Sofi Uziel

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Sofia
Bulgaria
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Family background

We, Jews, have come from Spain. All Bulgarian Jews come from Spain. [see Expulsion of the Jews from Spain] 1

My maternal grandfather, Nissim Benaroya, wore a beard and moustache. He was a very hot-tempered person and he dispersed the family. As far as I know his father was a rabbi in Vidin. But my grandfather dispersed his children. My grandmother, Rebecca Benaroya, was a feeble person and did whatever he said. She used to dress like town folks, but there was nothing special in her clothing. I remember her being dressed only in black.

I don’t know what their life was like in Vidin. I only know that they had a housemaid. But when they came to live in Sofia, my mother bought beds and tables for them. They occupied a room and a kitchen. They only went to the synagogue on high holidays. They celebrated Pesach, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah and Sukkot. They used to cook according to tradition – meals, which were cooked then. On Pesach they had matzah and Boyo [Boyo is a large flat loaf without yeast]. My grandmother and my grandfather were very strict. They lived on Czar Boris I Street. My mother had found accommodation for them nearby because our house was very small – we were three children and there was a sick man in the house, my father. Later on, when my grandfather Nissim died, my mother took my grandmother to our home to look after her. I was very little then – five or six.

Growing up

My father, Haim Nissim Benaroya, knew seven languages. He was a corn-merchant – he used to purchase grain from Kiustendja and sold it in Europe. As a soldier during World War I he had been very badly wounded and had lost one hundred percent of his working capacity. He was ashamed to be among people because he wasn’t able to move at all. We were very lonely. Only my aunt, Sofi Benaroya – she was gassed in the death camp during the Holocaust – who loved me very much, helped me. If it hadn’t been for her, I would have never obtained even a secondary education. My aunt Sofi lived in France, but she used to send me parcels and money, which considerably helped me to finish school.

My mother was a manlike, hard-working woman. Life made her such. My mother's brother Avram – he was my mother's benefactor – opened a grocery on the corner of Positano Street and Sredna Gora Street. There my mother achieved her proficiency in calculating and in reading Bulgarian. At that time marriages among young people weren't a love-match. Parents used to do the matchmaking. Thus my mother's brother Avram arranged the marriage between my parents. They had a religious marriage in March, 15 days before my father went to war, but I don't know the year.

I have two brothers: Nissim Benaroya, born in 1915, and Rafael Benaroya, born in 1928. Rafael used to work for the Boyana Film Center and Nissim was a hat maker. After he went to Israel, Nissim worked as builder.

We were a very close family. My mother was a great woman! No woman would stand living without a man for such a long time, without going for a walk, without getting dressed up to go out. She only knew home, home, home... She knew nothing else, poor thing.

My parents weren't members of any political party, but they were progressive people. I was brought up with Judaism. My parents were more religious than I am. Very little was spoken about religion at home, but my mother observed traditions. I remember that when Fridays came there had to be cooked meals for Saturdays and Sundays – that was our tradition. My mother used to send me to the synagogue to have the chickens ritually slaughtered – I was dying from sorrow for them, but had to go to do the job. Here, where the apartment block is now, there used to be a Jewish house. We used to get together there for Pesach and for the Jewish holidays. There were ten to twelve Jewish families then. My favorite holiday was Pesach because the children of all families used to get together and have a romp.

I started working at the age of six. I used to work in my spare time when I finished my homework and sometimes I went on working till midnight. We had a small grocery here, on the corner. We lived on the income from that grocery and on my father's invalid pension.

We lived in the district where the families of the invalids lived. My mother told me that in 1922, when she was pregnant with me, she had to take on the whole workload – for the house, for getting things done. My mother used to bring supplies for the grocery. Every day she went to get whatever was needed in the shop – eight to ten kilos of sugar, etc. I used to stay in the grocery. I was very industrious. At the age of six I already knew how to weigh sugar and rice and constantly cried our wares: 'Grapes!', 'Fresh watermelons!'. What could one do – we had to eat! We lived poorly, but we never complained. We were never hungry nor without shoes or clothes. We were always very well dressed; my mother insisted on that. She used to chase us with a glass of milk and wouldn't let us go until we had drunk it all. I never learned kids' games because I had no opportunity to do so. Whenever children came [to the shop] for a candy, they stayed to play with me for a while because I had to look after the shop.

My parents were neither rich, nor poor. Initially our house was a grocery, then my mother turned it into a living room, where my mother, my younger brother and I used to live. We had a small kitchen, too. My brother Nissim got married in 1940 and he occupied the other room. Those were big, huge rooms for that time. We always had water and electricity. We also had a summer kitchen, where we used to cook. From spring to fall we used to look after pullets, which we killed and had as a meal.

There was a woman who used to come once a week to help my mother clean the house and do the washing. We had both religious and secular books. My mother had no time for reading – the poor woman had three children and a sick man to look after. But newspapers were read every day. I subscribed to a daily newspaper called Parents and Children.

We, the children, spoke Bulgarian and Ladino, but when my mother and father wanted to say something secretly to each other, they spoke Greek or Turkish. As a little girl my mother had lived in Anatolia, in Turkey, and when he was a child my father had lived in a district in Vidin, where his neighbors were Greeks and Turks. Later on he traveled a lot, that's why he knew many languages. We spoke Bulgarian everywhere – at home, in the street, at school – that's how I learned it.

I had a free ticket for the railways. I used to go to Vidin to see my aunt Sara Benaroya. I was very skinny. I also used to go to a camp [Rakitovo], which was one stop before Velingrad. Children of war invalids used to be sent there.

There were four synagogues in Sofia then, but there were no synagogues nearby. There was one synagogue in the center, in Iuchbunar 2, where I got married. There was one beyond the canal – my husband was from that district. The poorest people lived there. One was located on the plot where Hotel Rila is now.

Our neighbors were Jews. Many Jews lived here, in our quarter – about ten to twelve families. We all gathered [for holidays] in our house because we had a spacey hall – about 50 people used to come. We used to gather on Pesach, Sukkot and other Jewish holidays. And children, lots of children, were born then. The Jewish community was in our quarter, we had no ties with other communities. This was a quarter on the outskirts of town. There were about 40-50 children of war invalids. We used to get together by a pole close to the grocery – because of me – and played hide-and-seek. That was my only pleasure. We spent our days at school. I had a couple of Bulgarian friends there – Lyubka and Lencheto.

I didn't study at a Jewish school. The youth in my time was progressive. I felt bad about not going to a Jewish school, but the two Jewish schools were quite far from my place and there was nobody to take me to and from school. Later on, when I grew up, I liked it in the Bulgarian school. It was then that I got introduced to communist ideas, which were progressive at that time – I was a member of the UYW 3 the young communists' organization.

I graduated from the First Girls High School. We were poor girls. A group of ten girls, including me, used to play hookey, but otherwise I was an excellent student. There were Jews at the school but I wasn't friends with them – they were children of wealthy Jews, while I was the child of poor Jews. I managed to finish school thanks to Aunt Sofi's money and the allowance I used to receive from the War Invalids' Society.

There were both good and bad people as far as anti-Semitism was concerned. I was the best pupil in the class, but the schoolmistress made me repeat the 3rd grade – in her opinion I was a poor pupil. I hated those who hated me. I didn't hate schoolmates, though, only teachers.

My friends were Bulgarians. My school years are so far in the past that I've forgotten many things. I remember having a lot of friends – Bulgarian girls. The Jewish girls at school were wealthy, while I was poor, therefore we didn't mix. Later on, when I grew up, I had a few closer Jewish lady-friends.

I had a student allowance because I was the daughter of a war invalid. There was a lawyer here, Zachov was his name. He was a very good man, also a war invalid. He filed a lawsuit against the state, and he didn't take a single lev from us, but he raised our pension from 60 percent to 100 percent. There was a pub nearby, which belonged to Uncle Vlado. He leased a shoe repair shop, where we used to leave our shoes which we wore for school. The streets were very muddy then.

My father used to spend three months a year in the Home for Invalids in Bankya. This was his holiday. We used to visit him on Sundays and that was our holiday. My father was very ill – he suffered from insomnia and couldn't sleep because he had a grenade splinter in his brain. He died from it later. There were no operations back then. Although very ill, my father cared for us very much and insisted on our speaking properly.

The night before my father died – I will never forget it – he couldn't lift his hand to feed himself, he was an invalid to such an enormous extent. My mother, Ventura Benaroya, nee Levi, was feeding him when he said, 'That's enough, Ventura, I've had enough!' He suddenly reached with his hand to the table and took some grapes from the bowl. I said, 'Papa, you'll be getting better!' I constantly inspired him with the idea that he was going to get better. He said, 'You are right, I'm going to get better!' We went to bed. As I already mentioned, he suffered from insomnia. I used to stay up late at night to read whatever I had at hand – a book, a newspaper etc. He suddenly said, 'Please, give me the newspaper to read.' He had no problems with his speech. He took the paper, read an article and said, 'Let's go to sleep now!' So we went to bed. He would normally call us during the night, but he didn't that night. I was lying in bed, waiting for him to call me, but he didn't. I woke my mother at about midnight and said, 'Mother, dad hasn't said a word yet. Why?' She said, 'He has died. If he hasn't spoken yet, he has died!' We turned the light on and saw him: He had hugged my brother, who used to sleep in the middle of the bed, and had died with a smile on his face. It was something beyond description! A human tragedy!

When my father died in 1938 we closed the shop. We had no money then. I worked for the 'Bulgarian embroidery' along with doing my schooling and looking after a child. The man from 'Bulgarian silk' turned out to be a very noble man – he brought money for me in Pleven to save me from starving, found accommodation for me… He was a Bulgarian and had business deals with America; he used to send them embroidery from here.

During the War

Then laws against us were introduced – the Law for the Protection of the Nation [4]. We didn't move to the ghetto, which for Sofia was in the district of Iuchbunar, because my father was a war invalid.

First of all we were deprived of our jobs. I was working for the 'Invalid' Company. Then I became a governess. I was working as a governess for a Jewish family in Gorna Banya – the Moshes. They were Dodescos and we weren't. But I was fired because due to the Law for the Protection of the Nation I wasn't allowed to be a governess, either [to have two jobs at the same time]. We weren't allowed to walk beyond Krasno Selo up in the mountain, but the family I worked for as a governess lived in Gorna Banya, which was further on after Krasno Selo. Then I found a job with another family, looking after their little girl. Then I went to work for yet another family – Jewish again. The grandfather was a manufacturer – he had a toothbrush factory. Their daughter was studying at the French College [5]. She embraced the Orthodox Christian religion and ran away to France. She gave birth to a boy, Zippo. Then she poisoned herself. Her husband hired me to look after the child and I

took good care of him. They wanted me to move to Israel with them, but I was already engaged to my husband and didn't go with them. They emigrated in 1947 via France.

My mother used to do the shopping. I used to give her whatever I earned. When I got married, my husband did the same. He would keep only a few leva for cigarettes. I didn't do any shopping because my mother used to do it. We always had whatever we needed stored in the basement – fruits, vegetables, vermicelli – we had a whole chest with vermicelli. All traders knew her because she had been a shopkeeper herself and our basement was always full of provisions.

I have worked both with Bulgarians and Jews. I learned many songs, knew many people. I joined the progressive organization Hakoah 6, a sports organization. We celebrated all Jewish holidays, but we celebrated them more progressively. As far as celebrating the different holidays the difference between us – the progressive ones – and the more conservative Jews was that we didn't go to the synagogue. We were members of the UYW. We dreamed of establishing a state. We dreamed of peace and love between people, but not in the way it was later distorted – RMC and everything. We thought everything was going to happen like in the fairy-tales. But life showed its true face. I remember all events – particularly the handing back of Dobrudzha [after WWII the previously Romanian Southern Dobrudzha was given to Bulgaria.], the Czar's death. We closely followed all events at the front. We used to hold our meetings for discussing those events at Vitosha mountain. Usually we spent the night there. We used to leave for the mountain in the afternoon and held our meetings in the evenings in order to avoid being heard or seen by anybody, particularly when we started hearing about certain things. We used to get on the tram after 11pm to go to Vitosha for our meetings.

Initially I was in charge of the basketball team; then I took up the Bulgarian folk dances group [in the Hakoah]. That was in 1941 and 1942, when Hakoah, which was part of the Slavia Sports Club, was closed because of the Law for the Protection of the Nation. My husband was a basketball player for Slavia.

When the authorities started interning Jews Bishop Stefan, Bishop Kiril 7, and another Bishop from Kiustendil – I don't remember his name, but he is highly respected in Israel now and a monument was erected in his memory – raised their voice against it. When the authorities started interning us, the people began to protest straight away. We were surrounded and the Bulgarians who defended the Jews, as well as some of the more eminent Jews, that is whomever they could lay their hands on were sent to Somovit and was interned in the school. We protested, too. And then the authorities arrested the priest and the Jewish leaders and interned them initially in Somovit, then in Kailuka 8. Then the Bulgarians who defended the Jews and some of the more eminent Jews were sent to Kailuka and on the eve of 9th September 1944 9 the camp commandant set the camp on fire. Eleven people burned to death then.

We were interned in May 1943. I was robbed of my whole luggage. I went to Pleven with 20 kilos of luggage – I was one of the first ones to be interned. The bed, the wardrobe, the small table, the divan … we were robbed of everything. When we were interned to Pleven in 1943, I was in a group of five girls who were put on the train. We were told: 'Don't you dare get out of here!' and we were locked in order to prevent us from escaping to the partisans. Then we were taken to the school and given hay to sleep on. We weren't allowed to rent an apartment. We couldn't walk on the main street, where bread was sold, so we used to ask ordinary people to buy bread for us.

I worked for a communist in Pleven. He was a Bulgarian, whom I called Uncle Tsonyo. I didn't know how to sew, but he taught me. I learned to sew trousers within 15 days. He used to pay me a wage of 120 leva per day. Then a [secret] agent started to entice me – he used to come every day for me to iron his pants. Uncle Tsonyo noticed what was going on and said, 'Sofi, I'm going to send you to work in the back room!' So I joined the other two of his workers in the room behind the shop – one of the workers was a Turk, Mehmed, the other one a Bulgarian; both young men and tailors. Uncle Tsonyo told them, 'She can sew trousers well now. She can make a whole pair of trousers.' So, I kept on sewing – what else could I do? The shop was at a corner of the main street and a smaller one. Whenever I had to go out, I had to put on my badge [yellow star]. I lived like that for a long time.

I was married then, but had no children. I met my husband through Hakoah, in the sports club. I married him in January 1943 in the synagogue in Sofia. My husband, Nissim Leon Uziel, was unemployed. When he was interned to a camp in Gigen in 1943, I was interned to Pleven. Gigen was a camp for Jews. Jewish men used to be taken there from February to December; then they let them go home because they were all ill. My husband was taken to Zvanichevo first, then to Mihalkovo, then somewhere along the Struma River and finally to Gigen. He spent four years in forced labor camps 10 altogether. They worked hard there; they constructed bridges. They had to wade in water up to here [pointing at the height of her chest]. Different locations, different rivers... There were only Jews. A boy even drowned in the Iskar River.

Our life was a great tragedy. My hair stands on end when I think of those years. Could I endure all that now? I was in Pleven from 24th May 1943 11 till October 1944. This is the reason I'm so ill now –I lived through very hard times during the evacuation. I returned from Pleven to Sofia by train. I was pregnant at that time and gave birth to my son, Leon Nissim Uziel, on 7th December 1944.

After the War

When we returned to Sofia, we didn't even find a speck of our luggage. An officer, supervising things under the Law for the Protection of the Nation, had plundered it all – he got in through the window of my room. Everything belonging to me and my mother had been stolen – even the plates and saucepans. After 1944 only I, my mother and my brother of all Jews remained to live in the district. All the others left for Israel. They were subject to an odd harassment, but nothing could stop them. I only pray for peace in Israel now! My brother emigrated there in 1947.

At the beginning my husband worked as a carpenter and that way he managed to provide for me and the baby. We lived with my mother who helped me looking after the baby. Later on my husband started working for the Trade Unions as an organizational worker. My husband used to go on business trips around Bulgaria, but mostly to the Soviet Union. He was an organizational worker. He organized the log-cutting site in Komi. Often he would get a call in the middle of the night; we've had a phone since 1946. He was involved in organizing many things. My husband was chairman of the Timber Industry Workers Trade Union. He used to organize the work of timber loggers in different regions of the country. He has been to Hungary and the USSR. He took me along, to Bucharest, Hungary and Poland.

Our views were progressive. My husband used to work in a carpenter's workshop here, at the corner. We received aid and bought some things. Later on, when he went to work for the Labor Union, there was a special shop for the employees there and on a number of occasions we were

given blankets and other articles. When I was pregnant I was given 10 meters of flannelette. They [the Labor Union] have helped me a lot and I can't deny it.

My husband became a party member in 1945 and I in 1946. He was a more active member than me because I didn't have much time for party work. The party membership didn't interfere with our Jewish origin and way of living. We didn't feel oppressed because everything was democratic.

We observed all Jewish traditions. We didn't go to the synagogue, but we observed Jewish traditions at home. For example we had separate utensils for dairy products, our cuisine was Jewish [kosher]. It wasn't difficult to be a Jew in communist Bulgaria, particularly if one was a communist. I've never told the children what happened during the war. I want them to look and go forward and never to experience what we experienced during the war. My father used to tell us something he knew from his father, 'Study languages, girl!' My grandfather had constantly repeated, 'Teach the children to study languages! If they know languages, the whole world will be at their feet!'

My kitchen is kosher. I have a separate utensil for boiling milk. But since I've live alone I haven't had the strength to work and cook. My daughter comes and helps me, but she lives in the countryside. She works there because she lost her job here. She used to be Chief of Department in the Ministry of Forests. My son-in-law used to work for the same ministry.

I started working for a bookshop because it was very hard for me to travel back and forth [to her place of work as a governess]. Apart from that I had to leave the children home alone. That's why I had to resign. Thus I found that job at the bookshop. There was a Jewess in the party organization I was a member of. She was married to a Bulgarian and her son was the director of [the publishing house] 'Science and Arts'. She arranged things for me and initially I became manager of the bookshop opposite the Culture cinema on Count Ignatiev Street. Later I was appointed manager of the bookshop opposite the Russian church.

At that time [1951] I was pregnant with my daughter, Eli [Nissim Djelepova, nee Uziel] and stayed home for some time. My daughter was prematurely born – in the eighth month of pregnancy. I had put the books on the top shelf. Nobody wanted to climb up the ladder to take them down. Those were books by seven professors – Jews, who were some of the most prominent professors in the USSR. They had been accused of espionage and were executed. When Stalin died we cried, not being aware of his atrocities…So, I climbed up to the top with my huge belly, the ladder broke and I fell. Three days later Eli was born, all blue with bruises, but alive, thank God! Before that I had given birth to a boy who died by the doctors' fault – they had immunized him against diphtheria with poison. Eight babies from our district died for that reason then. Because my daughter was prematurely born, I had a longer maternity leave. My position at the bookshop was taken over by somebody else – there is no such thing as an irreplaceable person. When I went back to work I was appointed to work at three or four other bookshops here and there. Then I retired.

I visited Israel three times – in 1960, 1994 and 1998. For some time I kept in touch with my relatives through letters and on the phone. My husband's mother [Simha Levi] was very ill, but he couldn't get a visa. My husband's mother emigrated to Israel in 1949 during the Exodus [see Mass Aliyah] 12. So, I went there and told them, 'If you want to, you could put a tail on him. My husband is an honest and social person. The fact that he is a communist doesn't mean he can't go to Israel. His mother is very ill. Check it!' So, within three days they let him go. The minister's plenipotentiaries were Bulgarians and I said to them, 'Please, understand, I'm talking about his

mother!' They let him go, however, they did put a tail on him; they safeguarded their country's interest.

All of my friends are in Israel and most of my relatives are there, too. I also have some acquaintances there, but almost no friends. It wasn't dangerous to maintain correspondence with Israel, but I haven't done so because I had no time to spare. I communicated with my relatives in Israel mainly by phone. My husband didn't want to emigrate to Israel because he had a good job here. He said, 'I'm going to give our children good education. I don't want to go and build a new country! What is going to happen to me there?'

I don't have any contact with my relatives abroad. I only keep in touch with my brother's younger daughter in Israel and with my grandchildren. They constantly call me. They respect me and love me very much because I've brought them up. They were brought here straight from the hospital. I have looked after them from the time they were babies to the age of seven. That was my delight... Everything! My daughter and son-in-law used to work, that's why I looked after their children. At that time I was already a pensioner and was able to care of my grandchildren.

After 1989 [following the events of 10th November 1989] 13 things took a very bad turn. The economic and social situation got worse and people got poorer, including me. My husband had a paralytic stroke. Once, twice, three times... Having read a lot of medical books, I knew that when a person had high blood pressure, his feet should be put in hot water and cold wet towels should be put on his head. This reduces high blood pressure immediately. That way I kept on saving his life but the fifth time...

Currently I'm a member of the Health Club, which was established in 1994 under Shalom. My husband died that year and my son said, 'Why don't you join this club? That will be some nice change for you.' At the beginning I had to force myself to go, but later I got into the habit of doing so and now I find pleasure in it. I attend meetings on Mondays and Wednesdays. I have received aid – once I got USD 1,000, then again USD 400. Now I have applied for aid for a third time.

I have four grandchildren – two from my son, Nissim and Yosif, and two from my daughter, Tsvetelina and Sonya. Only Sonya, of all my grandchildren, is in Bulgaria. The others live in Israel.

Glossary

1 Expulsion of the Jews from Spain
The Sephardi population of the Balkans originates from the Jews 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, Izmir, etc.) and also in the ones situated on significant overland trading routes to Central Europe (Bitola, Skopje, and Sarajevo) and to the Danube (Edirne, Plovdiv, Sofia, and Vidin).

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

3 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. After the coup d'etat in 1934, when the 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.

4 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 expulsed 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.

5 French College

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

6 Hakoah

Max Nordau's call for the creation of a 'new Jew' and for 'muscular Judaism' at the second World Zionist Congress in 1898 that marked the beginning of a new awareness of physical culture among Jews, particularly in Europe. At the turn of the century, Jewish gymnastics clubs were established, encouraging Jewish youngsters to engage in physical exercise and serving as a framework for nationalistic activity. Beginning in 1906, broader-based sports clubs were also established. Most prominent in the interwar period were the Hakoah Club of Vienna and Hagibor Club of Prague, whose notable achievements in national and international track and field and swimming competitions aroused pride and identification among the European Jewry. The greatest of them all was the Hakoah soccer team, which won the Austrian championship in 1925. The best Jewish soccer players in Central Europe joined its ranks, bringing the team worldwide acclaim. Today Hakoah clubs exist all over the world and mainly represent the community as a social club. However, the original purpose of soccer remains high on the list of the clubs' activities.

7 Bishop Kiril (1901-1971)
Metropolitan of Plovdiv during World War II. He vigorously opposed the anti-Jewish policies of the Bulgarian government after 1941 and took active steps against it. In March 1943 the deportation of the 1,500 Plovdiv Jews began and Kiril succeeded stopping it by sending a protest to King Boris III, threatening the local police chief as well as by him lying across the railway track. Since 1953 until his death he was the Patriach of Bulgaria. In 2002 he was posthumously recognized as one of the Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem.

8 Kailuka concentration camp
Following protests against the deportation of Bulgarian Jews in Kiustendil (8th March 1943) and Sofia (24th May 1943), Jewish activists, who had taken part in the demonstrations, and their families, several hundred people, were sent to the Somovit concentration camp. The camp had been established on the banks of the Danube, and they were deported there in preparation for their further deportation to the Nazi death camps. About 110 of them, mostly politically active people with predominantly Zionist and left-wing convictions and their relatives, were later redirected to the Kailuka concentration camp. The camp burned down on 10th July 1944 and 10 people died in the fire. It never became clear whether it was an accident or a deliberate sabotage.

9 9th September 1944
The day of the communist takeover in Bulgaria. In September 1944 the Soviet Union unexpectedly declared war on Bulgaria. On 9th September 1944 the Fatherland Front, a broad left-wing coalition, deposed the government. Although the communists were in the minority in the Fatherland Front, they were the driving force in forming the coalition, and their position was strengthened by the presence of the Red Army in Bulgaria.

10 Forced labor camps in Bulgaria
Established under the Council of Ministers' Act in 1941. All Jewish men between the age 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.

11 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 out against the deportation of Bulgarian Jews. Although there was no official document banning deportation, Bulgarian Jews were saved, unlike those from Bulgarian occupied Aegean Thrace and Macedonia.

12 Mass Aliyah
Between September 1944 and October 1948, 7,000 Bulgarian Jews left for Palestine. The exodus

was due to deep-rooted Zionist sentiments, a 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. Further numbers 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 emigrated to Israel until only a few thousand Jews remained in the country.

13 10th November 1989

After 35 years of rule, Communist Party leader Todor Zhivkov was replaced by 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 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.