

Venezia Kamhi

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Sofia

Bulgaria

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After the political changes in Bulgaria of November 10, 1989, life became harder for my family. Everything we had built and fought for started to fall apart. I value Eastern Europe's opening to the world. History goes on. We had capitalism, then socialism, and now a democracy. Life goes forward, and that is how it should be. Changes are natural, but they are very hard for us.

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My family background

My ancestors came from Spain two centuries ago. They belong to the Sephardi settlers' group that came to the Balkan Peninsula in the 18th century. My paternal grandfather and grandmother lived in Sofia. My paternal grandmother and grandfather were born in Sofia. My mother's parents were born in Kiustendil, and so was my mother. My paternal grandfather, Mordohai Konorti, was born in the 1840s in Sofia, which was then under Turkish rule. I do not remember exactly what my father's parents' occupation was, because I was a little girl when my grandfather died in 1938. I do not remember my grandmother, Lucia Konorti, either; she died before I was born. She was born in the 1850s and was probably a housewife.

I remember my grandfather Mordohai sitting in the courtyard and reading big books in Hebrew. He used to give me 1 lev every Saturday to buy something for myself – he gave money only to me probably because I was his youngest granddaughter. He spoke Ladino and Bulgarian. He used to wear casual clothes. He didn't work at the time that I remember him.

We used to lay a big table every Saturday after Grandfather came back from the synagogue and the whole family used to gather around it. My mother, Regina Konorti, used to cook chicken soup, chicken with rice and traditional meat pastry. My grandfather used to perform the whole ritual for Pesach. Our neighbors loved to visit us for this holiday because my grandfather and my father were very good singers.

My father had a younger brother and a sister, Baruh Konorti and Buka Konorti. Baruh was a barber. He went to live in Palestine in 1926. He had a lot of difficulties there and he wrote many letters to my father asking for help. He had to leave Palestine and come back to Bulgaria in order to go to Israel in 1949; he settled in Akko.

My mother's parents were from Kiustendil. My maternal grandfather, Israel Lazar, was born in 1872 and died in 1945 in Sofia. He was a merchant. My maternal grandmother, Venezia Lazarova, was a housewife.

All my mother's relatives moved from Kiustendil to Sofia after my grandmother died. My older uncle Buko Lazar got married and gathered the whole family in a big house on Serdika Street in Sofia. This house belonged to an aunt of my mother's; unfortunately I do not remember her name. My older uncle lived there, together with his two brothers and two sisters. My mother also lived there before she got married. Later, everybody moved with his or her families to Israel. Only two sisters-in-law of my mother's kin remained in Sofia. My uncle Albert Lazar got married in 1940 and his daughter was born in 1943. Uncle Buko died in 1942. My youngest uncle, Nisim Lazar, got married in 1946 and he moved to Israel in 1948. Buko and Albert Lazar had a fruit shop. I think my grandfather in Kiustendil had been in that trade, and my uncles inherited that profession from him. Nisim Lazar was in the clothing trade, and Aunt Matilda was a housewife.

My father, Avram Mordohai Konorti, was born in 1900 in Sofia. He had studied in the Jewish school. He spoke Ladino, Hebrew, Bulgarian and a little Italian, because he had been a captive in Italy during World War I. He had a command of Hebrew and Bulgarian, spoken and written. My mother was illiterate. She learned to read and write when my brother and I started school. My father was a carter. He transported goods from the railway station to different factories and shops. I suppose that my mother and father got married in 1921-1922, because my brother was born in 1923. They didn't get married before the registrar; they had only a religious wedding.

My parents wore traditional European clothes. My father used to wear a jacket, trousers and an overcoat, my mother, dresses. There was nothing special about their clothes.

My father went to the synagogue, mostly on holidays. He dressed elegantly. He wore a hat, and he had a tallit. He used to take his Jewish prayerbook and go to the synagogue. We prepared the festive table before his return. The Jewish community wasn't that well organized at that time, as it is now. Then 5,000 Jews lived in Sofia. We are only that many in the whole country now. We had a Jewish community center, Bet Am, a school and a synagogue. The strict organization of Bulgarian Jews now is mostly a consequence of the small number of Jews in the country. The people want to feel Jewish, but, let us admit, step-by-step the Bulgarian population assimilated us.

Growing up

My first home was in the Jewish neighborhood in Sofia, on Dr. Zlatarev and Odrin Streets. The house was destroyed and now there is a block of flats on its place. My daughter lives there now. My father was born in that house. Half of the house belonged to my father and the other half to my aunt. The house itself was not big: a one-story brick house with one large room, one narrow corridor and a small room where my grandfather lived. We had an entry hall where my mother used to cook, and we also received guests there.

We had a big courtyard with a garden and hens. There were flowers in the garden, mostly. The hens lived in the corner of the yard and laid many eggs. We also had a goat whose name was Roska. I was very slim as a child and my parents were told I had to drink goat milk. That's why they bought the goat. My father was a carter, so we had a horse and a special building for it. All the courtyards in the Jewish neighborhood were connected via small doors and we could go from one house to another without going out on the street. Even during the blockade in 1923 [a year of coups d'etat and curfew] people could go and visit their neighbors. The blockade was so strict in June 1923 that when my mother was giving birth to my brother, Mordohai Avram Konorti, on June 9 [coup d'etat when prime minister Alexander Stamboliiski was overthrown], soldiers came to verify that my mother really needed a midwife before they would let her come to our house.

There was electricity and water in the house. We used coal-burning stoves for heating. The mornings when I got up early for school were very pleasant. My mother used to get up earlier and fire the stove, and it was "roaring" and its light was blazing; it was lovely on the ceiling.

We lived in the Jewish neighborhood on the western side of Opalchenska Street. There were Bulgarians living together with us, of course, and we got along very well. When my mother left for Israel in 1949, she asked our Bulgarian neighbors to take care of me. They have always been very friendly and gentle with me. They used to call me Vizka. After my mother emigrated, they felt somehow obliged to take care of me, as I was not old enough to take care of myself alone. I was only 20 years old.

When I was a child, most Jews were merchants. Of course, they practiced other professions, too. My father, for example, was a carter; there were craftsmen, too. Jewish people belonged mostly to the middle class, but there were very rich people, too – factory owners, tradesmen with big shops. Most people had a good occupation until 1939 when the "National Defense Law" was accepted. After 1939, Jews did not have the right to own shops or have prestigious jobs, and that is when privation and limitations began. The National Defense Law was very harsh on the Jewish people.

There was a Jewish community in the neighborhood. The synagogue was on Osogovo Street. The Jewish school was also there. This building is a school once again and it is a bit larger now. There was a very small synagogue in the school. Many parties were organized in the school, and there was a lot of singing and dancing. This is where I heard the famous singer Mati Pinkas for the first time. I had seen her as a very young girl when she used to visit one of her aunts who lived on our street.

We observed Shabbat. We usually worked during the day, but in the evenings we observed Shabbat. Pesach was my favorite holiday. All the children in the neighborhood used to meet and play with walnuts. We used to arrange carnations and quinces, and they smelled lovely. We spent eight days enjoying a happy holiday. Our neighbors used to visit us on Pesach and everyone used to have their own table. Many younger families used to come to us as they did not know the Pesach ritual. At my house, Grandfather used to perform the whole ritual. My mother used to wash all the dishes with soda in a big cauldron every year before Pesach, and the dishes became really bright. She did that because my grandfather insisted – he was very religious. She used to do that every year – she cleaned everything and after that we brought matzah. During Pesach we used to eat only matzah for eight days, no other bread. After I got married, I did not observe those rituals that strictly anymore.

We used to celebrate Frutas – a holiday of fruits – which is also in the spring, after Pesach. On this holiday seven or nine kinds of fruits are mixed on a big plate. Afterward, we put the fruits in bags and gave them to children. My granddaughter also enjoys that holiday very much. Another holiday when we used to gather was Hanukah. We used to light eight candles on eight consecutive days: the first day, my grandfather lit the candle; the second day, my father; the third day, my mother; the fourth, my brother; and after him, it was my turn to light my candle.

I had a happy childhood. My parents got along very well and the atmosphere at home was calm. I got new shoes and clothes for every holiday. I remember that my father sent my mother and me to the town of Dupnitsa to visit his brother, and that was my first journey by train – in the 1930s.

My family was wonderful. My father loved to sing, and he really sang very well. He, my brother and I used to sit on the bed in the bedroom on Sundays and sing songs from songbooks. My father sang songs in Ladino. The texts were very romantic.

I do not speak Hebrew. I have been to Israel five or six times, but I only know some 100 words. I did not study at a Jewish school. I don't know why I started at a Bulgarian general school directly. I graduated from Vassil Drumev primary school, which still exists now in Baltova vodenitsa. Afterward, I studied at High School No. 13 and I graduated night school. I have a very pleasant memory of my first teacher, Mrs. Darina Alexandrova, who came to live in our quarter and used to visit me even after my daughter was born.

As I did not have grandparents living outside of Sofia, I had to spend the holidays at home. In the 1930s, when I was a child, we used to amuse ourselves a lot by going to the Odeon theatre, which was then on Vaptzarov Square. I recall many beautiful weddings in the synagogue. There was an empty space next to our house and the children used to meet and play different games or perform theatrical recitations.

I was only 15 years old when my father fell very ill and was bedridden for a year and a half. My brother owned a brush workshop on Pozitano Street at that time. My father died of cancer. He left us very early.

My brother, Mordohai, is six years older than me. He was born on June 9, 1923. He studied brush-making in a craft school before World War II began. He did not graduate because we were interned outside of Sofia. He went for an exam after September 9, 1944, and he became a master and got the right to open his own shop. He left for Israel, together with my mother, in January 1949. My mother thought that was the way it should be: the mother should go with her son and he had to take care of her. I begged her to stay with me, but she left with him. My brother got married late, after my mother died. He was 40 years old then. Now he has a family and two daughters – each of them has three children.

During the War

On May 24, 1943, there was great unrest. Members of the Brannik organization appeared on horses in the town. They did not have any restrictions – they could beat and destroy, and we were very oppressed by them once Hitler started the war. At that time, Jewish young men gathered in the

Central Synagogue and organized protests against the National Defense Law. I was a little girl, but my brother and my future husband took part in these protests. These were youth protests mostly; my father didn't take part in them. Right after that, we started to receive notes about the internment. According to these notes, we had to leave for Kiustendil; we had the right to take only 20 kilos of luggage. We started to get rid of our household belongings. The whole neighborhood brought their belongings out to the street to sell them and earn some money, and so did we.

We got the message to leave Sofia on May 24, 1943, and on the 25th-26th, we were already on our way to Kiustendil. There was not enough time to pack properly. We put only clothes and blankets into those 20 kilos of luggage. The officials sent us a message with the date and time we had to go to the railway station. People said we had to be assembled in different towns so that they could easily transport us to the Aegean region. The 11,000 Yugoslavian Jews who were deported there had died. Meanwhile, there were many protests by the Bulgarian public against the deportation of Bulgarian Jews to Poland. A great part of the population protested: religious organizations, the vladika [Bulgarian church leader], Petar Dunov [famous Bulgarian philosopher] who was very close to Czar Boris III. More than 50 members of the Parliament signed a petition against the deportation of Bulgarian Jews to concentration camps in Poland and that's how we were saved.

In Kiustendil, a friend of my mother's took us to her house; that was where we lived. My mother suffered from stomach aches and she was ill all the time, so we had to buy fresh milk for her. But at that time, we didn't have the right to buy even one liter of milk. One of our neighbors offered to buy one bottle from the milkman for us. The courtyards between the houses were separated by low fences, so she could easily pass it to us. She did not realize what could happen if somebody saw her. She took the bottle of milk and passed it to us. Brannik members saw her and came to our house. We did not even have an oven at home. We only had one small hotplate in the corridor, where my mother used to cook. The Brannik members rushed into the house and started to kick the hotplate and spilled the milk. They were very aggressive. Fortunately, this organization stopped after September 9, 1944.

We, the Jews, by God's law, have to help the other Jews. This is a mitzvah. If you have 1 lev only, you have to give it to the poor – never mind this is all you might have. You may give only 1 stotinka [the smallest Bulgarian coin], but you have to help the poor. That is how the Joint works now in Bulgaria – the rich Jews gather money to help the others. This is the core of the mitzvah, to help your fellow men. We do that in our Jewish organization. Tomorrow, for example, I will visit a sick woman. Usually we take 5 or 6 leva from the community funds and give them to the person in need. Every one of us donates 1 lev every three months for sick people, for birthdays and other occasions. I am the treasurer and I report at the end of the year.

At the beginning, when we moved to Kiustendil, we had food from the common cauldron, as did all the newcomers. It was in the Jewish school of the town, where we were settled first. After that we moved to my mother's friend's house. My mother was ashamed to go and get food from the cauldron because Kiustendil was her native town and everyone there knew her. My father also did not want to do that. My brother was often absent from home as he was sent to work somewhere else. I used to take my bag and saucepan and go to the Jewish school where they fed us with beans and potatoes. Life was really miserable in Kiustendil.

When I was a student in the first class, Czar Boris III's son Simeon was born. To mark the occasion all the students got excellent marks. [Six is the highest mark in Bulgaria.] Some even got seven! Another political matter we discussed in the family was Hitler's rise to power. After that, the Jews began to wear special badges. My parents thought that was a Jewish tragedy. When Bulgaria entered the Tripartite Pact – Rome, Berlin, and Tokyo – we started to fear for our lives. We had a foreboding that something terrible was going to happen, that we might not be here now. They were on their way to leaving for the crematoria.

I started to work very young. I began to work during school vacations. I started at a small hatter's shop. I went on working at a hatter's in Kiustendil. I studied the craft in my mother's cousin's shop. I did not like to sew in the beginning, but that became my profession for life. After we came back to Sofia, I started work at a tailoring factory named Osvobozhdenie [liberation] that was built by the Joint. Meanwhile, I studied at a night school. I married my husband, Josif Kamhi, in 1950– the year I graduated.

My family and life after the War

I met my husband in 1943 in Kiustendil, where we were interned. All the young Jews used to meet at the Jewish school in the town. We used to play volleyball or narodna topka and chat in the evenings. Despite the poverty and the persecutions, we managed to have our happy moments. We used to gather in one of the Jewish schools where many Jewish families were settled. Several families used to share one room equipped only with mattresses. We used to carry on philosophical conversations, discuss books. I had my first New Year's Eve without my family. We didn't have enough money then and everyone used to give whatever they could to prepare for the celebration – flour and other products. The girls prepared the meal. I had an admirer in Kiustendil who used to sing songs in Spanish and play the guitar. He used to call me "the goddess of my happiness." Since then, my friends started calling me "the goddess."

When we came back from Kiustendil to Sofia, our house in the Jewish neighborhood had been robbed. Even the windows were missing. I traveled 24 hours on my way back to Sofia alone on a freight train. I thought that my brother would meet me at the station, but he had misunderstood and waited for me on a different railway station. When I got off the train, it started to rain heavily. A carter saw me and offered to take me home. Our neighbors helped me to unpack my luggage. A friend of my mother's, who had already settled, sheltered me at first. In a few days we managed to reconstruct the house; we put in doors and windows and dried my wet luggage.

We started to study and work again. I kept in touch with my friends in Kiustendil. My husband and I got married in Police Department N1, opposite the Rila Hotel in the center of Sofia. My mother and brother had already moved to Israel and didn't attend the wedding. I did not go to Israel in 1949 because I already had a serious relationship with my future husband. I saw my mother and brother again in 1957 when I managed, with great efforts, to buy tickets and take my 5-year-old daughter to Israel with me. That was the last time I saw my mother.

My husband was born on June 29, 1926. My husband's parents were also Jewish. His father was a butcher and his mother was a housewife. His family's house was on Pozitano Street. He was interned to Kiustendil, just like me. He had been in the concentration camp Kailaka in Pleven. There was arson in the camp. His mother saved him; she told him to run away immediately while she died

in the flames. He tried to save her. He tried to pull her away when her long skirts got stuck between the beds. But the roof went down; melted asphalt poured down on her.

My husband studied in a Jewish school; after that he went to a secondary school for boys. He graduated after September 9, 1944. He studied in the mechanical and electrical technical institute in Sofia and became an electrical engineer. After he had graduated, he worked on many different projects. He has always been respected and highly esteemed by his colleagues. He worked on a project for the electrical installation of a factory in Cuba and he spent nine months there.

My husband and I were members of the Revolutionary Youth Union [formed before the coup d'état of September 9, 1944]. We both thought we had progressive political convictions. Now I think that was a youthful aberration. We shared the same ideals, we lived in privation and worked hard, but gradually I concluded that all this was useless. We used to go on youth brigades every Sunday, we wanted to build a beautiful country, and we wanted Bulgaria to have successful industry. But it all has crumbled to nothing, and now I ask myself why we have wasted our lives that way.

My daughter Beti was born on July 13, 1952. I always tried to bring my daughter up in the "Jewish spirit" and I always encouraged her to have Jewish friends. She herself also wanted to be in a Jewish circle as we, her father and I, did. I have always lived in a Jewish circle. Ever since my childhood, I have had Jewish friends. My daughter and granddaughter have a much wider circle of friends than mine. The Jewish people were quite scattered at the time, so my daughter married a Bulgarian boy.

My aunt Matilda used to look after my daughter. Aunt Matilda was very religious. She observed all the Jewish rituals. Her husband used to go to the synagogue regularly. They both spoke Ladino and my daughter learned a little Ladino from them. Thanks to my aunt and uncle, I did not have to explain to my daughter what it means to be Jewish. I used to tell stories about our life during the war, to my granddaughter mostly. When my daughter was a child, I had to work so Aunt Matilda looked after her. Aunt Matilda even used to go to the meetings of the parents' committee in my daughter's school.

I started work in the Osvobozhdenie factory after World War II; I worked there from 1945 to 1949. After that – from 1950 to 1955 – I was a librarian in the Jewish students' reading room. I worked as a dressmaker in the Zoya dressmaking factory from 1955 to 1958. Later I worked in a dressmaking establishment named Vitosha, from 1958 to 1968, and after that in the state company Texim until 1975. My next workplace was in the Center for New Goods and Fashion, Lada, and from 1980 to 1982, I worked in a design factory again. I left work in 1982 to look after my newborn granddaughter Anna. I retired later, because in 1982 I was still not at the age required for retirement.

Life became much calmer in the 1950s. Our salaries, homes and work became more secure. That is why I value that period so much. Whatever I dreamed of, I bought it. Now I cannot even think about that. Nowadays, I go short of even the smallest things. My profession, a dressmaker, is valued as "third category" labor; that is why I have a very low pension – only 68 leva. It is good that my husband gets more – 150 leva – so that we can make ends meet. I try not to bother my daughter, because I know that her life is not easy.

I was always afraid that something bad might happen to my relatives in Israel during the wars in 1967 and 1973. All my relatives live there. When I went Israel before, I had to go to the Swiss Consulate to get my tickets certified. I am very happy now that there is an Israeli Consulate in Sofia. I have been to Israel six times. The first time was in 1957, and the last time, in 2000. The last time, a friend of mine provided a whole apartment for my husband, my daughter and me. Every time I go there, all my relatives and friends come to visit us. They all are very friendly, and I feel surrounded with love and attention. I do not have enough money when I travel to Israel, so all my relatives there – my husband's and mine – help us. They even give us money for bus tickets.

People in Israel live with war. When I was there for the third time, the son of my best friend there was a soldier in the army. One day she saw a car of the Red Cross [Magen David Adom] driving to her house, and she ran out, very worried, to see if they had brought bad news about her son. That is how people in Israel live. They worry and fear that something horrible might happen to their children. People there are ready to give anything for their country. They believe in that! My two nieces have been soldiers in the desert for two years. We, the Jews, should have our own country! We are spread all over the world, but when we have our own country we feel safe. Otherwise we could be persecuted and humiliated everywhere. If I were persecuted in Bulgaria now, I would go to live in Israel because this is my land!

I did not have any trouble calling my brother, even during the wars in Israel. I phone him seldom now, as it is quite expensive for me. My brother calls once a month. Many friends and relatives also call us. They are my life and I always keep in touch with them. The war in Israel did not affect my life directly. Anyway there was a certain distant attitude to us because we are Jews. We couldn't organize any events spontaneously. We only had a formal Jewish community since 1989.

People revealed their Jewish origin depending on their profession and their position. For example, my husband's aunt worked in the military services and she had to refrain from pointing out her Jewish origin and saying in which countries her relatives lived. I myself had a very ordinary state job, and I didn't worry about talking about my relatives in Israel at all. My husband and I didn't hide the fact that we had relatives there.

I still observe all the Jewish holidays. I observe Christmas and Easter only when I go to visit my daughter's family; her husband is Bulgarian and they celebrate these holidays. I prepare Easter cakes every year. I live in Bulgaria, after all, and I do not want to feel different in this way. I have a special vessel to boil milk and a special baking dish for almond cookies. I use those dishes not because of religious reasons but for practical reasons only.

After 1989

After the political changes in Bulgaria of November 10, 1989, life became harder for my family. Everything we had built and fought for started to fall apart. I value Eastern Europe's opening to the world. History goes on. We had capitalism, then socialism, and now a democracy. Life goes forward, and that is how it should be. Changes are natural, but they are very hard for us. Parting is something that is very difficult. I was very happy when the Berlin Wall fell and many people could meet again. I know very well what parting means.

We have a special group within the Jewish community in Sofia where we learn Ladino once a week. We meet to read and talk in Ladino. We have a study group in Hebrew at the Jewish organization "Shalom" in Sofia. I don't go to these lessons because they only practice the language there and do not exactly study it. I visit the "health" club twice a week and I am a cashier there. We gather in the "third age" club on Saturdays. The leader of the club has many contacts in the cultural and artistic circles. He organizes different events for us: discussions, celebrations, singing, concerts. I am a very sociable person, and I love talking to people. That is why I attend all the events in the club. I am a member of the volunteer group in "Shalom" that takes care of the sick people in the community.

All the Jews who have very low pensions are supported by the Joint. This foundation helped build a factory that provided Jews with jobs immediately after the coup d'etat of September 9, 1944. The foundation also helped people go on holidays. I have been on holiday in Borowets.

I have met Russian Jews in the "health" club and they told me stories about how they were persecuted and terrorized. I remember how much we trusted Stalin; we thought he was an idol. We did not realize the truth. We were such idealists in the years between 1944 and 1953 that we believed him utterly and didn't realize he was a dictator. We only knew that he had borne the whole brunt of the war. Later we learned that he had built many concentration camps, everywhere in Russia and especially in Ukraine, and many Jewish people were killed there.