Jul Efraim Levi

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Sofia
Bulgaria
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Jul Efraim Levi is a unique man, artist and interlocutor. He impresses not only with his lively language, full of metaphors, associations and jokes, but also with its melody. In his eloquent speech it's his pauses rather than his words which have theatrical overtones: ironic, deep, dramatic, etc. The composer of the first Bulgarian musical, 'The Girl I Loved,' fascinated me with his concise use of words and facts. The teasing, but never spiteful humor, is his second nature. That is why it was a real pleasure and privilege to share his company, even just for a few hours.

My family history

My ancestors were Sephardi Jews [see Sephardi Jewry] 1, persecuted by the Inquisition in Spain more than five centuries ago [see Expulsion of the Jews from Spain] 2. As it is known, during their immigration there were a lot of French Jews, running from the persecutions in the 15th century in France. [Probably these were local persecutions, which took place in France after the issuance of the edict of Ferdinand and Isabella in Spain in 1492. The migration wave that followed included also French and Italian Jews who were welcomed in the Ottoman Empire.] I know nothing more about the persecutions. During that period, whole families [communities] settled in [the territory of contemporary] Albania, Serbia, Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria. I would call it 'the sea route of salvation from the Royal Inquisition.' So, my maternal kin settled in Seres, Greece and my paternal kin in Samokov, Bulgaria. [Both countries were part of the Ottoman Empire up until the 19th century.]

My mother's family name was Ovadia, and my father's was Levi. Our ancestors were among those French-Spanish settlers, since my maternal kin spoke both French and Spanish [Ladino] for many years. [French, being the lingua-Franca and the language of international commerce was widely adopted by the Ottoman Jewish communities during the 19th century. Being a French speaker, therefore, doesn't mean French origin in this case.] Both my maternal and paternal ancestors spoke Ladino 3, but different versions. The difference is that the language of Jews which I

remember being spoken in Salonica [today Greece] when I was a child was pure Castilian, from the times of Miguel de Cervantes, [There are more than a hundred years between the expulsion of the Sephardim and the time Cervantes wrote Don Quixote.], a literary Spanish from the Middle Ages, with no external influence. The Ladino spoken by the Bulgarian Jews was full of influence from various kinds of languages.

My parents, Efraim and Victoria Levi, have always been the nicest couple on earth, according to me. My father was born in Samokov to the large family of the local rabbi. He was one of seven children. My grandfather was called Avraam Levi and his wife was Reyna. Obviously, my grandfather was able to ensure his children a good start in life, because when my father graduated from high school in Samokov, he left for Bucharest [today Romania] where his elder brother, Uncle Buko, had already settled. There my father continued his education in a polytechnic boarding school, where they studied technology, painting and applied arts: wrought iron, 'chekanka,' which is the art production of copper dishes, as well as all general subjects such as math, physics, chemistry, history, geography, literature, languages and a lot of physical education. My father once told me that they also had a farm in the school and once one of the cows gave birth to a calf. After the polytechnic school, in 1912, he graduated in architecture and just as he received his degree, he got the news on the start of the wars: the First Balkan War 4, the Second Balkan War 5 and World War I [see Bulgaria in World War I] 6. He decided to return to Bulgaria immediately.

My father had a proverbial sense of duty and responsibility. When he got back to Bulgaria, he joined the engineer forces and fought at the front for eight years. For some well-done task, of which I don't know any details, he received a Medal of Valor, two more medals and some stripes. Besides all the awards and victories in the wars, he achieved another victory of a different kind. And it was the greatest one!

During his leave my father went to Seres. There was a Bulgarian garrison there and his eldest brother Buko was serving there. [Aegean Thrace, including Seres, was an integral part of Bulgaria prior to the end of World War I.] Since my uncle was in the supply service, my father had permission to sleep outside the barracks and he was accommodated with the family of Mr. Jeuda Merkado Ovadia. He had four sons and one daughter. The daughter was the youngest and obviously the most wanted. Her name was Victoria. Whenever my father visited his brother he slept at the same house. During his last day before he returned to his company, my father shared with his brother that when World War I finished and if he was still safe and sound, he would go back and ask Mr. Ovadia for the hand of his daughter, because he was sure she was 'the lady of his heart.' My uncle told his landlord that, but he answered that his daughter was too young: she was 16 years old, and they would have to ask for her consent. Then, the door opened 'by accident' and the young girl said, 'I'll wait for him!'

When the wars ended my father was demobilized. He passed through Samokov to receive the blessings of my grandparents and told them that he was going to Seres to ask for the hand of a young girl. And so he left. My mother's parents also blessed the young couple and they got engaged. At that time there were advertisements in the Greek papers [Aegean Thrace was attached to Greece after World War I.] that young architects and engineers were wanted by an Italian construction company, 'Modiano,' which had received a concession to recover the city of Salonica, which had been afflicted by the war. My father applied for the job immediately and was accepted. So the Ovadia family and the young Levi family moved to Salonica. There the aunts and

uncles started enlarging the Ovadia family with children, and our family, the Levis, had only three children: my sister Rene, my brother Albert, who died very young, and me.

My mother was always kind and smiling. I would always remember her with a book in her hand, or even more often on her lap and some knitting in her hands. She was very good at knitting and made wonderful sweaters, hats and gloves. She was also an excellent housewife and housekeeper. Probably I inherited my interest in cooking from her. Thanks to my mother, Rene and I learned three languages. At home we spoke Ladino and French and at school and on the street, Greek. In fact, all our relatives knew many languages. My father knew the most: Ladino, Bulgarian, French, Romanian, Italian, Greek, and he could read and write in Ivrit. At the beginning of the last century every intelligent Jew in Salonica knew at least three languages.

Growing up

I was born in Salonica on 19th June 1930. Obviously the Franco-Sephardi [Farcified Sephardi] roots of my maternal kin had their say. So, I was named after my maternal grandfather, who was Jeuda Merkado Ovadia. [Editor's note: Jul is probably the local version of the French Jule, which originates from the Latin Julius. Jeuda, on the other hand, is a variant of the Hebrew Yehuda. The two names sound similar but their origins are different. It is customary, however, to name Jewish children after their grandparents and often a similar but modern name is chosen, like the French Jul (Jule) instead of the traditional Jeuda.] I'll always remember Grandmother Donna with her noble beauty and the songs she sang to me from the cradle until I became a pupil. The songs with which she put me to sleep were the wonderful Spanish romances 'La paloma', 'Maria la O,' and 'Donde estas korason.'

At the beginning of the last century [The period the interviewee is describing is between the two World Wars.] there was a law in Greece according to which foreign nationals weren't allowed to own a company or any real estate. So, we occupied one floor of a house, which my father had built and rented from the landlord. I remember that our landlord's name was Chorbadjako. He was a good man. My father told me that the landlord had said to him, 'Build the first floor of the house as you wish. You will live there. Then build the second and third floors as I tell you.' And so my father did as instructed. My family occupied three rooms on the first floor of a big house. My father's workshop was also on this floor and he sometimes spent the whole night working there. It was between the children's room and the guests' hall where the piano was. By the way, that piano was unique. My grandfather had bought it for an enormous sum of money at that time. It was a 'Schimmel' and was produced in a German factory, which had made seven pianos and was burnt down with people inside. [The Schimmel piano company was established in 1885 in Leipzig and has been producing ever since.] That happened in the middle of the 1930s. Hitler knew the exact time and place.

My first memories are related to the gramophone with the large horn and a picture of a little dog listening to the 'voice of its master' coming from the horn. [The 'Gramophone dog' has been the Symbol of EMI Records since 1909.] That was the first explanation they gave to me when I started asking questions. When I started going to school, I realized that what was written on the picture was the gramophone brand 'His master's voice.' Ten or twelve years later, when I was in Bulgaria, I learned that these gramophones were also called 'a dog's brand' [a Bulgarian idiom meaning 'shoddily made'], but I didn't understand all the connotations of the phrase yet.

At our home in Salonica there were a lot of records with the same dog on them. They were all opera and symphonic pieces. My sister played the piano. She was seven years older than me and studied music and singing from an early age. I remember that there was music playing at home all the time. Either Caruso [Enrico Caruso (1873-1921): a famous Italian tenor] would be heard from the gramophone or my sister would be singing and playing. Sometimes I would be taken for a walk to the 'White Tower' [Major attraction of Salonica's seaside promenade, built by the Byzantines in the 15th century and the symbol of the city.], in front of which there was a park with an orchestra, which I was told I loved as a child. A number of years later I heard the same orchestra playing the famous overtures by Suppe, 'The Light Cavalry' and 'Peasant and Poet' [Franz von Suppe (1819-1895): a famous Austrian composer and conductor of operettas.] Nobody could foresee that I would become a conductor and those overtures would be part of my concert repertory. The whole operettas haven't been performed in Bulgaria yet. When conducting them, my first memories of listening to them always resurfaced.

My relatives told me that I loved pretending to be a musician when I was a child. Obviously, my parents realized that my interest in music was deep and they bought me various musical toys. The first ones were some small violins. Naturally, I started out by ripping them to pieces to see what was inside. So, my father had to buy me a tin violin, which I couldn't break. And it worked. You could tune up its strings and they played the right tones. I even keep a photo of mine with it: standing on a chair looking as if I'm just starting to play 'Caprice' by Paganini [Nicolo Paganini (1782-1840): a famous Italian virtuoso: violinist and composer]. Probably my parents were influenced by the media, which at that time wrote a lot about an infant prodigy, a violinist from the USA. His name was Yehudi; we had the same names, and so what? Due to the popularity of Yehudi Menuhin [Yehudi Menuhin (1916-1999): one of the greatest violinists of the 20th century] my parents probably thought that I would be the next to play the violin around the whole world. But no! My photo is a total refutation of the proverb 'The morning shows what the day will be.' Never in my childhood did I play anything serious on the violin, let alone Paganini. Well, later, due to certain circumstances I found myself playing many other instruments through a small slender stick, without touching them physically, of course, only emotionally.

After the tin violin I received a lot of other musical children's toys. I had a number of mouth organs. Then I had a real small accordion with eight 'bass' types. With the accordion I grew to like music so much that in 1947 at the First World Youth Festival in Prague [today Czech Republic], a colleague and I recorded on a gramophone Rhapsody 'Vardar' by Pancho Vladigerov [Pancho Vladigerov (1899-1978): a famous Bulgarian composer, musical pedagogue and pianist. Several works of his such as the Bulgarian Rhapsody 'Vardar' are considered to be an emblem of Bulgarian music] in transcription with two accordions. I also have a photo with that accordion when I was seven or eight years old. I'm dressed in white sailor's clothes. At that time I was in the third junior high school grade. At that time in Greece children started school when they were five years old.

Going to school

I was enrolled in the nearest private school of Kiria Deliu. [Kiria means Mrs. in Greek; Kiria Deliu was the owner and the headmistress of the school.] Kiria Deliu remains in my memory as an embodiment of the greatness of ancient Greek goddesses: tall and beautiful like the statues and pictures in our books with fairy tales, which our young teacher read to us so beautifully. I even remember that we started to like certain characters from ancient Greek mythology. I, for example,

admired Heracles, because he overcame a number of snakes in his cradle. We, the children, often argued who was stronger: Heracles or Achilles, who was dipped by his mother in a magic river in order to make him invincible. I also remember that we all loved our first teacher, Kiria Deliu. She always treated us as if she was an older friend. The school had a large yard and she would run after us during the break and play games with us.

I also have another funny memory from my early school period. One day in class we were singing some song. Without realizing what I was doing I had started singing a second part to the song, similar in melody but in another tone. It was different but nice. Suddenly the teacher commanded the kids to stop, turned to me and said, 'Jul, there is no letter as 'zh' in Greek, what are you singing?' [Bulgarian sound, also non-existent in English; it is pronounced similarly to the initial sound of the French 'Jour' (day).] What could I say? I didn't know. I think I blushed. She asked me to go to the blackboard with one of the girls, whom she asked to sing the same song as before. And she asked me to sing what I had been singing before that. And so we did. It was years later when I realized that I had been singing the so popular third part. The teacher was very pleased. She stroked my blond hair and asked me to come with my mother the next day. I don't know what they talked about, but in the evening my parents told me that I would start taking piano lessons with my sister's tutor.

My sister

As I said, my sister, Rene Isak Gershon, was seven years older than me. But before I was born she had another brother, whom I don't remember much, because he died early. His name was Albert Efraim Levi. He was named after our paternal grandfather. My sister was a very gifted woman. She wasn't only charming and beautiful, but also smart, artistic and musical. She also spoke many languages. But she was unfortunate, because when our whole family moved from Salonica to Sofia in 1939, she hadn't completed her secondary education yet. She had been studying in a private French school in Salonica, which was very distinguished. She wanted to become an aero-engineer. When we were banished from Greece for being Bulgarian nationals and went to Bulgaria, she already had a boyfriend: Eliyau Shlomina, a Jew, whom she knew from school. Unfortunately, he stayed in Greece. He joined an illegal partisan group who saved themselves from the Germans by escaping to the Balkans. But they failed: we learned that after 9th September 1944 7, the authorities in Greece caught and executed them. They were all Jews from Salonica.

I remember when in the fall of the fateful year of 1939 my family had just got on the train to Bulgaria, my father noticed a ring on my sister's finger. 'Eli gave it to me,' she said. My father said, 'Do you know what that means?' 'If I hadn't known, I wouldn't have taken it,' she said. It was later that she learned that her boyfriend had been shot. At that time a distinguished Sofia bachelor became close to her. His name was Isak Gershon. Being an 18-year-old Jew, he was mobilized to labor camps [see Forced labor camps in Bulgaria] 8. He escaped twice from his camp, to go to Pazardzhik where my family was interned [see Interment of Jews in Bulgaria] 9 and meet his beloved.

My sister and Isak Gershon had three children. But that happened in Israel where they immigrated during the Mass Aliyah 10 in 1948. Her first child was a girl, but she died when she was one year old. After her she had two boys: Moni Solomon Gershon became a great scientist, aero-engineer. He had a high rank in the Israeli army. Her other son was an electrical engineer. Both of her sons

have their own children now. The elder one has two sons and the younger one has a son and two daughters. One of them is already married and has a child. My sister died two years ago in Haifa [today Israel]. Her husband, Isak Gershon, died before her.

Our first piano teacher was Spanish and came to teach us twice a week. My sister was already quite good. What impressed me most from her piano repertory was a minuet by Paderewski [Ignace Jan Paderewski (1860-1941): a famous Polish virtuoso: pianist and composer]. I knew it well and I could even play it on my mouth organ, because during my sister's lessons I would usually hide behind the door and listen to them. From her vocal repertory I remember most clearly her star number: Juliet's waltz from the opera 'Romeo and Juliet' by Guno [Charles Guno (1818-1893): a French composer]. I also tried it on my mouth organ. When my sister was at school, I would sit at the piano and improvise. Those improvisations must have been strange for the others, because during my first meeting with the Spanish piano teacher when I started showing her what I could do, I don't know what my mother had told her, she cried out, 'No! No! No! I forbid you to play such things. You'll only play what I tell you to!' That was very rude and repulsive. When she went home I started crying. To my terrified parents I said that I didn't want to see that teacher again. I made up a story that my fingers were aching and I couldn't play the piano. After that the teacher taught only my sister and I would once again listen from behind the door. I heard them saying that I was very good at playing.

My relatives in Salonica read a lot, mostly fiction: Mayne Reid, Victor Hugo, etc. My sister and mother read the most in our family. My mother read all the time. Even while she was knitting or doing the housework. I remember very well that we read at home a French newspaper, known as 'the independent newspaper.' It was published in French in Salonica. I can't remember what newspapers we read in Sofia, because I personally don't like newspapers.

As far as I know, though I could be wrong, the Jews in Bulgaria were around 40,000, whereas in Salonica they were around 80,000. I remember that in Greece we, the Jews, gathered mostly at our homes. The typical Jewish occupations were the same as in all the other countries: merchants, craftsmen, workers. The Jewish holidays such as Purim, Pesach and Chanukkah were celebrated the same way in Bulgaria, but more merrily. Let's not forget that both the Bulgarian and Greek Jews are Sephardi. I remember that my favorite holiday was Purim, probably because of its carnival character, the masks that we, the children, put on; we had as much fun as the adults.

I'm not sure of the exact number of synagogues in Salonica while I was there. I only remember the synagogue to which my father took me on Friday evenings. It was large and nice. Naturally, there was a shochet, a chazzan and a rabbi, but I don't remember their names. I remember mostly the shochet, because when I was a child he would slaughter a rooster above my head singing in Ivrit something I couldn't understand. Unfortunately, I can't say on which holiday we performed this ritual, probably Pesach or Yom Kippur. [The interviewee is referring to the kapores ritual of Yom Kippur.] But I was old enough to realize that it was some kind of a sacrifice.

As for the typical market day in Salonica, I could say with pride that I loved markets, probably because my father was the architect of the Salonica Hali [covered market]. While it was being built my father took me with him when he went on 'inspections' after the market closed. I remember how enthusiastically the merchants, who had already settled their goods in front of the unfinished Hali, competed for his attention. Most of them were Jews. Everyone loved him! Their love made me

very happy and proud of my father.

During the War

While growing up I played the piano all the time, every free minute I listened to the gramophone and then tried to play it by ear. I clearly remember that fateful morning at the end of the summer of 1939 when a police officer came to our house and told us that we had to leave Greece within 24 hours, because we were Bulgarian nationals. World War II had just started. We called our father urgently. When he came home we were all flabbergasted. We were given 24 hours to leave all the things we loved: our home, my maternal grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins and many other close friends.

In the morning, on the next day, we all went to the station in Salonica and started hugging each other goodbye. The day was warm and sunny, sad and wonderful at the same time. My sister's classmates from the private French school had come, friends and colleagues of my father's also. But from that day I remember most clearly one extraordinary woman. Her name was Sarika. She looked after us while my sister and I were growing up. 'Governess' sounds too pretentious for her, and 'nanny' sounds too disparaging, because she had become a member of our family. Sarika was of great help to my mother when she was too young to manage everything by herself. When we had to get on the train she could hardly let us go and she was the last to leave the platform, staring at us and crying disconsolately. Probably she anticipated what would happen.

And so we left. I didn't know yet that all these people dear to us would be part of the six million people with tattooed numbers on their hands, who would enter the gas chambers and crematories of Treblinka and Auschwitz [both today Poland]. Innumerable friends of my father's had urged him to reject his Bulgarian citizenship and apply for a Greek one. But he had always said no. He told them, 'I'm Bulgarian, and I have my own country for which I fought for eight years on the battlefront.' It's scary but true that this love of his towards Bulgaria saved us from the concentration camps. We are alive because of it. We are the only ones left from our large Salonica family.

It was as late as fall 1945, on Yom Kippur, in the yard of the Sofia synagogue [see Great Synagogue] 11, when my father heard someone calling him as he was called in Greece: 'Tio Efraim' ['Uncle Efraim']. A distant cousin of my mother's accidentally saw him among the multitude of Jews and recognized him. He was dumbfounded. He hardly recognized her, she had changed a lot. It turned out that she had been traveling with a group of Salonica citizens who had survived Auschwitz. The Soviet troops who entered the camp in 1944 and released them asked them about their home towns and where they would like to go. And they all said 'Salonica.' So an echelon of Jews from various Balkan countries headed for Salonica.

When they arrived at the Sofia station it was Yom Kippur and some of them asked to be taken to the synagogue. She told us that she had been in one shed with my cousin Renika and they remained alive because they were working. When they were released in the commotion my cousin asked where the French were. She spoke French and probably she wanted to speak to someone and understand more about the situation. They showed her and she disappeared in the crowd. Nobody saw her again. When my father heard that he wrote letters to various organizations. They all replied, 'We regret to inform you that we have no information about this person.' Our main hope was in the International Red Cross. But they also couldn't help us.

At the border checkpoint in Svilengrad some people in uniforms rummaged through our luggage, which consisted of four suitcases. It also contained a small bag with all our personal documents: birth certificates, the ketubbah of my parents, my father's degrees and other similar documents. The man in uniform opened it, eyed it suspiciously and passed it to the other officials. The bag disappeared. We never saw it again. And we had to hurry because our train was leaving at any moment.

By the way, an important detail is that thanks to a colleague of my father's from the university in Bucharest, who was Bulgarian, my father received a copy of his degree. When my father told him what had happened at the border checkpoint in Svilengrad, he said, 'Don't worry! Come and see me at the bureau, you'll write it and I'll sign it.' The truth is that thanks to these Bulgarians we survived in the period 1939-1944. In 1942 during the Law for the Protection of the Nation 12 we were interned from Sofia to Pazardzhik and I had to prepare my documents to continue my education in the Jewish school there. But I had no such documents. Fortunately, three good neighbors of ours signed a document saying that they knew our family and I was 'really born.' In this way I received a 'neighborhood certificate,' which I still use.

I also remember something else. On the border checkpoint in Svilengrad the officer who checked the passports asked my father where we were coming from and where we were going. My father said enthusiastically that we were returning to our motherland. Then the officer said flatly, 'You, Jews, have no motherland.' My father's face lost color. 'I'm sorry, but I fought eight years for this country!' he said. The officer said nothing, just stamped the passport and threw it into my father's hands. That's the welcome to Bulgaria that I remember.

From that moment on my father knew what to expect. He was very intuitive. He sat calmly in the compartment. The train had already set off. He was watching the Bulgarian scenery and he was gradually becoming his old self: kind, a little thoughtful, with a great sense of humor and always with a biblical or another quotation at hand. He was silent for a while and then said, 'God is great! All that is done by the Heavens is for our good!' And he was right. After all, we stayed alive.

We reached the Sofia station. My father's family was waiting for us. Uncles, aunts, cousins, welcomed us with hugs, kisses, etc. We got on a cab. That was my first time in one and I sat next to the coachman. We passed over a bridge crossing the smallest and narrowest river I had ever seen and there were four lions on the bridge railings. ['Lion Bridge', located on the main avenue of Sofia, connecting the city center to the station.] Someone told me that they were famous for having no tongues. We turned left past the river, then right and we stopped in front of the house of my eldest paternal uncle. There was a church opposite their house. I heard my cousin say that it was 'St Paraskeva' Church and I concluded that something happened every Friday in it. [The Greek Paraskeyi means Friday.] We were in the center of the capital, on the corner of Tsar Simeon Street and Rakovski Street.

There was a radio in my uncle's house. I remember that in Salonica we once visited some relatives who had bought that miracle of civilization. I must have been five or six years old when I saw for the first time the miracle box, speaking with a human voice. Now, in Sofia, I was already nine years old and I was familiar with it. I was told by my cousins that there was a radio broadcast for a few hours a day and there was a special children's program. By the way, when I came to Bulgaria, my cousins were older than me. Albert Levi-Pepo was also five years older than me, but we were like

brothers. We felt this way ever since we met each other.

I remember that I was greatly impressed by the first children's program that I listened to on the radio. Some man in the box was talking like a hen, a rabbit, and other animals. I didn't understand a word from the story, but its melody, intonation, and the animal sounds imitated, grabbed me. My uncle told me the name of the actor who was telling the children's stories and I still remember it. That was Nikola Balabanov.

After some years when I was working for the National Theater, I could appreciate even better the greatness of his artistic talent. But then, when I first heard the miracle box, I would have never believed that nine years later, I would 'enter' that box.

It was very funny in 1939 when we came to Sofia. I understood nothing of what my cousins were talking, especially in the first days. They spoke the local Spanolit [Ladino]: a language full of Turkish words and variations of Bulgarian words. I found the Bulgarian verbs used in Spanish conjugations the funniest. Something like: 'No razvalees el ezik', which means 'Don't ruin the language!' [The words are Bulgarian (razvale and ezik) with Ladino ending (es) and the grammatical structure is Ladino]. A story was being told as a joke at that time about a Bulgarian Jew who had left a note on the door of his house when he went out: 'El kliuch esta debasho de la chergita' [The Bulgarian words in the sentence are kliuch (key) and chergita (rug with Ladino suffix) while the syntactic structure is Ladino.] or 'The key is right under the rug.' It sounds like a code.

I remember that when we arrived in Bulgaria, we felt that the situation was very tense. An invisible ring was being tightened up around us. Even our first days at my uncle's were worrying. Suddenly, they started talking about smashed shop windows of Jewish shops, death threat notes written on the houses, and similar scary things. I was very scared by them. I had felt the same way in Salonica just before we had left. The first time I felt dizzy with fear was when a group of newspaper boys, running along the main street near us, shouted at the top of their voices, 'Polemos!' In Greek that word means 'war.' I didn't understand the situation then, but the sheer intensity and strength of their shouts and their chaotic intonation made me very scared.

In Sofia, soon after the incidents with the shop windows, we found an apartment for rent on 1 Stara Planina Street. It was only two blocks away from my uncle's house so we only had to transport the four suitcases we had. My father found it very difficult to find work here. I already mentioned that all our documents had been taken away at Svilengrad. He was also a Jew. The Law for the Protection of the Nation was coming into force. And at that extremely difficult moment a helpful Bulgarian gave us a hand. His name was Nikolay Tsvetkov, a distinguished Sofia architect, colleague and friend of my father's from the university in Bucharest. He offered a position to my father in his bureau. So we managed to get on our feet again. At the first opportunity my family bought me a Honer accordion with 80 bass buttons. Now I really appreciate everything my parents did for me and my music at that time in spite of poverty. In fact, music was our psychological support in those days.

In fall 1939 I had to continue my education in Sofia. According to Bulgarian laws I had to enroll in the third grade. I didn't know Bulgarian yet, but I knew French, which was another favorite subject besides music, so they enrolled me in the French College 13. I remember that my first entrance into the new classroom was a very pleasant experience. There was a harmonium in there. Our class teacher, Frere Bernar, played it excellently and we sang to his tunes almost every day. If someone

said a word in Bulgarian he was given a black key. The pupil with the black key had to observe the other students and if someone else said something in Bulgarian, he gave him the insulting key immediately. At the end of the school day the last person to hold the key had to pay a fine, by giving a number of nice pink paper slips with ornaments and a notice ‘Bon point.’ We received them when we answered a complex question very well. Giving back such precious trophies was a great punishment because at the end of every week we received our mark books and the people with the most paper slips and highest marks received medals, of which they were very proud. The pupil who had such a medal went home wearing it on their uniform and on Monday morning the class teacher collected the medals back so that he would give them to other children at the end of the week.

Frere Bernar was my first favorite teacher. We liked him not only because he was very clever and well-read. I will never forget how he told us that all people from all parts of the world and of every nationality, race and faith are all God’s children. He also told us that we all had to live in peace, understanding and love. And he said such things when half of Europe was awash with green uniforms and flags with swastikas. His own homeland, France, had already been run over by foreign tanks, the ones we could also see in Bulgaria. But the words of the Franciscan monk showed no anger or spite. I will never forget how he explained to us what slander was. He said, ‘Imagine holding a pillow and going up to the roof of your house. And there, in anger, you decide to tear it apart. Then, naturally, the wind will disperse it. But soon you will feel remorse and you’ll realize that you’ve done something wrong. And you’ll want to gather back everything that’s been dispersed. But will you be able to do it?’

My class in the French College was international and I liked that. There were Bulgarians, Armenians, Russians, and Jews. I was friendly with everybody. But my best friends at that time were Pepo Arie, his brother Filko Arie, and Bati Rozales, who immigrated to Argentina a long time ago. [Judging by the family names these friends were Jews.] We played on three accordions together. Bati was a piano student of Pancho Vladigerov. A wonderful musician! And Pepo, who went to live in Israel, became chief musical director of the national Israeli radio ‘Kol Israel’ [Hebrew for The Voice of Israel]. By the way, at that time we were all members of UYSU: the United Youth Students’ Union. That was a youth union, in which we discussed art, went on excursions, listened to lectures, etc. We were also UYW 14 members. But at that time we weren’t interested in politics, we were idealists.

My other favorite teacher was Mr. Tsviatko Veselinov, who taught us Bulgarian. I still remember his slender figure. He was the only one with civil clothes among the ‘freres’ who all wore cassocks. I also remember how much he loved his students. There were some teachers, whose aim in life was to prepare their students in the best way. And he was one of them. Thanks to him I grew to love the Bulgarian language and culture. One day during a lesson, Mr. Veselinov asked me to go to the front of the class and asked me a question, which I must have answered well, because he kissed me on the head and said to the class, ‘Have a look at him! He’s been here for a couple of months and already knows Bulgarian!’ Those words made me very proud.

I also remember that at that time my mother went down with a disease. Her blood vessels couldn’t stand the cold and turned blue because her blood had stopped flowing. So, she couldn’t move her arms and legs. That was the main reason why my parents immigrated to Israel. I promised them to immigrate too, but only after I graduated from the Musical Academy. But inadvertently I lied to

them. Another time I upset my parents was when I told my father that I wouldn't become an architect like him. He asked me why all the time and once said, 'Get a degree in architecture and be a composer as well. Be a musician, but have another profession as well!' And I said to him, 'Alright, if you want me to build houses that fall down!' He started crying, he was very upset. And he went to Leon Lazarov, a conductor who was also a Jew and a close friend of my father's. Leon told my father, 'I don't know if your son will become a good architect, but he will definitely become a great musician.' And my father believed him.

The first time I felt anti-Semitism towards me was in my first days in Sofia in fall 1939. The Law for the Protection of the Nation hadn't been adopted yet, but people were talking about anti-Jewish laws to be passed. So, it was no surprise that one morning the shop windows of Jewish shops were all broken and with anti-Semitic slogans painted on them such as 'Death to Jews!' My heart sank. Soon after that, Branniks 15, Legionaries [see Bulgarian Legions] 16 and Otets Paisii 17 members appeared on the streets and chased us to beat us. During the Law for the Protection of the Nation one of them caught me in front of the door of our house, hit me hard a couple of times, swore at me and left.

But to be honest the Otets Paisii members in a way saved our family. That happened in 1942 when we were living in the ghetto. My family was living on Hristo Botev Street and the headquarters of Otets Paisii was in the same building. There was a board on the wall of our house saying that their organization was housed there. The Otets Paisii members treated us better than the Branniks and Legionaries. They only bothered us at night when they were drunk. But the event I'm talking about took place on 24th May 1943 18: the famous demonstration on Klementina Square against the internment of Sofia Jews to the countryside. At that time I went to school with a classmate and friend of mine called Ziko Gratsiani who later became a general in the Israeli army, but I don't know anything else about him.

We were told that there would be a school celebration, because in Bulgaria that date was the day [May 24] 19 of Slavic script and culture. We entered the school but there was nobody there. Then we decided to go home. Suddenly we heard voices, and gunshots. Instead of running away, we stopped and looked around. We were on the corner of Dragoman Blvd, very near the synagogue. And right there at the corner we were stopped by a man. He seemed scared. He told us, 'Run, boys if you live nearby because there will be a blockade!' And so we did. We ran as fast as we could. I learned later that that same day the authorities were going from house to house to take Jews to the labor camps. But they didn't enter our house. The board of the anti-Semitic organization had saved us. But a couple of days later a uniformed police officer came to tell us that in a couple of days we were leaving for Pazardzhik. We had to be interned there.

From the time we spent in Pazardzhik I remember mostly the hunger. I was 13 years old at that time, but I had to work in the local carpenter's factory of the Sotirovi brothers. I gave up my whole day's earning for vegetable soup. It was 30 levs and the soup was 35 levs. I made wooden boxes on a burnisher. I worked as an apprentice. My hands were full of sores all the time and that is a nightmare for a musician. Nevertheless, I learned to play the guitar. A friend of mine, who had also been interned to Pazardzhik, Jecky Levi, taught me. Apart from the factory I also worked in a workshop where I hammered large nail-heads. We were paid according to the work we did. Thanks to that money I could buy some bread. At that time bread was rationed. Everyone was allowed to buy a quarter of a small bread. And they mixed the bread with soil. Yet, I saw a light at the end of

the tunnel. There was a Bulgarian at the bakery where I bought bread, who noticed that I was all skin and bones and gave me some extra bread. Our neighbors, the Chaprazovs, from 1 Stara Planina Street from Sofia, also visited us in Pazardzhik. They came loaded with big bags of food. If it hadn't been for the Bulgarian people, we wouldn't have survived.

There was a curfew during the Law for the Protection of the Nation. Jews were allowed to go out on the street only between 10am and 12pm and we could only walk on specific streets. Those who worked were given passes, saying which streets we could pass and at what time. We weren't allowed to stray from the times and streets on those passes. It was very frightening every evening especially in the fall and winter when it got dark early. On our way we passed the Club of the Branniks. They would wait for us to beat us. We weren't allowed to avoid that street. The Branniks consisted of boys older than us. They thought that they were some kind of heroes. But there was one boy who was in charge of the antiaircraft siren and he was often on that street. Thanks to him I escaped from being beaten a number of times.

I remember clearly the beginning of September 1944. The political prisoners had just been released from the prisons in Pazardzhik. After the power was overturned, the new authorities there organized a militia unit right away. Since they had no clothes to wear they used the rubber anti-gas clothes from a German warehouse. They walked around the town wearing helmets with a red ribbon. They were quite funny and pompous. But still they had authority. They often searched the houses of the rich people. Once they found assault rifles, cartridges and various guns in one of those houses. I remember that the prison in Pazardzhik was in the place of the present-day theater. In the center of the town! I won't forget how hours before 9th September 1944 the political prisoners appeared at the windows and hung down pieces of their clothes on which they had written their claims, mostly 'FREEDOM.'

After the War

My life after 9th September 1944 was very nice. I graduated from high school and was very happy. My first public concert was also at that time. It was a charity concert for the Jewish orphanage in Sofia, which was in great misery. So, I and some boys of my age with whom I played in the school orchestra, put some tickets on sale and we organized a concert. We played the accordion, saxophone and the orphans danced. It all went great.

I never had problems at my work for being a Jew. On the contrary, I have always been respected. I was declared an Honored Artist. I was given the rank of colonel, head of the Army Ensemble. The story of how I became head of the ensemble is interesting. It all started with a personal tragedy. While I was still a student, I suddenly lost my eyesight. It happened on 2nd March 1948. It turned out to be lack of vitamins and milk. I weighed only 44 kilograms then. But I recovered thanks to an incredible woman, Dr. Roza Goleminova. Later the same year, I was already healthy when I met Petar Stupel [a Bulgarian composer] on the stairs of the Musical Academy. He told me to apply for the competition for a composer for the children's radio theater. At that time some distinguished artists worked there: Grisha Ostrovski 20 was the director, Veselin Hanchev 21 was the playwright, and Leda Mileva 22 was the head of the literature department. The poet Alexander Gerov 23 was the editor-in-chief of the literature department. An incredible staff! I was appointed among them and was really honored. Those were great times!

I first met my future wife Sabina Diankova when she was performing with the State Musical Theater. That happened in the 1950s when I was still young and went often to the opera or musical theater. One day I noticed a young girl playing wonderfully in a Soviet musical composed by Nikita Bogoslovski [a Soviet composer, author of film music.]. Sabina made everyone happy when they were around her. I said to myself, 'That is a new phenomenon!' Later, I continued to go and see her play some minor parts. At the same time I was invited to compose some ballet scenes for 'Circus Princess' by Imre Kalman for the Music Theater. [Imre Kalman (1882-1953): famous Hungarian operetta composer. He composed Circus Princess in 1926.] The young circus dancer, Miss Maydel Gypsun, was played by Sabina. She impressed me with her dancing and her resourcefulness, her immaculate diction. At that time I had worked for five years as a composer in the Theater of Satire. [The Aleko Konstantinov Theater of Satire.] Shortly after my work in the Musical Theater we started rehearsing for the first Bulgarian musical: 'The Girl I Loved' by Nikolay Parushev. [This is the first Bulgarian musical staged in the Musical Theater in Sofia in 1963. Composed and conducted by Jul Levi.] I did the music and the conducting. That was in fall 1963. Sabina played the role of Palechko. I was once again impressed by her. Shortly after that we started going out.

Before starting work in the Musical Theater, Sabina had been an excellent student in the Philology Faculty of the Sofia University [see St. Kliment Ohridski University] 24. Then she became a soubrette in the Musical Theater. Before she became a soubrette, she took part in a competition for choir members in the theater, where she was evaluated the highest. When she went to the Ministry of Culture to ask for permission to study extra-murally in the philology faculty the Deputy Minister said, 'You could study extra-murally only if your education had something to do with your job. And you're an actress. The Musical Theater has nothing to do with literature.' So, she gave up her studies in order to stay in the Musical Theater. Then she graduated from the Higher Institute of Theater Arts. She was admitted without any exams to study acting in the class of Mois Beniesh [a famous Bulgarian theater and film director of Jewish origin]. But she continued to work with literature: writing poems and short stories, which she showed to no one. Later, she started publishing her work in the big literary publications such as Puls 25 and others.

We got married in 1963. My wife is a Bulgarian. We married before the registrar and we didn't have a religious wedding. Our daughter Simona was a gift from Heaven to us because both Sabina and I weren't very young. Simona was born on 12th August 1974. From the moment she learned to speak, she started saying everything that came to her mind. She also had an acute sense of logic. I remember a lot of funny stories about her. For example, the first time I took her to the Musical Theater. That was our theater: her mother worked there as an actress, and I as a conductor and composer. I took her to see the children's comic opera 'King Midas has Donkey's Ears' by Parashkev Hadjiev [Parashkev Hadjiev (1912–1992): a famous Bulgarian composer, pedagogue, public figure]. Sabina played the part of Pam: a mischievous man with horns. At the end of the first act Sabina put on a mantle and disappeared. Then there was an interval and after the interval a second act. Suddenly Sabina's head appeared from the curtains of the fore-stage and she shouted, 'Children, do you recognize me?' And they all said, 'Yes!' 'I'm Pam,' she said. But suddenly a voice was heard from our box just above the orchestra, 'No, this is mum!' The whole audience burst into laughter, and the orchestra stopped playing. It was very funny!

I visited Israel for the first time ten years after my parents and my sister's family had emigrated. I saw how the musicians lived there, in misery. I didn't like the atmosphere in Israel. I also saw that

my father, who was a very honest man, could also not stand that atmosphere. I've been to Israel many times since then. I also kept in touch with friends, colleagues and relatives. From my friends and colleagues I mostly kept in touch with Nissim Alshveh, a great musician, and Albert Cohen. From the relatives I kept in touch with my cousin Albert Levi-Pepo, the great poet and painter of Israel. He was born in 1923 and died in 2003 in Haifa. I kept in touch with him all these years.

On the significant date of 10th November 1989 26 I was in Kiev [today Ukraine], where I had a concert. I was a conductor in the big Kiev hall 'Ukraina.' Those halls were called 'interconcerts' in musicians' slang, because they gathered at one place many actors and conductors from all musical theaters of the former Soviet countries together with the local orchestra. So, on 11th November, the morning after the concert my phone rang and woke me up. Some actors and musicians were looking for me to tell me what had happened. 'Maestro, are you ready? Come down quickly!' Me being a conductor my hotel room was one floor above theirs. 'Wait, I can't come, I haven't gotten up yet. I must wash and shave!' I said. But they said, 'You will wash and shave later! It's very important, come down!' So I went down. They all surrounded me and said, 'You have no idea what news we have for you!' 'What?' I asked. 'Todor Zhivkov 27 is no longer in power!' 'You are kidding me!' I answered. So I learned that the previous night one of the dancers had spoken to her mother who had explained to her what had happened.

I had to return to Bulgaria to find out what exactly had happened. To be honest, I was happy. I didn't regret that. Although, especially towards me, Todor Zhivkov had always been nice. He gave me a number of awards. Frankly speaking, he wasn't fit to be a great leader. Otherwise, he was kind and intelligent. He was nice to Jews. Before 9th September 1944 he had even been an actor in the 'blue-shirt theater' of Boyan Danovski 28 and Mois Beniesh. I know that from them both. Still, in spite of the crisis, which followed after 10th November, I don't regret those changes.

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 Expulsion of the Jews from Spain
The Sephardi population of the Balkans originates from the Jews who were expelled from the Iberian peninsula, as a result of the 'Reconquista' in the late 15th century (Spain 1492, and Portugal 1495). The majority of the Sephardim subsequently settled in the territory of the Ottoman Empire, mainly in maritime cities (Salonika, Istanbul, Smyrna, etc.) and also in the ones situated on significant overland trading routes to Central Europe (Bitola, Skopje, and Sarajevo) and to the

Danube (Adrianople, Philipopolis, Sofia, and Vidin).

3 Ladino

otherwise known as Judeo-Spanish, is the spoken and written Hispanic language of Jews of Spanish origin. Ladino did not become a specifically Jewish language until after the expulsion from Spain in 1492 - it was merely the language of their province. It is also known as Judezmo, Dzhudezmo, or Spaniolit. When the Jews were expelled from Spain and Portugal they were cut off from the further development of the language, but they continued to speak it in the communities and countries to which they emigrated. Ladino therefore reflects the grammar and vocabulary of 14th and 15th century Spanish. In Amsterdam, England and Italy, those Jews who continued to speak 'Ladino' were in constant contact with Spain and therefore they basically continued to speak the Castilian Spanish of the time. Ladino was nowhere near as diverse as the various forms of Yiddish, but there were still two different dialects, which corresponded to the different origins of the speakers: 'Oriental' Ladino was spoken in Turkey and Rhodes and reflected Castilian Spanish, whereas 'Western' Ladino was spoken in Greece, Macedonia, Bosnia, Serbia and Romania, and preserved the characteristics of northern Spanish and Portuguese. The vocabulary of Ladino includes hundreds of archaic Spanish words, and also includes many words from different languages: mainly from Hebrew, Arabic, Turkish, Greek, French, and to a lesser extent from Portuguese and Italian. In the Ladino spoken in Israel, several words have been borrowed from Yiddish. For most of its lifetime, Ladino was written in the Hebrew alphabet, in Rashi script, or in Solitro. It was only in the late 19th century that Ladino was ever written using the Latin alphabet. At various times Ladino has been spoken in North Africa, Egypt, Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, France, Israel, and, to a lesser extent, in the United States and Latin America.

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 Second Balkan War (1913)

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

6 Bulgaria in World War I

Bulgaria entered the war in October 1915 on the side of the Central Powers. Its main aim was the revision of the Treaty of Bucharest: the acquisition of Macedonia. Bulgaria quickly overran most of Serbian Macedonia as well as parts of Serbia; in 1916 with German backing it entered Greece (Western Thrace and the hinterlands of Salonika). After Romania surrendered to the Central Powers Bulgaria also recovered Southern Dobrudzha, which had been lost to Romania after the First Balkan War. The Bulgarian advance to Greece was halted after British, French and Serbian troops landed in Salonika, while in the north Romania joined the Allies in 1916. Conditions at the front deteriorated rapidly and political support for the war eroded. The agrarians and socialist workers intensified their antiwar campaigns, and soldier committees were formed in the army. A battle at Dobro Pole brought total retreat, and in ten days the Allies entered Bulgaria. On 29th September 1918 Bulgaria signed an armistice and withdrew from the war. The Treaty of Neuilly (November 1919) imposed by the Allies on Bulgaria, deprived the country of its World War I gains as well as its outlet to the Aegean Sea (Eastern Thrace).

7 9th September 1944

The day of the communist takeover in Bulgaria. In September 1944 the Soviet Union 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.

8 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.

9 Internment of Jews in Bulgaria

Although Jews living in Bulgaria where not deported to concentration camps abroad or to death camps, many were interned to different locations within Bulgaria. In accordance with the Law for the Protection of the Nation, the comprehensive anti-Jewish legislation initiated after the outbreak of WWII, males were sent to forced labor battalions in different locations of the country, and had to engage in hard work. There were plans to deport Bulgarian Jews to Nazi Death Camps, but these plans were not realized. Preparations had been made at certain points along the Danube, such as at Somovit and Lom. In fact, in 1943 the port at Lom was used to deport Jews from Aegean Thrace and from Macedonia, but in the end, the Jews from Bulgaria proper were spared.

10 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.

11 Great Synagogue

Located in the center of Sofia, it is the third largest synagogue in Europe after the ones in Budapest and Amsterdam; it can house more than 1,300 people. It was designed by Austrian architect Grunander in the Moor style. It was opened on 9th September 1909 in the presence of King Ferdinand and Queen Eleonora.

12 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.

13 French College

An elite Catholic college teaching French language and culture and subsidized by the French Carmelites. It was closed in 1944.

14 UYW

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

15 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.

16 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.

17 Otets Paisii All-Bulgarian Union

bearing the name of Otets (Father) Paisii Hilendarski, one of the leaders of the Bulgarian National Revival, the union was established in 1927 in Sofia and existed until 9th September 1944, the communist takeover in Bulgaria. A pro-fascist organization, it advocated the return to national values in a revenge-seeking and chauvinistic way.

18 24th May 1943

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

19 24th May

The day of Slavic script and culture, a national holiday on which Bulgarian culture and writing is celebrated, paying special tribute to Cyril and Methodius, the creators of the first Slavic alphabet, the forerunner of the Cyrillic script.

20 Ostrovski, Grisha Iser (1918)

Bulgarian theater and film director. He worked as actor in the Realistic Theater and the Experienced Theater in Sofia. After World War II he also worked as director in Radio Sofia, the People's Theater, the Youth Theater, the Theater of the Bulgarian Army and the Satire Theater; as an art director of the Varna State Theater and the Sofia theater ‘Salza i Smiah’. He was a teacher and professor in acting and directing in the Higher Institute of Theater Arts in Sofia. Among the numerous plays he directed are works by Shakespeare, Durrenmatt, M. Frisch, V. Petrov, Y. Radichkov. In cinema he directed the movies ‘Deviation’ (script by Blaga Dimitrova), ‘Men on a Business Trip’ (script by L. Stanev), ‘Nona’ (based on a work by Y. Yovkov), ‘The man from La Mancha’ by Vaserman.

21 Hanchev, Veselin Simeonov (1919-1966)

Bulgarian poet. From 1938 until WWII he worked as a literature manager of the newspaer

‘Literaturen Glas’ (Literatarian Voice) and after the war he worked as an editor in Radio Sofia. In 1949 he started work as a playwright for the People's Opera. From 1962 to 1968 he worked as an adviser in culture issues to the Bulgarian embassy in Warsaw and afterwards to the one in Paris. The most prominent of his numerous works are the poem collections ‘Spain on a Cross’ (1937), ‘Poems in cartridge boxes’ (1954), ‘I am alive’ and ‘Selected Lyrics’. He also wrote the popular plays ‘Gold’, ‘Poisoned Bread’, ‘The two and the Death’. He also worked as a translator. One of his most unforgettable translations is ‘Heroic Comedy’ by E. Rostan.

22 Mileva, Leda Geo (1920)

Bulgarian writer, daughter of the Bulgarian expressionist poet-artist Geo Milev. In 1938 she graduated the American College in Sofia and in 1940 – the Institute for Kindergarten Teachers. At the same time – 1938-1940 she studied law in Sofia University. In 1951 she started working in publishing – as head of a literature department in the publishing house ‘Narodna Mladezh’ (People's Youth). In 1952 she worked as editor in chief of the magazine ‘Pionerska Deinost’ (Pioneer Activity) and from 1965 she is once again head of a literature department in the publishing house ‘Balgarski Pisatel’ (Bulgarian Writer). In 1966-67 Leda Mileva was appointed deputy director of the Bulgarian National Television and from 1967 to 1970 she was its director. She worked as permanent representative of Bulgaria to UNESCO (1972-78), deputy chairperson and chairperson of the Bulgarian PEN club (1960-1980), chairperson of the Union of Translators in Bulgaria (1979-1989), member of the board of directors of the Union of Bulgarian Writers. For her written works devoted mostly to children she is included in the honorary list Hans Christian Andersen of the International Council on Children's Books. She has written around 30 books with poems devoted to children. They have been translated and published in France, Germany, Russia, Romania, the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary.

23 Gerov, Alexander (1919-1997)

Bulgarian poet. He graduated law in Sofia University. In 1944 during World War II he was arrested for conspiracy activities. After the end of the war he started work in Radio Sofia where he worked from 1944 to 1952. In 1952 he started work as an editor in the magazine ‘Kinoizkustvo’ (Cinema Art) and then in the newspaper ‘Kooperativno Selo’ (Collective Village). His greatest poem collections include ‘We, the people’ (1942), ‘Two Billion’ (1947), ‘The Best’ (1958), ‘Friends’ (1965), ‘Love Lyrics’ (1983).

24 St

Kliment Ohridski University: The St. Kliment Ohridski university in Sofia was the first school of higher education in Bulgaria. It was founded on 1st October 1888 and this date is considered the birthday of Bulgarian university education. The school is named after St. Kliment, who was a student of Cyril and Methodius, to whom we owe the existence of the Cyrillic alphabet. Kliment and his associate Naum founded several public schools in Ohrid and Preslav in the late 9th century with the full support of King Boris I.

25 Puls

Bulgarian literally and artistic journal, issued by the Central Committee of the Dimitrov Communist

Youth Union from 1963 until 1992. Puls coverd the most important artistic events in Bulgaria as well as abroad. Among its editors were the best Bulgarian poets of the time: Vladimir Bashev, Georgi Strumski, Georgi Svejin, Borislav Bojilov, Borislav Gerontiev.

26 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.

27 Zhivkov, Todor (1911-1998)

First Secretary of the Central Committee of the ruling Bulgarian Communist Party (1954-1989) and the leader of Bulgaria (1971-1989). His 35 years as Bulgaria's ruler made him the longest-serving leader in any of the Soviet-block nations of Eastern Europe. When communist governments across Eastern Europe began to collapse in 1989, the aged Zhivkov resigned from all his posts. He was placed under arrest in January 1990. Zhivkov was convicted of embezzlement in 1992 and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. He was allowed to serve his sentence under house arrest.

28 Danovski, Boyan Ivanov (1899–1976)

Bulgarian writer, theater critic and translator of Jewish origin. He studied engineering and music in Milan and was one of the closest people to the poet Geo Milev. His first publications were translations from Italian and were published in the magazine 'Vezni' (Scales). After it was closed, he worked for the magazine 'Hyperion'. In 1928 he devoted himself to directing and theater activities. In 1932 he established a workers' theater 'People's Stage' and next year he established a theater studio using the method of Stanislavsky. In 1944 he started work as director in chief of the Radio Theater at the People's Opera and the People's Theater 'Ivan Vazov'. In 1945 he founded a theater group in the Jewish community house in Sofia, which included some of the most interesting Bulgarian actors of Jewish origin: Leo Konforti, Leontina Arditi, Luna Davidova etc. From 1957 to 1965 he was director and producer in the Satirical Theater in Sofia. In 1951 he became a professor in acting and teacher in the Higher Institute of Theater Arts in Sofia. In 1965 his first film 'Point One' was produced.