

Aron Alkalai



This is a photo of me as an adolescent in 1938 in Dupnitsa. I have painted mustaches. I had lovely artistic photos with a cigar, with a hand in the pocket. There was a French artist - Charles Boaye, whom we imitated. I started work in 1934. In the evenings I went to school and during the day I worked.

There were two Jewish organizations in Dupnitsa. One of them was the Zionist's one and the other was bigger and its name was 'Saznanie' [Conscience]. It was a cultural and educational organization with left ideas. It organized operettas and drama plays. The cultural life of Jews was rich. My father's sisters Kalina and Vita took part in the choral groups at 'Saznanie'. They also had a table for ping-pong for the young people. It was a very good organization. There was a fight for the leadership of the bank and the Jewish municipality between the Zionists and 'Saznanie'. People organized debates and made discussions. The organization had a community house and a big library. As far as I remember they did not have ideological discussions. I was a member of 'Saznanie'. We gathered there as youths and took books from the library. The Zionists appeared to be the richer Jews in town. 'Saznanie' was considered more of a left organization, that is, closer to the socialist ideas. That is why my father, who had left beliefs, was a sympathizer of 'Saznanie'.

After the Jewish school I went to study in junior high school - in the district school 'Evlogi Georgiev'. Then I went to study for a cobbler. My father told me that if I did not study, he would send me to work as an ironmonger which was very hard work. I enrolled in evening classes in the vocational school. We studied four hours a day - from 6 to 10 pm. They gave us some food - tea with cheese and bread. We studied the anatomy of the human leg, Bulgarian language, literature and calculation of materials. I graduated the school, but I had to repeat one of the years. When I was

told that I had to repeat the grade, I went to my practice teacher to ask him if there was some mistake. His name was Mr Peshev. He opened the teacher's book where he had made a note that I had refused to complete the tasks he gave to me. That is why he made me repeat the grade. Then I went to my father and told him that I was made to repeat the grade unfairly and that we should call for a commission from Sofia to review my case. I would work in front of the commission and if they decided that I should repeat the grade, I would. My father talked to the director of the school. When the director heard his story, he advised him not to call for a commission from Sofia because they would probably respect the teacher's decision and he would have to pay for their expenses. So, I repeated the last year of the vocational school. I worked silently the whole year and the teacher gave me as an example to the others. At the end of the year I received my certificate with a prize. I went for a master's exam in front of a commission, who had come from Sofia. At that time there were no materials and everyone brought their own. At the start of the exam, I started working right away. The members of the commission told me that I should draw a ticket first. I answered that I had materials only for ladies' shoes. But they said that if my ticket said men's shoes, I would change my materials with someone else. I answered that I did not want to give my materials to someone who would ruin them. Yet, fortunately, my ticket said ladies' shoes. I had chosen a simple but nice model for shoes made of suede. I designed and sewed them in the first day. The deadline was in three days. I presented them to the commission and received a master's certificate.