

## Nissim Kohen's Father Mihael Kohen At Leisure With Friends



This is a photo taken in the park around the nearby church 'St Nikola' in Sofia in the 1960s. My grandfather and my father liked to spend their time in that park. My father Mihael Kohen is third from left to right on the photo.

My father Mihael Kohen tried many things in life. He spent eight years in captivity during World War I. He was held captive by the French army near Thessaloniki as a soldier from the Bulgarian army. After that he worked as a tinsman. He took part in the construction of the roof of the first building of the Sofia University. He traded with second-hand products. Later, together with an uncle of my mother's Chelebi Haravon, and with the active help of my uncle Mois Haravon, he managed to set up a haberdashery on Lomska Street [present-day George Washington Street, near the central Sofia synagogue], but those were the years of the great crisis in 1929-1932 and he was forced to close it down. Then he started work as a street vendor and walked around the neighborhood with a tray selling elastic cords, tights and haberdashery. Then he made a warehouse selling coal near our house. At that time people could not afford to buy a lot of coal and came to buy 5-10 kilos. In this way my father was able to support us and helped the people in the neighborhood. That continued until the passing of the anti-Jewish laws when he was forbidden to work.

Many changes took place in Jewish life from 1945 to 1950. People returned from the internments and faced much difficulties in finding places to live. Jews died in the war or as partisans. People had to start their lives anew. The Zionist organizations abolished by the Law for Protection of the Nation appeared once again. Those were Maccabi and Ehalutz, which continued the traditions of Hashomer Hatzair. Some Jews wanted to immigrate. Ben Gurion came to Bulgaria. He negotiated with the Bulgarian government the immigration of Jews. Before that, in 1941 on the eve of the signing of the pact with Germany many young people left for Israel. So, now their parents wanted to go to their children. Many people left from 1948 to 1950 [the big aliyah]. At one point I also wanted to live and applied. But I was much influenced by the ideas of a new life in Bulgaria and I believed that origin would not be of matter any more. We believed in the socialist ideas. I thought that in the future there would be no problems to travel wherever you liked. My parents were also old and sick I could not leave them. Probably many people left and stayed, it is hard to find the right number. There was Zionist propaganda but I do not know if that was what convinced the people to leave. Certainly, Zionists were the people who helped people to leave. They provided steam boats and took care of the people when they arrived in Israel.

All families on my father's side and most of those on my mother's side left for Israel. I do not have many close relatives here. We wrote to each other regularly when they left. But to my regret, I did not write much. My mother kept the contact with our relatives in Israel.