Yako Yakov

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Ruse
Bulgaria
Interviewer: Patricia Nikolova
Date of interview. November 2003-March 2004

Yako Izidor Yakov is an intelligent and careful interlocutor. Although he is of advanced age, 84 years old, he is still active both communally and politically, in a position which he has developed throughout his life. His rank as an officer and colonel – captain of the Bulgarian navy – does not hinder his greatest passion – that of participating in the cultural organizations of the city of Ruse. Although according to Bulgarian law during the communist regime, if someone was a partisan during the events of 1944, he could retire immediately after 9th September (in accordance with the new Constitution of the People's Republic of Bulgaria, promulgated in 1947, and the socialist legislation accompanying it), Yako Yakov insisted on working – first in the Bulgarian navy, then in various cultural departments. He did not graduate from the navy school, rather from the Military-Political School in Sofia, which enabled him to pursue his political career. Nearly 20 years of his life passed as director of two Bulgarian theaters – a puppet and a drama theater.

My ancestors came from Spain 1. I know nothing about my great-great-grandfathers who lived there. I don't know how they dressed, or where they worked, because no one ever told me any stories about their lives. Yet I do have some idea about my grandfathers, who came to the Ottoman Empire. They lived in Odrin [a city in the westernmost part of Turkey]. Then they moved to Bulgaria, and settled in the beautiful city of Ruse, on the Danube coast.

The names of my paternal grandparents are Yako and Sara Samoil. I don't remember them; I've only seen a very interesting photo of them – my grandmother and grandfather in Odrin, both dressed in lavish Turkish clothes. Of course, this doesn't mean they were rich; after all, one could borrow such clothes. They were born between 1865 and 1870.

The names of my maternal grandparents are Mushon and Beya Melamed. They were hospitable and loving people, with a great sense of humor. They had eight children: Robert, Simanto, David, Sharlota, Flora, Estreya, Sofi and Roza, my mother. They spoke Ladino, Romanian, Bulgarian and a little French. They knew Turkish perfectly. Their children also knew these languages. My grandfather alone supported the family. Naturally, they didn't have a cook and a maid. The family had a small shop, in which Mushon Melamed sold vegetables and fodder. My mother's father had some Zionist inclinations, but I don't know if he was a member of any of the Zionist organizations in Ruse.

They lived on the coast of the Danube, in the Bulgarian neighborhood. This was the site of Bulgaria's first meteorological station. They had very nice neighbors. Their friends were Bulgarians and Jews.

I remember that my maternal grandparents had two houses close to one another. In the beginning, Beya and Mushon lived in one of the houses with their sons, and their five daughters lived in the

other. In the house where the boys and their parents lived, there were two rooms and a kitchen. In the other house there were two big rooms. I can't say why the family lived this way. Probably for practical reasons, there were ten of them, after all.

There was a very big veranda, where they placed mattresses and sometimes they all slept outside. They also had a yard with very nice fruit trees. I remember, for example, a big mulberry tree with big fruits. There were also hens. But there was no running water. They didn't have running water in Ruse until the beginning of the 20th century.

Ruse was the largest town at the time of the liberation of Bulgaria 2, with around 32,000 citizens. The Jews numbered between 1,500 and 1,800. Overall, the Jews were not rich then, although there were some who were very rich. There was also a middle class, which consisted of merchants, traveling salesmen and craftsmen. There were also iron mongers, glass makers and tinsmiths.

Ruse was a small town compared to present-day towns. One of the present central boulevards in Ruse was a ‘metirisa,’ which means ‘a ditch around the town’ in Turkish – Ruse was surrounded by a city wall. There are some remains of this wall around today's Military Club in the center of the town. One of the doors still stands at the end of the town. In fact, the city ditch was the town's dump; I, personally, remember people on carts throwing away their rubbish there, because in my childhood, my family lived in the Jewish neighborhood, which was at the end of the town – right on the street near the city ditch. At the same time, transport in Ruse was by carriages, and in the winter it was by sledges decorated with lots of bells, or by carts.

The parades in Ruse took place at the site of the old post office, in the center of town. A memorial to the participants in the First Balkan War 3 and the Second Balkan War 4 in 1912-13 was erected there. The most lavish and interesting military parade I remember was on St. George’s Day 5 – the day celebrating the Bulgarian army. There were two big barracks in Ruse – an infantry and an artillery regiment. We, the children, were very impressed when the cannons of the artillery rolled along the central street of the town. Their horses galloped, throwing sparks and we thought that this was the strongest army in the world. Naturally, after 1st March 1941 when the Germans came to Ruse, we saw their army and we were disappointed by ours.

In the beginning of the last century there were three synagogues in Ruse. I remember them very well – the small Ashkenazi one, the big Sephardi one and the small Sephardi one. We didn't have a rabbi, because he was from Sofia. But we had a chazzan, who was also a shochet. His name was Avram, but we all called him Avramiko. Near the municipality there was a special slaughterhouse, where we brought him hens for slaughtering. Avramiko also went to the town’s slaughterhouse, where he slaughtered the other animals, which according to Jewish tradition had to be kosher.

For us, the children, the holidays in the synagogues were big celebrations. There was a nice yard there, in which we played. Later, at the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s we, the young Jews in Ruse, became atheists under the influence of the leftist ideas of communism. We were involved in illegal activities and escaped from the labor camps to become partisans.

There was a good spirit of tolerance between Bulgarians and Jews in Ruse. Many Turks and Armenians also lived there. Besides, Ruse is a town much visited by foreigners. They were mainly sailors from the port in Ruse. That's why the Nobel laureate writer, Elias Canetti 6, who was born here, said that Ruse was a multi-national town where one could hear all the languages of the world.

When Canetti went to Austria, he wrote, ‘All that I see in Vienna, I have already seen in Ruse.’ So, Ruse was a European town tolerating foreigners – Jews, Turks and Armenians [by foreigners, the interviewee means national, ethnic and religious minorities].

Although they were not the largest ethnic group, the Jews had the strongest presence in every respect: they worked as advisors in the town’s municipality; they also influenced the cultural events in the town. For example, the foundations of the opera in Ruse were laid by the Jewish musical association ‘David’ in the 1930s. The best baritone in the opera in Ruse was the cashier of the Avoda Bank; I don't remember his name.

My father, Isak Yakov Samoilov, was born in 1890 in Ruse. He liked people calling him Izidor. He also loved calling himself Izidor Yakov and all his books at home were stamped with the name ‘Izidor Yakov.’ My father served in the artillery regiment in Ruse as an artillery signaler. He connected the command with the canons and during one bombardment he managed to ensure the connection through a torn cable by biting the two ends of the cable. They gave him a medal of valor for that.

My father had leftist, that is, communist beliefs. His weakness was subscribing to whole literary movements. We had all volumes by Lev Tolstoy 7, including one of the first editions in Bulgarian, Jack London, Maxim Gorky 8, Victor Hugo, Emil Zola, Stendhal and Balzac. [London, Jack (real name John Griffith London) (1876-1916): American writer, best known for works such as ‘The Call of the Wild’ and ‘White Fang.’ Hugo, Victor (1802-1885): French writer, poet and playwright, best known for ‘Les Miserables,’ one of the brightest representatives of progressive romantic literature of the 19th century. Zola, Emile (1840-1902): French writer and critic, leader of the naturalist school. Stendhal (pen name of Marie Henri Beyle) (1783-1842): French novelist and critic, best known for his work ‘The Red and the Black.’ Balzac, Honore dé (1799-1850): French novelist, best known for his masterpiece ‘La Comédie humaine.’]

Many Jews in Ruse, including my father, took part in the wars – the First Balkan War, the Second Balkan War and World War I. My father took part in the last two and is a bearer of a Medal of Valor from the Second Balkan War, in which he fought as a signaler. My uncles were also at the front during World War I – David was a sailor and Simanto was wounded in the leg and was a disabled soldier.

Since my father was a traveling salesman, he couldn't go to the synagogue every Sabbath, but he always went on the Jewish holidays, because his trips in the countryside lasted around a month, a month and a half. There was a mezuzah at home. My father had a tallit and prayer books. When he was absent, my mother was the head of the family. I remember that the members of the Association of Traveling Salesmen organized a ball every year. I eagerly awaited my parents' return from the ball, because they always brought me an orange.

My mother, Roza Mushon Samoilova [nee Melamed], was born in 1895 in Ruse. She has junior high school education, but like my father, she loved reading. By his example my mother was a long subscriber to a women’s magazine – ‘Savings and Household.’ And the literature my father received was so nice that she read all of it. She went from time to time to WIZO 9. She was not one of the activists, she preferred staying at home. As a boy, I was very mischievous and wild. She used to beat me with anything she could get hold of, including the laundry basket.

My father has three sisters: Buka, Estreya and Rashel. Buka is married to someone named Graciani; I don't know his first name; Estreya to Moreno Atias, and Rashel to Isak Melamed. Graciani had a dairy farm and produced milk, Moreno Atias owned the first Bulgarian canning factory and Isak Melamed traded in eggs.

My mother has three brothers and four sisters: Robert, Simanto, David, Sharlota, Flora, Estreya and Sofi. Robert owned a smithery, Simanto owned a mill in the Ruse region, David worked in Romania; he had a business with petrol products, but he went bankrupt. Sharlota, Flora, Estreya and Sofi were housewives. Sharlota married Levi from Dupnitsa and Flora married Epstein.. Estreya married Hason, and Sofi married a Jew from Plovdiv; unfortunately, I don't remember their names.

I don't know exactly how my parents met, but I know for sure that it happened in 1919, the year when my father returned from the front. They married right away and had a religious wedding; there were no civil marriages at that time.

I was born in 1920 in Ruse. I was the eldest of three children in the family and I remember that we spoke only Ladino at home. I didn't have a nanny, because my family was poor. I didn't experience much anti-Semitism in my childhood. I studied first in the local Jewish school, which was private and then in the Bulgarian secular school. I then studied in the Jewish school for 4-5 years, until I finished junior high school. In 1932-33 when I went to the Bulgarian school, I had to repeat one grade. I don't know exactly why, such were the laws then.

In the Jewish school my teacher in Ivrit was Giveret [‘Miss’ in Ivrit] Dina. She came especially from Israel [then Palestine] to teach us, using mainly the Tannakh. The only teacher I hated was in the Bulgarian school, the director Mr Boyadzhiev, who taught us arithmetic and geometry; there was no maths then, but two separate subjects. He was very strict, although he was fair. And yet I hated his subjects. My favorite subjects were history and especially literature, because when I was a child I loved reading Bulgarian literature. I inherited that from my mother – I ran away from school to go to the Hashomer Hatzair club 10 where we had a library and where we went to read fiction. I read a lot the works of Jack London, Maxim Gorky, Upton Sinclair [(1878-1968): American writer of novels and non-fiction], Soviet literature – Sholokhov 11 and others. That was in the 1930s. There was one publishing house, ‘New World,’ a party one, in which many distinguished writers and poets worked. The address for ‘Hashomer Hatzair’ and ‘New World’ was my address. They sent me the catalogues, and then we, the Jewish kids, collected stotinkas [Bulgarian cents] to buy books. We had a decent library.

The market days in Ruse were Tuesday and Friday. There were two markets at the opposite ends of the town. Mostly villagers from the neighboring villages came to sell their produce. I don't think our family had a favorite vendor. By the way, only my mother did the shopping at home. I was not interested in it, although I started working in a shop from an early age, when I was 16 years old. I was hired as a merchant, but I was an errand boy; I did everything, lit the heating stoves, swept the floor, brought parcels from the post office, took parcels to the railway station or the post office etc. When I received my pay, I had to give it to my mother so that she could pay the rent for our apartment. This went on for five years, until 1941, when the Law for the Protection of the Nation 12 was passed and we were forbidden to work.

My two sisters, Sara and Beya, are named after our grandmothers – Sara Yako Samoilova on my father’s side and Beya Mushon Melamed on my mother’s side. Sara was born in 1925 and Beya in

1932. Later they immigrated to Israel with the aliyah in 1949 13. In 1941 when the Holocaust began, I was sent to forced labor camps 14 and knew little about my sisters. Later I became a partisan, after 9th September 1944 15. I was very involved in my job and when they left for Israel I lost contact with them. Sara Izidor Samoilova married someone named Glikman, a Ruse Jew, who was a son of one of the shareholders in 'Shapkarska Industria,' a hat factory that no longer exists. Beya married a Romanian Jew in Israel. His name is Israel Schwarz and he worked in the Israeli army.

At first my family lived in the Jewish neighborhood. I was born there and spent my childhood there. Later we moved to live at the end of the town, opposite 'Shapkarska Industria,' in a rented house. My first home in the Jewish neighborhood was on Vidin Street near Maccabi 16 and very close to the Armenian neighborhood. We, the children, the Armenians and the Jews, often played 'wars' with each other – these were just children's games, we were in fact great friends. I remember that at that time the town was dug over and leveled with carts. We, the Jews, played mostly in Hashomer Hatzair and Maccabi.

Our home on Vidin Street consisted of two rooms and a kitchen. Then in the Bulgarian neighborhood we had two rooms, a bedroom, a hall and a kitchen. There was no difference in our relationship with our Jewish and Bulgarian neighbors. At our second house we shared a yard with our landlords, who were Bulgarians. They lived in a house smaller than ours. My mother got on with them very well, even during the Law for the Protection of the Nation. Our friends and neighbors always supported us.

I was only eight to nine years old, but I clearly remember that 1929-30 was a bad period 17. There was a strong economic stagnation. My father was left without a job, because the company where he worked as a traveling salesman went bankrupt. My mother had never worked. He was also suffering from a stomach ulcer and had to be one of the first people to be operated on for an ulcer in Bulgaria. The operation was performed in Pavlikeni [a town in Northern Bulgaria] by the young Dr. Varkoni. At that time he lived and worked in the town of Pavlikeni. Later he moved to live and work in Sofia. Today there is a medical clinic in the center of Sofia named after him. My father had to pay for the operation and put aside some money for medications. We had to sell some of our furniture to be able to make ends meet.

Our situation started improving only in 1933-34 when my father resumed work as a traveling salesman, and he established his own company. He often went with two briefcases from Ruse to Sofia, where he bought ironware, screws, bolts, latches and hinges. Then he came back to the small towns on the Danube coast to bring them the advances of civilization. At that time households in Europe were already using latches and hinges. There was no electricity and running water in Ruse then. I remember that for most of my childhood my mother cleaned the bottles of the gas lamps regularly. Electricity came to the Jewish neighborhood at the end of the 1930s.

By the way it is known that Ruse was one of the towns with the least water in Bulgaria. There was a special profession – sakkanadzhia ['sakka' means water barrel on wheels in Turkish]. The people went to the Danube, filled their barrels with water and went around the houses to sell it. In every house there was a cone turned upside down made of limestone. The procedure was the following: the cone was filled with the water from the sakkanadzia, the water was filtered through the limestone and poured into a pot placed under the cone. That was how we got drinking water in

Ruse. We used wells for our everyday household needs, but we didn't drink from them. The wells in Ruse were very deep. There were also a lot of dry wells, which were used to keep food cool.

I took an interest in politics from a young age. I was very interested in the elections for the Spiritual Council [traditional mandate elections for the so-called Israelite Spiritual Council for the leadership of the synagogue and the religious community] and in the municipal elections [traditional mandate elections for the chairman of the Jewish municipality]. I was around eleven to twelve years old when I started taking interest in these things. At that time I was a Hashomer Hatzair member. The so-called General Zionists 18 were dominant then. Their youth organization was Maccabi. All well-off Jews were from the General Zionists who had one dream: Palestine. Although this was their dreamed land, nobody dared to go there. Their power was not in their deeds, but in their ideas.

The left party Poalei Zion 19 included the poorer people. Poalei Zion was a social democratic party at that time. There were continuous scuffles between the General Zionists and Poalei Zion in all kinds of elections. The other youth organization was Hashomer Hatzair, which was more left-oriented than Poalei Zion, meaning that it was more influenced by the ideas of communism, social equality and justice. I was one of its activists. There was another small group, Betar 20, which was a pro-fascist organization.

Almost all of my childhood friends have passed away. Among my closest friends were Izidor Ayzner and Ariko Haimov. I worked together with Ayzner in a shop and in 1939 we established the UYW organization 21 of the Jewish neighborhood in Ruse. Ariko Haimov and I tried to escape from Bulgaria. We boarded the ship of Anton Prutkin, who was commander of Sofia during the government of Alexander Stamboliiski 22. On 1st March 1941 we had to sail on his ship and he had to take us to Turkey or Cyprus. But on 1st March the Germans entered Bulgaria.

Anton Prutkin was a very interesting person. He was very honorable and returned to us the money we had given him for fuel when he learned that we would not be able to set off. He was imprisoned for political activities, then he went to Varna where he worked as a ship owner. But he was hanged there as a spy in 1944, because he was caught handing over materials to the Soviet intelligence.

During our free time my friends and I were involved in illegal activities in Ruse; all the more important anti-fascist activities in Ruse were organized and performed with our participation. As I mentioned I was one of the activists together with Izidor Ayzner. He worked for the cause in Maccabi and I in Hashomer Hatzair. At that time we became atheists.

After 1944 Ruse became modern in every respect. There were metallurgical factories, a weaving factory, a silk factory, a factory for iron works, for tobacco, one of the first factories for bricks and roof-tiles. Today the majority of these factories have been closed down. Only eight survived, which preserved the names and, partly, their area of work. They are: Yuta, Megahim, Zhiti, Fazan, Dunavska Koprina, Arda, Trud and Dunarit.

Yuta was a factory producing jute sacks. Megahim was the factory owned by Iskovich-Levi, producing paints. Zhiti was a factory and a shareholders' company for iron and wire products. Its biggest shareholder and director is Avram Ventura. Fazan preserved its name and activity while Dunavska Koprina preserved only its name. Arda was a shirt factory. Under a decision by the Politburo [of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party] the production of shirts was moved to Vidin and the present-day Vidin shirts are in fact heirs of the Arda factory. Today, Arda

has started producing ladies’ clothes. Trud was a factory producing bricks, paving stones and roof-tiles. Dunarit produced gunpowder explosives for shattering rocks, which still exists today.

The first time I got on a train was when the Law for the Protection of the Nation was passed and I was fired from my work as a merchant. Some months later I was sent to a labor camp. My first labor camp was near the village of Chepino in Kara Tepe [‘black hill’ in Turkish] village. We made an illegal UYW organization in the camp. Then I was in a labor camp in Tryavna. In 1942, a week after I returned from the camp in Tryavna, two policemen and three guards came to our house and started taking all our possessions outside. The table was laid for dinner, the burning stove was still on. It was a cold November day. But the house was not ours, we had rented it. During the Law for the Protection of the Nation it was given to the driver of the German consul. But our possessions were untouched. We managed to keep some of it in the basement, leaving other possessions at our neighbors'.

We were given two rooms to live in at my uncle Moreno Atias' Can Factory. We put the rest of our luggage there. We had a folding table, we put a mattress on it and used it as a bed in the evening. The rooms had been used to store cans before that and smelled very bad. When the interned Jews from Sofia came my parents brought four people to live with us: my aunt Flora, my uncle Isak and their two daughters, Matilda and Beya. We lived in the factory until 1949 when my relatives left for Israel.

In 1943 I was sent to a third camp. I continued the illegal activities there. But we failed, because of a very good friend of mine, who made me escape from the camp. Marko Behar and the doctor, whose name I don't remember, gave me the address of Angel Vagenshtain 23 in Blagoevgrad. We went to their place. His mother didn't know why we were looking for him and told us that he was not at home and he would not come back.

We were four boys, having just escaped from the camp to become partisans: Miko Yulzari from Ruse, Miko Israel from Sofia, I and one boy from Lom, whose real name I don't know, but his partisan name was Gosho. We walked along the main street of Gorna Dzhumaya and suddenly the boy from Lom said, ‘That girl across the street is one of our girls, I remember her.’ We caught up with her and violated all rules of conspiracy; we told her we had escaped from the camp and wanted to get in touch with the partisans. She told us, ‘You, boys, are very lucky. On Friday Dzheki [Angel Vagenshtain] became a partisan. He is not coming back. I have replaced him and you met the right person!’ It was like in the movies!

She took us back to Vagenshtain's house, his mother welcomed us, gave us food and we spent the night there. Then she took us to a boy at the end of the town, in a vineyard. An old woman, Gina, and her two daughters hid us in a hole and we, the four of us, spent 28 days in that hole. This woman brought us food all that time. Well, the UYW organization also helped us, gave us bread. They knew that the four of us were waiting to be contacted by the partisans. On the 28th day the political commissioner of the Gorna Dzhumaya partisan team came and together with him we crossed the Struma River on foot.

Our fate after we escaped from the camp was the following: Gosho died, Miko Yulzari immigrated to Israel and became a merchant, but he was not successful and he committed suicide; Miko Israel taught Russian for many years in Gorna Dzhumaya and I returned to Ruse. I spent part of my life in the army in Varna as a fleet officer, and my rank is colonel, captain.

My fate after 9th September 1944 was interesting. In 1944-46 I worked as an organizer in the District Committee of the UYW in Ruse. In 1946 I led the first permanent brigade 24 of Samuil-Silistra. At that time young people came to work for free on the road Samuil-Silistra for 20 days and I was their leader. The following year I became a commander; after I finished a course for brigade commanders in Beli Bryag.

Then my team became the national champions of Pernik-Voluyak [The construction of the path between Pernik and Voluyak was done by a number of youth brigades, who competed with each other in terms of quality and speed.] Afterwards I was asked to go to Sofia where I was appointed at first as an inspector and then as head of the ‘Competitions and Awards’ department in the headquarters of the brigadiers [the competitions were labor ones]. Around 400,000 youths took part in the brigades in 1947. Our team was a national champion again [competing with five national teams]. Our prize was a red flag with the words ‘national champion’ and a parade in front of the National Assembly [on Georgi Dimitrov Blvd] in Sofia.

At the end of 1947 I was assigned to go to the army. I went there, passed a course for political officers and was appointed to the headquarters of the Ist army in Sofia. The political officer's job is to be in charge of the moral and political preparation of the soldiers and officers. Said in ‘Soviet’ style, this is a commissar – at that time we copied the Soviet army, like we copy the American one now. There was one political officer in every battalion and on every ship. We had to be familiar with military science and know as much as the officers who had graduated from staff colleges and we also had to prepare the servicemen entrusted to us both morally and politically.

There were two headcount reductions in the Bulgarian army after the signing of the peace agreement with the UN powers. The first reduction was done in 1956 or 1957 and the second in 1958. I was affected by the second one. I decided to ask to be released from the army, because I had worked enough years, which together with the years of work experience awarded by the state for being a partisan, were enough for me to retire. So I was in the so-called 'first category of labor.'

During totalitarianism in Bulgaria this category included officers, miners, submarine operators etc., all of whom retired after 15 years of work. The so-called 'second category of labor' included employees of the Bulgarian Interior Ministry and other state departments, who had to have 18 to 20 years of work experience to retire. The third category included all the others, who had to have 25 years of work experience. Today retirement is done in accordance with new regulations, because the previous categories were rejected. Yet I did not want to stop working, because I was still young. So I said I would agree to retire if they found me work in Ruse. And they did.

I first worked in the District Committee of the Party as head of the Culture department in 1958, right after I returned from Varna. I was in charge of the cultural institutes and the bigger cultural events. But I didn't get along well with the propaganda secretary Petko Yordanov. He wanted me to send the drama and opera actors in the villages to lead amateur groups in the community houses, without paying for their transport or for decent accommodation, expecting them to stay in the municipalities' miserable bedrooms. I was against that. So he said, ‘It seems that I cannot work with comrade Yakov.’ I answered, ‘It's not a big deal. There is plenty of work to be done elsewhere.’ But nobody could fire me, because partisans could leave work only on their own accord. So I didn't leave. But he played a cunning trick – he discharged my position for one year. No position – no problem. But I was offered many other positions.

So in 1959 I agreed to become deputy director of the Drama Theater. Of course, I am no theater specialist, but thanks to my experience as head of the 'Cultural Institutions' department in Ruse, I started working in the management of the theater. The director of the theater was Alexander Bechev. The puppet theater in Ruse had to become a state one, that is, it had to be turned from an amateur one at the Home of Transport Workers to an official branch of the Drama Theater. As deputy director I insisted a lot for us to have such a branch, because I grew to love theater, in contrast to Alexander Bechev. He was also not a theater specialist, but he was appointed by a party decision. And he told me, ‘If you insist so much on us having a puppet theater, then you will be chairman of the art council of the branch.’ So, on 15th February 1960 I signed the appointment orders of eleven people, who founded the Puppet Theater in Ruse. After some time I was appointed secretary of the Regional Community House Council, but only for a year, because I wanted to go back to the Puppet Theater.

In 1961-62 a national review of puppet theaters was organized in Sofia. During the review there was only one theater about whose professional qualities doubts were voiced, and that was the one in Ruse. I got worried. At that time I was party secretary of the theater, deputy director and chairman of the art council. So we decided to take serious measures. I managed to convince Petar Alexandrov, one of the distinguished actors in Ruse, to come work with us. He came from the theater in Stara Zagora where he played after he graduated from VITIZ [Higher Institute of Theatrical Art, the former name of the National Academy for Theater and Film Arts]. He agreed to prepare to become stage manager in the puppet theater. We sent him to Czechoslovakia for half a year, then to Leningrad for two to three months to learn the craft. When he came back, the director of the Puppet Theater Nikola Krastev was dismissed and I was appointed in his place. I do not remember the year exactly, but by 1980 I was twice director of the Puppet Theater.

My wife’s name is Nadezhda Alexandrova Yakova, nee Gavrilenko. She is half-Bulgarian, half-Ukrainian. We met at a party; she was a gymnast and I was impressed by her beauty. Her parents and my parents were against our marriage, so she eloped from her family and came to be with me in Sofia where I was an officer. We had a civil marriage on 22nd December 1947 in Ruse.

When we returned to Ruse my wife worked as an advertising organizer in the Ruse branch of the ‘Bulgarian Photography’ state company. Then she worked in the ‘Cultural Recreation’ department of the municipality for more than 20 years. My wife was also politically active, that was the main reason she worked on this job.

We have one son – Plamen Yako Yakov, who has two children. At the moment my son is chairman of the Regional Shalom Organization 25 in Ruse. His mother raised him to feel Jewish, and he feels Jewish more than I do. And she raised her grandchildren in this way, too. My granddaughter Nadezhda, who is 26, lives with her husband on a kibbutz in Israel. She graduated in some fashionable economic specialty in the Economic Institute in the town of Svishtov, where my son and his wife studied. Plamen graduated from there majoring in ‘Finance and Credit.’ My two grandchildren studied there, too.

My other grandchild Kaloyan was born in 1980. He is now in the USA. He went as a brigadier [these are young people, typically university students who go in teams abroad during their summer holiday to do seasonal work, mostly in agriculture]. He applied to study in the university in Santa Monica, near Hollywood, where he lives and works to pay for his studies. He is studying some

fashionable specialty related to computers; I don't know its name.

I didn't immigrate to Israel because of the values of communism. After all, I was one of the distinguished members of the Party here. In the 1950s I was not allowed to see my relatives who left with the big aliyah to Israel in 1949. So I went there only once – in 1988 on the 40th anniversary of the establishment of Israel as a chairman of the philatelic association in Ruse. This was the fulfillment of a dream for me. I grew up with the desire to go to Israel. I was impressed by the civilization level of the state of Israel.

After 10th November 1989 26 I retired and I have been working part-time as an assistant, as a director of the Home of Culture; I was also director of the trade unions in Ruse. We have organized some very interesting events. For example, for the past 20 years I have invited around 40 writers to meet with their readers here. The goal is to make people turn to books, and not only watch TV, but to read and meet the writers instead. I have received aid from the Joint 27 and from Switzerland. But I think that the events from 10th November were absolutely devastating. I am speaking of lost ideas, unrealized dreams, people losing their way. My feelings are shared by the majority of the Jewish community in Ruse.

Glossary

1 The expulsion of the Jews (Sephardim) from Spain
In the 13th century, after a period of stimulating spiritual and cultural life, the economic development and wide-range internal autonomy obtained by the Jewish communities in the previous centuries was curtailed by anti-Jewish repression emerging from under the aegis of the Dominican and the Franciscan orders. There were more and more false blood libels, and the polemics, which were opportunities for interchange of views between the Christian and the Jewish intellectuals before, gradually condemned the Jews more and more, and the middle class in the rising started to be hostile with the competitor. The Jews were gradually marginalized. Following the pogrom of Seville in 1391, thousands of Jews were massacred throughout Spain, women and children were sold as slaves, and synagogues were transformed into churches. Many Jews were forced to leave their faith. About 100,000 Jews were forcibly converted between 1391 and 1412. The Spanish Inquisition began to operate in 1481 with the aim of exterminating the supposed heresy of new Christians, who were accused of secretly practicing the Jewish faith. In 1492 a royal order was issued to expel resisting Jews in the hope that if old co-religionists would be removed new Christians would be strengthened in their faith. At the end of July 1492 even the last Jews left Spain, who openly professed their faith. The number of the displaced is estimated to lie between 100,000-150,000. (Source: Jean-Christophe Attias - Esther Benbassa: Dictionnaire de civilisation juive, Paris, 1997)

2 Liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman rule
Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire in early 1877 in order to secure the Mediterranean trade routes. The Russian troops, with enthusiastic and massive participation of the Bulgarians, soon occupied all of Bulgaria and reached Istanbul, and Russia dictated the Treaty of San Stefano in 1878. This provided for an autonomous Bulgarian state, under Russian protection, bordering the Black and Aegean seas. Britain and Austria-Hungary, fearing that the new state would extend

Russian influence too far into the Balkans, exerted strong diplomatic pressure, which resulted in the Treaty of Berlin in the same year. According to this treaty, the newly established Bulgaria became much smaller than what was decreed by the Treaty of San Stefano, and large populations of Bulgarians remained outside the new frontiers (in Macedonia, Eastern Rumelia, and Thrace), which caused resentment that endured well into the 20th century.

3 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 30th May 1913 with the Treaty of London, which gave most of European Turkey to the allies and also created the Albanian state.

4 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.

5 St

George Day: 6th May, the day of the Orthodox saint St. George the Victorious, a public holiday in Bulgaria. According to Bulgarian tradition the old cattle-breeding year finishes and the new one starts on St. George's Day. This is the greatest spring holiday and it is also the official holiday of the Bulgarian Army. In all Bulgarian towns with military garrisons, a parade is organized and a blessing is bestowed on the army.

6 Canetti, Elias (1905-1994)

Born to a family of Sephardi Jews in Bulgaria, Canetti immigrated to England with his family at the age of 6. After his father's death he moved to Vienna, lived and studied in Austria, Germany and Switzerland and earned his doctorate in chemistry from the University of Vienna in 1929. In 1938 he moved to France and later to England. His first and only novel was 'Die Blendung,' published in 1935 (tr. Tower of Babel, 1947). In 1960 he completed the non-fiction masterwork 'Masse und Macht' (tr. Crowds and Power, 1962). Canetti's work defies national categorization, is original and extremely attentive to sounds and meanings of language. In 1981 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, the first Bulgarian to be so honored.

7 Tolstoy, Lev Nikolayevich (1828-1910)
Russian novelist and moral philosopher, who holds an important place in his country's cultural history as an ethical philosopher and religious reformer. Tolstoy, alongside Dostoyevsky, made the realistic novel a literary genre, ranking in importance with classical Greek tragedy and Elizabethan drama. He is best known for his novels, including War and Peace, Anna Karenina and The Death of Ivan Ilyich, but also wrote short stories and essays and plays. Tolstoy took part in the Crimean War and his stories based one the defense of Sevastopol, known as Sevastopol Sketches, made him famous and opened St. Petersburg's literary circles to him. His main interest lay in working out his religious and philosophical ideas. He condemned capitalism and private property and was a fearless critic, which finally resulted in his excommunication from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1901. His views regarding the evil of private property gradually estranged him from his wife, Yasnaya Polyana, and children, except for his daughter Alexandra, and he finally left them in 1910. He died on his way to a monastery at the railway junction of Astapovo.

8 Gorky, Maxim (born Alexei Peshkov) (1868-1936)
Russian writer, publicist and revolutionary.

9 WIZO
Women's International Zionist Organization, founded in London in 1920 with humanitarian purposes aiming at supporting Jewish women all over the world in the field of education, economics, science and culture. A network of health, social and educational institutions was created in Palestine between 1921 and 1933, along with numerous local groups worldwide. After WWII its office was moved to Tel Aviv. WIZO became an advisory organ to the UN after WWII (similar to UNICEF or ECOSOC). Today it operates on a voluntary basis, as a party-neutral, non-profit organization, with about 250,000 members in 50 countries (2003).

10 Hashomer Hatzair
('The Young Watchman') Left-wing Zionist youth organization, which started in Poland in 1912 and managed to gather supporters from all over Europe. Their goal was to educate the youth in the Zionist mentality and to prepare them to immigrate to Palestine. To achieve this goal they paid special attention to the so-called shomer-movement (boy scout education) and supported the re-stratification of the Jewish society. They operated several agricultural and industrial training grounds (the so-called chalutz grounds) to train those who wanted to immigrate. In Transylvania the first Hashomer Hatzair groups were established in the 1920s. During World War II, members of the Hashomer Hatzair were leading active resistance against German forces, in ghettoes and concentration camps. After the war, Hashomer Hatzair was active in 'illegal' immigration to Palestine.

11 Sholokhov, Mikhail Aleksandrovich (1905-1984)
Russian novelist, whose multi-volume novel The Quiet Don is considered one of the most important literary works published since the Revolution of 1917. This masterpiece depicts the conflicting

loyalties among the Don Cossacks during the Revolution and sold millions of copies in Russia and abroad. Sholokhov was elected to the Supreme Soviet, the legislative body of the nation and received the Order of Lenin in 1929. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1965.

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 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.

14 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.

15 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.

16 Maccabi World Union: International Jewish sports organization whose origins go back to the end

of the 19th century. A growing number of young Eastern European Jews involved in Zionism felt that one essential prerequisite of the establishment of a national home in Palestine was the improvement of the physical condition and training of ghetto youth. In order to achieve this, gymnastics clubs were founded in many Eastern and Central European countries, which later came to be called Maccabi. The movement soon spread to more countries in Europe and to Palestine. The World Maccabi Union was formed in 1921. In less than two decades its membership was estimated at 200,000 with branches located in most countries of Europe and in Palestine, Australia, South America, South Africa, etc.

17 Crises of the 1930s

The world economic crisis that began in 1929 devastated the Bulgarian economy. The social tensions of the 1920s were exacerbated when 200,000 workers lost their jobs, prices fell by 50 percent, dozens of companies went bankrupt, and per capita income among peasants dropped by 50 percent between 1929 and 1933.

18 General Zionism

General Zionism was initially the term used for all members of the Zionist Organization who had not joined a specific faction or party. Over the years, the General Zionists, too, created ideological institutions and their own organization was established in 1922. The precepts of the General Zionists included Basle-style Zionism free of ideological embellishments and the primacy of Zionism over any class, party, or personal interest. This party, in its many metamorphoses, championed causes such as the encouragement of private initiative and protection of middle-class rights. In 1931, the General Zionists split into Factions A and B as a result of disagreements over issues of concern in Palestine: social affairs, economic matters, the attitude toward the General Federation of Jewish Labor, etc. In 1945, the factions reunited. Most of Israel's liberal movements and parties were formed under the inspiration of the General Zionists and reflect mergers in and secessions from this movement.

19 Poalei Zion

Leftist Zionist movement, founded in the late 19th century in Russia that combined Zionism with Socialism. The early Poalei Zion found its expression in the organization of trade unions, mutual aid societies, and Zionist groups of workers, clerks and salesmen. These groups emphasized the need for democracy within the Jewish community. The Austro-Hungarian branch of Poalei Zion differed markedly from the Russian one. Its ideologists maintained that the Zionist movement was an expression of the entire Jewish people and transcended class interests. It maintained that the position of the Jewish worker and commercial employee was different from that of the non-Jew, since the Jew had to face both exploitation and discrimination at the same time. It warned the Jewish workers against following the teachings of the Social Democrats in Austria-Hungary who denied this fact. It negated the socialist solution unless it were combined with a Jewish autonomous territory. Instead it stressed the need for the conscious direction of the migration of the Jewish masses to Palestine. The Poalei Zion groups in other countries followed in their ideology either the Russian or the Austrian models. Poalei Zion in Romania and Bulgaria adhered to the Austrian school. In 1907 a Word Union of Poalei Zion was founded. In 1920 the movement split over the attitude toward the Socialist and Communist Internationals, the Zionist Organization, and the place

to be accorded to the movement's activities in Erez Israel. Left Poalei Zion sought unconditional affiliation with the Third International (Comintern); by 1924 it had abandoned this attempt and reorganized itself on an independent basis. The other faction, the Right Poalei Zion, merged in 1925 with the Zionist Socialists.

20 Betar in Bulgaria

Brith Trumpledor (Hebrew) meaning Trumpledor Society; right-wing Revisionist Jewish youth movement. It was founded in 1923 in Riga by Vladimir Jabotinsky, in memory of J. Trumpledor, one of the first fighters to be killed in Palestine, and the fortress Betar, which was heroically defended for many months during the Bar Kohba uprising. Its aim was to propagate the program of the revisionists and prepare young people to fight and live in Palestine. It organized emigration through both legal and illegal channels. It was a paramilitary organization; its members wore uniforms. They supported the idea to create a Jewish legion in order to liberate Palestine. From 1936-39 the popularity of Betar diminished. During WWII many of its members formed guerrilla groups. In Bulgaria the organization started publishing its newspaper in 1934.

21 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.

22 Stamboliiski, Alexander (1879-1923)

Leader of the Bulgarian Agrarian Union and prime minister of Bulgaria. He studied in Germany and founded the Agrarian Union in 1899. He became a Member of Parliament in 1908. Stamboliiski maintained anti-war activities during World War I. After the war he held various posts in ministries, and in 1920 he headed the agrarian government and was also Minister of Foreign Affairs and Religions; Minister of Trade, Industry and Labor. As prime minister Stamboliiski was forced to sign the Treaty of Neuilly as part of the Paris peace treaty after World War I, which was a hard blow to Bulgaria. Besides the great territorial losses Bulgaria was placed in international isolation. In order to bring the country back out of it and stabilize its international situation Alexander Stamboliiski made intensive diplomatic efforts in a number of European states and introduced extensive land reforms in the country. On 9th June 1923 the officers' organization 'Military Alliance' performed a coup d'etat. Stamboliiski tried to organize a counter coup d'etat, but failed; he was captured by the participants in the coup and brutally murdered.

23 Vagenshtain, Angel (b

1922): A classic of Bulgarian cinema. He graduated in cinema dramaturgy from the Russian State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow. Author of some 50 scripts for feature, documentary and animation films, as well as of novels published in Bulgaria, France, Germany, Russia, and the USA. Since 1950 he has worked in Bulgarian and East German cinematography. His 1959 film

'Stars,' dedicated to the fate of Jews in WWII, and directed by Konrad Wolf, won the Special Prize of the jury at the 59th Cannes International Film Festival. Among Vagenshtain's most famous films as a scriptwriter are: 'Amendment to the Law for the Defense of the Nation,' 'Goya,' 'Stars In Her Hair, Tears In Her Eyes,' 'Boris I,' etc.

24 Brigades

A form of socially useful labor, typical of communist times. Brigades were usually teams of young people who were assembled by the authorities to build new towns, roads, industrial plants, bridges, dams, etc. as well as for fruit-gathering, harvesting, etc. This labor, which would normally be classified as very hard, was unpaid. It was voluntary and, especially in the beginning, had a romantic ring for many young people. The town of Dimitrovgrad, named after Georgi Dimitrov - the leader of the Communist Party - was built entirely in this way.

25 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.

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 Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee)

The Joint was formed in 1914 with the fusion of three American Jewish committees of assistance, 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 cultural amenities and brought 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 Europe and from 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.