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Victoria Yosif Almalekh (nee Levi)

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Interviewer: Svetlana Avdala

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I like Vicky's emotional commitment. I think that in this respect she is like me, although she always introduced me to her friends like that: 'This is Svetlana Avdala – she is from a mixed marriage'. And that was how everything took its own place. Someone had told me: 'Vicky... Oh, she is the most Jewish of all the Jews in our community in Varna, because she has always worked towards the purity of the traditions.' Vicky responded immediately after our first conversation on the phone in which I told her: 'I am coming to Varna tomorrow! Can we do the interview?' 'Yes, of course, I feel it as my duty.' And now, as I'm writing these lines, I can almost hear her youthful bubbling voice, her clear articulation, her elevated way of talking! I didn't know for sure when I was going to be in Varna. The appointments we made were unclear, but she was eagerly waiting for my phone call. She was feeling very committed indeed... We entered her sister's apartment. All the recollections of the beloved Rebeka, who died 14 years ago, took hold of Vicky and she burst into tears... Some people may say she overreacted! But I understand her. I understand this excess of love and responsibility which makes things become part of you. And everything you are separated from leaves you feeling torn, dismembered, extorted... I understand how difficult changes could be for people like her. When they have to turn the leaf and go on as if nothing had happened, they just can't do it...

I was born in Vidin [1] on 10th March 1931 and I am a nurse. I had a sister – Rebeka Yosif Levi (1933-1992) who was a chemical engineer. She was single. My husband's name is Yosif Samuil Almalekh and he was an economist. Our child is Samuil Yosif Almalekh (1956) and he is an electrician. He is single. I used to live in Sofia. Now I live in Varna [a resort city on the Black Sea Coast in Northeast Bulgaria].

We are Ladino Jews [2] on both maternal and paternal sides. I can't say almost anything about my parents' families because when I was born only my grandmother Vintoura (Vizourka) Isak Levi (1870s – 1956) – mother of my father Yosif Isak Levi (1892 – 1979) was still alive. Her husband Isak Sabitay Levi had died in the 1920s, some time before my father's marriage. The only thing I know is that my mother's father Sason Haim Pinkas used to be a corn trader in Vidin. He had 3 brothers – Moushon, Pinkas and Mazal and he had died before 1931. His wife Rebeka Pinkas died in 1931, before I was born.

The family of my father, Yosif Isak Levi, used to live in Sofia. He was also born in the capital. I can't say where his father, my grandfather Isak, was from. The only thing that my grandmother Vintoura (his wife) had related about him was that he used to work in a grocery, which he didn't own.

Because of working there he had a nickname – Bakalov (grocer). My grandmother Vintoura used to tell me that at the time of the Liberation [Russian-Turkish Liberation War (1877-78)] 3 she was only six years old. At that time they settled in Sofia after they had run away from the town of Ferdinand [then Koutlovitsa]4. She didn't know whether she had been born in Ferdinand. The only thing she remembered was that they had moved to Sofia on donkeys. She never told me how she had married my grandfather. She never told me anything definite about him. All I know is he died in Sofia a little before my father's wedding in 1924.

My father finished the Jewish school in Sofia as well as the junior high school there. He was a goldsmith by profession, this was his main occupation. He used to work in Sofia but when he was still quite young he got the well-known vibration disease. This is a disease of the peripheral nervous system. It is typical for people making the same moves all the time in their job, like goldsmiths. It causes hand-tingling which makes working impossible. Of course in those days there were no professional disease clinics so the vibration disease was practically incurable. The easiest thing my father could do was to change his occupation. So he became a medical goods dealer. He started providing pharmacies with finished and semi-finished medicines such as drugs, different kinds of syrups, pills and powders. For instance some pharmacy would need a bottle of davilla tincture whereas another one would buy only 25 grams of it, because this is the quantity needed for a certain kind of syrup. They would also order some ethyl alcohol, cotton, bandages etc. So he was supposed to have certain knowledge which he had gathered during the Second Balkan War 5 when he was a health-officer. He served under the leadership of professor Racho Angelov – the first Bulgarian Minister of Health after 9th September 1944 6. What he had learned there was of great help in his job.

My father didn't have his own home in Sofia. He married my mother by matchmaking. How did they meet? One of my aunts (Soultana – my mother's sister) used to live in Sofia near Ekzarh Yosif Street and the Synagogue [The Great Synagogue] 7. [Jewish neighborhoods in Sofia] 8 She used to live in lodgings, which was synonymous to poverty. She was the poorest in the entire family. So this aunt of mine was a friend to a cousin of my father's. She introduced my mother Rashel Pinkas-Levi (1893-1977) to my father and they got married. The not so short distance between Sofia and Vidin didn't matter. What did was that there was someone who did the matching. Otherwise people stay single like my son and my sister. I can't say for sure if my parents married for love. Their marriage was arranged. But they stuck to one another till death parted them and the different generations at home were always on good terms. My father moved to Vidin with my mother, because he didn't have his own home. Both he and my grandmother Vintoura moved to my mother's paternal house. In Vidin my father found not only that they owned a private home but also a store that belonged to my mother.

My father was already not incapable of working as a goldsmith when he arrived in Vidin from Sofia. The last occupation he had in Sofia was as a merchant of medical goods. Vidin is a town significantly smaller than Sofia and people already had taken up all the available positions. So he immediately started working in my mother's store. She used to sell manufactures – sewing cotton, necklaces, combs and other small goods. This store was in the middle of the market, on the same line with the municipal shops. No one could buy anything there unless you knew Romanian. This market was located by the Danube and a lot of Romanians used to go shopping there as well.

I remember my father as a serious person. He never talked too much and on top of that he stammered. He had started stammering at school after being beaten by a teacher. I remember him reading a book sitting on his chair in our big living-room. He used to read books by Dostoevsky and Tolstoy 9. He always said 'That's not for you'. and he would read us Mayne Reid 10 or Jules Verne. He used to take books from all kinds of places. During the Holocaust finding something to read was an achievement. But he managed to do that by using the little doors that connected the houses. Although he didn't talk much he was good at communicating to people without a needless waste and overuse of words. I remember that at the market place he only communicated with two or three other merchants.

My mother, Rashel, was from a wheat-trader's family – her grandfather and her father Sason were intermediary wheat-traders. They didn't use to plough or mill the wheat but to trade with it. It had to be kept in big warehouses built only of ashlar. Their windows were right under the roof. At first the wheat had to be bought and kept there until it was sold. Warehouses like those supplied carriages and ships. The plain of Vidin is quite fertile and besides the Danube is a convenient navigable route.

After finishing a Jewish school and junior high school my mother was the last one to get married. She knew Ladino and Ivrit, which she had probably studied at the Jewish school. She was the youngest child in the family. Her brothers and sisters – Sara, Soultana, Haim and Yosif were already married and everybody had settled down in a different house. My mother was very devoted to the house and when my father joined the family he paid off the shares to the other inheritors from her family. My father started living there with his mother – my grandmother Vintoura. I can't imagine how much ethics the family had in order to let the two mothers, the in-laws, live under the same roof. I mean my maternal grandmother who owned the house and my paternal grandmother who came to live in the house later. I used to joke with my father that he brought his mother – granny Vintoura, in the house as a dowry. My mother had prepared her trousseau. As a matter of principle a Jewish girl's trousseau must include some underwear for the bride, household linen, pillows, blankets, bedspreads, pyjamas and a shirt for the groom. Everything was supposed to be washed and starched. Ironing the trousseau is called Utilitar Elashugar and is a real ritual. Women from both families gather together and start ironing the stuff. The ironing is actually an occasion to take a look at the trousseau and it was accompanied by giving treats to the ladies. After that the washed and ironed stuff was spread in a special room so it could be seen in its entirety. The trousseau (Ashugar) sometimes included silver tableware. I've never seen jewelry. Jewelry is given by the mother or the mother-in-law during the wedding ceremony.

My mother's Ashugar is still at home. Take a look at it. Look at the outline embroidered on the pillow-case. When I look at it I always remember my mother. And this sleeping pillow has a monogram - Rashel Pinkas. I cherish these highly. No one sleeps on them. I've left a lot of things for my son so he would know who his grandmother was. She was an extremely neat lady - big, massive and beautiful. We all looked like midgets next to her. She was so hard-working – could do the job not of one and two people, but of four people together. Even nowadays I wonder when she was sleeping. I don't remember her complaining to be exhausted or to say she was unable to do something or not to know how to do it. She used to deal with so many things. At that time we didn't have socks. Some unbelievable things would be unknitted so that the wool would be used for knitting socks. I learned how to knit socks at the age of twelve. Whenever she managed to take

wool from the villagers she would knit me a sweater, a bodice or something else. She was busy all the time – either sewing, knitting, ironing, or soaking laundry in some indescribable lye mixtures. That procedure was important because the laundry could be seen from the other end of the street so it had to be snow white no matter that it was heavily patched up. She also used to help my father at the store as well. And this continued till we were old enough to leave the house and the town of Vidin after finishing high school. When I got married in 1955 every single thing in my trousseau chest was starched. She used to work a lot without preaching to us and giving us unwanted advice. After high school I went to the Nurse School in Sofia and I finished it. My sister came to Sofia after high school, too. The love for our home was so big that whenever I had a free day and a half (for instance – after being on duty), I would take the train to Vidin in the early morning.

During my childhood we were surrounded with love. I'm the eldest child and I was born in the seventh year of my parents' marriage. My sister was born three years later. The children had come relatively late to our parents. Probably this is the reason for us to get so much love. All that's been said in connection to my late birth was that a woman met my mother on her way to her shop. She told her that a childless neighbor got pregnant after going to the baths in Ovcha Kupel. My parents went there immediately. My mother got pregnant with me and my twin brother right away. My twin brother died from pneumonia at the age of six months on 28th August – my mother's birthday. From then on my mother never celebrated her birthday until her 80th anniversary. Only when she turned 80 a friend of hers and I offered to organize a party so we had a great time.

We were always together with my sister Rebeka Levi (1933 – 1992). The situation didn't change although the time was passing. She used to follow me everywhere. We were said to look alike (especially as adults). We were carrying the same genes and shared the same way of living. She was a woman of exceptional intellect. She had a great heart. Half of the people in the world could find a place in her heart but she died alone. Obviously the leading principle in life is not only to meet people but to miss those meetings as well… She was a gentle, good and confiding person. She went through her entire length of service in the Devnya Factories 11. I remember she was born at home with the help of a midwife. My grandmother Vintoura (my mother's mother-in-law) and Sara (my mother's aunt) assisted at the birth. It was in December and it was very cold. I'm two years and ten months older than her. I was waiting in the other room with my father. When the baby was born and while they were giving her a bath they called us to see her. In the living room (the salad-salon – in Ladino – as we used to call it) the stove was burning very hard. My grandmother was holding the baby in her arms. I ran to her. They all gave an exclamation, put her in my arms and said 'You will always take care of her'. But I couldn't. And that is what I can't forgive to myself. She died from cancer.

The house where I was born (my mother's house) was built in Ottoman times. It was a one-storey house built right on the ground. Its floor was made of wood and there was a basement. The boards were about 35 cm wide. When we turned seven or eight we started helping our mother in the housework. Every Friday evening in order to prepare for meeting Sabbath mum would ask us to clean the floor with caustic soda. She was a huge, plump woman and bending down was difficult for her. She would remove the dirt after us so we wouldn't burn our hands with caustic soda. In our good years we used to have some washing soap, but during the years of war [WWII] we didn't have any so we used caustic soda and lye in the cleaning water. We used to bring water from the

Danube. It was softer.

Our windows had vertical iron bars. The house was built in Ottoman times when windows had two pieces – interior and exterior on both sides of the bars. It sounds strange but that house survived till 1966 when my parents moved here, in Varna. From the door you would enter a small hall which had no plumbing, but a tin container full of water. We had a sink under it to gather the water. Usually we would cook in that hall in warm days. We used to cook on a brazier. We also had a cooker with a cast-iron plate and circles. The cooker had an oven as well. From the hall you would go into a big living room which looked more like a big hall. We used to invite our guests, study, have meals and spend most of our time in this room. We had a four-meter long seat made of nailed boards. We used to lay mattresses and pillows filled with wool and rags on it. My grandmother was fond of saying that if that seat could talk it would tell all kinds of stuff, because we all would take a seat on it and talk. There was something like a small table under the windows where my sister and I used to keep our textbooks. Next to it was my mother's sewing-machine. The cooker was on the other side so the steam could go out as fast as possible. We cooked there in very cold weather. My paternal grandmother Vintoura used to cook only twice a week during winter days, because the weather was cold and food could be preserved for longer.

People didn't use to have refrigerators in those days. In warmer days we would keep food either in the well between two neighboring yards or in a side northern room which was as big as a larder. We had a big dining-table. On the right of the living-room there was a door leading to my parents' bedroom. Next to it there was a door leading to my grandmother's room which had a door leading to our bedroom. My sister and I would only sleep there. We would spend most of our time in the living-room.

The house was surrounded by a fruit-tree garden, a vegetable garden with a water-pump in the middle. The privy was outside, too. We used to have chickens in the yard. The pump was located in the middle on purpose. Everyone passing by would wash his hands, face or eyes with water from it. It was no good for drinking. The taste of the water was bad. We used to take drinking and cooking water from a fountain at the end of the street. Water for washing clothes and the floor we used to take from the Danube. In hot summer we would take the laundry to the Danube so that it wasn't necessary to carry water from the river. We would wash with as much water as we wanted there. The water from the Danube was very soft so our laundry was always crystal clean. After that we would fill buckets and baskets with laundry and if the three of us (Mom, Beka and I) couldn't carry it home at one time one of us would stay by the Danube and wait. The other two would bring some of the laundry home and come back for the rest. That was the way of life in those days. Now if I tell that to my son, he would be speechless.

One of Vidin's peculiar features which I remember is mosquitoes. Before 9th September 1944 the wall of the Baba Vida Fortress 12 was surrounded by moats full of water. They weren't cleaned or maintained regularly and they were like mosquito farms. Ducks would often swim in the water, because they could find food in there. On the surface of the water there was this plant called 'lechovina' – birds' favourite food. Local boys used to collect it and bring some home. They would mix it with corn flour for feeding birds.

Anyway there was no escape from the mosquitoes. My grandmother used to prepare some solution of salt, water and vinegar and rub my sister and me with it before bedtime. She looked after us like

a guardian angel. Mosquitoes could cause malaria. It was widespread in Vidin and it was like a curse from God. I suffered from malaria when I was 13 or 14 years old in 1944 during the Holocaust. I was ill for three years. A funny thing about malaria is you get fever only if it is summer. After that some medications were imported and they were distributed at school for protection.

I lived with my grandma Vintoura Levi till 1956. She lived with us (my mother, my father and my sister) in Vidin and is a standing image from my childhood. She had an unshakable authority in the family.

She was rather tall and thin, but she was well-built. She always wore black as a widow. That's how I remember her. Her main task was to prepare Erev Sabbath, to cook all the meals, to take a bath, get dressed and go to the synagogue. Mum would invariably stay at home to make Sabbath. My grandmother used to stick to absolutely all of the norms when cooking - always kosher, always on her guard not to mix dairy products and meat. If somebody by accident mixed up the saucepans and put dairy products instead of meat, the saucepan itself would be thrown out, can you believe that? They were even different in colour. That was no game for her. We weren't rich, but that's how it was – the saucepan would be thrown out. We used to go to the public bath every Friday. There was an old Turkish bath 13 in the Jewish neighborhood, which was within the fortress walls. The people working there were Bulgarian Muslim women, from the so-called 'pomatsi' [Bulgarian Mohameddans]. I have a hazy recollection of rush, hasty preparations… For instance, I remember my father had a separate bath-towel. It was still at home about 20 years ago, but it isn't here anymore. It disappeared somewhere…

As a matter of principle at the end of the winter every Jewish or Bulgarian house must be thoroughly cleaned, but the chores performed at home during Pesach can be narrated as a myth, because they can be described as extreme. For instance, in winter all clothes were regularly washed but during Pesach the so-called Simans di Pesach [the Weeks before Pesach in Ladino]. This means at least two weeks before Pesach granny would make mum take out all the night wear and underwear which was put in order in the wardrobe, wash it and iron it. The wardrobe would be emptied from A to Z and everything would be washed and sterilized. We used to have some huge copper vessels (about 100 kilos each). There was no way for anyone to lift them by himself. A bonfire would be started in the garden… All of this would be done outside. And all the clothes were sterilized in lye. We would take ash from the stoves for the lye. We had separate crockery for Pesach. No one would have meals in them during the year and we kept them aside. But on the last day it had to be sterilized as well. Nowadays I wouldn't do such a thing even if they kill me. And I've never done it since I have my own home and a family.

Granny Vintoura used to keep a close watch on the order at home, because my mother was always at work helping my father with the store. Their store was at the market place. I remember when I was seven or eight years old my sister and I used to bring lunch to my parents. My grandmother used to cook the meals. She used to wrap the meal in a white cloth – meat, bread, salad, etc. As it was said above there was a distribution of duties in our family. Grandma would cook and deal with the chickens and vegetables in the yard, mother would do the laundry and clean guided by granny's instructions. Granny used to grow flowers in the yard – we had beautiful roses. My sister and I used to help her. We accepted the requirements my grandmother had to us for keeping everything in order as something absolutely natural and never as a burden. Yes, she would observe the order, but I can't say she's ever been severe to us. She even would help us get away without

getting our bottoms spanked by mum. We always knew the safest place is behind granny. And she had an unshakable authority in the family. Now I think, she probably had some misunderstandings with my mother. But this was never revealed. Grandma had the unshakable authority. I remember a case like that. My grandmother was completely illiterate. Even her Bulgarian wasn't good. But she felt it was her duty to check how we prepared for school. One day I saw her giving an exam to my sister with the textbook upside down.

A part of my granny's image is how she used to make rooster soup. Not only did she use to do the cooking but she also grew the necessary vegetables as well as the animals. Rooster soup was cooked once a year – when a new rooster entered the household. Usually this happened at the beginning of the summer when the old one was slaughtered. That time of the year would be the time when green plums would form their pits, celery and lovage would come up. Those used to grow in our little vegetable garden in the backyard. Actually it was not much of a vegetable garden. What kinds of vegetables Jews would grow for God's sake. It's more of a joke than vegetable production proper. My grandmother learned how to grow vegetables from her Bulgarian neighbors, not from handbooks and manuals. Probably they also taught her to take a bag of ash and to sprinkle tomatoes and peppers with it. She had vegetables enough to help herself with early morning cooking if the market hadn't opened yet. She would just pick a couple of tomatoes and peppers. The garden couldn't sustain our household and grandma always said: 'This is your pastime'.

Rooster soup was quite greasy. I remember grandma used to put it to boil at dawn so it would be ready at noon. But, what can I say, up to now my home has never smelt of such soup like the soup my grandma used to make. She would also put dried tomatoes in the soup. No one would make tinned food in those days. We hadn't dreamed of such stuff, we had never made any. Tomatoes used to dry split under the sun. After that they would be brought in and put into cheese-cloth bags. The green plums I'm talking about were put in the soup as they were, absolutely fresh. After that we would form an entire brigade. Grandma, my sister and I would form it to split those green half-ripe plums that had just started changing colour. They would be still sour but already with their colour changed. We would sit and split them one or two times each and arrange them on wooden trays. Grandma would keep the cheese-cloth bags till the next summer. Plums were used for sour seasoning of different meals. Because the soup I'm talking about used to be made in springtime when plums hadn't ripened yet, it smelled of fresh plums, fresh lovage and fresh celery that was picked from the backyard. It used to be cooked with home-made noodles. Yes, fideus. It could be used for pilaf as well. The whole house would participate in making fideus. Grandma was not strong enough to roll out twenty to thirty sheets of pastry a day. She was already old. My mother used to roll out thin fine sheets. The entire house would be covered with white bed sheets so the pastry could be spread on them to dry a bit. After that the pastry sheets would be rolled up and grandma would slice them into really thin (about 2 mm wide) pieces. And that stuff would already be noodles after being sliced. After that the noodles would be spread on the same bed sheets. They would be left for a couple of days to dry out completely so they wouldn't get mouldy. Then they would be put into cheese-cloth bags. We would have enough noodles for a year.

For all the time I've known grandma she had never had good eyesight. But she taught me how to knit socks, to reprise, to crochet, to plait my hair etc. A girl shouldn't walk around without her hair plaited.

The family used to gather together for breakfast. We didn't have a radio till 1946. But mum, although she was extremely busy with her everyday chores, would tell dad early in the morning the news she had already heard. I used to be quite choosy as a child but all of us had to be at the table in the morning and for dinner. No one would sit down before my father. I don't remember a Sabbath with the table set before my father returning home. And it was not only for Sabbath. That's how it used to be till I got married and left the family. Somebody to sit at the table before my father… That was out of the question. Usually he would read something on his chair and he had to stand up and sit at the table so all of us (the rest of the family) might sit. We weren't allowed to eat before he did no matter how hungry we might have been. And we never rummaged in the cupboards to eat not at the right time. There simply was order. The only food that had to be hidden at home were candies. And this used to happen in the war years when there wasn't a box of chocolates at every corner. I last had some chocolate some time in elementary school and lost tracks of chocolate all the way to finishing the nurse school. There was none. The only thing that used to be hidden in those days was chocolate. The most common treat in those years was a spoon of jam and some cold water. That wasn't bad but those things had passed by and there were supposed to be some chocolates in case somebody was to drop by. You should have something to put on the table. My parents would even talk in Romanian about where the chocolates were hidden. We used Ladino, Romanian and Bulgarian at home.

Although there was some order I wouldn't say our family was too patriarchal. We felt quite free. I knew other families where what the children were reading, who they were friends with, which houses they went to was under strict control. My sister and I were free to choose whom of our friends to invite to our place and whom to pay a visit. But despite that the spirit in our family was quite patriarchal. Both my father and my mother were really devoted to the family. The most precious things for them were we – their daughters.

Despite the daily grind every Sunday the entire family would go on picnic in the nearby village of Sinyagovtsi (15 km away from Vidin). There was this carter who would give us a ride in his cart. The inside of the cart was covered with beautiful rugs. There were wooden stools placed on the rugs for us to sit. On reaching Sinyagovtsi we would take out the food that we had prepared in advance. In summer we used to go to Sinyagovtsi again but stayed longer – ten to fifteen days. Mamma and Papa used to look at the houses in the village beforehand to choose the one in which we would put up.

The house where I was born was the house in which my mother was born. It was in the Jewish neighborhood right in front of the synagogue [An imposing building constructed in 1894 which impresses with its interior design] and near the Danube. Only few compatriots have stayed to live there nowadays, but in those days there were a lot of us living there. 200 metres away from the synagogue door was the Jewish school. Our street was on one of the sides of the synagogue and there were only Jewish houses there; on the other side there was another street – and there were only Jewish houses there, too. Behind the synagogue was the mezamel's house – this was the person who was taking care of the synagogue and was guarding it. Right next to the street with the Jewish houses was the Vidin Prison. At the place where the building of the prison ended, from the houses there started the Kale – a neighborhood which could be entered through large gates called Kapii… So after crossing those two streets we would reach the Kale and go staright to the Danube… Apart from the Bulgarians and the Jews there were also Turks, Wallachians, Armenians

and gypsies living in the town. There were no strictly differentiated neighborhoods. For instance in the Kale most of the houses were Jewish and near the synagogue, there was also a mosque. Some of my classmates in the junior high were Turkish girls. Some of my sister's friends were Turkish girls, too. We were on very good terms with them. We cared for each other a lot and even nowadays we keep in touch with these girls. I remember for instance there was an old Turkish woman, who had two daughters. They used to have buffalo-cows and to supply us with buffalo milk. It was like that even during the Holocaust when such relationships could cause them trouble. In the beginning we had only Jewish neighbors. Gradually Bulgarian families would move to the Jewish neighborhood. This process started before 9th September 1944.

Most of the Jews were merchants. There were also exceptions – a sandal-maker named Bouko Farhi, a pharmacist – Izidor Lidzhi, two or three professional dressmakers whose workshops were in their houses. I remember the full name of one of them – Rebeka Moreno, but only the first name of the other – Bouka. There were a few physicians: Dr. Arie, Dr. Besan, Dr. Kokhinov-Koen. Sofka Pinkas is still alive and she's in Sofia, God bless her. She is a second generation physician and Dr. Kohinov's daughter-in-law. Dr Besan married one of Dr. Kokhinov's sisters. There were also some tinsmiths. My cousins' family name is Vagenshtain – they were tinsmiths. All the Vagenshtains in Bulgaria were tinsmiths.

I remember their shops. The shop of the sandal-maker was at the market place in Vidin and I can still see it in my mind. We were friends with the master's daughter. The shop faced the big street which led the peasants to the market. The shop was their first step in business so to say. The owner had started a highly profitable business and had filled a market niche as we would say nowadays. There was an optical shop owned by Sara and Raymond Koen – the only opticians in Vidin. One of my cousins had a barber-and-hairstyle salon in the building of Izidor Lidzhi's pharmacy. His name was David Moreno. Some people still continued with grain-trade. Anyway Vidin is a port and is located on the border and there were some Jews interested in grain-trade. But the big grain-trade families like my mother's were no more. I don't know why.

We were on good terms with our neighbors. We used to boil tomato puree or some kind of jam – from plums or apricots in our yard. Usually we would make 50 kg at least. My mother, my sister and I weren't able to deal with all the stuff for one day by ourselves. So we would ask our neighbors for help. On the next day the brigade would move to their yard and would start cooking there, too. For instance I had never seen neighbors arguing for something or being on bad terms. I don't have such a memory from my childhood, even those people were in one and the same business sphere, no matter what the competition theory claims. Now people would kill each other for nothing. I don't remember such things. We were often visited by different people, but mostly relatives. For instance, on a big holiday everybody would come to our house after attending the synagogue, because we lived right in front of the temple. Mom usually couldn't go to the synagogue, because she had to prepare everything. Grandma would be one of the first. She used to have a paid seat (one of the best). She had always insisted on that. Papa was the one who would pay for it. In most cases mom would stay at home on some holidays like Erev Sabbath. Rosh Hashanah was an exception. So when they got out of the synagogue after Erev Sabbath, for instance, they would come to our place. They wouldn't have dinner at our place because everybody had already cooked dinner at home, but they would have a boiled egg, drink a glass of rakia 14, and wish Sabbath Shalom to each other.

I also remember the roses on Shavuot. Mom used to grow some beautiful roses in our yard. On a holiday she would get up at 8 a.m. put them in separate vases while they were still dewy and wait for the relatives to come from the synagogue. On Shavuot we used to have some rice-pudding at home at all costs. We were far from rich, and every rite was performed for decency's sake! My parents always found ways and money to keep the ritual. A Shavuot with no milk was no good. The Chanukkah coincided with my sister's birthday. This was a great holiday at home for me and my family. The Jewish calendar is a Moon calendar so the Chanukkah floats. But exactly on Chanukkah we used to celebrate my sister's birthday, although we celebrated 8th December as well. The chanukkiyah would be placed on the wall next to the window and to the synagogue. And later when Bulgarians moved to the neighborhood we would light the chanukkiyah and leave it so everybody knew that it was a glorious holiday. Beka's birthday would be celebrated on the day of the Chanukkah. I already told you mom and grandma were excellent cooks. Wonderful dinner would be cooked and some halva (flour halva) 15 would be made for the holiday. My father would always tell a legend for the holiday on the day it was celebrated. So I'm saying that without being fanatically religious we used to observe the traditions in our home. My grandmother would always light the first chanukkiyah, my father – the second one, my mother the third one. Then it would be our turn. Each day another one must be added.

On Pesach the Haggadah would be related from the very beginning to the very end at the holiday table. Although we were children we were never bored. Even more, we always eagerly waited to sing the song about the little goat. It is written in one of the Haggadah books, or we used to sing the song about the origin of the Jews. It's in Ladino and it goes like this: 'In understanding and knowledge let us praise our beloved Lord', and then – 'The Creator was first – he is One, blessed be his name. Moshe and Aaron are two…' and so on. Those were very beautiful songs and we used to eagerly wait to sing them. A piece of 'matzah' would be hidden and we would wait and see who was going to find it, you know. On Purim we would always be delighted with the Mah Purim – a present of money, given to every single child. If there was a young bride in the family, her father-in-law was supposed to prepare a Mah Purim - something precious for her in order to make her happy. During the Purim celebrations in the Jewish school where I studied from 1st till 4th grade we used to wear masks. Usually we would perform a little play about the story of Tsarina [Queen] Ester [The holiday coincides with the early spring] during the celebrations at school.

I had a lot of relatives so we were able to gather together either in my house or in any other house. But it was a tradition for all my relatives and people close to the family to pay us a visit after attending the synagogue. They would have some rakia, get a flower from mum or have an egg on Pesach, either baked or preserved in the oven; this used to be a tradition for all my kith and kin. Do you know those old tin cookers? You haven't even dreamed about those. After boiling the eggs, nobody of a Jewish origin was allowed to deal with fire on Sabbath. A neighbor would come to light the stove. In most of the cases this would be a Bulgarian woman because grandma would let neither mom nor one of us (although we were old enough) to do it. We were able to light the stove. But she wouldn't let us. A neighbor had to come. And they did it with pleasure. They would of course have some coffee with us and hear most of the stories about the respective holiday. It was a pleasure for them to visit us. Well, we survived the Holocaust thanks to the Bulgarians. Let me tell you - Bulgarians used to come to our place with a handful of maize-flour so mom could make us some malai for breakfast. [The word malai comes from the Romanian word mamaliga – maize. Malai is a maize loaf. First the flour used for the loaf has to be put into boiling water. It has to be

mixed till it turns into dough. The loaf has to be baked till it becomes yellow like gold and after that soaked in sugar syrup]. Such unbelievable poverty. Can you imagine they had to go through five or six houses to hide so they could bring it to us? In those days no one had the right to help Jews. People would come with a handful of beans so mom could feed her children. What do you think? How can one not feel indebted and forever devoted to those people?

We used to communicate a lot with Bulgarians. And Pesach was the exception. There were some Bulgarians who persuaded their children not to go to Jewish houses, and who were these people? They were the rabble. Intelligent people wouldn't even think that Jews killed Jesus. You know, Pesach and Easter are related. Those were the rabble. Otherwise all the other people – our closest neighbors would come to congratulate us with the Pesach. They would come on Easter with the Easter cake and the eggs, too. What did this mean? It meant that the holiday itself was celebrated. And if someone asked who saved the Bulgarian Jews I would have only one answer – Bulgarians did. They can write whatever they want. And they can build as many monuments as they want because those people deserve it... For all the Bulgarian people has taken care of us... They've kept the property of the interned 16 for years. And there was not a single rag missing. Does that deserve gratitude? Of course, it does... Why don't Serbians boast the same? They lost all the Jews in Serbia. The ones who managed to escape through the border from Serbia to Bulgaria, only they managed to go to Israel and die there. I have some friends amongst them and they were saved by Bulgarians as well, because they managed to enter Bulgaria. Yugoslavian (then Serbian, Serbia was not Yugoslavia yet) ones were taken to the gas chambers.

I don't live in Vidin anymore and I haven't been there recently. Lately I have heard from my friends from Vidin and read in a Jewish paper that all that is left from the majestic frame of the synagogue was four walls. It's the same situation with the synagogue in Varna as well. I have a family memory about the Vidin synagogue. It was completed in the year in which my mother was born – 1893. It used to be the most beautiful one on the Balkans – designed by an architect from Vienna. I can't say what his name was. My mother was a newly-born child. The family name of the cousins is Vagenshtain. Every Vagenshtain in Bulgaria used to be a tinsmith. My mother's brothers (my uncles Haim and Yosif) were 12 and 14 years old. And an unexpected baby was born in their house. They said: 'We already have three sisters – Buena, Sara, and Soultana. What do we need a fourth bed-wetting girl for?' And they took the bathed and diapered baby and ran up the scaffolding of the synagogue to the roof with the intention of throwing her down from the roof. But one of the cousins of Vagenshtain worked on the scaffolding. He saw my uncles and said 'Uncle Sason's boys are carrying something. What are they doing on these scaffoldings?' And he stood on their way. 'Where are you going? What are you carrying?', 'Well, we're carrying Rakhinata.', 'Well, why?', 'We're going to throw her down from the roof. We already have three sisters so what do we need a fourth one for?' This cousin grabbed the baby from their hands and took it to my grandmother and told her: 'These fellows want to get rid of their baby sister.' Afterwards, when they were grown ups if there was a way, they would carry mum on their arms. But at that time they wanted to throw her down from the roof. And that's why my family remembers that mom was born in the year when the synagogue was completed.

The synagogue was extremely beautiful. On the sides of the entrance there were two big marble slabs. On one of them was the Torah – the Ten Commandments, on the other one there were the names of the contributors. They were written with golden letters on the pink marble. The entrance

was leading into a very big and very high hall. The ceiling was domed and had golden stars on a blue background drawn all over it. It had three chandeliers which were Czech. Every year before Pesach the chandeliers were taken down and each of the lusters would be soaked in lye. They used to take us from school, it was probably in the third grade, to the synagogue before Pesach to wash and dry the parts of the chandeliers.

Down the hall there was the gallery where the seats for men were. Everybody felt it as a duty to buy nice seats in the gallery. I think I've already told you grandma had one. Mom also had a seat but in most of the cases she would meet guests from the synagogue to our house. The tebah [a higher place in the synagogue where the divine service takes place] was made out of ebony. This was the place for the rabbi; this was the place for wedding ceremonies, this was the place where the brit milah would be done [a ritual done on the boys on the eighth day after their birth – the circumcision connects the Jewish boy with God and with the Jewish tradition. There is a similar ritual for the girls called bat milah – days after the birth of the girl her father is obliged to go to the synagogue, to announce the birth of his daughter so that she could be given a name].

I've been to a lot of rituals at the synagogue. I remember my cousin Zafira's wedding. Before marriage comes the engagement. This is a beautiful Bulgarian word – godezh (engagement) which means that the future newly-weds engage each other, before getting married. During the engagement ceremony both sides negotiate when the wedding is going to be, where the young family will live, what the dowry that the bride will bring will be, which side will give what, etc. This practically means laying the economic foundations of the new family. After that, during the period of engagement, they date like engaged people – they've already vowed to each other. They date like betrotheds – they have dinners, lunches with kinsmen, without kinsmen, preparing the trousseau. People gather together a week before the wedding to iron the trousseau. It's being ironed and shown to everybody. The two families gather together in full array. Not only mothers, brothers and sisters, but some of the aunts come, too. The entire trousseau is allegedly taken out although it's already ironed and starched. It's ironed and rearranged one more time which is an occasion for everybody to take a look at it. If the groom's mother decides this is not enough she declares her requirements. This happened sometimes. I've heard because I was a curious child. I've heard old women talking about a certain mother-in-law who asked for more bed sheets and said that the underwear was not enough.

After the Ashugar comes bathing the bride and then comes the day of the wedding. These two things must be done in a week. The bride would be bathed and looked at from women from both families in the bathroom. I was too young to be invited to Zafira's (my cousin) bathing, but I was a curious child. Something kept gnawing me from the inside. And what do you think I did. Since my mother was busy with the preparations and couldn't keep an eye on details I slightly pushed a copper ice-bucket with my foot. Ice was needed for the event. The women panicked – somebody had to bring in the ice bucket and I got into the Turkish baths. I couldn't get in otherwise. I was nine or ten years old. Women from both families were already naked in the baths. And that was the most favorable occasion to take a look at the bride. She had to be given a bath. On getting out of the bath the women would take seats in the locker room and have treats of jam and syrup… And if it happened to be Fruitas [Tu bi-Shevat] 17 and water-melon time they would slice cold water-melons as well, but that happed in winter. There was some jam, syrup, biscuits and stuff like that. Everybody should give their best wishes on the occasion, but the idea for all those women was to

take a look at the bride. Where else would they have the chance to see her if not while bathing. They would greet her, wish her good things, but in fact they examined her – a bride was to be healthy with no faults or scars on her body. Imagine a woman with a surgical incision… And she's only twenty years old. What lurks under that incision? Those things must be known. In most of the cases people lived in the same neighborhood, they communicated, they knew what was going on, but sometimes the newly-weds were not from the same town and people wanted to know what kind of person would join their family. I don't have the slightest idea how the man was examined. I don't remember such a thing. But in Vidin there was a family like that. Their relatives married them before they had a sexual intercourse. And she got a sexually disabled man. Despite everything they lived together till the end of their lives. That man didn't suffer from lack of attention. She was a beautiful woman – big and juicy – like a painting… What she usually used to say when this was mentioned was 'This was my luck.' Of course, the family didn't have any children. Later the word of his deficiency spread in the Jewish neighborhood. But they didn't divorce although they both had the right to file for a divorce. Only the clerical council had the right to allow a divorce in the Jewish community. In Ivrit [Hebrew] it's called 'Home of the Law' – the members used to sit and discuss complaints of the incompatibility between husband and wife; the good and bad sides of the marriage in question and finally took a decision on whether to grant a divorce or not. But that woman, she never asked for their advice, never filed for divorce. She accepted this as her destiny; she accepted they would live without children and they passed away quite old – more than 70 years old.

Let's go back to my cousin's wedding. First the groom had to go and officially take the bride from her house, but that was only a mockery. Her father would take her out and the groom was accompanied by his parents. So they headed to the synagogue, lead by the bridesmen, carrying the wedding candles. You can see them on the picture. On reaching the synagogue they went to the tevah. Two people chosen from the family were present by the tevah. In modern weddings they are called best men. They were present at the vows exchange. When the rabbi announced and blessed the marriage those two people were holding the two ends of a tallit and they threw it over the newly-weds. It was the symbol that came to show that the marriage was a fact. Wedding rings were then exchanged. Then a chorus or a duet (depends on what the synagogue had) sang the Mendelssohn march and the sexton who's behind the tevah – would break a glass for good luck and say 'Let this be a good sign' in Ivrit. That was the sign that the marriage was a fact. In those days there were no more ketubbahs – wedding contracts. The wedding took place around 1940. However, mum had a ketubbah. She got married in the same synagogue.

At the entrance (this beautiful entrance that I have already told about) there were some girls waiting with trays full of matsapan [a typical Jewish sweetmeat made from crushed almonds and sugar syrup, served on holidays] and, first of all, when the bride walked through the synagogue doorstep a bowl of candy and rice was spilled. It was a symbol of the wish their happiness to be as multiple as the rice seeds and as sweet as candy. And then these two girls gave treats of matsapan to the guests and the ones who brought flowers could present them. 1940 was quite a difficult year and on top of that no one would go to a restaurant in wintertime. Wedding lunch usually would be held at the groom's mother's house. So that was the custom – engagement should be held in the bride's home, and lunch, dinner or whatever they've decided to give – at the groom's mother's home. In some cases there was no honeymoon, because things were quite mixed-up economically and politically.

The school was located near the synagogue - less than 500 m away, in the same neighborhood. My mother, who was born in Vidin, had studied in the same school. One of the ends of the schoolyard was the end of the neighborhood. The other one reached the barracks and the Baba Vida towers. The last time I saw the school building was in 1988. I don't know if it still exists. I remember we went together with my classmate Benko Koen. We met in front of the school. That's how the small things are. They bring so many memories and cause such excitement. The school was a very old two-storey building. We started learning Ivrit in the 1st grade. We had a female teacher in the Bulgarian subjects – a Jew – a siser of Benko Koen's mother. Her name was Sara Koen but our first teacher was Ernesta Benyozef. Her son ended his days in Sofia as well but his wife was Bulgarian. So our teacher Ernesta taught us some 1st grade Bulgarian subjects such as reading, writing and algebra. Those days no other arithmetic but addition, subtraction and multiplication would be learned in primary school. Arithmetic was a junior high school subject.

The building was a two-storey one and classes were both for boys and girls. There were nine of us in my class whereas my sister's class consisted of seven students. She started three years after me. She finished only the second grade and I finished the fourth grade. We used to study the Torah as well as Bulgarian subjects and Ivrit but those weren't religion lessons. You have no idea how bad I feel because I lost my Torah and Ivrit textbooks during all my migrations. The Ivrit textbook was a piece of art. That's right, it was an artistic ABC book. It started with the Ivrit alphabet and the first words: mom, dad, grandma, grandpa. We used to learn all of that. In the beginning of studying Ivrit we would mark vowels with dashes and dots. Later when we learned the language well we would stop using dots and dashes for the vowels and we would write only consonants. Sometimes there's a mark for a vowel which has to be turned into a sound. Without the dots below reading turned out to be a puzzle of connected words. This helps reading.

We had also a Torah textbook. It would be open lengthwise from right to left. On the first page there was a picture of Abraham with the donkey. Believe me, it's before my eyes. I'm sorry I didn't keep it. I'm pretty sure this made me Jewish as well as learning manners at home. The first page is Abraham with the donkey and the staff. And the Torah goes like this: 'Let it be the First day when God created the World for seven days…' etc. It was written what He created in each one of the days and it was graphically illustrated. We would get to the Jewish generations; we would get to The Flood and Noah's Ark, to the legend for the Tower of Babel etc. All of that we would learn from that Torah textbook. We had a teacher in Ivrit who we used to call Adoni [Mr.] Haim. Our teacher in Torah was Adonim Bito. He had arrived in Vidin from another town, but I can't say which one. Our textbooks would be at home. Most likely our parents bought them from somewhere. I can't say where, because they were not for sale in public bookshops. I think so, because we were only few children and textbooks were probably ordered all at once for the whole class. My mother knew how to read and write in Ladino as she studied Ladino in the Jewish school in Vidin. Papa knew how to read and write in Ivrit (he finished Jewish school and junior high school in Sofia). There he learned some Ivrit. He would help us if we had any difficulties. So that's why even nowadays I say that traditions and Jewish school turned me into a Jewish woman with Jewish consciousness. All I've been through nowadays I've been through in a different way from other people. That's true in any meaning. I even think our perceptions are a bit different. In this connection I would like to cite by memory a poem by Gracia Albuhaire which says that a mother would teach her daughter that whatever she did she might not forget she's Jewish. I'll tell you what I mean. I have a lot of Bulgarian friends. They've always told me as we speak: 'Vicky, I don't find you different.' That's

where I'll answer: 'The fact that you expect to find me different has already made the difference.' We have different manners. I wouldn't say manners are a matter of pedagogy. Manners could be acquired even through the skin. I've already said that. Even when grandma would hand me a cup I would feel love. And when I left the family, where I had been surrounded with so much love, adjustment to other people, to people I didn't know, would be so hard for me. They would never give me that much love. And why should they. All this reflects in life. I know that every parent loves his or her children. But if a baby was born on the Jewish street four houses away from ours, everybody would be happy. That's because everybody lived in the same neighborhood and everybody was close to each other. Everybody would be expecting the brit milah, the celebrations and the joy, because another Jew was born. And people would think what present to give to the family and how the celebration would be held. They would feel involved. The community would feel involved. Those were the excitements of a small community of people.

In Vidin communities had different types of organizations. The organization of women – WIZO 18 had charity designations. That's why only rich women were members and my mother wasn't. Besides she didn't have the time for this type of activities. She wouldn't leave the store so she could go to rich people's houses to collect donations. My father wasn't a member of the board of the Jewish Municipality either. But he had always given Tzedakah – charity for the poor. The money-box for Tzedakah was placed in the synagogue. In this connection there is a Jewish proverb which I remember 'Rich ones should give to poor ones. Poor ones should give to poorer ones. The poorest ones should collect their crumbs and feed them to the birds.' My father was quite a work-worn person and had no time for organized social life. After the workday ended he would be busy dealing with bills and calculations.

We weren't exactly middle-class people. We were lower-middle-class people. We were not poor either. I've never eaten in a public soup-kitchen although there was one for the poor in Vidin. There was an announced poverty level. There was also an ethical level which would stop a parent from announcing his child as a poor one no matter where. There was some pride and people knew it would cause economic constraints in their families, so it wasn't that simple to go and tell someone to write down your child was poor. My sister and I had never been registered in a social refectory for poor people or in such a school although we were not rich.

There used to be Maccabi 19. I was a member of Hashomer Hatzair 20. My father had been a communist since 1918. In 1978 people from the communist party in Varna came to the neighborhood to honor him as one of the oldest members of the party. His activities in the party had never been discussed at home in the presence of the children for safety reasons, but I'd always known that he used to go to meetings. During the Holocaust he would give clothes and food to partisans and political prisoners. He had been arrested twice. I understood well that he was going to bring food, because of the big amounts of food that were being cooked and the food would be cooked inside the house instead of in the yard although it was summer because it had to be done in secret. I remember my grandmother would bake peppers inside the house and this was a type of activity normally done in the yard. Mom knew about his activities. Actually it has always been impossible to hide something from her. Her senses reached everywhere. She showed him understanding and empathy in what he was doing.

I inherited my love for reading from my father. I remember in summer we would get together with the neighbors to do handiwork. We would sit on some tiny chairs and knit or embroider and my

father would read us Emil Zola, Mayne Reid, Jules Verne etc. There was no way for me to come from a family with such Jewish consciousness and not get into Hashomer Hatzair which was the most leftist organization. I couldn't even say that anyone had ever told me my place was there. I think that the environment made me become a member of Hashomer Hatzair. But this was after 9th September – from 1944 till 1948. I was too young before 9th.

And so we used to live well on the Jewish street before the war started in 1941, the flood in 1942 and the outburst of scarlet fever in 1943. In 1942 the Danube froze over, because it was very cold. This closed the German floatable route to the Eastern front. They started bombing the bottleneck at Zhelezni Vrata to open it. The ice dollops started floating down the stream and made specific noises. We could hear them at night and mom said she had been through a lot of years with the Danube frozen, but noises like these meant that something unusual was going on. The next morning we heard there was some heaping of ice dollops at the village of Archar, which is a little after Vidin. There is another bottleneck there. This was the reason for the flood. On the night of 2nd March mom took us to a tailor to take our coats. On our way back some people met us and told us the Danube was overflowing. We were walking down the streets and water was coming after us. Our neighborhood didn't get flooded because it was on the highest place. When the water receded we had to be evacuated because there was a danger of epidemics and we went to Sofia to my mother's nephew Rebeka Beraha. We stayed there for a month. Despite all the measures there was an outburst of scarlet fever in Vidin after the flood. My sister and I were in the Jewish school. I was in 4th grade and she was in 2nd grade. I had started school a year before.

During fascism – in 1941 all the Jewish schools were closed. In 1942 I started studying in a Bulgarian junior high school. The big flood in Vidin from 1942 took place after my first year of my junior high education. The epidemics of scarlet fever occurred after that. It broke out all over Vidin. So school was closed firstly because of the flood, secondly because of the outburst, thirdly when the anti-Jewish laws [Law for the Protection of the Nation] 21 became effective and we no longer had the right to go to school. So I lost the third year in junior high. As a matter of fact until that moment I had never felt I was different. I felt the difference when we had to put on the yellow stars 22 during the Holocaust. This was in the beginning of 1943.

My father was too old to go to a labor camp 23, but they closed his shop. So not only a Jew wouldn't have the right to work in his store, but on top of that they would take all the goods on stock, having before that visited the shop and put an inscription 'Jewish shop' on the store. Those were the moments when you would definitely feel different. We were deprived of the means to earn a living.

So they took the goods but my parents found a Bulgarian carter who was a friend of theirs. They loaded up as much stuff as they could hide in his cart and brought it home. In those years there were no plastic bags so they put the stuff in kegs and buried some in the ground… some went under the mattresses… others were put at the bottom of the wardrobes where a second board had been placed. This way it couldn't be seen. Some people would come to check whether any stuff had been hidden. My mother would work during the night so they couldn't see her, because she was not allowed to work. She would make men's shirts and pants from unbleached calico and sheeting and in this way she earned some money. The only paint on sale in the shops was yellow. They would paint the shirts and pants yellow in the morning so they could sell them to the peasants. Peasants didn't want to wear white. They would get to our house through the tiny doors

leading to our neighbors' yard, buy some of the stuff, made by my mother and bring back some provisions.

In the summer of 1943 the big family of aunt Soultana Koen and her husband Marko arrived after being interned from Sofia. They had four children – Adolf, Sason, Rebeka and Soloucha. Adolf arrived with his Bulgarian wife – Tsvetanka. Soloucha was alone and Rebeka brought her husband Albert Koen and her two children – Izi and Marsel. They all moved to our house. As if that wasn't enough one fine day my mother met a woman with two children on her way back from the post-office. Her name was Redzhina Sidi. The woman asked my mother about the way to the Jewish school in the Jewish neighborhood. My mother showed some interest in the reason why this woman was asking about the Jewish school. She understood they were interned and would be accommodated in the Jewish school, because there was no room left in the private homes. When mom understood that the woman was a widow with two children she invited her home. And imagine how this house where the five of us lived accommodated all of the people listed above. We would also have to share the provisions which we were getting from the peasants with everybody living at home.

The tragedy with the people interned to Vidin was probably a tragedy for all the Jews and the situation was very hard. There was too little space. Things got a little bit more organized after some time anyway. We had only one lavatory – in the yard. So we, the elder ones, started to get up at dawn. Afterwards one by one we all could go to the privy. Some night-pots were put in the corners for the little children. In the entrance-hall where we cooked we would put a brazier with more charcoal and every one of us would warm up some water in his own pot or cup before going to the bathroom to freshen up. Taking a bath was quite a story, because going to the Turkish baths was not that simple. That's how it was – 'The Jewish hour' would come. But all of this is another story.

Let me tell you how we shared the living space. My father, my mother and her sister with her husband shared my mother's bedroom. My parents weren't that old. Probably they needed some privacy, but that's how it was. One of my cousin's children slept on the couch in front of my mother's beds. The widow Redzhina, her two boys, my cousin's older son and one of my aunt's sons shared the hall. There wasn't enough space in this big room for her other son so he had to sleep on a big wooden bench in the entrance-hall. A mobile board was added to the bench. It would be removed during the day but it used to make the bench wider during night. A mattress would be laid on it so my cousin could sleep on it. My cousin Rebeka slept with her husband in grandma's room. My sister and I shared our room with granny. I don't know what to say, all of us managed to live together.

There wasn't enough food for everybody. The time we could spend out of the house was restricted. You would not to be allowed to be out on the street at nine in the morning. We had some coupons for bread, but what could we use them for when we couldn't reach the bakery. And what kind of bread we would eat. It had two crusts as dark-brown as this blouse. It was round and heavy with something like mud-pulp in the middle. And what would my mother do. She was really afraid not to make us ill. So she would take the two crusts – one for me and one for my sister, and split them for three meals. And then she would knead and roll the mud-pulp from the inside into some corn-flour. This she would cover with some newspaper and put into the oven. It couldn't be baked, it was mud and it could only dry out. After that she would share it between grandma, father and herself. If a

neighbor would bring some white flour she would make something for the children. And we would celebrate if somebody brought a handful of walnuts. They're quite a nutritious kind of food. The amount was enough for dinner. When mom pounded them up they quenched our hunger. We would have two stoves burning during winter. One would be the cooker in the so called hall. The other one would be in grandma's room.

When spring came each family used to take out a saucepan and a brazier in the yard. Do you know what are braziers made out of an old greased saucepan and three bolts, heated with some live coals or plain charcoal? Everybody from the community used to have one and if a child smelled your delicious cooking you would definitely let him have some. Even nowadays I wonder how came no conflicts occurred under those circumstances and we separated with love. I can't say how this was possible. There was another drama in our home: until the moment when people from Sofia moved to our house none of us had ever heard about bed-bugs. These families brought some luggage including some blankets, mattresses and some plank-beds and I don't know what. So the entire house got full of bugs thanks to those old things. The house was old and all of the eaves, floors and sashes were wooden. Everything got full of bugs. Can you imagine when they were gone? You won't believe it if I told you – in 1945 when the DDT appeared.

The war with the bugs was a real epopee. This used to be Egyptian labor because the only things that could make the bugs go away were fire and petroleum. We would take out everything. Our beds were with metal bed-springs and panels. We used to make petroleum-soaked pieces of wick and put them into the empty spaces of those beds and strings. We would set them on fire afterwards so the bugs were forced out. After they burned and burned we would spread some petroleum on the edges. It stank but you would be okay with it, because nothing would be biting. We had some rashes with pimples as big as lentils grains. We were just children and we couldn't fall asleep. Despite this horrible menace we didn't get into a conflict. That's how Jewish people used to suffer. That's why I'm saying I don't have the right either to forget it or to stop telling the story about it while I'm alive. That was the suffering of the Jews. It was a great suffering, but it is over. The victims we gave were the political prisoners – no one else.

My father was a communist. One day he headed through the wickets to a meeting-place to bring some clothes and bed-sheets. They were collecting some to use them as bandages. They had found a wounded partisan and he needed some clothes and bandages. Fortunately, they saw only the back of the man who went out with the stuff, but they caught my father anyway: 'Why were you talking to a Bulgarian in the evening? Come with us.' The police-station was downtown, some tough thrashing followed. Well, my father had been stammering since childhood anyway. Policemen couldn't know he did. So he could barely talk. And because they couldn't understand what he was saying they let him go. He only got some thrashing. He didn't go to court and he didn't go to jail. I've already told you the prison was in the neighborhood.

The adults used to talk about deportation and concentration camps, but all of that used to pass somehow around me, because I was young. Later on I realized the entire horror that was ahead of us.

The 9th September 1944 came. The Soviet army entered from Dobrich in the first days. They remained in Vidin for about a week after 9th September. My sister and I heard some big noise coming from the prison around noon, but there was no one to tell us what was going on. We were

at home. In those days everybody used to wear pattens. There were no shoes – only pattens. So we put on our pattens and went to the prison at the moment when political prisons were being released. Their relatives had heard they were being released and went to meet them forming a line. People started singing songs. I can't remember the songs, but one of them was in Russian. The line headed to the square for a rally. They took over the police-station, which, I told you, was on the square. We the children, fools that we were, followed the line of people to the square. They took the police chief out and different people started making speeches. We stayed there till 9 p.m. it was dark then and we went home. In the meantime mom had gone mad, because the last ones who saw us told her we went to the prison – two little girls. They already knew there was a rally on the square. How could they know we would be there wearing our pattens on our feet. Oh, boy, what happened when we got home? While I'm alive I will always remember what a spanking I got from my mother. She was beating mostly me, because I was the older one and I was responsible for Beka. She thought I was supposed to keep that in mind and not go there. So 9th September was the last time I got beaten.

9th September came – the war ended. 9th May came, but poverty didn't end – postwar years. What do you think we used to wear for sandals? You would cut a 1.5 cm thick board into the shape of your foot. This board would be covered with leather. After the board was covered with leather you would put a leather strap on it. The strap would have been previously cut to be bendable. Each board would get a nail and there would be your sandal. That's good, but the problem was that the wood was not good enough to hold the nails. So whenever I got to the end of a street the nails used to start giving me a stabbing pain. My feet aren't big now, and in those days they were tiny. So I used to stop, bang the nails back with a rock or something and then continue my way to the high school. That's good, but what about the rainy weather and all the mud. I didn't have shoes and there was no place you could buy any. So, I used to put on a pair of old galoshes belonging to my mother. But a galosh has no collar – nothing. Snow easily comes in. You have to put them on with a pair of bootees on your feet. My regular trick was to stay in school with my wet feet in those galoshes. And only when I got home I would take them off. And during all that time we used to say 'We survived anyway.' That's why I'm telling you there is a dividing line in my life – before and after the Holocaust.

My father's store was taken away. [On 27th December 1947 in State Gazette was promulgated the Act for the Nationalization of the Industrial and Mining Enterprises according to which the state had to start the liquidation of the private sector. The next step was the promulgation of the Act for the Nationalization of the Banks again in December 1947. In the following year was accepted the Act for the Nationalization of the big, covered, urban real estate – with these acts started the establishment of socialist economics]. We had no financial funds. We had some stuff left from the hidden reserve. My parents adjusted the pram of their grown children and placed a door on it crosswise. So they went to the market with the pram with what was left from the shop. Besides the yarn and the textiles there were also some beads, some village ear-rings, some combs and sewing needles. After that they placed the stuff from the pram on the board as on a street-stall and started selling. In those postwar days people didn't have anything. God forbid you learn what poverty is. I don't wish you that. There was nothing. There was no sewing thread, for instance, but since no one had any money no one could buy a whole pack, if there was some for sale. There was enough money to buy a couple of needles only. We used to stick them two by two on a piece of cardboard. We used to unwind big skeins of thread and wind some on smaller skeins, so people could sew a

button. Three or four years we lived thanks to that pram.

In the meantime trade developed. Obviously other people had also hidden some things. My father started going from Vidin to Sofia with a small briefcase for some stuff, because what we had hidden we sold for about a month. So the pram and its door used to feed us for four years this way.

After that came some years of prosperity. A carpenter told us he could make a covered stall for us and he made one. My parents placed it on the market. They were finally in the lee. And this was prosperity – there was a cover, there was a roof over their heads. Snow was no longer on them. They brought up me and my sister with that.

After 9th September I went directly to high school. I don't even want to remember how I got to draw level with my Bulgarian classmates. There were some really great people in the school. What did my teacher in Literature – Roza Popova and my teacher in Mathematics – Sevastitsa, whose family name I don't remember - owe me? They both used to stay with me after classes only to help me catch up with my classmates. No one paid them extra. No one made them do so. Boys and girls used to be in separate high schools – a boys' school and a girls' school. There were thirty children in the class and six or seven out of them were Jewish. This was after 9th September. We all had caught up with our friends by the end of the first term. Our teachers had the good will to help us achieve that. If they had left us alone we wouldn't have reached the same level as we did with them. That's why I always say – I've had big luck twice in my life – I got lucky with parents and with teachers from the beginning to the end. I was lucky with the teachers even I started studying in the Nurse School.

As I told you, from 1944 till 1948 I was in Hashomer Hatzair. It was horrible. There were no uniforms. We used to be twelve or fifteen children and we gathered together in the Jewish school. We used to study Ivrit. The goal of Hashomer Hatzair was to prepare for the life in Israel. The year was 1948.

After finishing high school in 1948 I went to Sofia to study in the Nurse School. I missed the admittance exams, but I went with my father to meet Racho Angelov – the first Minister of Health. He gave my father a piece of advice: 'There are two profiles – for obstetricians and for nurses, but the obstetricians are sent to villages immediately after they graduate.' He looked at me. I weighed only 40 kg. He continued: 'Your child is not for a village. You must get her to the Nurse School if you want her to work in the city.' In those days people were assigned which means that they were ordered by the authorities to settle down and start work in a place the authorities had chosen. So I became a student in the Nurse School with the Red Cross 24. There I was on a state allowance along Red Cross lines. In other words I was on board and lodging. The place where today Pirogov Hospital is was the Hospital of the Red Cross I had a place to live in. Scraping a living was not a problem. It was the time of coupons. They used to take good care of us in the boarding-house, because of the support from the Red Cross. In other hostels there was tuberculosis. It was the years after the war and there was a coupon system. For instance, I had never eaten leeks with rice, but in those days we used to have such a meal in the free refectory. I used to have some bread with some salt and the leeks I used to give my food to the other girls. I couldn't eat it. The second school for nurses was on the other side of the Russian Monument. Now it's the hospital of the Ministry of Interior.

After graduation I was assigned to the Red Cross Hospital. It's in the yard of the Pirogov Hospital. There was a three-storey building in there. If you were on tram number 5 you could see the operation rooms in the hospital. I had worked there for four complete years when suddenly, in the fifth year, some children from Korea arrived for training. This was during the Korea War. For those new needs a child-section was opened in the hospital. I started working there. I married my husband and came here – to Varna.

I couldn't visit the Jewish Home during my study in Sofia, because I was in a boarding-house. After starting work I didn't have much spare time. I used to take some night shifts and I could go to the Jewish Home only once in a while for a discussion or a concert. I used to go with my friend Souzi Vidas.

In 1948 all my relatives moved to Israel 25. My father insisted on our remaining in Bulgaria. He was a real communist and thought he would participate in building the communist system. He thought that we, his children, were going to live in socialism. After 9th September I was a member of Hashomer Hatzair and my sister – of BCP 26, but I can't say exactly since when.

My sister also became a student in Sofia in 1950. She used to live in lodgings while I was living in the boarding-house. Her place was on the corner of Georgi Kirkov St. and Bratya Miladinovi St. this was quite close to the Zhenski Pazar [Women's Market]. Tram number 4 used to stop exactly opposite her place. In those days SofZhilFond [A shortened version of Sofia Housing Fund – a department in Sofia Municipality whose aim was to operate with the housing fund – the vacant flats and houses. After the nationalization of the covered urban real estate Sofzhilfond was responsible for accommodating the citizens of Sofia in different places for living. Later on, after 1960, the department started the building of new flats.] used to give rooms for rent. There were four more rooms on the floor where my sister lived. She lived in one of them. The chief of the post office at that time Albert Koen lived in another one. The daughter of aunt Sarina and uncle Leon lived in the third one with her Bulgarian husband. Three students shared the fourth one. I used to visit my sister quite often.

Albert Koen's family were friends with my husband's aunt. They had seen me coming to visit my sister and they knew I was working in Pirogov Hospital. They liked me for their nephew and decided I was a good match for him. He was an officer in the Navy in Varna. They arranged me a date with him in the house where my sister lived. I had to take a night shift in the hospital the same night. I had to wash all the tools after the shift. I set up palette and opened all the windows for ventilation because it was March. I poured some spirits on the palette and scratched a match. At the same moment the door to the hall opened. There was a draught, the fire broke into flames and caught half of my blouse and my hair. So I lost some hair, my eyelashes and my eyebrows. Everything was singed. I went to meet my future husband like that. Despite the accident I had given a promise. The date was at 10 p.m.

My sister used to be a beauty too. My matchmakers (if I have to be more specific – Albert Koen's wife Berta) decided to hide her. She asked her not to show up while we were on our first date. 'We settled this job for your sister. When you become of age we'll think of you as well.' She was a second year student at that time. When I understood I got angry and decided they shouldn't hide my sister. I remember the only things we had on the table on our first date were some pounded up walnuts and some peanuts. On the table we were with Albert and Berta Koen, my husband's uncle

and aunt – Yona and Bucha Adzhiman, Yosif Almalekh (who they were dating me with) and a friend of his named Eliezer Moskovich. We were drinking lemonade. I was irritated because they had hidden my sister and without rhyme or reason I said 'I have a younger sister. I'm going to introduce her to you.' When I turned my back to call my sister my future husband told his friend 'What a nice ass.' I felt insulted. I don't think his first comment about me should have been that. He was such an earthly and calm person.

We met on 10th March – my birthday in 1955. On 29th April we got engaged in Sofia in the presence of relatives of his and mine. Our wedding was in Varna – my husband's home town. We were married only before the registrar with no ketubbah, no Ashugar and no Ravni. In those days my parents used to live in Vidin. They came a day before and spent the night at their in-laws' apartment. The same night my mother-in-law made a grand scandal, a real hell for me, for reasons I don't want to relate now. That day was really indicative as from then on our living together passed under the banner of scandal. This continued for 23 years - this was the time during which my husband, my son and I lived together with my parents-in-law. It ended when my husband and I could afford a house of our own and started living separately due to my firm insistence.

I got married on 29th April and on 1st February I gave birth to my son Sami – Samuil Yosif Almalekh. At the time when I was pregnant it wasn't possible to see the sex of my future baby. I couldn't imagine giving a birth to a girl and naming it after my mother-in-law. I had warned my husband: 'We have had a lot of wars in the family, but if you start a war about the fact that I won't name my future child after your mother – this will be the last war.' Thank Goodness it was a boy. It was clear that he would be named after my father-in-law and I didn't mind. We had to do his brit on the eighth day. It could be done only in Sofia in those days. My mother-in-law raised hell again. She thought it wasn't necessary to do the brit: 'Who does a brit nowadays? Where are we going to find money to call a mohel from Sofia?' Then I told her: 'This child is your first grandson and has your husband's name. You accepted me as a Jewish woman in this house. I came to you to find a Jewish family. I took a circumcised Jewish man for a husband. How much money have you made for your life? It's less than 20 stotinkas [0.2 leva]. So you will not talk about money. Your son who has a son and has become a father has his responsibilities. He will find a way.'

We didn't do the brit on the eighth day, because the baby got ill. I also left the maternity hospital with a lot of complications. We did it on the thirthieth day. It was performed in our home in the presence of a mohel from Sofia, whose name I can't remember. He arrived in the morning on the day of the brit and left in the afternoon, because otherwise he had to spend the night at home and there was no space. They counted on me as a nurse to take care of the baby's wound. David Levi and his wife Dora (a professional obstetrician, who used to look after me through the entire period of pregnancy besides the consultations) became a sandak and a sandaka. A sandak is a man chosen by the family who has to hold the baby during his circumcision. A sandaka is his wife. She has to take the baby from the mother's arms, to take him to the place of the circumcision and deliver him to the arms of the mohel who accomplishes the act of circumcision. It's the act of uniting with God. After the brit the sandaka takes the baby once again and delivers him in his mother's arms. My father-in-law and my mother-in-law were present at the brit as well. My father-in-law announced the baby's name to the mohel. They had placed some gauze with some cotton soaked in wine in the baby's mouth so he couldn't feel pain during the circumcision. I had run away to the end of a large balcony at the end of that floor so I wouldn't listen to the baby's cry. It was

March and spring was coming. Seagulls had started showing up. Some were flying and croaking above the balcony and I felt like that was the baby's cry. This twenty-minute period felt like it's never-ending. I don't know how I didn't go berserk. After that they called me when they removed the wine from his mouth. I was almost unconscious. I took the baby to my breast immediately and he threw up his mother's milk. I didn't take into consideration he was full of wine. I should have left him throw up the wine first.

When I moved to my husband's family there was already a big change in celebrating Jewish holidays. My mother-in-law used to go to Bet Am 27 for the holidays, but I think she was too lazy to celebrate at home. They had their excuse – they were communists. There was no place where you could buy kosher meat any more. My mother-in-law used to bring and eat pork. My parents never put pork in their mouths.

My husband Yosif Samuil Almalekh was born in Varna in 1923. He was a marine officer – chief commander in politics (CCP). In December of 1955 he suffered the Geneva dismissal – the first dismissal in the army after 9th September. He was out of work and got hired as a manager of two of the hotels in the Druzhba resort [Some big and famous sea resorts built at that time – Drouzhba, Albena, Golden Sands, Varna, Sunny Beach]. He worked there for two years and a half. When Sami was a year and a half old – in other words the summer of 1957 – they set him up. They accused him of obstinately going to dinner with the ambassadors of Switzerland and Israel, who were guests at the hotel. In a week he was fired from Balkantourist [a state business enterprise established in 1948 with the main task to organize the international tourism in Bulgaria and the trips of Bulgarian citizens abroad] and expelled from the [communist] party. He was unemployed for thirteen months. At that time I hadn't started working either. I was looking after my child. My husband didn't earn anything because he was chased away, fired and expelled from work. I don't know what to tell you – we went through a difficult period. At one point an acquaintance of my old father-in-law's from the harbour found him a job in the cereals warehouses, which were across from the harbour. That's how he started dealing with accounting as an economist. He changed a few places afterwards. He worked as an economist till the end of his length of service.

My husband was earthly, calm and funny by nature. He never strained for anything in this world. So God has never sent him to a straining job and always sent straining jobs to me. In this world I've never got a 20-stotinki bun without working hard for it, but I'll go to Kingdom-come with my debts paid, without a single one left unpaid.

On 31st November 1957 I started working in the Workers' Hospital in Varna, where I retired in 1986. For my forty-year length of service I have never been felt any anti-Semitic moods. Only once a hospital attendant, who was not a Bulgarian lady, but a Serbian one, called me 'chifutka' 28. She had come with the Yugoslavian children between 1944 and 1950. So she came with those Yugoslavian children, got married and stayed. So this woman, who everybody used to call Mara-the-Serbian, called me 'chifutka'. At that time the chief doctor of the hospital that I worked in was a Jew. His name was Hari Kaponov. I went to see him and I told him. He promised he was going to call her but he changed my opinion by saying: 'Nurse Almalekh, it is beneath your dignity to waste your time on Mara-the-Serbian.'

When Sami reached the age of six months my sister also came to Varna after graduating in chemistry. She started work in the factory in Devnya. At first she was on probation, but they liked

her a lot and hired her on a permanent contract. She was accommodated in a hostel in Devnya. She used to visit us often in Varna. When she decided she spontaneously jumped on the train – we would eat together, she would see the child, we would talk and then she would go back to Devnya. Later she hired an attic room here in Varna. There was a common wash-room with a common lavatory. There was no bathroom. When Sami turned six the winter was very bad. We were afraid how our parents were going to live through it. My sister sheltered them in that small room. So that's how three people used to live in those poor conditions for three years until my sister got a house from the factory. The house in Vidin had been left empty for two years until they decided they could no longer live there. They sold it in 1962 and in 1963 they settled down in Varna. My mother died in 1977 and my father – in 1979. They were buried according to the seven-day Jewish ritual, despite the fact there wasn't a rabbi. The prayer must be read by the closest male inheritor. That turned out to be my son. All of them were buried in white bed-sheets in covered coffins. That's how we buried my sister in 1992 and my husband in 2000, too. That's how my father-in-law was buried in 1976 and my mother-in-law in 1988. In December 1977 my husband, Sami and I moved to a house of our own.

I used to have some relatives in Israel. My first real contacts with them started in 1961. Till that moment we couldn't write letters, because my husband was an officer and our correspondence was always checked. In 1965 was the first time when I went to Israel despite the fact I wasn't keen on going. They refused to give a permission to my husband three times, because he was an ex-officer. One day he boiled over. He was quite a patient person but when things went beyond all tolerable boundaries he would fall into a fit of rage. He went to the militia and said 'All right you won't let me go. Will you let my wife and my child to?', 'We will.' He immediately wrote an application without thinking how much money we have and, on top of that, some time passed before his coming home and he forgot to tell us.

After some time there came a message saying that Sami and I were permitted to go. At that time my son was nine years old. I didn't want to go without my sister. She also managed to get the necessary papers and we went on a ship after some very short preparations. At the moment the ship was out of Galata [a suburb of Varna by the sea] we all got seasick. Only my sister could go to bring some water. So until reaching the harbor in Haifa we hadn't got out of the cots. It was the same and even worse on our way back. It was so bad that my husband had to get on the ship to take Sami out in his arms. He was so seasick he couldn't get out of the ship. In Israel they told us that a fellow-student of my sister's went to see her relatives in Israel and stayed there, because she didn't want to go through the seasick horror once more. I met all of my relatives. I hadn't seen them for seventeen years. They were very happy. There was a cousin of mine living in a kibbutz –Vida Pinkas and I spent ten days with her, Sami and her child. We were surrounded with so much care. They would organize walks and trips. They would choose where to take us to – to places with no risks. We had a great time, but on the very first day I said I couldn't live there. I think it is fair for the country of Israel to exist. This is what justice is. Why should Bulgaria and Turkey and all the other states have their own countries? Besides it's located on the same land that was the land of origin of the Jews, but I couldn't live there. Both my husband and I have been to Israel four times, not always together. My sister went there only once. That country is very different from what I am used to. I realized that if I stayed there I was going to be uneducated. I knew how to talk in Ivrit, but a nurse must be educated enough to help with the doctor's round and to write some papers. I had forgotten now to write. I liked it there. I liked their democracy. That terror reached us as well.

In 1982 during my second visit everybody felt indebted to vaunt with what alarm-system he had or what protecting grille there was on the floor. It would be the first thing which they showed me. The second thing – some different insurance companies had appeared. They used to make people take out insurances by force. If you refused to insure the same night you would have your shop or your apartment on fire. We all are interested in such things but in our home with our roof above us.

So when in 1990, on New Year's Eve, my son rushed to go and live in Israel I wrote him a letter and I left it in the outside pocket of one of his bags: 'You should always keep in mind that our street door will always have a green light. You can always enter, come back and stay.' And I left him keys for home in the pocket. Let him always keep in mind that he can always come back. By the law as a new emigrant he had the right to get six-month training in Ulpan provided by the country. After that he was to get a job. Yes, but there were jobs in construction only in theory. When they said a construction technician they thought that he should go to the construction site, grab the wheel-barrow and start building. They didn't need managers in technology. I don't know what the situation now is but at that time those highly-eduacted men replaced their seasonal Arab workers. He left home in December and on the next 1st March I was already there. I stayed in March and April. I just stood there these two months and observed. At this time my son told me how many jobs he had changed and all of them were the least prestigious possible. At the end of the aliyah they hired him as a head-technician and he worked for six months, but he didn't get a worker to pound the border pegs and he had to do it himself. The night after this work-day his knee was already full of water, because he had a disease. He took three days off to get some injections so he could walk. On the fourth day he showed up at work and they told him: 'Go home! We don't need any sick people!'

After my sister's death in 1992 I lost 17 kilos. My hands started shaking. I used to have that crazy insomnia, because a looked after her till her last breath. After her death I was driven to a sanatorium and burglars broke into her house and took whatever they could. Before it was a year after my sister's death some relatives of mine went back to Israel. They were here for the summer. They told my son about my condition. He came back to Bulgaria. He found a pile of medications on the table and he understood this was not going to work like that. He spent one more year in Israel so he could repay the subsidies he had been given at the beginning and he came back to Bulgaria. He had worked only for ten months of his three years' stay there. Now Sami works for a construction company in Varna. We live together because my age doesn't allow us to keep two apartments and two households.

I am a leftist. In my eyes capitalism is a curse for humanity. On 10th November 1989 29 I was on vacation in Hisar [resort] with some friends from Varna. We heard on the radio that Todor Zhivkov 30 was ousted. I said my supposition in front of everybody that that probably was our last time together in Hisar. No one believed me then but that's what really happened. After 10th November my life changed completely. We got poor. I retired in 1986 after forty years of service and my pension was 141.90 BGN [around 70 EUR]. Today my pension with the widow-extra is 135.30 BGN. For twenty years I have never reached my first pension at these standards. No one can live like that. I'm pretty sure that (God forbid) such a regime should definitely lead to revolutionary changes; if these changes should be called European Union it is going to be a change. This can't continue for too long. There is no way.

I keep in touch with the Jewish community; I am a member of Shalom 31 and WIZO. I go to the Jewish Home, which I really think of as my second home – Home of the people. Our community is small, but it's full of life. This revival started about ten years ago. The point is that the population is going low. The ones who gather together are old people. The middle-aged generation (30 to 50 years olds) make separate meetings, because their interests are different from ours. All of them are members of most of the organizations. I got 500 German marks once and after that – 1000 dollars as compensations.

I think that the prime cause for all of the bad luck in life both for me and my family was fascism. It turned the lives of all the Jews upside-down. You can say it brought the condition for the assimilation. If fascism didn't pass through our beautiful Bulgaria, which gave us a second life, would the Jews move from Bulgaria to Israel? None of those fifty thousand people that left could forget what happened. A lot of people stayed here. The social structure changed. All the consequences for mixed marriages and for the lack of such ones came from there, too. The years of forgotten traditions came. There is a sharp division – crucial time. I imagine it as, you know what happens, when a flood ends and after the water goes out... In my opinion, in my mind, all the negative things are due to fascism. Just think about it. In my life for 75 years there has been one war, two revolutions, fascism and the horror of it. Isn't that too much for a single human life? It is impossible to be unaffected. And it's not only about me, but about the entire Jewish community. It's fixed in the subconscious and it can't be deleted.

Translated by Dimka Stoeva

Glossary:

1 Vidin
a town in north-western Bulgaria, situated on the bank of the Danube River. Population – 123,000 people. It was established in ancient times on the place of the Celtic settlement of Dounonia. Later on, the Romans built a fortress town called Bononia. During the time of the Roman Empire it was the main town of Gorna Miziya Province. During the Second Bulgarian Kingdom king Ivan Stratsimir founded the Bdin Kingdom which existed for only 32 years – from 1364 till 1396 when it fell under Ottoman rule. In this town the Jewish community has existed since 13th c. Its first members were refugees from Byzantium and Hungary. According to the chronicles from 1376 here had worked the rabbis Moysey Yevany and Shalom Noyshtadsky, the latter had founded the first rabbi school in Bulgaria. In XV-XVI c. Jews from different countries settled in Vidin. From a document by Samuel de Medina we know that in 1558 the Jews from Vidin were mainly occupied with producing yellow cheese. In 1784 here settled the Ventoura family who moved from Dalmatia. The members of the family later had positions in the Jewish town council. In 1807 the doctor Koen was wrongfully accused that he had tried to poison the Turk Osman Pazvantoglu. The slander was refuted and from then on the Vidin Jews celebrate the so-called Vidin Purim.

2 Ladino
also known as Judeo-Spanish, it is the spoken and written Hispanic language of Jews of Spanish and Portugese origin. Ladino did not become a specifically Jewish language until after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 (and Portugal in 1495) - 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 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 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.

3 Russian-Turkish War (1877-78)

After the loss of the Crimean War (1856) the Russian Empire made a second attempt in 1877 to secure its outlet from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean by conquering the strategic straits (Bosporus and Dardanelles) and strengthening its position in the Balkans. The pretext of the war declaration was pan-Slavism: protecting the fellow Christian Orthodox and Slavic speaking population of the Ottoman controlled South Eastern Europe. From the Russian controlled Bessarabia the Russian army entered Romania and attacked the Ottomans south of the Danube. With enthusiastic Bulgarian support the Russians won the decisive battles at Plevna (Pleven) and the Shipka straight in the Balkan Mountains. They took Adrianople (Edirne) in 1878 and reached San Stefano (Yesilkoy), an Istanbul suburb, where they signed a treaty with the Porte. This provided for an autonomous Bulgarian state, under Russian protection, bordering the Black and the Aegean seas, including also most of historic Thrace and Macedonia. Britain (safeguarding status quo on the European continent) and Austria-Hungary (having strategic interests in the region) initiated a joint Great Power decision to limit Russian dominance in the Balkans. Their diplomatic efforts were successful and resulted in the Treaty of Berlin in 1878. According to this Bulgaria was made much smaller and large populations of Bulgarians remained outside the new frontiers. Eastern Rumelia as an autonomous Ottoman province was created. In Berlin the Romanian, the Serbian and the Montenegrin states were internationally recognized and Austria-Hungary was given the right to occupy Bosnia and Herzegovina to restore order.

4 The town of Ferdinand

A settlement which had different names during the different historical periods: Montana, Koutlovitsa, Ferdinand, Mikhailovgrad, Montana. It is situated in north-western Bulgaria along the valley of the Ogosta River. The first name of the town was derived from the name Montan/orum/ in 134 AD from the name of a Roman military camp. After the fall of the Roman Empire Montana became part of the Byzantine territories. In V-VI c. the town fell into decline and in the end of VI c. disappeared from the map. Later on, in VII c., on the remnants of Montana the Slavs founded a

settlement called Koutlovitsa. After the end of the Russian-Turkish war, 1877-1878, and the Liberation of Bulgaria, Koutlovitsa became the centre of the district. The main means of living of the locals were connected to agriculture and stock-breeding. There were about 50,000 inhabitants. On 2nd December 1891 the village was granted a town statute and its name was changed to Ferdinand.

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 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.

7 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.

8 Jewish neighborhoods in Sofia

The so-called Jewish neighborhood is situated in the center of Sofia, in the western part of Pozitano Street where a lot of Jews used to live. The commercial activities were carried out around the Sveti Nikola Passage, where a lot of little Jewish shops were located. According to data from 1878 in Sofia lived 3,689 Jews. In 1887 the mayor of Sofia Dimitar Petkov gave plots of land to the poor Jews in the quarters of Iuchbounar and Konyovitsa, which gradually turned into Jewish neighborhoods. Apart from these two Jewish neighborhoods the Sofia Jews lived in the streets Budapeshta, Alabin, Moskovska, Kaloyan, Ekzarkh Yosif – these streets are in the central part of Sofia mainly around the Synagogue, Halite and the Mineral Bath Houses.

9 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 he also wrote short stories and essays and plays. Tolstoy took part in the Crimean War and his stories based on the defense of Sevastopol, known as the 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.

10 Thomas Mayne Reid (1818-1883)

a British novelist, author of adventure books for children and young people. He was born on 4th April 1818 in a poor Irish family. In 1840 he left for America where in the Wild West he occupied himself with hunting, trade with the Indians, he was a trapper. He also worked as a correspondent of the Spirt of Time newspaper and he took part in the Mexican War of 1846-1848. In the end of the war he was promoted to the rank of captain. In 1848 he left for Europe with the intention of taking part in the revolutionary movements in Bavaria and Hungary. Due to delay he settled in London. After being unsuccessful as a journalist and merchant, Mayne Raid decided to commit to the literature. His first novel The Rifle Rangers was published in 1850. This was followed by The Scalp Hunters, The Quadroon, Oceola and The Headless Horseman. He died in 1883.

11 Devnya

the third biggest town in Varna District. Nowadays the population of the town is about 11,000 people and includes three villages – Devnya, Reka Devnya and Markovo. In the end of 1950s started the construction of the Devnya factories which produce nitric acid, ammonia, cement, sugar, sodas and polymers. The whole region is known as the Valley of Chemistry.

12 Baba Vida fortress

The only medieval Bulgarian castle entirely preserved to this day. Its construction began in the second half of the10th century on the foundation of a former Roman fortress. Most of it was built between the end of the 12th century and the late 14th century. Today, the Baba Vida fortress is a national cultural memorial.

13 Turkish bath

the traditional Turkish bath appeared with the arrival of the Turks in Anatolia and it includes the traditions of the Roman and Byzantine baths combined with the Muslim principles of purity of the body and respect to water. In this way the Turkish bath was created as a real conception. It is called Hammam and was with the status of an institution. The traditional Turkish bath is a place for meetings for people of different status. The first bathing takes places forty days after the birth. The objects used in the ritual are: peshtemal – a big towel, wooden slippers, a little basin, boxes – a big and a small one, a carpet for dressing and undressing and rose water. A most important element is the careful cleansing of the skin which is conducted by a Tellak – a man or a woman who soap and

scrub clients' bodies. All these elements are wonderfully depicted in the famous painting by Enger 'Turkish Bath'.

14 Rakia
strong liquor, typical in the Balkan region. It is made from different kinds of fruit (grape, plum, apricot etc.) by distillation.

15 Halva
A sweet confection of Turkish and Middle Eastern origin and largely enjoyed throughout the Balkans. It is made chiefly of ground sesame seeds and honey.

16 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.

17 Fruitas
The popular name of the Tu bi-Shevat festival among the Bulgarian Jews.

18 WIZO
Women's International Zionist Organization; a hundred year old organization with humanitarian purposes aiming at supporting Jewish women all over the world in the field of education, economics, science and culture. The history of WIZO in Bulgaria started in 1923. Its founder was the wife of the rabbi of Sofia, Riha Priar. After more than 40 years of break during communism WIZO restored its activities oi 1991 with headquarters in Sofia and branches in the countryside. From that moment on it organises a variety of cultural and social activities and cooperates with other democratic women's organisations in the country. Currently the chairwoman of WIZO in Bulgaria is Ms. Alice Levi.

19 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.

20 Hashomer Hatzair in Bulgaria

'The Young Watchman'; A Zionist-socialist pioneering movement established in Bulgaria in 1932, Hashomer Hatzair trained youth for kibbutz life and set up kibbutzim in Palestine. During World War II, members were sent to Nazi-occupied areas and became leaders in Jewish resistance groups. After the war, Hashomer Hatzair was active in 'illegal' immigration to Palestine.

21 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.

22 Yellow star in Bulgaria

According to a governmental decree all Bulgarian Jews were forced to wear distinctive yellow stars after 24th September 1942. Contrary to the German-occupied countries the stars in Bulgaria were made of yellow plastic or textile and were also smaller. Volunteers in previous wars, the war-disabled, orphans and widows of victims of wars, and those awarded the military cross were given the privilege to wear the star in the form of a button. Jews who converted to Christianity and their families were totally exempt. The discriminatory measures and persecutions ended with the cancellation of the Law for the Protection of the Nation on 17th August 1944.

23 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.

24 Bulgarian Red Cross

the oldest NGO in Bulgaria. It was established in 1878 by eminent Bulgarian doctors and statesmen

– Dr. Dimitar Mollov and Sava Mirkov. The statute of the society was officially ratified by Knyaz Aleksander Batenberg on 20th September 1885 and the society was acknowledged by the International Red Cross Committee on 20th October 1885. On 28th May 1900 a school for nurses of mercy was officially opened with the society. The school still exists today.

25 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.

26 Bulgarian Communist Party [up to 1990]

the ruling party of the People's Republic of Bulgaria from 1946 until 1990 when it ceased to be a Communist state. The Bulgarian Communist Party had dominated the Fatherland Front coalition that took power in 1944, late in World War II, after it led a coup against Bulgaria's fascist government in conjunction with the Red Army's crossing the border. The party's origins lay in the Social Democratic and Labour Party of Bulgaria, which was founded in 1903 after a split in the Social-Democratic Party. The party's founding leader was Dimitar Blagoev and its subsequent leaders included Georgi Dimitrov.

27 Bet Am

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

28 Chifuti

Derogatory nickname for Jews in Bulgarian.

29 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.

30 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.

31 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.