was terrified of going into the toilet, because some of the floorboards would shake and I had that awful fear of falling down. We had a mezuzah at the front door of our house. When going in or out, my mother always kissed the mezuzah.

We had a yard also and I took care of it. My uncle Yuda's wife used to advise me: 'Don't bother yourself now, the hens will come and peck it.' And they really came and pecked everything, while I was trying to plant flowers in my garden. We all had hens before the war. They were egg layers. When we didn't have enough money to buy some gas for the lamp - without electricity the lamp was our source of light - my mother would pay with a few eggs in the grocery in exchange for gas. A special hen was left, not only an egg layer but also one that would also raise little chicken. We had chicken at home as well. And we had a dog. But unfortunately a cart ran over it. There was a cat as well. But they lived in the yard, in the street. We loved them, but they had no names.

The house was at the edge of the Jewish neighborhood, where at that time some 100 or 120 Jewish families lived. Almost all of them were Sephardi. We used to live very harmoniously together. Young people were friends and the older people also knew and respected each other. Our house was at the end of the street, very close to the hill. Next to it there was a pasture with sheep and wolves would frequently appear there. Our toilet was outside and I was so scared to go in there in winter because I thought a wolf might come and attack me. I was really very frightened. So, when I went to the toilet, especially in winter when there was a thick layer of snow, my mother used to escort me!

My grandfather once built a wonderful well. Karnobat is a place with a considerable water shortage and at that time there was no water at all! In the years I lived there, in the Jewish neighborhood there was only one well. People used to queue for water. The fountain also had a trough and people used to come with a kettle to collect water, waiting for hours. During the summer it hardly trickled. In winter it froze quite often. We were blessed with our well full of cold, fresh and sweet water. The neighbors - our relatives - also used to take water from there but we would hardly let strangers use the well because we were afraid of an outbreak or that it would become unsanitary. We used to close it. Much later uncle Yuda placed a pump there. Before that we hoisted up water with a simple wooden pulley, a rope and a bucket. The bucket used to fall quite often into the well and we had to pull it out, which cost us enormous efforts. We had a special iron hook, which we let down. It usually came up with a very old bucket, one that had fallen in there a long time ago, but not the one that had just fallen in. After some time it 'jumped' out while another one fell down. Finally we used just one bucket. That well saved us, especially in the dry years.

Above the Jewish street there was a hill with trees planted by many generations. My father planted trees there as a schoolboy, my brother Jack, my little brother Sami and I did as well. And yet the forest always looked young. There were more acacias and broad-leaved trees there. On one of the sides of the Jewish street the Bokludzha river passed. It was dry in summer and in winter it swelled so much that it destroyed the bridges. Behind that river was Diado [grandfather in Bulgarian] Dimcho's hill, where boys and girls used to walk. That lasted until 1939-1940. We had lived so well, but the war began and along with it the persecution of the Jews.

Uncle Yuda Yulzari, a cousin of my father, used to live with his family opposite us. His wife's name was Dudu, just like my aunt's. He had only one daughter named Rashka. She had a boy and a girl also - white, blue-eyed, resembling our kin.

Next to us lived Uncle Salvator. His grandmother is my father's cousin, probably on his mother's side, as her family name is Decalo. Salvator's mother had died. His grandmother tia ['aunt' in Ladino] Buhuru was an elderly woman, who used to cook corn traditionally in a large pot every Friday evening, and used to invite us to 'piniunikus' [a meal, Judezmo]. She shelled the corn, and then boiled it and it was very delicious. She, the poor one, got very scared when kukers [3](#) passed by. She usually locked the door with an axle so that no one could get inside. That was a custom inherited from the Turkish [Ottoman] yoke. My aunt was also very scared of strangers. She used to even call my little brother 'You, Tartar' when he did mischief. Another cousin of ours, Buko Yulzari, with his wife Gracia and their two children lived on the other side of us.

We got on very well with the Bulgarians who lived next to us. My aunt Dudu's best friend was Neda who lived high on the hill. They visited each other very often. Bulia [aunt in Bulgarian] Neda, as I used to call her, used to come to our house and aunt Dudu would visit their house, too. They had a garden with flowers.

My father fought as a soldier in the Balkan War [see First Balkan War] [4](#) and later in World War I. It was such a misery with no food in wartime. My mother was left in the shop but there were no goods, no money, and she went bankrupt! The shop was closed and this was when we became very poor. My father had no profession and he didn't know where to start. He was thin and feeble. His participation in wars had brought nothing positive to him. He was in the army supply train and he even caught the Spanish disease - this was a kind of severe influenza, which usually had a lethal



outcome in those times. They brought him home and he was saved literally in the last minute. That was the time when an indescribable misery visited our house. When I was one and two years old, we used to be the poorest family in town.

Our means were very meager. My mother used to buy one and a half liters of milk from neighbors who had sheep. She boiled it, put it in the middle of the table and we all sipped from it - and that was our dinner! Also at that time there were Albanian sellers of boza [5](#), who passed by our house and we would buy some and eat bread and boza!

My mother was tall and thin. She was a hard-working woman. When a holiday came, she took horse or cow dung and clay from the mountain, mixed it and cleaned the clay floor of the house with it. She used to whitewash the walls with a thick cloth, as there was no brush. I remember what her hands looked like after that with her fingers full of gashes, as the lime ate into her flesh. She took care of everything. She went to the Bokludzha river to wash clothes and I accompanied her. In spring the waters were low, there were flat stones and she beat the rags with the paddles, washed them and then stretched them to dry a little so that we could carry them home. This usually happened on Pesach. In winter my mother washed outside, in the terrible cold. Next to the toilet she made a fireplace. She would build up a fire, put the cauldron with a bag with ashes in it so that the water would become mild. She saved the soap as if it were a very rare and expensive food - she used it in very small quantities, because later on we wouldn't be able to afford it.

Starting as early as summer, my father saved coin after coin to buy an ox cart full of logs for winter. It was enough only for a month and what would we do in the remaining five to six winter months? We had a 'Gypsy love' stove at home - a small one. My mother used to get up early in the morning, when it was still dark - sometimes at one, two, three, or five o'clock. She never knew what time it was, as we didn't have a clock at home. She fired up the stove, put on the traditional rye coffee, which she roasted and ground herself. My brother and I had only coffee and bread for breakfast. Every time she shuddered by the stove until it lit up. She had bronchitis and a heart disease as well. Nevertheless she got up every morning to prepare us for school.

In winter, when the thick deep snow was falling and it was above our heads, she started to dig with a spade in order to make a path for us so that we could go to school. Our lessons were in the afternoon and in winter she was afraid for us, as it got dark very early. She, poor woman, went out into the snow to wait for us in front of the gate. She took great care of us; she was an honest, humble and a very exhausted woman.

I went to the nursery school and then to the Jewish school where I studied until the 4th grade. I had lessons in Hebrew and Bulgarian, and then we had an exam and transferred to a Bulgarian school - first to an elementary school and then to high school. Our teachers changed very often - in an unfamiliar city, with no company in the Jewish neighborhood, they must have felt bored. Almost every year we had different Hebrew teachers. I suppose they attended courses, perhaps in Sofia, and they came out there to teach us. I remember all of them.

In the nursery school my teacher's name was Benzion. He was a dark-eyed, nice man, who lived in my classmate Mois's house. I was in love with that teacher. He also paid attention to me - he used to take me in his hands, put me on his knees and told me fairy tales. And I stared at him with an open mouth. In the 1st grade another teacher came - Pesach was his name - he was a big man, a little rusty. Then came Lili - in the 3rd grade - from Plovdiv; she was short, fluffy and very nice. I

remember only that once she visited us and in my garden there was one hyacinth and I picked it and gave it to her. My mother said, laughing: 'This was the only one you had'.

In the 4th grade our teacher was Abramovich from Romania. He didn't know a single word in Bulgarian and therefore he was always looking for someone to accompany him. And it was announced that everybody who knew Hebrew should assemble. He chose me. I accompanied him all the time - to the barbershop, the food shop, as though I was 'sewed' to him in order for him to manage. I learned Hebrew quite well, yet so many years have passed since then and I don't remember the words anymore. But I remember him.

When my father was young he attended the Jewish school. They studied in Ladino, or Judezmo-Espaniol, as we used to call it in our town. In Sofia they call it Ladino but we used to call it Judezmo-Espaniol, which means Judeo-Spanish. But they wrote in the Rashi script. Therefore my father and my uncle Chelebi, who was from Sofia, used to correspond in Rashi. The letters greatly resembled the ones of the Hebrew alphabet, but the meaning was not understandable. I asked my father about it, he laughed and said that he didn't want me to know what their correspondence was about. I can speak Judezmo-Espaniol, which I learned from my parents. I don't know Rashi, because when I started studying, everybody used Hebrew already. That's why I can write in Hebrew but I don't know Rashi.

At school we spoke more Bulgarian, while at home we spoke Judezmo. My aunt Dudu, for example, didn't know Bulgarian and she spoke Judezmo and Turkish. The Turkish [Ottoman] Empire reigned in this country and she was a witness of those times [see Ottoman Rule in Bulgaria] [6](#). With Bulia Neda they communicated both in Bulgarian and Turkish.

I had a Bulgarian friend at school, a classmate, who lived close to us - Zdravka was her name. We still keep up a correspondence in letters. We were born in the same year, in the same month with only a week's difference. My mother even told me that once, when she got ill and couldn't breast-feed me, Zdravka's mother took me and fed me for a week. She is my milk sister - that's how I call her. Now she lives in Dimitrovgrad and we communicate very often. We are very close. I also had another good friend, 'Americata' - the American - they called the family like that because my friend's father had left for America in search of a job. He couldn't find any, so he stayed for a while there and then returned to Karnobat, where he opened a café. His nickname remained.

My brother became a 1st grade student when I was already in the 4th grade. I have a memory of celebrating the Jews' liberation from Egypt during Purim with a lot of games, songs, and with masks. Our teacher, gevevit ['Miss' in Hebrew] Ester prepared the program. Everyone had something to perform - a sketch, a song, a poem, etc. And then my little brother came home crying and said that gevevit Ester had distributed all of the sketches for Purim and he was the only one left without a task. He used to stammer a little and she, probably not wanting to bother him, didn't give him anything to perform. But he felt insulted and he was crying. I was sorry for him and told him not to cry and that I would find him a poem to recite. He asked me where I would find the poem and I replied that I was going to write it. He was very surprised by this but I wanted to prove it to myself, so I sat and wrote a poem inspired by Purim. It was the first poem that I wrote out of necessity. I made him learn it, encouraged him not to recite it too quickly, not to stammer and not to embarrass himself. Sami was really very enthusiastic about it and gave his best. Next day in the evening he showed the poem to the teacher and insisted on reciting it. They opened the Purim

evening with that poem. Sami recited it perfectly and everything went well!

On the next day the teacher met me in the street and asked me where my brother had found the poem. I was very ashamed and embarrassed and I said: 'I copied it from a newspaper. 'Which newspaper?' she asked me - as there were no newspapers at that time, let alone Jewish newspapers! I said: 'I don't know, I don't remember'. She laughed and went on. I came home and told my brother what had happened - that I had become embarrassed and told the teacher that I had copied it from a newspaper. 'Shame on you to lie to the teacher, yesterday she asked me and I told her that you wrote it!'. I wrote the poem in Bulgarian. [It translates as follows:]

'Day of Purim, our holiday, coming here again! We will wear masks and scare the children! How much fear they will feel - The well-known fear of the old times - Of the Jewish people - from those Mizrim's awful! They would slaughter them, they would hang them, By the order of minister Haman the 'tipesh' [fool]. Yet, our queen, Beauty Ester, She would save all Jews from death!'

At the time when I was to start high school we had no money. Everyone said I should be responsible and begin work in order to support my family. I had just finished the 7th grade in junior high school. I had no choice so I started working for a tailor. I had to hem garments. I was stuck at my work place all day long; I wasn't even allowed to eat. The tailor kept telling my mother how skillful I was, and how I would become an excellent tailor. But I wasn't satisfied with this, because I wanted to continue studying. There was a bell in the school. It usually rang at 7.30am and at 2pm - few people in the town had watches and they used to orient themselves by the bell's ringing. When I heard the sound of that bell, I usually hid so that my mother wouldn't see me and I began to cry. I was so sad that I couldn't go to school. I remember that even for the poorest people the school fee was still expensive - 1,200 leva. I cried for a week and finally my mother decided there was something wrong. She managed to collect the money from here and there and finally I went to school about two months late. I enrolled in the 5th grade in the same way - several months late, yet this time I wrote to my elder brother Jack in Sofia and he sent me the money. At school they knew I was a good student and they always showed understanding.

Our friendship circle was quite interesting. I was a poor girl, therefore the town's boys didn't pay much attention to me. Moreover, I was quite small and thin, and I went to school dressed in a black overall with a white collar and a beret. I didn't raise any interest as a woman. When this group of young men came from Bourgas, I really fell for Albert. I was introduced to him in the evening but he didn't really notice me. The next evening I decided to find a way to attract his attention. I had a blue and white dotted cotton costume. It was like the color of my eyes. I put it on and it looked perfect on me. I wore large sandals, given to me by my cousin Fortune from Sliven. I had beautiful curly hair, which I usually plaited into two braids. But on this occasion I let my hair loose and turned the plaits into curls. I made myself look smart and in the evening I went out in the street together with the company. When I arrived, the boy who I liked asked the others to introduce me to him. On the next day, while I was going to school, he met me in the street, looked at me, smiled and said: 'Hey, kid!' And since then he always called me 'My little kid!'

During the Holocaust we used to write letters and that is how he wrote to me. We saw each other only when he left for the labor camps in early spring [see forced labor camps in Bulgaria] [7](#). And we only met for four or five minutes - the time when the train was waiting at the station. And when he was coming back from the camps, we again met for five minutes. He was in many camps. There



was mail, so I got letters from the camps. We wrote in Bulgarian. Once he even played a trick on me. I received a letter from an unknown man, a Jew named Nicko Varsano, who wanted to correspond with me and get to know me. But when I read the letter, I realized that it was from my boyfriend because I recognized his writing style.

There is another interesting thing: his parents didn't accept me during my school years, because we were poor. I even got a letter from his mother that she would report me to the teacher if I were dating her son. This did not offend me, as he was the one who actually mattered to me. Yet, after the war he himself offended me. Then I told him that I wasn't a match for him and we broke up. Albert left for Israel in 1948-1949. He had a shop for roasted kernels there, inherited later by his children. During one of my visits to Israel, in Herzlia, I met him and had a formal lunch with his family. His wife knew a lot of things about me.

We used to make mill-clacks on the holiday. There is a song which says: 'Avanarisha, rash, rash, rash...' and then we started with the mill-clacks and such yelling and screaming began at school that you can hardly imagine! The evening before we disguised ourselves with whatever we found - we wore the clothes of our grannies and mothers, we painted ourselves and we prepared masks. And in groups we went about from one house to another singing that special song: 'Hak Purim, hak el feia lel aldim!' We sang the song and the housewife gave us 'mahpuri' [money]. If she had mahpurim she would give us some, if not she would treat us with sweets! It was such great fun on that holiday! We used to make special sweets called 'mavlach' - either white or white and red. This is condensed sugar in the form of scissors or pretzels. We also gave each other presents and ate other kinds of sweets also - 'saralia', 'baklava', 'burikitas elhashu' - filled with nuts, raisins and sugar inside and generously poured with syrup. Some even used to make 'masapan' - but it was prepared rather for other holidays- wedding celebrations, brit milah, the circumcision of boys, bar mitzvah, etc.

'Masapan' is a traditional Jewish delight, meant especially for celebrations. It is prepared only from sugar and ground almonds. Sugar is condensed to the required thickness, which we call 'al punto' - to capture the moment! Then the almonds are added. When my daughter got married, I made masapan. All the Jews gobbled up the masapan, while the Bulgarians preferred the chocolate. None of them tried the masapan, because they had never tasted it and they didn't know how delicious it was.

My mother always prepared herself for the holidays, with whatever she could. At Pesach, besides the basic cleaning we did, we had special dishes to serve in 'pascual', special glasses for water, a frying pan, in which we used to prepare Burmoelos [8](#) for Pesach. We soaked bread, added eggs and roasted it. We had a special pot, in which we cooked; plates, forks and spoons especially for Pesach. After the holiday was over, we washed the dishes and placed them in a special cupboard, keeping them for the next Pesach. The everyday dishes were taken out in their place. They were chametz, mixed with bread.

Some ten days before Pesach the Jewish community hired a bakery. Women came and sterilized it, they washed it, took out everything that was chametz and they kneaded bread - boyo and matzah - and gave all the people unleavened bread to eat for eight days. Poor people received it for free. They paid for it with the social support provided by the community for such purposes. In these eight days we ate only boyo, which was as hard as a stone. Even those who had good teeth

couldn't eat it, let alone those who didn't have teeth. My mother put it under vapor in a pot, and it got a little softer so we were able to eat it.

For Pesach my parents always bought me something - usually patent leather shoes with buttons on the sides and squeaking; they were fashionable at that time. We always compared them to see who had the loveliest pair. We didn't wear special clothes, we wore what we had; it just had to be neat. My aunt, who belonged to the older generation, put a bonnet on her head. She made it out of special tea lace: a beautiful bonnet, a hat for a parade. When she went out she put on a large lined taffeta underskirt. When I got married I made an official evening dress out of it. She put on a sleeveless jacket. She had a nice coat and elegant patent leather shoes. She had very small feet and I was dying to try on her lovely high-heeled shoes when she wasn't at home. She mumbled that I shouldn't put them on, for she didn't have another pair, and I might ruin them.

In addition to the school, we also had a synagogue. My father sat on the ground floor - men gathered in the stalls, while women gathered upstairs, in the box. Men and women don't sit together in the synagogue according to the Jewish custom. Children used to gather downstairs, because if they took us upstairs, we became very noisy. In the stalls everything was covered with white marble and we weren't able to make that much noise. There were benches where we used to sit while the grown-ups sat elsewhere. For holidays like Pesach, for example, we were presented with patent leather shoes and we enjoyed hearing them squeak while walking. And when going out of the synagogue both our shoes and the marble used to squeak and there was that strange noise. And the school's servant - the shammash, tiu Ishua -was waving his finger for a 'Hush!' so that we wouldn't disturb the prayer.

The synagogue was decorated with large beautiful chandeliers. The synagogue seemed very large to me. It had a nice yard. All the rituals were performed. People didn't wear kippot but hats. Everyone wore whatever he had but nobody entered the synagogue without a hat. My father wore a suit. Men entered the synagogue with whatever clothes they had, with a hat or a cap, and it was obligatorily to wear a tallit. My father had a very beautiful tallit, inherited from his father, and a cap - but not a bowler hat as he didn't have one - and he took the prayer book with him. The tallit usually passes from one generation to another. But after my father's death, the tallit, as well as some books in Hebrew, prayer books and other things were all lost somewhere.

The shammash in the synagogue was tiu Ishua. He also worked in the school. He cleaned and washed the synagogue. When there were holidays he usually took a pan with oil [in Bulgarian, it is called a chrism] out of the synagogue and everyone looked at himself in it for health, dropping coins as a gift. He built a small wooden house [sukkah] at Sukkot. People gathered there in the evening, they served grapes, cheese and bread and for us, the children. But there wasn't enough space and we usually sat outside waiting impatiently for tiu Ishua to bring us some food. The sukkah was a large shed, covered with tarpaulin from the outside, with a straight roof. They put two big tables and wooden benches in there. They gathered, read the prayer and afterwards they ate.

We had a hakham, but we didn't have a rabbi. He said not only the prayers but was also the shochet. Our hakham, whose name was Haribi Haim, used to go to special market halls when he had to slaughter lambs. He read the prayer and performed the ritual. We bought only lamb and veal that was kosher, i.e. meat for Jews. The rest is called 'trofa' [or treyf] and it shouldn't be eaten.

We had a special market where kosher meat was sold, yet it wasn't in the Jewish neighborhood, but quite far away.

When Haribi Haim read the Jewish prayer for kosher meat, he took livers and other animal innards and he divided it into portions in special plates called 'platicus' and each family was given one. The young lamb was called 'trofanda'. Rich people usually returned the plate with money, while poor people didn't put in anything. The hakham also used to do brit to the boys on the eighth day after their birth. Later, when the war started, those rituals stopped.

The hakham walked with a slightly bowed head. He took a cane only as a formality, as he wasn't that old. He wore dark clothes. He had two daughters and one son. A special house in the town was given to him to live there with his family. I don't know for what reasons but he left even before the war. Another hakham replaced him but he wasn't as active.

There is an old Jewish cemetery in Karnobat, where my grandmother Gracia is buried. Once I went there with my aunt Dudu, but we couldn't find her gravestone. My father was buried in the new cemetery.

### **During the war**

But all that normal life lasted only until the war began in 1941-1942. We knew that a war had started; yet we didn't have enough money to buy newspapers, and we didn't have a radio. Finally we realized that a war with Britain had begun. But we learned about the persecution of Jews much later, we even didn't know anything about the gas chambers. In early spring, when the earth was still frozen with ice, the Jewish men were sent to labor camps and women were left home alone. [see Law for the Protection of the Nation] [9](#)

In 1942 we were at first 'decorated' with yellow stars. We received them from the community and we stitched them to our clothes. We couldn't go out without the star on the overcoat! On my graduation photo I also wore that yellow star. They changed my name. Gracia wasn't Jewish enough, so I was renamed Zili. After that our radios and jewelry were confiscated, we were forbidden to walk freely on the street. Our street had two ends - one end led to the main street, the other to the Gypsy neighborhood. We didn't have the right to walk in the center, which contained a large street with several branches. We didn't have the right to go to the cinema or to the theater. Bulgarians were forbidden to hire us for work.

In Karnobat Jews mostly owned boutiques for textiles, paints and haberdashery, in the main street. There was also a Jewish café, as well as the 'Garti' kiosk for cigarettes. When the Law for the Protection of the Nation was passed, everything was closed, sealed and confiscated. The Commissariat on the Jewish Questions was responsible for this. There were also some Jews in the Commissariat, thus they could influence its decisions in our favor, as the authorities dictated everything. Uncle Yuda was also a member. The Commissariat was placed in the municipality - in Karnobat there weren't many administrative buildings.

Uncle Yuda's dairy was also liquidated. There were no possibilities either for dairy farming, or for leather processing or even trading! We all became unemployed, hungry, no matter how rich or poor we were. Only those were able to survive, who had plenty of gold or money and who had previously used the chance to put something aside for savings.

A coupon system was introduced. We couldn't buy anything. We were given very small portions of bread - a half or a quarter per person. My brother ate his whole portion in the morning. Later he didn't have any money for lunch or for dinner and my mother gave him her entire portion and she went hungry. I was quite a poor eater myself and somehow I managed to cope with hunger. The bakery belonged to a Turk from our neighborhood. Sometimes I went there and asked him to give me a half-bread, and when there were no people around, he did me the favor and on such days the situation was much better. There was a time when we ate only potatoes. Everyone could receive a kilogram. It was a period of severe hunger.

Medicine, doctors - all these things were a luxury! There was no cinema, no theater. We were so isolated that in the end it was like in a ghetto. Sometimes branniks [10](#) came, breaking the windows, damaging the doors, especially the hakham's house, on which swastikas were drawn.

Before the laws were repealed, uncle Yuda came and warned us to prepare no more than 30 kilograms of luggage because we would be sent somewhere. As we were in a border zone - Karnobat, Bourgas, and Kjustendil - we would be deported. I wasn't aware at all what was happening, but my mother was terrified. We didn't have any underwear - it was all worn out; we didn't have any proper blankets, everything was torn. We didn't have money for food. Yet the second order never came. It was postponed by the protests in Kjustendil. And the Soviet Army was already close as well.

My brother Jack was sent straight to Sofia to a camp. My father was already advanced in years and they didn't call him. We, the young people from the country, were sent to do agricultural work. The food we produced was sent to the Germans on the front line.

First I participated in gathering the harvest for a landowner in the summer of 1942. I tied sheaves there. The landowner had a daughter, who was my classmate. She must have told her father about this because the next day he came with a special reaper. He taught me how to regulate the knife in order to reap uniformly. He took me with him and from then on I didn't have to walk on foot. He drove the reaping machine and I regulated the harvesting. Thus my job was easier than that of my classmates, who gathered the crop and tied the sheaves.

In 1943 I went to gather the harvest and pull out the potatoes. The soil in Karnobat was fruitful and there were fields in the suburbs. It was a rich agricultural region. There were plenty of vineyards and well-developed stockbreeding - producing the best sheep and the best wool. People soon learned that I was a good student. The landowner I had to work for had a son, a second grade pupil with poor marks who had to retake an exam. He told me that he would pay everything if I prepared his son to pass his exam in Bulgarian. So I became a tutor and he passed the exam.

I remember once a blockade. The authorities were chasing a Jew, who hid in a hencoop in a Jewish house in the highest part of the town. Later he joined the partisans. And I recall another blockade as well. A friend of mine came to me and told me to destroy anything suspicious that I had. At that time I was corresponding in Esperanto with a teacher from the countryside. I wanted to practice and learn the language. I also had a book at home with a story about a sailing boat with some 300 Jews, leaving for Israel, which sank. In that book I had made a note, which said that the Gestapo or the police had a hand in that affair of killing so many Jews. [Editor's note: The interviewee is referring to the tragedy of a sailing boat with Bulgarian Jews aboard, which left for Israel from the Bulgarian coast in 1941 and sank in the Black Sea.] I threw both the letters and the book into

the stove.

The Jewish school was immediately occupied - first by the German troops in 1941, when they were on their way to Greece, and later by the police. It was never opened again. Jews weren't allowed to study in high schools. Interned young people from Sofia came to our town, excellent students, who were deprived from the opportunity to continue their education. Only the best among the local Jewish schoolgirls and schoolboys were allowed to study in the Bulgarian school. The ones from the capital were forbidden. Of some 1,000 Jewish students, only three people from Karnobat - I, Nora Hanne and Mois Tano - were admitted to go on with our education in the Bulgarian school. We went to school through side streets, not along the main street. We were wearing our yellow stars, of course. Sometimes branniks and legionaries [see Bulgarian Legions] [11](#) made fun of us. We were pretty girls, and they, pretending that they were making passes at us, were actually poking fun at us as Jewish girls. Otherwise I didn't have any problems in my class, nobody maltreated me there.

When we finished school, I wanted to go to the secondary school students' farewell ball like everybody else. A girl from Sofia gave me her costume. I went to the ball, but my teacher stopped me at the front door, and told me not to go in because it was expected that the legionaries and branniks would get drunk, which could lead to something bad. I guess she must have had instructions not to let Jewish people in the ballroom of the theater. And she didn't let me in. I was very upset but I couldn't say anything. What could I possibly say in those years of terror? I just left. Then she said: 'Gracia, wait for me please, I will walk you.' She was scared that someone might attack me in the street, as I was alone. She walked me home. I have a short story in my book 'Monologue for Love'. It was dedicated especially to this occasion. It is called 'The White Blouse' and in it I tell the story of two white blouses - mine and that of my daughter, who, many years later, did go to her farewell party. I tore my white blouse with the yellow star and threw it in the Bokludzha River when freedom came. I was so happy to be free that I climbed the hill and began crying: 'We are free, we are free!' That is how that period of persecution between 1942- 1944 ended.

## Post-war

Right after the war we celebrated Pesach, Purim and other holidays, but there was no sugar for sweets. People moved and there was nobody to prepare them. The factories were no longer working; the families had left. The synagogue in Sofia remained closed a long time after the war. We only started observing the traditions again after 10th November 1989 [12](#). We organized a fancy-dress ball with masks for Purim, we lit a chanukkyah at Chanukkah. After the synagogue was opened, some ritual objects were found for it. The small synagogue was destroyed during the war. Now it is partially reconstructed. Moreover, from the 48,000 Jews only about five or six thousand were left, including the mixed marriages.

After 9th September 1944, I became a temporary teacher in the elementary school in the village of Nevestino. It was about 15 kilometers from Karnobat. In the beginning I walked by foot, later they found me lodging in the neighborhood. We prepared food and sweets for the wounded among the front line soldiers and we carried them to the Sliven hospital. We helped women whose husbands were still fighting at the beginning of 1945 to plant vegetables in their yards. Later I moved to Bourgas to become a regular teacher. I was told that I had to graduate from the Pedagogy Institute, which had open doors during the summer. So, I began in the summer and later I became a teacher



of Bulgarian language and literature at the Jewish school in Bourgas for two years.

There was a saying after 9th September 1944: 'Work the whole day, go to a meeting in the evening and join the brigade on Sunday'. At a meeting where my future husband was a speaker, a friend called Albert was there, too. After the meeting there were dances. Everybody invited me because I was a guest. My husband didn't dance with anybody, and then he suddenly came and invited me. He asked me to wait for him after his meeting in the municipality, because he wanted to speak with me. I said 'Fine'. I left with Albert and told him that I was going to come back because Jack asked me to see him afterwards. At first he didn't say a word, then he snapped very angrily: 'Don't you see he is going to propose to you. Go, if you want.' I was mad at both of them. At Albert because he spoke sharply with me, and at Jack because he would ask me to marry him after only seeing me for the first time. I took my suitcase and left for Karnobat. The following day Jack arrived in Karnobat with his friend Shimon. And there they took me to a football match. And then they left. Jack didn't say anything more to me at this point. He was very shy. Then we met at a meeting in Bourgas and Shimon said: 'Let me congratulate you on your engagement!'. And I shook hands with my husband. He said: 'Let me introduce you to my mother.' And so it all started. I went there and sent a telegram to my mother that I was getting married to Jack Albuhaire.

My father-in-law was born in Turkey and had Turkish citizenship. During the fascist times the authorities wanted to send him back to Turkey as a Turkish citizen, while his wife Rebecca and the children, who were Bulgarian citizens, were to remain in Bulgaria. My father-in-law, very upset, went to Sofia to try and solve the problem. A motorcycle hit him there. His leg was broken, he was sent to a hospital and so he missed the internment in Turkey. This is how they remained in Bourgas.

My husband graduated from the business high school in Bourgas. During the Holocaust he was sent to forced labor camps. He had a certificate, issued by the Jewish community, listing all the camps he was sent to. Unfortunately I don't know to which ones. He worked in the big Bourgas flourmills and during World War II, despite the prohibition to hire Jews, the owner retained his position but took his sister Matilda instead.

My husband had a younger brother named Mair and a sister, Matilda. My mother-in-law didn't let us marry for a long time because according to the tradition the daughter had to marry first. When we got engaged, his brother Mair was in a military school, while his sister worked as a teacher in the Jewish school in Sofia. We lived in one room, and my father-in-law, who was ill, and my mother-in-law lived in the other room. My husband provided for all of us. We lived for three months as a family but we were only engaged. In a small town people often gossip and they invent so many things. One day I received a letter from my mother, in which she told me that a rumor had spread in town that I was kept as a mistress and that they would get rid of me sometime, leaving me with nothing. I read the letter, smiling faintly, because we were so busy that this didn't even occur to us. When he read the letter, Jack got so upset that he took my hand and told me: 'Let's go and sign right now.' I told him: 'Please, give me at least a week to prepare myself!'

The Women's Section of the Karnobat Jewish community, the WIZO [13](#), presented me with a pink silk cloth, which they had bought with coupons. Some tailors volunteered to sew it for me for free and from the silk petticoat of my aunt Dudu they made a lacy evening dress for me. It was wonderful, it suited me very much - I was very thin, and had a nice body. So, it took me a week to

get ready for the wedding. My bride's coat was made from my grandmother's old coat; it was turned inside out and sewn like that. Jack wore his regular suit.

Our wedding was in December 1945. We had a civil marriage. Everything was bought with coupons and we couldn't buy anything from the market in order to prepare ourselves for the modest party. My husband still worked in the mill, where, despite the prohibition, his sister had worked as an accountant in his place during the war, as he was in the labor camps. From there he was given some pork guts, from which we cooked meatballs. We found a kilogram of semolina somewhere and made artificial caviar - with onion, red pepper and a little vinegar. There was no sugar to make sweets. It was something extraordinary when we first received support from the Joint [14](#) - orange juice. We saved it for our daughter, so that she could taste it. In the evening they came to our home to have a modest celebration. That was it - our wedding.

We stayed for two years in Bourgas, where my elder daughter Reni was born. I gave birth in a house, which had been turned into a maternity home. There was one obstetrician and one nurse there. After the birth I had a three- month maternity leave [the maximum amount at that time]. Yet the child had to be nursed not for three, but for nine months. So I had to go home from school. I was given a break at ten o'clock. One hour to go and breast-feed my baby and then return to school. I was exhausted from running around. I was undernourished; I had no milk. The baby was crying, and I had no experience with babies, I didn't know that she was crying because she was hungry. Later I fed her from a bottle. While I was working, my mother-in- law took care of her. It was very hard but I didn't quit my job.

After the annulment of the coupon system during the 1940s, things loosened up a bit; holiday houses were built at the sea and mountain resorts sprung up too. A special department was formed for the distribution of holiday cards. They were at reasonable prices for 15-20 days. We went on holidays every year, either the whole family or just one of us with the children. My husband loved to take me to different interesting places and show me the most picturesque ones. I still remember, as though in a dream, a wooden palace of woodcarving called 'The Forest King', somewhere in the Varna district. We visited the Plovdiv fair on a regular basis. My husband took me everywhere with him; he enjoyed traveling with me. When he went to a conference in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia or some other country, he took me with him at his own expense. He loved providing me with these pleasures. He was a very good person and we lived very well.

After 1948, when everyone left for Israel [during the Mass Aliyah] [15](#), there were no more children and the Jewish school was closed. We couldn't leave. My husband's relatives all remained here together with their families. As for my family, my elder brother left, but my younger brother stayed here. My mother and my aunt lived with us also, as I took care of them.

In Sofia my husband worked for the trade unions. In the beginning when we came to Sofia, my mother and my aunt lived with us. We lived in one room, on Veslets Street, as there were no apartments at that time. Those were hard times, until we were given a two-bedroom apartment in the center. Several years later we moved to the apartment in Mladost district, which I eventually bought. We didn't have any firewood - and my poor aunt lived in a room, which I couldn't heat up. We were given half a ton of house coal for the whole winter. And my little daughter Olya was about a year old. We only heated the kitchen stove, where we gathered to cook and this is where we spent the most time because it was warm enough for the baby and my older daughter. My aunt

couldn't get up and she had to stay in the cold room. She died in 1952. My mother died quite soon afterwards due to having a bad heart. They are both buried in the Jewish cemetery in Sofia.

My husband retired as a chairman of the Trade Union of Banking and Trade Workers. He was also elected a deputy of the Sofia municipality. He died in 1986 after an unsuccessful prostate operation.

I graduated with a degree in journalism in 1954. The faculty of journalism was temporarily closed then; there weren't many newspapers and radio stations, there was no TV, but there were quite a lot of people who enrolled and graduated in journalism. A decree was passed, saying that all the people who were employed as journalists were obliged to have a higher educational degree. As there were many editors-in-chief and department directors who had no degree, a class was formed by the Central House of journalists with people who didn't match the criteria. They passed a qualification course there, at the end of which they got official diplomas, authorizing them to practice their profession. So, I joined the class with my editor's recommendation letter. That's how I graduated in journalism with the same professors who taught at the university.

When I came to Sofia I first began working in the Voluntary Auxiliary Defense Organization (V.A.D.O.) at the Ministry of Defense. It was a school for radiotelegraphic operators, parachutists, and motorcyclists. I was there for some six years and in charge of the radio programs. Then I was redirected to the military editors of Radio Sofia and our programs were broadcast from there. The programs were dedicated to different competitions in yachting, parachuting, and to various club activities; to the work of the V.A.D.O. in different enterprises. At that time Kamen Roussev, a senior lieutenant, was the editor-in-chief. I didn't get on well with him at all. I was inexperienced at the very beginning of my career as a journalist and he was constantly making remarks to me.

Then I switched over to working in the 'Internal Information' department of the radio. I traveled around plants and factories and made a lot of interviews and articles about them reflecting on various problems. Now most of those enterprises are destroyed and it makes me feel really sad. Those were highly esteemed enterprises, which had worldwide export.

I made an interview with Tupolev - the aviation constructor, who created the TU-154 airplane. I also interviewed a Chilean diplomat who came to establish friendly relations with Bulgaria [that was long before the Junta]. We arranged a meeting in the Balkan hotel with the understanding that he would come with an interpreter, but his interpreter didn't come. With my school French I was quite unable to make an interview. I tried Judezmo-Espaniol and the conversation went well. However, as a diplomat he passed me a paper with already prepared questions, but I couldn't read his handwriting. So what was I supposed to do? In order to resolve the delicate situation, I offered to take him to the radio studio because of the noise in the hotel lobby. He agreed but preferred to walk there by foot. I introduced him to the director and the secretary immediately found an interpreter - and that's how the interview was finally taken. I have also worked for the radio shows called 'Foreign Programs' and 'Program for the Capital'.

I also collaborated with newspapers; I wrote short stories. Albuhaire is quite difficult to pronounce and I was working primarily with Bulgarian people, so I decided that my husband's name Jack was much easier and I chose to present myself with it as a penname. So I am known as Gracia Jack in the radio and writers' circles and that's how I sign my name. In the Jewish quarter and the Bet Am [16](#) I am better known as Albuhaire.

I started publishing books after 10th November 1989. I had greater opportunities because I received financial support from Switzerland, and I invested a part of this in publishing my books. The promotion of my books took place in the Jewish school and the Jewish community Shalom [17](#). Many of my poems became popular in the Jewish community. In my book 'Shadai - the Star of David' I wanted to immortalize the memory of my perished compatriots.

I have rarely come across anti-Semitic manifestations. Once I was on a business trip to Kula [in Northern Bulgaria]. I went to the municipality to meet the person responsible for the military department. It turned out that he was an acquaintance of mine from Kardzhali [Southern Bulgaria]. We had been colleagues. So we shook hands like in the old times and we talked for a while. It was during the Six-Day-War [18](#) in Israel. Suddenly he started saying: 'Those dirty Jews, how could Hitler have not exterminated them all!' The awful things he said terrified me and I told him in the end: 'What have I done to you to make you wish that Hitler had killed me too?' 'Why?' - he asked. 'Because I am a Jew.' - I replied. He turned pale, he wrung my hand but he couldn't say a word to me. And that's how we parted. I didn't make an interview with him. There were isolated cases like this one, but the good things were more numerous and far more interesting.

Isidor Solomonov from our 'Jewish News' newspaper, with which I used to collaborate, introduced me to the writer Marc Abramovich [his pen name was Marc Rasumnii] from Riga, Latvia, from the former USSR. I got in touch and kept correspondence in Russian with him until his death. He used to send me his books and short stories and I translated them. One summer I visited him. He took me to the Riga Memorial of the Jews who perished in World War II. He was an elderly Jew who had survived the Holocaust. We discussed a lot of themes with him and now I feel sorry that I never asked him how he had managed to escape from the Nazi occupation in Riga. He kept correspondence with the 'Hamerlaind' Jewish newspaper in Moscow; therefore I suppose he was a German Haldeyan Jew. I still keep his letters and one day I will probably send them to Riga.

I tried to find the archives of the Karnobat synagogue, which was destroyed after 9th September 1944. The Jewish school is still there in Karnobat but it is quite neglected. The archives, the things needed for prayers - the Torah, the books and other ritual objects - have disappeared. I was told that they were in museums in Bourgas and Sofia, but I couldn't find them. I was also told that most of the things from the provincial synagogues had been put in a depot in Pancharevo [a village near Sofia], but there had been a fire in that depot and they were destroyed.

In Karnobat not only the synagogue has been destroyed but also all the Jews have left since 1948, in large groups. Today there is not a single Jew in the town. Even the Jewish neighborhood, which had once been so lively, is now populated with Bulgarians who came from the nearby villages. The name of the street has been changed to 'Ivan Vazov', although people still say that they live in the Jewish quarter. I visited the town on a school graduation anniversary, and the first place I went to was the Jewish neighborhood. I was terrified because I couldn't find my father's house. I saw my neighbor 'Americata' by chance and she led me to the place where a big residential estate had been built. I asked her where the nice well had vanished to with the cold water we had once drunk from. The pear tree, the trellis vine had also disappeared. The well was now in the basement of the living estate, plugged up and quite useless. Uncle Yuda's house, which was opposite ours, looked dark, plain and abandoned. It looked like a shack, although it had once been stately, beautiful and large. I was very saddened. The well next to the school, from where the whole city took water, had also vanished.

I became a member of the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1946, in the teacher's organization in Bourgas. Yet my children were brought up as Jews in the spirit of the Jewish holidays and traditions. My older daughter, Reni, graduated in machine engineering and worked as a constructor and designer, but she became ill with diabetes and she is now an invalid. My younger daughter, Olya, married Victor Avramov but they got divorced. He didn't like being a Jew and being called Beraha, so he calls himself Victor Avramov, after his father's and grandfather's name. They have one son, Alexander, who studies in the American College in Kjustendil and lives with his other grandmother.

After 10th November 1989 we would have had to get documents to prove that my grandfather owned his house and to prove our rights as heirs, but most of the family members were in Israel. It was all too complicated, so we left it at that. Nobody had the nerves and the time to deal with this.

I went to Israel in 2000. My nephews sent me the ticket and organized my stay there. In the course of a month I visited all the relatives on my father's side and some on my husband's side. When I arrived I felt like I was on an Asian continent. In Tel Aviv I saw broad-leaved trees. My first impression was that the country was wonderful. I had meetings with poets and leaders of different organizations, who had arranged literary meetings for me. I saw many people from Bulgaria. Obviously they had announced my visit and people from Karnobat came especially to see me. I traveled to many cities. Be'er Sheva, Jaffa, Tel Aviv, Rishon Letzion, Ramat Gan, Jerusalem, Haifa. When I was in Israel I was as though in a dream-like state - full of emotions and experiences. We were all the time worried about our relatives and friends in Israel, as well as now.

During my trip to Israel that year, I also visited professor Albert Behar in Jerusalem. We saw the sights of Jerusalem; we visited the Yaf Ashen memorial. At the same time the road to old Jerusalem was closed. The Arabs had announced a day of revenge, a day for peaceful manifestations and meetings, although they actually fired shots. It was frightening. Therefore the police had cordoned off the whole region. I celebrated Yom Kippur in Jerusalem; we did taanit [means fast in Ivrit] and went to the olive forest. The professor showed me the city. When we saw a package with a bottle sticking out of it, he told me that we should immediately report it to the police because it might be an explosive. I thought that it was probably a bottle of water. But he insisted that it might be a 'Molotov' cocktail.

Almost all of my generation, the middle-aged or even the youngest ones, in the Jewish community know me. They ask me to read books or recite poems for them. I have recited poems in Ladino when there were guests from Israel. I think that people have respect for me. Nowadays I regularly visit the Bet Am. I am happy with the life within the Bet Am now. We have different celebrations and gather on different occasions. The time I need for personal amusement and recreation I usually spend in the Bet Am. Some of its initiatives are financially supported by the Joint because the Jews that live here don't have many financial possibilities. We get together and a Jewish atmosphere is created. Quite a lot of weddings are carried out currently in the synagogue, something that has never been done before. Traditions that have fallen into oblivion are renewed. There is a youth organization. There is also a Bulgarian school where Hebrew is taught. We call it a Jewish school. There are young Bulgarian people who have also enrolled to study Hebrew. The children also gather on Sunday. They visit the events of the different clubs, organized by Shalom, such as concerts, meetings with composers, artists, etc. They visit the synagogue also, especially on Sukkot. Older people are more active in terms of visiting the Bet Am. There is also the women's organization, the WIZO. At 'ESPERANSA 2000' we shared experiences and knowledge in how to



preserve our ancestors' language Judezmo-Espaniol, in which many books have been written. It will be a real treasure to read them and learn about our history. It was interesting to meet other Jews from other Balkan countries at this festival.

## Glossary

### **1 Sephardi Jewry**

Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin. Their ancestors settled down in North Africa, the Ottoman Empire, South America, Italy and the Netherlands after they had been driven out from the Iberian peninsula at the end of the 15th century. About 250,000 Jews left Spain and Portugal on this occasion. A distant group among Sephardi refugees were the Crypto- Jews (Marranos), who converted to Christianity under the pressure of the Inquisition but at the first occasion reassumed their Jewish identity. Sephardi preserved their community identity; they speak Ladino language in their communities up until today. The Jewish nation is formed by two main groups: the Ashkenazi and the Sephardi group which differ in habits, liturgy their relation toward Kabala, pronunciation as well in their philosophy.

### **2 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.

### **3 Kukers**

A traditional Bulgarian custom, in which men, called kukers, wear elaborate costumes and masks and parade through villages around New Year's time, making lots of noise and receiving food and drink. The ritual is thought to ward off evil spirits and to beckon prosperity and fertility for the new year.

### **4 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.

### **5 Boza**

A sweet, syrupy wheat-based drink popular in Bulgaria.

## **6 Ottoman Rule in Bulgaria**

The territory of today's Bulgaria and most of South Eastern Europe was an integral part of the Ottoman Empire for about five hundred years, from the 14th century until 1878. During the 1877-78 Russian-Turkish War the Russians occupied the Bulgarian lands and brought about the independent Bulgarian state, which however left many Bulgarians outside its boundaries, mostly in areas still under Ottoman rule. The autonomous Ottoman province of Eastern Rumelia united with Bulgaria in 1885, and Bulgaria gained a small part of Macedonia (Pirin Macedonia) in the Balkan Wars (1912-13). However complete Bulgarian national unity was never achieved as many of the Bulgarians remained within the neighboring countries, such as in Greece (Aegean Thrace and Makedonia), Serbia (Macedonia and Eastern Serbia) and Romania (Dobrudzha).

## **7 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.

## **8 Burmoelos (or burmolikos, burlikus)**

A sweetmeat made from matzah, typical for Pesach. First, the matzah is put into water, then squashed and mixed with eggs. Balls are made from the mixture, they are fried and the result is something like donuts.

## **9 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.

## **10 Brannik**

Pro-fascist youth organization. It started functioning after the Law for the Protection of the Nation was passed in 1941 and the Bulgarian government forged its pro-German policy. The Branniks

regularly maltreated Jews.

## **11 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.

## **12 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.

## **13 WIZO**

Women's International Zionist Organisation; a hundred year old organization with humanitarian purposes aiming at supporting Jewish women all over the world in the field of education, economics, science and culture. Currently the chairwoman of WIZO in Bulgaria is Ms. Alice Levi.

## **14 Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee)**

The Joint was formed in 1914 with the fusion of three American Jewish aid committees, which were alarmed by the suffering of Jews during World War I. In late 1944, the Joint entered Europe's liberated areas and organized a massive relief operation. It provided food for Jewish survivors all over Europe, it supplied clothing, books and school supplies for children. It supported the establishment of cultural meeting places, including libraries, theaters and gardens. It also provided religious supplies for the Jewish communities. The Joint also operated DP camps, in which it organized retraining programs to help people learn trades that would enable them to earn a living, while its cultural and religious activities helped re-establish Jewish life. The Joint was also closely involved in helping Jews to emigrate from European and Muslim countries. The Joint was expelled from East Central Europe for decades during the Cold War and it has only come back to many of these countries after the fall of communism. Today the Joint provides social welfare programs for elderly Holocaust survivors and encourages Jewish renewal and communal development.

## **15 Mass Aliyah**

Between September 1944 and October 1948, 7,000 Bulgarian Jews left for Palestine. The exodus was due to deep-rooted Zionist sentiments, relative alienation from Bulgarian intellectual and political life, and depressed economic conditions. Bulgarian policies toward national minorities were also a factor that motivated emigration. In the late 1940s Bulgaria was anxious to rid itself of national minority groups, such as Armenians and Turks, and thus make its population more homogeneous. More people were allowed to depart in the winter of 1948 and the spring of 1949. The mass exodus continued between 1949 and 1951: 44,267 Jews immigrated to Israel until only a

few thousand Jews remained in the country.

#### **16 Bet Am**

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

#### **17 Shalom Organization**

Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria. It is an umbrella organization uniting 8,000 Jews in Bulgaria and has 19 regional branches. Shalom supports all forms of Jewish activities in the country and organizes various programs.

#### **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.