

# Rebeca Gershon-Levi

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Sofia

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Interviewer: Dimitar Bozhilov

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My family is from Plovdiv. My mother's and father's parents were born and lived in that town. I was also born there on 29th May 1923. My childhood in that town was wonderful. Plovdiv was a quiet, cozy and very well-organized town. I don't remember the house where I was born because we lived in rented places then and moved several times during my childhood. It was quite usual at that time to live under rent and most families lived that way. My life in Plovdiv was like a fairy-tale. Our family wasn't very rich but I had a very happy childhood. I found Plovdiv very charming.

## My family background

My maternal great-grandfather lived in Pazardjik and was a Greek citizen. His ancestors had been from Greece. No one in my mother's family ever told me when he had come to Bulgaria and from where exactly. I remember that his daughter, my grandmother, Mazaltov Haim Kalet, nee Sidi, who was a Greek citizen, had to go to the municipal offices in Plovdiv every year in order to certify her passport. My mother, her sister and brother got Bulgarian citizenship after they turned 18.

My maternal great-grandmother was named Estrea. She spoke both Ladino and Bulgarian. She lived to a very old age – with one of her daughters in the town of Yambol. She used to visit my grandmother in Plovdiv. We even went to health resorts together – my great-grandmother, my grandmother and I. I remember that my maternal grandmother wrote in Ladino. She was a very calm and kind woman. She used to tell me fairy-tales – she was very eloquent and had an endless list of tales. My favorite ones were those from the 'A Thousand and One Nights' collection. My grandma was very intelligent and good and everybody in Plovdiv respected and loved her a lot. She died after we had already moved to live in Sofia, when I was in the 7th class of high school.

I remember one of my great-grandfather's brothers who lived in Plovdiv and he was a very impressive man. He lived on the main street and I often visited him. He lived alone; there was only one housemaid.

My mother Sarina Avram Gershon, nee Kalef, had a brother and a sister – Shmuel and Ernesta, and my father, Albert Haim Gershon, had three brothers and a sister from his father's first marriage – Shimon, Samuel, Josef and Matilda. My father's mother had died very early and his father married again after that. My father had two stepsisters and a stepbrother – Mari, Victoria and Leon.

My paternal grandfather, Haim Avram Gershon, was born in Plovdiv. He was an agent but my father and his brother supported him mostly as they were merchants and had a big shop. My paternal grandparents lived in Plovdiv on Sahat tepe [one of the hills in the town of Plovdiv] in an old Bulgarian house with a large chardak [a wooden penthouse] and a big courtyard. The house had a solid stonewall. The atmosphere there was wonderful. I loved going there a lot. There were three large rooms in the house that impressed me very much because I lived in a more humble lodging at that time. I loved to have breakfast on the sofras [a traditional low table] and eat popara [popular breakfast of crumbled bread and fresh milk].

My paternal grandfather had Bulgarian friends mostly. His circle of friends was totally Bulgarian and people used to visit us for lunch or dinner every day. He was a strict, handsome man, but not very tall. I respected him a lot because he was really strict but also a very caring person.

There was a small square near my grandparents' house and the local circus performed there. I adored going to the circus and watch the animal shows. The economic school and the mixed high school, where I studied for a year before we moved to Sofia, were also in that part of town.

My maternal grandfather died when I was just six years old. I remember that I heard some women talking about that on the street while I was going for a walk in town. I was a very little girl then and I couldn't understand very well what was going on. I understood it only after my mother explained it to me. According to our traditions women don't go to the cemetery so I don't remember my grandfather's funeral. [Rebeca Gershon thinks that women should not go to the cemetery]

### **Growing up in Plovdiv**

We lived in several places in Plovdiv. We moved from place to place very often because we lived in rented places. The house where we lived first was on the main street, Tsar Osvoboditel opposite Bunardjika [one of the hills in Plovdiv]. After that we went to live on Stranford Street on Sahat tepe. We lived twice on Tsar Osvoboditel Street – once at the beginning of the street and once at its end. The first time our landlords were Jewish and they lived on the upper floor and we lived on the first floor. My brother, Haim Albert Gershon, was born in that house.

I clearly remember that when we lived in the house opposite Bunardjika there wasn't electricity there and my father used a lantern at nighttime. We used to have a housemaid – a young girl who helped in the household. One evening on our way back home from some visit I started to tease and pull the girl, who was carrying my baby brother then. She dropped him. Fortunately he wasn't hurt but I got a big thrashing.

I remember another incident that happened in that house. My brother was a very beautiful baby. He had curly hair, blue eyes and big cheeks. I started to be jealous of him because all the attention at home was given to him. One day I asked my mother to let me carry him for a while and along with a cousin of mine we went out onto the terrace. We had bought big red sweets and we tried to stick it in the baby's mouth. We almost choked him and we were punished afterwards.

My brother was born on 16th January 1929 in Plovdiv. He went to kindergarten there. He started school in Sofia and he got as far as the 3rd class when they interned us to Pleven. Practically he didn't manage to get education while he lived in Bulgaria. He went to work after we came back to Sofia. He was a skilful boy and he started to work in a shoemaker's workshop. He made a pair of lovely tourist shoes for everyone in the family before he left for Israel. He got interested in mechanics after he went to Israel, he graduated as a 'mazger' [Hebrew for mechanic] there and after that he became a teacher. He has created big construction projects in metallurgy.

I studied in the Jewish school till the 4th class. It was difficult for me there and I started begging my mother to transfer me to another school. I found it really hard to learn a poem in Hebrew by heart. I still don't speak Hebrew and I'm embarrassed because of that when I go to Israel.

We lived on Karnegi Street and just opposite us was Karnegi school. I changed to that junior high school. Our house was then just between Bunardjika hill and the fire brigades. That's a very nice quarter of Plovdiv. We lived on the second floor at a cousin's of my mother, and she lived on the first floor. Another Jewish family that had come from Greece lived on the second floor as well. I started my high school education in Plovdiv – in the 4th class in the mixed school. I moved to Sofia in the summer of 1938 and I went on studying here.

In the last period before we left for Sofia, we lived on Bunardjika hill, opposite the main entrance, on Tsar Osvooboditel Street. It was a twin house, one house split in two. A Greek family lived in one half of the house: a Greek woman and her husband, their two sons, who were students and one daughter. My mother, my father, my brother and I lived in the other half. We had different entrances to the house. The house itself had a big courtyard and lots of plants in it and the Greek woman took care of them. I remember that she used to be very suspicious of us at first –she probably thought that we were going to do harm to her plants – but after she got to know us better, she became our friend. The Greek woman was a Protestant and she tried to persuade my mother to go to the Protestant church gatherings with her. I used to join her because it was interesting for me to watch their meetings and the atmosphere there – the people sitting on the benches and singing psalms – because you can't see that in our synagogues. This house no more exists now; an apartment block has been built there instead.

I loved to walk around Plovdiv and I had the chance to do so a lot. My favorite places were Sahat tepe, Bunardjika and Maritsa River. A bunch of children used to gather and wander around town. We played a lot of games – I used to play with small balls with the boys, for instance. We took the balls that came with bottles of lemonade or soda. We used to play 'thieves and policemen' a lot. Another interesting game was 'Ghosts': We used to gather in different houses and pull down the curtains. Then we started to summon ghosts until we seemed to see something and usually one of us got very scared and cried out loud. Of course we used to do that only in our parents' absence. We used to play hide-and-seek also.

I remember that when we lived on Tsar Osvooboditel Street I used to gather some children and tell them that if we dug the ground we would reach the center of the Earth. I imagined that there was a boat there and we could sail away on it. We started to dig and of course we found nothing. We loved to pick plums and other fruits from the trees in our neighbors' courtyards and they often scolded us for that.

I've always spoken with my friends in Bulgarian. My grandma and my mother spoke Ladino but I thought this language was archaic. We didn't speak Hebrew. I started to be interested in Ladino just recently because I realized the connection with Spanish.

In my family we used to go shopping on Wednesdays and Thursdays and on Fridays we did the cooking. We didn't cook on Saturdays, but we turned on the lights and listened to the radio. My family observed the kashrut. We always shopped in shops where the rabbi had put his stamp; we used to eat veal mostly. We ate pork after 9th September 1944 [1](#) for the first time. There was a great food crisis at that time: I got some pork from my work place, I brought it home and that was when my mother cooked pork for the first time.

## Our religious life

When I was a little girl, my maternal grandmother used to take me to the synagogue. I remember that she used to take me on the holiday of Yom Kippur – on that day we don't eat the whole day and then we have dinner at six o'clock in the evening. Then friends and relatives forgive each other their sins. That holiday is devoted both to the living and the dead. After the priest had finished his speech in the synagogue we bit into a big quince and that was the first thing we ate that day. It was a great success if the children managed not to eat the whole day.

We always celebrated Pesach. Then the oldest member of the family reads the prayer that tells the story of the liberation of the Jewish people from the Egyptian invasion. My father was the oldest in our home, but sometimes we used to gather with my mother's or father's relatives and then my grandfathers read the prayer. I was more attached to my mother's family than to my father's relatives. I felt they were more curious and interested in things.

We observed Chanukkah as well. We had a special chandelier that we used to light on the holiday. We always prepared big festive tables. On Purim they always gave me a small bag filled with different fruits – oranges, apples, dates and walnuts. They used to give us some money, too, and we went straight to the roundabouts and spent it there.

My father perceived religion in his own way. He was mostly interested in politics – he was a great dabbler in politics. My father wasn't very religious. He became more religious after he went to Israel. He learned Hebrew there and he used to read newspapers. My brother also learned Hebrew perfectly – he used to teach in Hebrew. My father was very studious and he read a lot, though he hadn't gone to school. He was a thorough Zionist and a revisionist and I often argued with him because I had left-wing convictions. My father and my brother didn't have enough time to read and educate themselves. Despite that they both had a thorough knowledge of certain matters. They hadn't studied anything special but knew a lot when it came to geography, history and economics.

My father was a merchant. He traded with haberdashery and worked with villagers mostly. He used to sell ribbons, laces and buttons but unfortunately he didn't sell any toys. His shop was on the merchant street near the mosque and Maritsa pharmacy. It was a two-storied shop. The first floor was something like a reception-room and the trade articles were on the second floor. My father liked to receive guests on the first floor. That's why he always had some fresh pastry or other small things to eat with him. As I mentioned before, my father was a devoted revisionist and a Zionist and he was a member of the 'Jabotinsky' organization [see Revisionist Zionism] [2](#) – a Jewish organization that propagandized the idea of reconstructing Israel's territories via military actions.

The organization is named after its founder – Vladimir Jabotinsky [3](#). Jews in Plovdiv had various political convictions at the time. My father was an extreme right-winger. I remember that there was a member in the organization in which my father participated whose name was Pasi – he was the grandfather of the present minister of foreign affairs Solomon Pasi.

My father used to spend a lot of money on the political meetings in his shop and that's why he went bankrupt when the crisis of the 1930s [4](#) started in 1929. My brother was born the same year and that was when poverty started. We had a housemaid as long as we lived on Stranford Street. After that we didn't have the opportunity to afford a housemaid and my mother started to do the housekeeping on her own.

Plovdiv was like a Jewish country-town for me. I felt very cozy there. My relatives were very united and they used to gather very often and supported each other a lot. Besides I was the only granddaughter in the 1920s and everybody was very kind to me. I lived a carefree life then and I didn't think about the political and economical situation in Bulgaria at all. I was always well dressed and satisfied.

We used to go on excursions out of Plovdiv every weekend. Sometimes we left on Friday evening. We traveled in drays. We went to Komatovo, Kuklino and Markovo. We passed through lovely walnut forests that unfortunately no longer exist today. We used to bring special barbeque grills with us and light a fire. My parents loved these excursions very much.

Very often – usually on Saturdays – we went to the Casino, a place on Bunardjika hill. We lived nearby and we used to sit together with other families and listen to the music. The singer and dancer Djip was very popular then. We, the children, received some money on Saturdays and we used to buy some food for ourselves – fried livers, grilled rissoles, baked maize. We also went to the confectioner's shop. Plovdiv was a horn of plenty!

## **My life in Sofia**

My parents and my brother went to live in Sofia in 1937 and I stayed in Plovdiv till the next year. I lived with my uncle Shmuel and I was studying in the mixed school in Plovdiv until I left for Sofia. My life in Plovdiv was charming and I used to cry a lot when I moved to Sofia. I was out of my reasons for entire six months. I went to Sofia in the summer of 1938 and I thought it was very miserable. All was strange and unpleasant to me. I went through this change with great difficulty. After a few months I went to Plovdiv again because it was summer vacation time. I managed to adapt to the new situation only after I came back to Sofia again and I already had close classmates. I used to go to the library club and I had friends there, too.

The first place where my parents settled in Sofia was on Opalchenska Street and after that they moved into the house of a classmate of mine, Ani Pasturkova, on Tsar Simeon Street. Later, in 1943, we were interned to Pleven. I remember one air raid on Sofia. We lived on Tsar Simeon Street then. It was a three-floor house. The raid was terrible. We hid in the basement of a neighboring house. They bombed the railway station and our house was near it and we could hear all the thunder very clearly. In Pleven we saw only squadrons of airplanes flying to Sofia.

My father started to work as a traveling salesman in a chocolate factory in Sofia. He became close to the owner, who realized that my father was a talented and responsible person. My father used to

travel around the country and he was in charge of the production disposal in the whole country. My father didn't have the time to be in contact with the Jews of Sofia. He traveled all the time and never stayed in town for a long time. He was a sociable person and had friends all over the country. The owners' living standards couldn't possibly be compared to ours. They were prosperous villagers. His daughter was my classmate in Third Girls' high school. We didn't have the financial opportunity to settle in our own home in Sofia. We only had my father's salary as my brother and I were still students.

### During the war

I felt the first anti-Semitic moods in 1939 when the Law for the Protection of the Nation [5](#) was passed. I remember that one day I was taking a walk with a friend of mine on Hristo Botev Boulevard. Suddenly a group of Branniks [6](#) started to bother us and then fortunately my friend, who wasn't Jewish, asked an officer, who was passing by, for help. I felt really humiliated wearing the Jewish badge. I was very lucky that I wasn't violated and maltreated.

The law from 1939 affected those who owned some real-estate property first. We had neither money nor property and even though my father was working for a Bulgarian employer, we also started to feel the stagnation.

In 1942-1943 Brannik was an official organization. I had a classmate in high school that became a member of that organization. It happened that I met her many years after that again. She was a repulsive person. I met her accidentally at the entrance of the Court of Justice. I was with my second husband who had known her from his work place. My husband kissed her on the cheek without knowing what I thought of her. I reacted emotionally and slapped him in the face. I was a trainee in the Court of Justice at that time and my husband was a lawyer. My husband forgave me, though with great difficulty.

I graduated from high school in 1941. We started wearing badges in 1942 so that it would be clear that we were Jews, but despite that we didn't lose our courage and I tried to start work in Sofia as I had studied to be a typist. We didn't have the financial means to settle in our own home in Sofia. But in 1943 we were interned to Pleven. We had to sell all the belongings from our house on Tsar Simeon Street where we lived then.

My relatives from Plovdiv were not interned from town. They were put under a restrictive regime. They weren't allowed to go to work or leave town.

My aunt Ernesta was married to a rabbi in Burgas. He was a Greek citizen. When the persecutions against Jews started, the district governor of Burgas advised him to leave the country so that he wouldn't be sent to the concentration camp. So the family packed and left for Turkey in 1942 and from there to Israel. My aunt already had two children then. She didn't live a happy life in Israel and she divorced her husband. We used to write letters to each other and that's how I learned that. I told her that I would do anything possible to help her come back to Bulgaria if she wanted to, but she didn't. She stayed in Tel Aviv and later she died of leukemia. I loved this aunt of mine very much.

We were first accommodated in a school in Pleven and after that we were allowed to rent a lodging – just one room in fact. We lived by the road that was leading to Kailuka prison [see Kailuka



concentration camp] [7](#). This region was in the suburbs of the town. Our landlords were very friendly and they invited us to pick grapes from their fruit garden. We used to eat in the public canteen [Jewish newcomers in the town received free food at a certain place at a certain exact hour]. I started work in a shoe factory. I became a so-called 'saiadjiika' because I was among the ones that made the 'sai', the upper parts of the shoes.

I had a very unpleasant time in Pleven. Only some people around me were good. I worked with many other girls in the shoe factory; other people used to go and work in the vineyards. One of the masters in the factory repressed me quite a lot – he kept watching me and bothered me all the time. He tormented me and when he was in a bad mood he made me go out and collect the leather cuttings. There was no reason whatsoever to do that. Finally, the factory owner approached me and advised me to quit and so I did. I went to another factory, where the owner was a fascist. Fortunately there was a nice Jewish man of my father's age who was working there and he helped me become acquainted with the atmosphere and protected me all the time. Thanks God, 9th September [1944] came and I quit my job there.

The factory master was impudent enough to come to Sofia to look for me. I threatened him with an arrest. I couldn't understand how a grown up man with a family could do such a thing. So, that was quite a bad period for me. Thanks to our Jewish ability to organize ourselves, we managed to go through it. We used to gather every Saturday and Sunday without any special reason for doing so. We even assembled a music band in which the musicians played the violin. We used to sing and give lectures.

Some very curious and paradoxical things happened in Pleven. I met three young men who treated me as if I was a princess though they were extreme left-wingers. One of them was even a legionnaire [see Bulgarian Legions] [8](#). They protected me and one of them was even in love with me and gave me a beautiful bracelet as a gift. We used to go for walks together, I visited his house, and I trusted him very much. They treated me like real gentlemen.

I met a member of the famous and rich family Aseo in Pleven. This family owned big real-estate properties in Sofia, including the most famous cinema in town. He was a young man and still a student, but his hair had turned gray. We became close but after we returned to Sofia our lives separated.

My father, his brother and my maternal uncle were sent to forced labor camps [9](#) during the Holocaust. My maternal uncle hadn't been interned, but he was sent to a ghetto that was built especially for Jews. My father was sent to the forced labor groups in Belene [a town in North Bulgaria]. We understood where he was allocated much later and we couldn't contact him while he was in the forced labor groups. We didn't have any other funds but my small salary at that time. My father was a very tough man and he was sick only once when he was already old. In 1988 he had a severe stroke and was put in a medical care center.

## **My return to Sofia**

I returned to Sofia in October 1944. The trains were crowded. After 9th September 1944 I was invited straight to the district administration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Pleven. I worked there and used to type reports. When it was announced that we could go back to Sofia, I went to the district governor who was a very nice man and gave me several recommendation letters. When

I came back to Sofia I went to the Police Department on Lavov most Square. An amiable man accepted me to work in the passport department there.

My parents came back a little time after me and found accommodation in a two-storied house on Tsar Ivan-Assen II Street. I received accommodation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Graf Ignatiev and Tolbuhin Blvd [today Vasil Levski]. The lodging on Ivan Assen II Street consisted of two rooms only, that's why we went to live on 2, Tolbuhin Blvd in the ex-lodging of a colleague of mine. We shared that place with a compatriot of mine – a Jewish woman who didn't want us at first – she even put out our luggage twice. We became good friends in the end. She lived in one of the rooms and my family – my mother, my father, my brother and I – had a kitchen, a living-room and a bedroom. The apartment was enormous. After my parents moved to Israel, I was offered to buy the apartment, but my first husband, Miuntzer Blagoev Zahariev, didn't agree because he believed that everything would become state property. Later we had to vacate the apartment because the owner's sister wanted to sell it. Meanwhile my parents went to Israel. After that my first husband and I moved to Marin Drinov Street.

I haven't had any problems at my workplace because of my Jewish origin. I remember an incident when a female officer at the Police Department was telling a story about how she had been chased out by her landlord. There was a certain practice then that the authorities used to settle the newcomers in Sofia in the houses and apartments of other people. She called the owner of the lodging where she was settled 'a dirty Jew'. The same had happened to that officer. I stood up and slapped her face. I was also settled in such a lodging on Tolbuhin Boulevard at that time. I would have never called my landlord that way, even if she had been Bulgarian. After that incident my boss threatened me with court procedures. It all turned out fine in the end and we even remained friends.

The BCP [Bulgarian Communist Party] took a party decision regarding the departure of Jews – everyone could go. The director of the Police Department then called to tell me that even if I applied for departure they wouldn't let me go for at least five or six years. And they really only let me see my relatives after 13 years – in 1963. After the coup d'état of 9th September 1944 I had left-wing political convictions [pro-communist]. Although many compatriots of mine left, I myself didn't want to. I made some pro-forma steps just to please my parents.

After 9th September 1944 I took steps so that my brother could go and specialize in the Bata [10](#) company school in the Czech Republic. He didn't get a good record from his work and he didn't manage to leave. Maybe if he had got a good record and would have gone to the Czech Republic, he wouldn't have gone to Israel that soon. That was a turning point in his life.

After Israel was founded, the Jews started to leave Bulgaria. My parents left in 1949 and my relatives from Plovdiv in 1948. There was a mass aliyah [11](#) after that and all my friends left. Just 10,000 out of 45,000 people stayed here, and I don't know if there are even 5,000 Jews left in Bulgaria today. My parents were put in so-called 'srikove' – special barracks. My brother didn't want to be settled in a lodging in the town and his first home was in lafo – in the newly-built part of the city.

My father started work in Israel immediately. The conditions were severe because there wasn't enough work for all newcomers. They looked for work at many places. My brother tells this sad story about how my father and he went from Pardes Hanah, where they had been in the camps,



right down to Haifa to look for work but they didn't manage to find any. They slept in the open air and had to come back in the end. My brother worked in the lime-stores and his legs were burnt there. After that my father found work as a manager in a municipal building company called Amidar that built homes for the newcomers. He used to help people settle and they loved and respected him a lot. When he announced that he was going to retire at the age of 78, a large number of people came and asked him to stay. He received a good pension while my mother used to get a social pension. They had their own house and my brother inherited it.

I used to go to the Jewish cultural club Klimentina quite often before the internment to Pleven. I loved to read and I went there mostly for that. Gradually I met different people there who started to educate me. I was in a Jewish circle before the internment. After I came back I went on visiting the Jewish community center and I even used to sing in the choir. But as a police officer my working time was unlimited and that was an obstacle for me to continue going there. My circle then consisted of my colleagues and a friend from school.

### **My first husband**

I met my first husband at work. He wasn't Jewish. His father was a co-worker of Georgi Dimitrov [12](#) and Vasil Kolarov [a minister in Dimitrov's government]. His family left underground for Russia in 1923. They came back from Moscow in 1947. He graduated in law. We got married in December 1949. My parents didn't attend the ceremony.

I didn't observe the Jewish holidays then. It wasn't popular to celebrate holidays after 9th September 1944. Most of my friends were Bulgarians. My husband was a strange person and he lived in isolation. He accepted his brothers only. That's how I gradually became estranged from my Jewish circle.

I went on living on 2, Tolbuhin Blvd after my parents left. I lived there with my husband. He was in conflict with Valko Chervenkov [then minister of culture] because of some objections that my husband had against the communist party rule. On the other hand his mother lived with the thought that she was an active party functionary. They had even been chased out of their apartment following an order by Valko Chervenkov.

I worked in the Police Department till 1951. They fired my husband then – he worked as an inspector there – because he didn't get along with the management of the department, and they also fired me. That made me very happy because as long as I was working there I was very restricted and I felt it was a burden for me. We got one extra salary and I remember that I went to the textile shop, which was located where the American Embassy is today, and I bought some wonderful fabrics there. I received job recommendations while Miuntzer got a penalty from the party. My recommendations were for three jobs. I chose the Union of the Bulgarian-Soviet Societies. The other recommendation was for the City Committee of the BCP. The Union of the Bulgarian-Soviet Societies was then located on Mizia Street and I started there as head of international relations. I worked there till my departure for China.

After my husband was fired in 1951, he didn't start to work again until 1954. I provided for him for four years. In 1954 the minister of finance Kiril Lazarov, who was Miuntzer's godfather, became a press attaché in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He recommended Miuntzer for a mandate in China and so we went there. We lived in China for four years. Miuntzer worked as a second secretary of

the Bulgarian embassy in China.

When I was in China I used to send my letters to my parents to Miuntzer's mother in Bulgaria first and then she put them in another envelope and sent them on to Israel. In the times when I was in Bulgaria I used to send my letters to Israel directly.

When I returned from China I didn't have a job and I decided to finish my education. I had passed exams for law in 1956. After that I had to leave university, as I didn't have enough time to study and work at the same time. When I came back from China I applied at the dean's office to continue my education. I graduated in 1967. I started to work with the Jurists Union. I was a legal consultant with the Water Industry company after that and I retired from there.

### **My second husband**

I divorced Miuntzer Blagoev in 1965 because of the great trouble he brought upon himself with his attitude towards the official authorities and the consequences this had for me. I got married for the second time in 1974, to a compatriot of mine; I knew him from my school years. My second husband's name was Solomon Levi. He brought into the marriage and left me a son and a daughter that I wouldn't have, had I not met him. I get along very well with them. They have helped me a lot – especially when I had to move to new houses. The years I lived with my second husband were full of many pleasant moments and many excursions to the countryside. After we got married we went on a journey to Israel and on the way back we passed through Greece.

When my parents were still alive I used to go to Israel very often – every two or three years. Sometimes it was difficult to leave. There was an absurd situation – when my mother was on her deathbed, they told me that I could only go to Israel if I was going for a funeral. That happened in 1983. My husband had already died then. My mother died the next year.

During the wars in Israel I supported my people entirely and I could have been punished for that. I believed that this country should exist because so many people had died for it. I was a trainee at the People's Court then. I remember that a young colleague, whose father was a dean of the Faculty of Economics, used to bring a map of the Near East every day and mark off the military action places with flags.

I remember a meeting when Todor Zhivkov [13](#) held a speech and he mentioned the Arab-Israeli conflict. One of the people then said that he was ready to go and fight on the Arabian side, but Todor Zhivkov answered ironically to that.

I think that the political developments in Eastern Europe are quite normal. The process of the opening of Eastern Europe is right.

I thought that the Russian military invasion in the Czech Republic was something normal. I thought that things were going in the wrong direction there – I was brought up that way. During the developments in the Czech Republic I was in Israel visiting a friend of mine – a colleague. She was a great communist. She was married to a very amiable doctor. She had been fired and punished for having an affair with one of her superiors, who was falsely accused of being an 'enemy'. My friend's name is Beka Francez. When I visited her she expressed an opinion against the intervention of the Soviet Union. I was amazed. That was a heresy for me then. Despite the negative consequences of my marriage to Miuntzer – I always knew that if I only mentioned that I

was his wife I would have been fired right away – I believed that I should be true to the party [the BCP].

I retired in 1978. I was very scared straight after 1989 [following the events of 10th November 1989] [14](#). I thought that we would return to a past that I was afraid of and hated. Then I realized that it was time for a change in both politics and economics. The Soviet Union first signaled for that. I understood then that nothing is just black and white but that there are nuances. Not everyone who isn't a BSP member is a fascist, and not everyone who is a BSP member is a democrat etc. I started to see people as people, not as members of a certain party. We were very politicized after 1989. I understand now that one man cannot make politics just by himself. I value people by their qualities now.

I live well with my brother's support and I don't have to worry about my living now. I gather with the Jewish community. Unfortunately I don't have many close friends.

## Glossary

### [1](#) 9th September 1944

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

### [2](#) Revisionist Zionism

The movement founded in 1925 and led by Vladimir Jabotinsky advocated the revision of the principles of Political Zionism developed by Theodor Herzl, the father of Zionism. The main goals of the Revisionists was to put pressure on Great Britain for a Jewish statehood on both banks of the Jordan River, a Jewish majority in Palestine, the reestablishment of the Jewish regiments, and military training for the youth. The Revisionist Zionists formed the core of what became the Herut (Freedom) Party after the Israeli independence. This party subsequently became the central component of the Likud Party, the largest right-wing Israeli party since the 1970s.

### [3](#) Jabotinsky, Vladimir (1880-1940)

Founder and leader of the Revisionist Zionist movement; soldier, orator and a prolific author writing in Hebrew, Russian, and English. During World War I he established and served as an officer in the Jewish Legion, which fought in the British army for the liberation of the Land of Israel from Turkish rule. He was a member of the Board of Directors of the Keren Hayesod, the financial arm of the World Zionist Organization, founded in London in 1920, and was later elected to the Zionist Executive. He resigned in 1923 in protest over Chaim Weizmann's pro-British policy and founded the Revisionist Zionist movement and the Betar youth movement two years later. Jabotinsky also founded the ETZEL (National Military Organization) during the 1936-39 Arab rebellion in Palestine.

### [4](#) Crisis of the 1930s

The world economic crisis that began in 1929 devastated the Bulgarian economy. The social tensions of the 1920s were exacerbated when 200,000 workers lost their jobs, prices fell by 50 percent, dozens of companies went bankrupt, and per capita income among peasants was halved between 1929 and 1933.

## **5 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.

## **6 Brannik**

Pro-fascist youth organization. It started functioning after the Law for the Protection of the Nation was passed in 1941 and the Bulgarian government forged its pro-German policy. The Branniks regularly maltreated Jews.

## **7 Kailuka concentration camp**

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

## **8 Bulgarian Legions**

Union of the Bulgarian National Legions. Bulgarian fascist movement, established in 1930. Following the Italian model it aimed at building a corporate totalitarian state on the basis of military centralism. It was dismissed in 1944 after the communist take-over.

## **9 Forced labor camps in Bulgaria**

Established under the Council of Ministers' Act in 1941. All Jewish men between the age of 18-50, eligible for military service, were called up. In these labor groups Jewish men were forced to work 7-8 months a year on different road constructions under very hard living and working conditions.

## **10 Bata, Tomas (1876-1932)**

Czech industrialist. From a small shoemaking business, he built up the largest leather factory in Europe in 1928, producing 75,000 pairs of shoes a day. His son took over the business after his father's death in a plane crash in 1932, turned the village of Zlin, where the factory was, into an industrial center and provided lots of Czechs with jobs. He expanded the business to Canada in 1939, took a hundred Czech workers along with him, and thus saved them from becoming victims of the Nazi regime.

## **11 Mass Aliyah**

Between September 1944 and October 1948, 7,000 Bulgarian Jews left for Palestine. The exodus was due to deep-rooted Zionist sentiments, a relative alienation from Bulgarian intellectual and political life, and depressed economic conditions. Bulgarian policies toward national minorities were also a factor that motivated emigration. In the late 1940s Bulgaria was anxious to rid itself of national minority groups, such as Armenians and Turks, and thus make its population more homogeneous. Further numbers were allowed to depart in the winter of 1948 and the spring of 1949. The mass exodus continued between 1949 and 1951: 44,267 Jews emigrated to Israel until only a few thousand Jews remained in the country.

## **11 Dimitrov, Georgi (1882-1949)**

A Bulgarian revolutionary, who was the head of the Comintern from 1936 through its dissolution in 1943, secretary general of the Bulgarian Communist Party from 1945 to 1949, and prime minister of Bulgaria from 1946 to 1949. He rose to international fame as the principal defendant in the Leipzig Fire Trial in 1933. Dimitrov put up such a consummate defense that the judicial authorities had to release him.

## **12 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.

## **13 10th November 1989**

After 35 years of rule, Communist Party leader Todor Zhivkov was replaced by hitherto Prime Minister Peter Mladenov who changed the Bulgarian Communist Party's name to Socialist Party. On

17th November 1989 Mladenov became head of state, as successor of Zhivkov. Massive opposition demonstrations in Sofia (with hundreds of thousands participants) calling for democratic reforms followed from 18th November to December 1989. On 7th December the 'Union of Democratic Forces' (SDS) was formed consisting of different political organizations and groups.