

# Beno Ruso

Skopje

Macedonia

Interviewer: Rachel Chanin Asiel

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Beno Ruso lives in a large apartment in a tree-lined section of Skopje. This apartment was built for him by the Yugoslav National Army in the 1970's. Once his children grew up it was too big for him and his wife, Roza, so they divided it in two. Now, his daughter lives next door with her husband and children. Despite the separate entrances it is obvious that he is very close to his family next door. During our interview, his granddaughters were coming in and out looking for milk, lunch and their grandfather's attention. The stray dog that the granddaughters have taken in also finds refuge and attention in Beno's side of the house.

My paternal grandfather, Benjamin Ruso, came from the Crimea, Russia. I ask myself why the last name 'Ruso' we are not ancestors of [related to] Jean Jacques Rousseau, he is from the West. Where are they [the ancestors] from? From Russia, Ruso. There were some people in Bitola who came from Russia and they had that nickname. Not a lot but some and they kept that name. [The nicknames became official family names.] There were two or three other families in Bitola named Ruso that we were not related to.

The only evidence of our origins are the stories. My older brother told me these stories when I visited him in Israel. He heard these stories from some old people in Israel and relayed them to me. See, at that time part of Criema was under Turkish control. [Russia seized the Crimea in the late 18th Century.] The Turks were the only ones who allowed the Jews to choose where they wanted to live. They went where they found work; they stayed where they found good conditions. The soon as something wasn't good, or they found something better they moved on. [In Russia freedom of movement was restricted and the Jews were allowed to live exclusively in the Pale of Settlement] [1](#) That is how they traveled around, and came to Crimea and how they came to Yugoslavia when the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was created. [They must have migrated to Macedonia while it was under Ottoman control, prior to the 1912-1913 Balkan Wars.] My grandfather and his two brothers crossed the border together near Pirot [71 kilometers from Nis], and then came to Nis [240 kilometers south of Belgrade]. [Editor's Note: There was no border between Serbia and Bulgaria at Pirot until 1878.] The elder one, who was more independent, went on towards Belgrade and the other two continued on to Bitola. The one in Belgrade I don't remember but I remember Mordehaj, the one who went to Bitola with my grandfather.

Mordehaj used to come to our house and we went to his. He had his own big shop in the Jewish quarter. He was a ,mehandzija', that is the what villagers called a brewery owner. But they didn't brew beer, there was no beer then, rather wine. He sold wine. He didn't make wine he bought it and sold it retail. He didn't have anything in his place other than rakija [2](#), wine and roasted chickpeas for snacks. A person ordered a shot of rakija and in order to prevent the brandy from going to his head too quickly he was given a plate of chickpeas to snack on. Mordehaj had a big house and a big family.

My grandfather was wealthy. He sold leather and coal. Although he was illiterate he was a very capable trader. While he was alive he had a lot of property, including a farm he bought from a Turk. How he got it I don't know. He was a wholesale coal peddler. At that time this was an item which one could not live without. How could one cook without it? There were braziers which ran on coal. Coal was used all the time except during the winter for the wood burning stoves. All the cooking during the summer was done on coal.

In his office he had a table where he kept sticks. He had one stick for each person he did business with. On each stick he would make a tally, a record, with a knife.

He knew Ladino, perfect Turkish and Serbian.

He built a house with a big yard, stables, cows, horses. My whole family: father, mother and us children, lived with our grandfather in this house that he had built. My grandfather was very hardworking businessman. He was a good head of the household. However, after my grandfather's death and the wars—World War I, Balkan Wars [see First Balkan War] [3](#) [see Second Balkan War] [4](#), everything changed in our family.

My grandfather wasn't religious. Back then there wasn't this religiosity that exists today. That was very rare in those days. Even though they were old people. He donated to the building of the church [synagogue] in Bitola. The citizens who lived there paid for it. In Bitola every street had its own temple. [Editor's Note: There were 7 synagogues in Bitola before WWII. They included: El Kal de la Havra Kadisha; El Kal de haham Jichak Levi (this was a beautiful temple next to the donor's house); El Kal de Shlomo Levi (this was in the donor's house, it didn't survive the war); El Kal de Jahiel Levi (in a space dedicated for this purpose); El Kal de Ozer Dalim (in a special building donated by the Aruti family, this one fell to ruins in 1950); a temple for the youth in a school building and a temple in the Los Kurtizos neighborhood. Sources: Zeni Lebl and Mark Cohen]. Since he was a powerful rich man he had a special seat right next to the altar [bimah]. I remember when I used to come I knew exactly where he sat. He was one of the people right next to the altar.

My grandfather had a white beard down to his belly. He didn't dress in modern dress. He wore a long sleeved robe called a ,saju'. He was a corpulent man; he was well developed. He had a round face, white hair, a long beard, impressive looking. The ,saju' had large pockets on both sides cut on an angle from under the armpit to the hip. It was like a bag. When he came for lunch or at night it was always interesting to see all the things that he took out of his pockets.

He always came home loaded with things. One of the things he brought in his pocket was a baby sheep. Back then they would slaughter a sheep that had a baby sheep inside her stomach. They took the little one out and sold her separately. We would eat the little animal. It was very tasty meat, a delicates. My grandfather many times carried that unborn animal in his pocket. He would take it out of his pocket and put it on the table. There were no bags so it was wrapped in paper. Now we have plastic bags but then they didn't. Paper is paper but it leaks. My grandmother had trouble with him. Imagine maintaining that. I didn't know my maternal grandmother. I don't know when she died.

I slept in the same room with my grandfather. I can't remember if my younger brother, Albert, was in the room too or not. My grandfather snored but at one moment he just stopped. And in the

morning he was dead. He was totally healthy but it seems he died from worrying. There were some problems with the farm which involved my father.

I don't remember my grandfather's funeral just how he died. Children didn't go to funerals. And especially women didn't go to funerals. I know that he was buried and then my father was buried right next to him. I looked for their graves when I was in Bitola but I didn't find them.

I don't remember any of my other grandparents.

My father, Isak Benjamin Ruso, was born in Bitola in 1887. He was one of the elite of the Bitolian Jews because of his level of intelligence, the fact that he was literate. It was rare that a person was literate in those days. He died young from some infectious disease.

Based on a picture I had of my father in a uniform I would say he served in the Serbian army. During one of the Balkan wars my father was in a camp. He was a Serbian loyalist. I had a picture of him in his uniform, with a moustache but I didn't save it. I can see that picture of him right now and I am sorry that I don't have it anymore. The picture used to hang in our house. My mother used to talk about how my father had been captured and she barely managed to find him in a basement in Bitola. She took him food. Then they moved him from there. My mother barely found him the second time and again she took him food. In general he was chased by Bulgarians... Bulgarian occupiers.

My father was very handsome, mustachioed, medium height. I think that I look like him. He wore modern dress. He smoked. He was very strict. But I don't remember that he ever hit me. He didn't hit me or anyone else. It was enough to hear his voice and his words. That was all. He kept strict discipline at home.

My father wasn't a backwards religious person. He was literate, he knew how to read. He knew all the prayers for Pesach. What's more, the neighbors would gather around him. For Pesach my father took care of prayers in the house and everything and some of our family members would come. My father was literate and very skilled and he knew how everything went. He knew all those customs. This was all customs not strict observance. Nothing was strict. Shabbat for example, today you have people who won't do anything on Shabbat. In Bitola it was known that on Shabbat gypsy women would come and light the fire because according to the law one is not supposed to do any work. Not even to light a fire. Not to do anything. But in our family it wasn't like that.

My father rented a coffeehouse where he served coffee and Turkish delights but no alcoholic beverages. It was a well-known coffeehouse in Bitola near the Dragor River, on the way to the gymnasium, not in the Jewish quarter. The Dragor River runs through Bitola and cuts it in half. The Dragor runs into the Black River towards Vardar. The tables were set up on the riverbank. The street had four or five big coffeehouses. Each one had its own clientele. The men who made and served the coffee were Turks. There were two brothers that lived near us. I went to one of their houses often. I would climb up his mulberry tree. We were good friends.

There was a fire on my grandfather's farm and my father was arrested because of it. The farm was insured and there was a suspicion that the fire was started intentionally. My grandfather took this very hard. My father was in jail when my grandfather died. They released him to come to the funeral. After this he was released and wasn't sentenced. A Turk was sentenced for starting the

fire. In general, Turks worked in coffeehouses, as coachmen and in stables. I don't know what happened after that with the insurance, but in general everything fell apart after this.

I was friends with the Turk who started the fire on my grandfather's farm. He had to go to prison and he served the whole prison sentence. Was he guilty or not I don't know. Did he take responsibility for someone else and go to prison, I don't know. He used to come to our house; we were family friends.

There was a time when we exchanged farms for a huge enormous meadow near the Bitola recreational airport. There was a recreational airport in Bitola back then and some small planes flew there. There was never a real airport. But there were huge meadows. We had a guard on this enormous meadow. Every year my father hired ten to fifteen men to cut the hay and bring it back to our warehouse in a defunct mosque in Bitola. Then we would sell it wholesale and retail. The Turkish guard from this farm was our friend and it seems to me that he was the father of the guy who was tried for setting the fire. It was one family.

After my grandfather died my father took over his business. It was a hard situation. It seems that my father wasn't skilled in handling it, even though he was literate. He got sick. From the time that he got sick debts started to pile up, mortgages. They took our house and we had to rent a place. They took almost everything. The family fell apart financially. That is why my [elder] brother, [Dario], went to military school and why I was unable to continue my education and had to learn a trade. It seems like he wasn't so skilled when he allowed the bank and others to reduce him to poverty. They took everything from him, our good, big and elegant house. It was around 1935.

My father was in the hospital and then they moved him back home where he died. I was there when he died. I remember it. During the night the family kept vigil. Since my older brother wasn't at home I was the main person with my mother at the catafalque before they buried him. There was a special place, near the Jewish church [synagogue] the main synagogue in the Jewish quarter, for this. Behind the church there was a special space for those who had died. It was almost in the middle of the quarter, near the bridge. He died at home and then was taken to this special place. I attended my father's funeral. Since my older brother was in non-commissioned officers' school in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia [probably Serbia] he came and left soon after the funeral. The custom among Jews is that the every morning for a month one should go to the prayers. So I went as the head of the family.

This was hard for me. First I had to learn to read the Hebrew. I didn't understand it but I had to read it. So, I had to learn to read it. Every morning I had to go. A hakham, that is a an assistant for those religious works in the synagogue, came and picked me up. The service lasted an hour or two and then I went home. He came and picked me up so that I didn't skip it. He was our closest neighbor back when we lived in grandfather's house. Neighbors at that time meant more than relatives, they were respected. Every morning he came and picked me up and when it was over he had some other work there so I went home by myself. For a month. It was hard to do this. My mother wasn't strict [about religious observance]. But my father's sister, Mato, was. She was backwards with respect to religious things. And I could not avoid her. I had to go. She organized that someone pick me up and make sure that I went.

The hardest thing when my father died was that we were left with nothing. We had already moved out of our home. We had already moved homes two or three times. In the end we were living near Mato. She had her own house and we were living in the neighborhood near her. He died in this house. Do you know how it is have to leave your house and go and live in strange houses? After that my mother was without resources to keep us going. My brother, Dario, he was a first sergeant, maybe he was working at that time in Kraljevo [120 kilometers south of Belgrade], and he sent us part of his salary every month. I think it was about 200 dinar a month. We lived off of this money. Rent was cheap. A clerk's salary at the time was 300 dinar. We could live comfortably off of 200 dinar. It wasn't easy for us but it was bearable. Right after my father's death I left Bitola.

My father had three sisters. One was Matilda Mato Levi, who was married to a grocer named Bencion Levi. She had six or seven children and lived well. Mato was killed in Treblinka with all her children. One of my father's sisters went to America. My father's third sister died during childbirth. The female child, Simha, survived and lived with us.

Mato was a very energetic woman, very strict, literate and cultured. She was the commander in the house. We lived right next door to her. She tried to reprimand me if I didn't do things. She disagreed about my going on hakhsarah. She wanted me to get married. And since my father had died she felt obligated to help us. If you help then when it is necessary you can also make demands. I informed her that I had no intention of getting married at that time. Maybe she already had someone in mind, I don't know. But I didn't want to speak about this at all. She didn't insist. After that I went on hakhsarah, then to the army and then the war came. After the capitulation of Yugoslavia [5](#) I came back to Bitola since I didn't know what to do. And again she started saying I should marry. Again I informed her that I had no intention of marrying. I had already begun actively participating in the resistance movement and I told her that I would not even think about it. She came to accept this. It is not just that she was strict she felt obligated. That is how it was, family obligation. Her brother had died and she wanted to help.

My mother, Vida, was a housewife. My mother was a calm illiterate woman. She was a good mother, hardworking. When my father died for some time she sewed fur linings piecemeal. Someone supplied her with the material and she sewed the linings at home by hand. My mother taught me to sew and I sewed as well. The pay was miserable, maybe 25 para [100 para constitute 1 dinar] for one piece. She could not make 10 dinar after a whole day's work.

She wasn't religious and didn't cover her hair. Today you have much more backwardness than you did then. In the surroundings where I grew up there wasn't this backwardness. My grandfather he went to temple on Friday night, for some holidays. Backwardness like with these sideburns, neglect; you eat this you don't eat this; you have to eat kosher; you can't mix meat with cheese. I don't know what else the modern world has. These things were unknown back then. At home we were liberal, including my brothers and I. My mother was a little more religious because of my Aunt Mato, who was too religious because of her husband. Her husband was like that. We kept a few customs but that was it.

My mother reconciled herself to Mato and she accepted her help. She didn't resist. My mother didn't insist that I listen to Mato and marry. But she also wasn't opposed to the idea. At the time of the second marriage discussion I had already begun to see Roza [Kamhi], who eventually became my wife. We worked together in the movement. One day when Mato insisted that I marry, and

marry some rich woman with whom I would have received a lot including the means to open a workshop where I could practice my trade, my mother said to Mato: 'Listen Mato, this is all in vain. Roza is hanging around him, and he is hanging around her. So there is nothing from this match that you have in mind.' At first my mother didn't understand that this was a party connection, but then she understood everything.

My mother's brother, Buhor Levi, got a certificate and went to Israel. The family combined the certificate: one person got the certificate but ten or eleven of them went on one. He had a big family but since a person got the certificate to accept more family members two family members had to remain behind, a male and female. [Editor's Note: Unable to confirm the veracity of this statement.] Those male and female family members that were left behind came to live with us in our house in Bitola. The male one was Mois Levi. My mother accepted them. When her brother went to Israel he took Simha, my cousin who lived with us after her mother's death, with him and his family to Israel. She lived in Israel until her death. We were in contact with her. She married and has a son in Israel.

My elder brother, Dario, was named for our father's brother, David, who died young. His death was a great tragedy for the family. I was named after my grandfather Benjamin. My younger brother is Albert. I also had a sister who died. Her name might have been Reina. I will never forget how she looked when she was dying. It is strange how it stays in my memory. She was sick for a long time and died at home.

Our house, grandfather's house, where I grew up, was in the Tabana neighborhood. Our second apartment was in La Kaleze. The house was built in 1922-23. The house had a faucet in the yard. We had water installation in our house at that time. The house had faucet, basement, and a modern stable. Bathrooms were never inside in that day. The bathroom was next to the right door, the door where the two-wheeled cart was kept. It was a two wheeled horse-drawn cart in which two people could sit. We used it when we went to the village, to our farm. We had a horse while we were in our house but when everything fell apart we lost that too.

It was a one floor house which was raised a meter above ground and went a meter below ground. Under the ground were the basements. On that meter above ground were the steps by which you entered the apartment. There was an entrance and a wide hallway from one end to the other. From the left to the right were four rooms. When you entered the house there was my parents' room, my grandfather's room, my brothers' room and the one that was rented out.

The kitchen, stables and toilet were in the yard. There was a faucet in the center of the yard. The faucet had a channel to carry the water right up to the main door and that was where the toilet was. The water constantly ran and was cleaning the toilet. This was a modern house in those days. Electricity was installed in the house. Each room had its own light. In the houses we lived in after this there was no electricity.

The kitchen was an old style kitchen. Look how a kitchen at that time looked. It wasn't like a kitchen today. The main kitchen was outside and there all the food was made for the whole week; bread and other baked goods and various cakes were baked there for Friday night, Saturday and the rest of the week. Our kitchen had two ovens. Next to them there was a table for when something needed to be made. Everything that needed to be made for a week was prepared on the table and cooked in the ovens. Coffee and other things were made in the room on a coal-fueled



brazier. They made them with different decorations. The coals were lit outside and when they were red they were brought in the house. Inside coffee, lunch and everything else was made. For everyday you had a brazier to make things. After that ovens came that ran on wood, coal, electricity.

We slept on beds. We each had our own bed and each room had its own closet, either one or two. And a small table in the middle with two chairs. That was all the furniture. Closets were not built into the walls. We didn't have any pictures or decorations around the house and walls. My mother and father had their own room. The children had their own room. I slept in the third room with my grandfather. As far as I remember we rented out one room.

Dario was a kid when the family still lived well. He went to the French school. You had to pay for this school so it was only for those who had money. He was involved in the Atehija cultural society [Editor's Note: Atehija was a Jewish club that did a lot of things amongst them there were sporting activities, a choir, literature, all sorts of things]. They had a small orchestra in which he played. He played the figorna, an important instrument in the orchestra. It was like a tuba. I don't know if he took music lessons. There was a big military garrison in Bitola. That garrison had some musicians. One of the non-commissioned officers who was a musician was the teacher for that society. I know that he came to our house as well. He wasn't Jewish and he was paid. My brother studied but I don't know if he went to some special music school.

The family was already in a financial crisis when Albert was a kid. He finished the first and second grade. After that he started to study a trade. Albert finished an apprenticeship with the same teacher as I did. Back then you could play with someone who was a year two older or younger than you but four years was too much. It was a whole different generation. My younger brother was too young and my older brother too old for me to play with them when I was young.

My elementary school had four grades. I finished the elementary school. The elementary school was a Serbian school in the Jewish quarter. The first three years I was in this school in the Jewish quarter then they transferred us to a school in the Turkish quarter. The things one learns in school today don't remotely resemble the things we learned then. In elementary school I just learned how to read and write. To read letter by letter and to write hieroglyphics. After elementary school a person was literate and nothing more. We didn't have religious lessons in the elementary school. No, there we just learned how to read and write the letters and to count to ten. Then there were multiplication tables, and division.

Then I went to the first grade of gymnasium which had eight grades. Rabbi Romano [6](#) taught us religious lessons in the gymnasium. But I don't remember what we learned there.

I finished vocational training. I studied my trade with a man named Marko Lisic. He had a workshop for rifles and machinery in Bitola. He was an officer who was stripped of his rank. He had this illegal workshop and practiced this trade. He was from Croatia. He had been a captain but was convicted and stripped of his rank. Friends from the army helped him open a shop in Bitola. I don't know why he was stripped of his rank. My brother, Berto Ruso, and I studied with him. I worked with him for five years. At first I was a student and then an apprentice. When I was an apprentice I took half of the proceeds for myself and gave the boss the other half. That was our agreement. We fixed mostly hunting rifles and all sorts of machines, sewing machines, typewriters.

I restarted my studies after the war.

When I was young it seemed as though there was never enough time for playing and that mother was never able to drag us home. And especially since we had a big yard in our house and not only that there was a big yard but also it wasn't densely populated around our house. Right next to us there was a well-kept garden with a wall. We, like all children, I remember this well, would climb up and run on the wall. Sometimes we would fall but this was our game. The owner would yell and throw things at us. We would jump into the garden and step on the things that he planted in the garden. It seems to me that there were never enough games.

As we grew older we went further away. Our house was on the periphery of the city. Not far from us was the Turkish cemetery, the Jewish cemetery, near the Bajir neighborhood and a forest. We walked around there. We went into the cemetery of course. Oh no we didn't go into the cemetery we had respect for that. But on the road to the cemetery we did all sorts of things. We were 13 or 14 years old, when I, as a mechanic, got hold of a pistol, a toy pistol. Someone saw me with it and wanted to buy it. I told him that I wasn't selling it. He had a camera. I said 'You give me the camera and I give you the pistol.' This was alluring for me. I traded with him. And my friends and I went to take pictures of ourselves. I shot the whole roll of film somewhere behind the Jewish cemetery. We pretended that we were mountain climbers and I took pictures. I kept those pictures for a long time and I am sad that they were ruined. I want to say that there was a great interest in everything in those days. I never remember that it was boring for me as a child.

Directly next to our yard was an enormous old unused mosque without a minaret. We children played in this mosque. What didn't we do in that mosque? We even did very dangerous things there. For instance, we climbed up the ladder to the ruined minaret. Around the dome there was a space covered with sheet metal so it didn't get wet. But there was also a passageway so that a person could pass. We kids ran around it, 50 or 60 meters high. Today I am still amazed that no one got killed. When our parents saw what we were doing they forbade us.

We organized a youth football club. Then we needed a ball. But it was very expensive to buy a new ball. Then we bought leather from one person, from another person we bought the inner part. But it was hard to find the same amount of exterior material and interior material. In the end we bought enough for a ball this big [With his hands Beno describes a ball a bit bigger than a grapefruit]. The person who wanted to be the first to kick the ball had to pay two dinar. And someone paid to do it. Now the question was where was he going to kick it from. Where else but from on top of the mosque. That is the kind of wonders we made.

It seems to me that then there wasn't a problem of entertainment. Today people have a hard time entertaining themselves. As kids we went on trips to Pelister [20 kilometers west of Bitola]. We usually went on Saturday and came back on Sunday and we slept in the yard of some church. We organized these trips outside of the city by ourselves. This was a normal thing. I remember that I went with my friends to Nizepolje, a village right near Bitola [10 kilometers west of Bitola]. From Nizepolje a group wanted to go to a river south of there. I joined that group and another one of my friends from the group said he wanted to as well. We came to the big river and from there we went to the other river up to the apex. When I saw that a group was going there I joined them. I was just a child, maybe I was all of 12 or 13. I asked the guy who came with me 'Do you want to go to the big one?' 'No.' 'O.K. so you go back. I am going there. We will see each other back in Bitola.' It was



all very normal. My parents didn't worry about me. It is not that they didn't take care of me but it seems to me that these days we exaggerate worrying. I don't know what it comes from, maybe insecurity.

In Bitola there were two Jewish youth groups, Tehelet Lavan [7](#) and Hashomer Hatzair [8](#). Tehelet Lavan was supposed to be working class. In Hashomer Hatzair there were more students, students in the gymnasium, especially in bogrim, those who ran the organization. One of the leaders was Roza's brother [Roza Kamhi's brother, Pepo Kamhi, was the head of the local chapter of Hashomer Hatzair before War World II.] Hashomer Hatzair was an organization that prepared a person to be a pioneer in Israel [Palestine] and to fight for the State of Israel. Pepo was rosh ken [head of the local branch] until the war. Actually Likac was rosh ken, as an instructor sent by the federation. Dafta Davidovic came before Likac. Pepo was rosh ken but the Hashomer Hatzair federation in Zagreb, the Yugoslav headquarters, sent instructors to help the local chapters. Pepo was rosh ken the others were like instructors. I don't know exactly because from 1937 I left Bitola and I can't say.

My older brother Dario got my younger brother and I involved. We were all members of Hashomer Hatzair. I was lucky to have gotten involved in this movement, the Jewish youth movement, already as a child, the soon as I finished the elementary school. In Hashomer Hatzair I learned to love books and the activities in that organization interested me. And from then on books became a constant part of my life. Even though I studied a trade I read belletristic literature and various other books. It was simply enjoyable for me.

It was a very developed movement for young people. It was an organization like SKOJ [see SKOJ (Alliance of the Communist Youth of Yugoslavia )][9](#), scouts. The Hashomer Hatzair building was the center of the whole Jewish quarter. Inside there were classrooms, the basements were converted into workshops. Here they taught trades like bookbinding, carpentry. I don't know what wasn't taught. These were some of the workshops. Everyone did what they wanted. The school had a big yard. We established a football team. It didn't have a name but we had uniforms and cleats.

Almost every week we went on a picnic. We didn't have a special uniform like scouts but we did the same things like scouts. We learned how to make tents, and fires, etc. It was all very interesting in those days.

This school building still stands. Today we insist that it remain a monument, a museum to the generation of Jews that passed through that school. Jewish life took place there.

Aragon was the central church [synagogue] in Bitola. The other churches [synagogues] were apartments that had been renovated for this purpose. I know of two or three that were either renovated basements or apartments and used as churches [synagogues]. Aragon was built to be a church [synagogue].

For a month after my father died I went to church [synagogue]. I went to the church [synagogue] close to the Jewish community. It was a basement that was renovated into a kal. I had to go to tikkun every morning. Avram Hason, an illiterate pope [Jewish religious functionary] and our friend, picked me up every morning. He read [recited] everything but didn't know how to read. In Bitola we had books that were printed in Hebrew. There were people who were literate and knew how to read and there were people, like Avram, who read prayers but were illiterate. He knew what was on each page but he didn't know how to read it. I knew how to read Hebrew. I learned Hebrew in

religion classes in school. The prayer that I needed to read for a month I read from the book. That is when I realized that he does not know how to read. He did it all by memory. That was the way the popes [rabbi] were in Bitola at the time. A modern pope [rabbi] came, that was Moris Romano's father [Rabbi Avram Romano]. Before him there was Djaen [10](#) and others but I didn't know them.

I knew Rabbi Romano because he was my religion teacher in school. Hakham Romano was a regular man with a small beard. He didn't wear a robe or fez. Avram [the hakham mentioned above] and the other chazzanim, who were half literate, wore fezes. When they went out to buy something they went out in those robes, black long coats with black fezes on their heads. He didn't wear that tallit; that he wore in church [synagogue].

I of course had a brit milah but not a bar mitzvah. My brothers and I knew to read not only Ladino but also Hebrew, even though we didn't understand. I learned that in school in religious lessons.

The Jewish community was called Komunita. It was an organization. It had an office. They kept records. Three people worked there. I never had a chance to see what they did; I only know that it existed.

Back then in Bitola there was one shop where they sold candies. It was called Simjanovic, it was famous. You got one or two dinars a week and you went there with half a dinar and bought candy. That was modern.

It wasn't rare to see a car in Bitola when I was growing up. In my time there were even taxis. Then the wide-gauge tracks didn't work and the narrow-gauge went from Gradska [80 kilometers north of Bitola] to Bitola via Pletvar [50 kilometers north of Bitola], it went up and then came down. It didn't pay. So a taxi service was started. People traveled from Bitola to Gradska and Skopje by car-- that is taxi. My wife Roza's first cousin had a company that worked with cars and he had his own car. Maybe there were ten people in Bitola at the time who had cars.

I didn't leave Bitola until I was 17. When I left I never returned. I lived everywhere a little. First I left school and started apprenticing. When I was studying a trade, it was a time of crisis. When I was 16 and 17 they were hard years. I learned mechanic trade but I didn't see a future in this.

My older brother, Dario, went to military school. I wanted to follow his example. First I applied to non-commissioned officers' school in hydroaviation in Diude, near Split [Croatia]. I sent in all the documentation and they called me for an exam. I left Bitola for the first time. It was the first time I got on a train to go somewhere. They didn't accept me. They found that I had a defect on my eye. So I came back. I had a free roundtrip ticket. I was disappointed and didn't know what to do with myself.

For the next year I worked for a man in Bitola and got 200 dinars a month. I worked for a guy who collected used metal. This was collection of scrap metals which was then shipped out for melting. I was the only worker he had doing this. People brought old metal to me. I weighed it, threw it into this big space where it was collected and wrote a receipt for how much that amount of metal was worth in dinar. That person took the receipt to some store where the boss's wife worked and she paid them. I only did this for a year because I didn't see any perspective in this work. I did it because I could not live with the fact that there was no perspective in trades in Bitola. And since at that time I had already read a lot and with reading opened my eyes, I could not be at

ease with this. So I looked for a way out.

During this year I applied to an officers' mechanical school in Sibenik [Croatia]. I went to Sibenik and they also rejected me for the same reasons.

From there I went to Zagreb where Dario was working. My cousin Mois, who lived with us until he left for Zagreb, was also working there. He lived with another relative who had a secondhand clothing shop. There they sold secondhand clothes or new clothes made from very cheap materials. Mois worked for him at home and the goods that he made or fixed were then sold in the store.

I got in touch with the Hashomer Hatzair headquarters in Zagreb in 1937-38. I knew that the headquarters were in Zagreb and my brother helped me find it. I went to talk to them in their office on Ilica Street in Zagreb. They listened and told me that at that moment they were organizing hakhsharah, a boarding school, in Novi Sad, with vocational training courses. It was a good thing that I called and they put me on the list. They told me to come back in a few days to see the results. When I came back they told me that everything was finished and to get ready to travel to Novi Sad in the next few days. I wasn't in Zagreb long, maybe less than a month, before leaving for hakhsharah.

All the things that I had learned in Hashomer Hatzair in Bitola were now activated. They immediately got me a job at Albus factory, a well-known soap factory in Novi Sad. Because I was trained as a mechanic they assigned me to the assistant to the fire stocker. I worked there about a year, in 1938. In Novi Sad I lived in the boarding school of Hashomer Hatzair. This was vocational preparation for Israel. I gave my whole salary to the boarding school, to the organization. I was the only person there from Bitola. There were people from Sarajevo, Rogatica, Zagreb, Novi Sad. Maybe there were 20 of us all together, male and female, but more men than women.

Then, in 1938, hakhsharah moved to Golenic, in Croatia, near Podravska Slatina [80 kilometers west of Osijek], to a Jewish baron's estate. He was the major owner of almost all the forests. His name was Gutman. He let the Hashomer Hatzair organization use his entire estate. He didn't live there. I don't know when or where he lived, maybe in Austria. I never met him. The organization was there before we came. The facilities had been renovated; maybe there were ten facilities. There were facilities for sleeping, stables, basements and two buildings which were contemporary castles. That is where we were. When we came to Golenic there was already a group of emigrants from Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia. They maintained the facilities and the estate before we came. We just joined them. Altogether we were about twenty or thirty people. It was half and half: men to women. The emigrants were adults. They didn't have children but were mostly couples.

After that, in 1939, I was drafted in the army. I served in Petrovaradin, that is Novi Sad [Editor's Note: Petrovaradin is a castle dating back to the Roman times directly across the Danube from Novi Sad.]. I served in a motorized brigade, which I believe was the only one in the army of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

I went straight from hakhsharah to the army. All my clothing remained in Golenic. I went to Bitola only to register since that is where they drafted me from. Then I went straight to the army almost without suitcases. In those days, the first son went for nine months, the second for a year and half. I intended to serve a year and half. After I completed half of my service I was granted a leave. I

went to haksharah in Golenic for the leave, not back to Bitola. While I was there invitations for aliyah came. There was legal and illegal aliyah then. At that time they were organizing an illegal ship from some port in Dalmatia. I was a candidate for this illegal aliyah. My leave had almost run out and we were waiting to hear when and where the group and I were supposed to board. The invitation didn't come. I was forced to go to a doctor in Podravska Slatina. He was one of ours; he took care of all of the people on the haksharah; he was our doctor. He came to visit us frequently. I told him about the situation and asked him if he could give me a document or call to say that I was very sick and that I would be delayed two or three days. The doctor agreed. He did this and so I stayed two or three days after my leave. After two days we received information that the boat had been discovered. If I didn't do this I would have been tried as away without leave. I returned to Novi Sad with the doctor's note and said I had been sick. The commander said 'Let's go! Five days in prison.' Even though they knew I was sick 'sick or not sick you have to come.'

In April I should have been released from the army but the war began. Because of the war I stayed in the army and instead of going home I went to the front. I don't know exactly how many vehicles there were in the division maybe ten. In this brigade there were some modern vehicles but there were also old ones, ones without inflated wheels. I don't know how to describe them-- old trucks. In the column there were trucks to small jeeps for the commanders. They were mainly cargo trucks. And in general they were maybe Czech made. This brigade was meant to supply the front. The brigade was responsible for supply. I was a mechanic. There were drivers and mechanics who fixed the [broken down vehicles]. The brigade had its own workshop that it carried with it.

Our first task was to move south, towards Nis. However we didn't make it to Nis. We had to go back towards Belgrade. At that time Belgrade had been bombed [11](#) [ see 6 April 1941]. The brigade went through Belgrade. But from the time that the brigade started back it began to sink. We left a certain number of vehicles on the road on the way. In Belgrade we also left behind some vehicles. After Belgrade we started towards Uzica. Somehow half our column of vehicles arrived in Sarajevo, maybe 20 arrived in Sarajevo. I don't know how many exactly. I just know that on the way the number got smaller. We lost almost half of the trucks. The whole way we fled from the enemies and then in the Sarajevo we ran straight into them. They disarmed us.

In Sarajevo the Germans were waiting for us and there we capitulated. Now I was in Sarajevo. Either I could go to a camp or flee. But flee where? It was a long way from Sarajevo to Bitola. We organized a group of almost ten soldiers. We equipped ourselves well with two sets of military clothing. At that time warehouses were full of all sorts of things. And we prepared bags of food. From Sarajevo we fled by foot to Visegrad [80 kilometers east of Sarajevo]. This was a group but it was really each man for himself. There was a reserve officer from Bitola in the group who knew German well and in this respect he helped us a lot.

I went into the army not from Bitola rather from Hakshara in Golenic. All my equipment and clothing I left there. Now I could not return to Golenic the only thing I could do was go back to Bitola. And how to go to Bitola when I didn't have what to wear there. This wasn't just for me but for a whole group. We went off the main roads. It was very risky. And a lot of people at the first village left their uniforms and took any kind of clothing. I could not do this. Then what would I wear when I got to Bitola. When I eventually got to Bitola the first thing I did was give the uniform to be dyed and fixed.

In Visegrad someone, some cashier, whose, which army, I don't know, was giving money to soldiers. It seems there were honest people who saw the poverty of the army, and helped them. They handed out salaries to all the prisoners. I remember they gave 200 dinar in 20 dinar silver coins. Instead of giving that money to the Germans, they gave it to the army. This was a very humane act. Look, I had to get from there to Bitola. The others were also dispersed all over the country, all over Yugoslavia. They needed some money. This money was very helpful on the way.

A group of us went from Visegrad, through Serbia, Kosovo and then to Macedonia. We were all in uniform. The next day we headed towards Kraljevo [120 kilometers south of Belgrade], by foot, and by train, sometimes waiting two or three days. All the way to Bitola we were wearing uniforms. Anyway, in Bitola I didn't have anything to wear because all my clothing was in Croatia. We traveled like this for 10-15 days before we arrived by train in Bitola. Something had been destroyed on the tracks near Skopje. A non-commissioned German officer told us that if we wanted to get to Bitola we had to work three or four days to fix the tracks and then he would arrange for us to get to Bitola. He made this arrangement with our reserve officer and after two days of work we got on the train and arrived in the Bitola train station.

We arrived at night, during curfew. Our German speaking officer asked the German officer to arrange for us to go home. Even today I remember how this German officer ordered the Bulgarian station chief that the army accompany us to our homes in two or three groups. And in the middle of the night they took us to our homes.

When I arrived home I rang the bell. My mother heard it but wasn't allowed to open it. She was scared. She didn't know what was happening. And then she was so surprised when she saw me in the middle of the night.

When I returned to Bitola I had to take care of my family. My elder brother didn't come back. So there was no more help from him. Only afterwards did we learn that he was imprisoned in Germany. I had to take care of the family. What should I do? So I opened a mechanic's workshop in 1941. I had some tools at home from the five years when I was an apprentice. My brother and I worked there. I was in charge and my brother was my assistant. We fixed woodburning stoves, sewing machines, Singers, and water pumps. Since one can't bring the stove to the store I had to go to them. I had a tool bag which I took with me to the repairs. I did all this despite the fact that most of my training was with rifles. But after the German occupation began who was allowed to have a rifle. That was all under strict police control. Most of the time I fixed stoves. We didn't have a lot of work. We barely got by. But that eking out of a living was our only existence. We had no other income. Earlier, after my father's death, when it was the financial ruin of the family, we lived off of the 200 dinars my brother sent from the army. Then when the war came and that money stopped coming.

At that time it was fashionable and profitable for contraband to go through the Greek border. My younger brother was very skilled at those things. He made one, two or three runs to Greece where he bought things and sold them here. He went back and forth a couple of times and we were able to buy a machine which we built into the workshop.

We worked like that until I started to neglect the work when I was drafted by the movement [see Jewish Participation in the National People's Army] [12](#).

During the occupation they gathered us in front of the Jewish community. In 1941 when the Germans organized an action for the first time they gathered us in front of the community [see German Occupation of Macedonia in WWII] [13](#). They contacted us through the community. We all came in front of the community. They organized actions for instance to clean the roofs of the barracks. This is the first time that I participated in this kind of action. I told all of them there 'Don't call me for this kind of thing again.' And I never went again. I never wore the star or marking for Jews [see Yellow Stars in Bulgaria] [14](#). I had fake identification papers with a fake name which I don't remember.

When the war came, all the connections that we had with Hashomer Hatzair throughout Yugoslavia were cut. This included with the headquarters in Zagreb. Hashomer Hatzair was never illegal it was under supervision. They knew well that Jewish youth could not be supporters of the fascist occupiers. This wasn't regular supervision. It was enough for them to catch you somewhere, for you to do something and then to go to jail or to forced labor. This supervision was by the Bulgarians. The Germans occupied Bitola and then the Bulgarians came and took over control [see Bulgarian Occupation of Macedonia] [15](#). And in Macedonia Bulgarian fascists were the practical government. They were worse than Germans. They wanted to prove themselves.

During the war [we] were all in the movement just some were more active than others; all were sympathizers. At that time to be active one needed courage, decisiveness. It was risky very risky. Pepo [Kamhi] was my idol as a leader in the youth movement. I appreciated and respected him a lot. He was the leader of the youth organization, but I don't how acceptable it was for him for someone to entirely devote himself to [the Party] [see Yugoslav Communist Party (KPJ)] [16](#). In 1941, there were big arguments about this [in Hashomer Hatzair in Bitola]. I don't know where Pepo was on this. Pepo didn't stand out as an activist for the movement even though he was a leader of the youth organization. We found a group of young people who joined this fight without reserve. But there was also a group of young people who wanted to maintain an independent movement. Pepo was an older intellectual; he finished gymnasium and that in those days already constituted an intellectual. Those intellectuals separated themselves a little.

Once as a party member, I was ordered to participate in a group where Pepo was one of the sympathizers. For me it was unpleasant. I was a member of the Party and he was [just] a sympathizer. I believe it wasn't pleasant for him either considering I had come as some sort of Party instructor to work with his group.

These were people up to 20 years old. They were not burdened. I don't know how to say it. Those who were older, Pepo's generation, they were reserved. They didn't enter into risk like the youth. Young people don't think a lot. And that is why the cofim and cofim bogrim stood out in 1941 and 1942. These generations, that age group, are the ones that went into the partisans. The others didn't. They stood to the side and the soon as it got a little serious they pulled back. This is a general characteristic of the movement in this war. Among those who were partisans it was rare to see a family man. They were all youth; they were the bearers. At least it was like that in Macedonia. As they say: One head one hat. But if he is a family person, if he is serious, then he thinks about all the consequences. Youth don't think a lot about the consequences. And that was the way the times were. If you thought a lot then you didn't do a lot, no fighting. It was very risky. Extremely risky. And even more so if you were a Jew and got caught. Then you were finished. Look at Pepo Pesun. They caught him as a partisan, they didn't try him at all, during the night he just



disappeared. He was in the partisans and then I don't know what happened he left the partisans then he was caught by the Bulgarians and they knew that he had been in the partisans. They didn't even try him, nothing, they just killed him. He was a Jew. Someone else they would not just kill. They would have tried him. For a Jew it was that risky. You could lose your head like this. Back then there were also those signs [yellow stars] and a curfew for Jews. Jews could not go anywhere.

It was hard for me and for everyone else to come to grips with the occupation. Moreover, when they began to enact those laws limiting Jews, to put on the armband, I don't know all sorts of limitations, with different laws conditions then there was no way except to join the organized resistance to all that.

You could not sign up to be a member of the party. First you were a member of SKOJ. But I wasn't a member of SKOJ. Then if you were older, you needed to become a candidate for the Party and after that to become a party member. I, for example, came [back] to Bitola at the end of April and immediately activated in Hashomer Hatzair. As an activist in the Jewish youth organization, I participated in certain activities in the movement. I joined the national liberation organization which at that time was developing in Bitola. Because others had studied with the same craftsman they knew that I knew how to work with rifles. At that time weapons, which were taken from warehouses before the Germans came, were very important. The organization had a special group which organized concealing these weapons. There were non-functioning weapons among them because the Germans would throw the broken ones away. Those broken rifles needed to be fixed. With my skills I was interesting to the national liberation movement in Bitola. I was of interest to those responsible for repairing and concealing weapons, for the people organizing the resistance to the occupiers. This was especially important after the German attack on the Soviet Federation [17](#). At that time the communist party of Yugoslavia announced that it was prepared for an armed battle against the occupiers. For that battle, it was necessary to organize people and prepare weapons.

I organized a workshop in my basement [for my work for the movement]. I had another workshop in which I fixed other things. Because of these activities I was accepted into the Party in August. First they made connections for fixing the weapons, connections for developing the networks within the Jewish youth, and these connections eventually led them to ask me to be a party [member]. The person that I had contact with for fixing the weapons, for example, was the secretary of the party in Bitola, Stiv Naumov. He and I were school friends. The soon as he heard that I was back he was interested [in me]. And after a defined [amount of activity on behalf of the movement] they asked me to be a party member and I agreed. I wanted to be active. If you are a member of the Party it is normal that you will have more obligations and have to work more. When my friends asked me if I was prepared to work for the movement, I answered 'I am that person. Here I am.' And in a short time, by August 1941, I became a member of the communist party and became a big activist in the city.

I don't know how many members of the party there were in Bitola. There were not a lot of members of the party, but there were a lot of candidates for the Party and supporters. These people worked for the Party and they worked as hard as they could so they could become members of the party. But at that time it was very difficult to become a member of the party. It wasn't easy. Maybe there were 100 active members of the party in Bitola. But that activity for the national liberation movement from the side of the party members and of the city's committee was felt

throughout the whole city of 50,000 residents. At the time the Party was organized in cells consisting of five or six people. Everyone in the cell was a member of the party but every member of the party lead two, three or five groups of supporters. First you were a party supporter and then you became a candidate for the party and then you were accepted. That was the order. It was a special time. It is inconceivable today and a little strange but that is how it was.

To be a member of the Party meant in advance to declare yourself against the state. To immediately come in conflict with the state, with the government. According to the law, if it was confirmed that someone was a member of the party, you immediately went to the court and were sentenced. This was an act against the state.

In the middle of 1941 after I became a member of the communist party, I developed the activities among the Jewish youth even more. We agreed to explore the options for the organization. Hashomer Hatzair was already under police control, all organizations were, and Hashomer Hatzair, as a leftist organization, was under special police supervision. All the organization's social activities were stopped. Then the question became what next. Those who we activated in the work of the movement made a campaign for the whole organization to join the Party. Others wanted each individual to join on their own in the place where they worked, lived, with their friends, through their connections. We discussed this all of 1941. In the end it was decided that each person needed to join in the way that was right for him. The organization since it was under police supervision could not even work as an organization. However, it could help members not remain passive. Then we began actions collecting food, money. The Front for Aiding the Movement was established, as a sympathizers' organization. This is how the older generation got involved.

And around that time I was sent to prison. I was involved in an action in which a group of activists burned a place in the mountains where cheese was made. There were cabins, sheep roamed around, they milked the sheep and made cheese, 'kaskaval'. It was in one such place that our group confiscated about 20 rounds of 'kaskaval' for use by the partisans and the underground. The operation was organized by Peco Bozinovski, a [Macedonian] national hero. He had a Jewish group of supporters or members of SKOJ. The 15-20 wheels of cheese were divided up among Jewish families, Jewish activists and sympathizers. I was given one to hide. That was the only one that was discovered. I hid it at my friend [Geron's]. This is his last name I can't remember his first name. Geron was the son of a Jewish priest in Bitola. I can't say rabbi because there was only one rabbi and there were many of these priests. [Geron's father] was one of these priests. He was a cobbler. Geron was one of the supporters and as such he agreed to accept the cheese, he had to prove himself in order to become a member. A commission came to him to check his leather. At that time people smuggled soles and other leather goods. So the Bulgarian police occasionally conducted random checks in shops. Instead of finding leather they found a wheel of cheese. When we hid the cheese we didn't take care to scrap off the stamps and they saw that it was one of the stolen cheeses. Instead of selecting soles they found the kaskaval. We were not skilled and we didn't scrap off the stamp on the kaskaval; each kaskaval had its own stamp. They immediately discovered that it was the kaskaval which had been stolen.

They came to my house and took me away. I admitted that it was my kaskaval and that I had bought it at the market. A little stupid but I stuck to my story. They made a whole ordeal when they tortured me.

The prison that I was in [during the cheese episode] was located in the Bogoslovija, a [Orthodox Christian] religious school [a seminary]. It was in the center of Bitola. We were in a huge classroom. There were 50 of us prisoners inside. I wasn't sentenced I was just being held. This was one type of temporary arrest for interrogation. If there is evidence you go to court if not they let you go. I was locked up with Geron, the guy who turned me in. When I admitted what I did they let him go. [Geron] was killed in the camps.

Bulgarians were very good at extracting confessions. They wanted to know who organized the action to steal the cheese. And they used various methods to get to that information. That guy told them only that I gave him the cheese. So I must be the one who organized it. They got me and began the interrogation. I thought up a story which I stuck to. They were not satisfied with that story and wanted me to tell them how I really got the cheese. Who gave it to me. First they beat the soles of my feet. But I guess it didn't appear efficient to them so they began with the electricity. They put a node on each hand and something on my back. When they turned on the one in the back I felt pain.

They called me one day to tell me they would call me again at 10pm and if I don't confess then they would kill me. Then they let me return to prison. I told everyone in the room where we were all together what happened. Those that had experience with prison told me 'It's nothing. Don't worry.' And at exactly 10 pm they called me. When I told them I didn't have anything to say they called the guards and sent me back to prison. The next day they released me. I survived 20 days, the corpus delicti had been eaten and in the end they were forced to let me go.

After that I was promoted to a higher function. I was almost running a cell, I don't know what else. A cell was one of the organizations. It was a group of at most 10 people, activists, party leaders, who organized, presided. The secretary of the cell was connected to the local committee. He received direct orders from the local committee and carried them out. I was a cell secretary. There were about 6 or 7 of us. I think 7. The others were discovered and then I was discovered as the secretary of the cell.

Some of my friends from the cell were captured. I went underground just in case. For almost 15 days I wasn't anywhere. My brother was taking care of the workshop. After 10-15 days I saw that there wasn't anything and I went home. Those ten days I was in the neighborhood I just avoided going to the workshop and home. I had just arrived home when the police came and took me away. I didn't have anywhere to run. They took me to the police and then to prison. They left me there for ten days during which time no one spoke to me. I knew all of those who were in prison with me. Right away I learned what was going on.

I was ratted out by a high functionary, Koco Desan, who ran the commission for military issues in Bitola. He was a member of the local committee. We worked in the same cell. The first day when they captured him, this showed his weakness, he admitted that he worked in the military commission, that he led the military commission and that he belonged to this and this cell and that this cell held meeting in these different places including at Beno's. They were interested in the military questions so they left these other things for another time. However, the next day he saw what he had done and he recanted what he said and didn't say another word. He was given the death sentence and hung. He was discovered and revealed as an activist who led the military sector. He was hung because he didn't want to give more information. He gave himself up but he

didn't want to give up anyone else. It was very important for the Bulgarian police to uncover and capture the whole channel. Based on what he had said about the cell they arrested members of the cell. And they looked for a guy named Beno. And then they arrested me.

Ten days after my arrest they called me for interrogation. Somehow I managed to convince them that I wasn't that Beno. Then they let me go.

A week didn't pass before I was discovered again, this time as the secretary of the local committee. They were looking for me everywhere. But they could not find me. Out of anger they arrested my mother and brother.

My mother was even involved in party activities. She was very active in the movement even though she was illiterate. When I had meetings she stood guard. [Editor's Note: Although Jews made up only 10% of the population in Bitola, they represented more than 75% of the members illegal cells and stations for various illegal activities. Many Jewish homes were used to promote illegal political activities in Bitola. Source: Lebl] She knew everything that was going on. She was afraid but she didn't oppose. When I went underground and the police came looking for me, they arrested my mother and younger brother. When she was in prison she didn't tell them anything. Not a word. And she knew a lot. She knew the people who had come to our house. She pretended that she was illiterate and knew nothing.

They kept them in jail in Bitola for almost a month. When they learned that I was no longer in Bitola they interned them [see Internment of Jews in Bulgaria] [18](#). They were interned for 6 months but they were in different parts of the country and had no contact. I know that my brother was somewhere near Turkey. From internment in Bulgaria they deported my mother to Skopje where she joined the convoy. My brother learned that something wasn't right. He was a favorite among the Bulgarian villagers where he was interned. They liked him because he was a mechanic and could fix things: he fixed their electricity, he fixed everything for them. They told him that something wasn't right; that the police were looking for him. He managed to go to Sofia. A friend of ours, Avram Sadikario, lived there. I think he helped him get some money and he managed to get back to Bitola.

He made it to Bitola at night on the day that they were deported [see 11 March 1941] [19](#). He hid in our aunt's attic. From there he watched everything that happened. Through me he began to work for the movement. For sometime he worked as a technician in Bitola, printing materials. He was the head courier. Through these connections he joined the partisans.

When the Kingdom of Yugoslavia capitulated in 1941 my cousin Mois could not stay in Zagreb so he went back to Bitola. In Bitola he worked as a tailor. He sewed for a clothing store. He married but didn't have any children and he was taken to the camps. The last time I saw him I was in the underground in Bitola and I didn't have a safe place to be. He lived on the other side of town so I stayed with him two days. He made contact with Roza for me. We saw each other that time. Through him I managed to make contact with the city's leadership and to finish some work. Then I went to an underground apartment.

Each unit of the partisans was named after an old fighter, to give continuity. It is a nice idea because they didn't succeed.

When the Damjan Grujev [20](#) detachment was formed it was anticipated that it would comprise two units but there were problems and it wasn't possible so the Jane Sandanski [21](#) detachment was created. Jane Sandanski was a Bitolian detachment which was formed on the periphery of Bitola, near Pilester, in a village called Lavci [30 kilometers west of Bitola]. There were two Jews in this detachment. I was one and the other was Mordehaj Nahmijas. He was killed as the battalion commander in Kajmakchalan [the highest point on the Nidj mountain in Macedonia.]. There were two other Jews, whose names I don't know, but there were no conditions for them and they were returned to Bitola. I was appointed deputy commissar of the Jane Sandanski detachment.

When the conditions improved Jane Sandanski and Damjan Grujev were connected and the enlarged unit took on the name Damjan Grujev. The units united in Prespa [30 kilometers southwest of Bitola]. From Prespa I went to the Debarca region which is the region in between Ohrid, Struga and Kicevo, where we liberated territory and formed a second battalion, Mirce Acev.

That is a broad view of what happened. I remember it all like it was yesterday. After the war I wrote 'Chronologies of the Damjan Grujev's unit.' In the book I wrote about everything up to the formation of the Mirce Acev battalion. Here, on the wall, I have a plaque from the Mirce Acev battalion. It says from 1943-2003.

I said that I was a deputy political commissar of a unit. I was also the secretary of the committee in Bitola, in the toughest of times. For 3-4 months I was in the toughest times. That was the summer of 1942. During this time there were the most discoveries.

The most remarkable experience I had during the war was the liberation of Bitola. This was the first city in Macedonia to be liberated. We held it for ten days. The Bulgarians were ready for capitulation, they were about to capitulate and we had some negotiations. The Germans didn't arrive. Then we went to Prilep [40 kilometers north of Bitola]. We isolated the Bulgarians who were in the barracks, garrison. We waited from Bitola for the Germans. And we fought off the first wave of Germans and the city was liberated for a few days, almost ten. This was the first liberation of Bitola. I led this brigade. This for me was the most significant event in the war.

I developed as the army developed. By 1944, at the end of the operation for Macedonia and for Yugoslavia [see Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ)] [22](#), I had reached the rank of political commissar for the corps. This is the rank of general. At that the time I was 24 years old. At the time there were about five of us in Macedonia. I was among the five main people. For this position one needs knowledge. I had a lot of experience, I had militancy, I had everything except knowledge. After that I needed to go to school for another five years. This was strenuous, extremely strenuous. I needed my education to be on par with my function. My friends, who had similar situations to mine, they had similar paths, they didn't make it. Hey, that is the way it was. Life drives some things voluntarily, some things by force.

When the war ended I was already a high functionary with the rank of general. After the war I devoted myself to the military.

In Bitola, in 1941, we got a letter from my brother saying he was in a German prison of war camp. I don't know the name of the camp. Because he was in a prison of war camp with other military prisoners they all came back. They were used for work. In fact they were not even used for work. Actually they had special treatment for military prisoners.

In 1945 it was announced, by the Red Cross, that prisoners from Germany were coming back by train over the next few days. I went and waited for him at the station [in Belgrade]. I waited two or three days for him but he didn't come. I lost hope that he would come. He came after that when I wasn't there. He went to Miki Alba's or to some other friends and they told him that I was alive and posted in Kraljevo. When he heard from them that I was the commissar of a division he thought it surely could not be me. Because then I already had the rank of lieutenant colonel and he could not believe that in these three or four years I gained such a rank and moreover that I was the head of the division. And he said that is not him. They barely convinced him that it was true. He came to Kraljevo. He confirmed that I was alive and healthy and had become that which I was. I can imagine how much of a surprise it was for him. He was in the army for ten years and he barely became a first sergeant. He went back to Bitola [or maybe Skopje].

I learned a lot from him such as: that I should not expect anything from those camps, especially Treblinka and Auschwitz. Coincidentally, I was in Sarajevo at the same time he was captured there but we didn't see each other. When I escaped for Visegrad he was taken prisoner, loaded on a train and transported to Germany.

My younger brother was a kid during the war. But you can't exactly call him a kid, he was in the partisans. He was a partisan with me. He went to prison at age 17. He was active the whole time. In 1942 he worked in illegal printing. Only he and I did this work. I headed up the printing at this time. He was the only one who knew about these things. He carried the materials that needed to be printed. He carried the printed materials to specific points. In all of Bitola only two people knew about what was happening with respect to printing production my brother and I. It was like this because Bitola had bad experience with printing. Some people had been killed who were involved in this. He is the recipient of the Partisans' Certificate of Service.

Albert was the recipient of the Partisans' Certificate of Service. At the time this was the highest medal of honor a person could receive. It meant that you were recognized as a leader in the fighting from 1941. To receive this you had to fill out a form and send it in to the committee in Belgrade which would decide whether you qualified for this medal or not. You had to prove [your worthiness]. I filled out the form and two witnesses, who were also recipients of this prize, had to verify my story. I don't remember who mine were.

The forms were sent to Belgrade to a special committee which reviewed the applications. Roza, Albert and I all applied and we [all received it]. This certificate comes with a lot of privileges as well. As a recipient you can ride the bus for free. At one time you had the right to one free airline ticket in Yugoslavia. These privileges were not stopped rather gradually phased out. There was no special order to stop them. Here, recipients of this certificate, can still ride the bus, or get a 13th salary for a vacation. You received a medal and a certificate. I think we got it in 1952. There was a date by which all these applications were resolved and that was it. They worked on these applications for years. Maybe ten years. You got the medal and certificate from the Federation of Fighters. Actually I don't remember how it all went.

If my mother had lived she too would have received this award. She held up courageously. And she sacrificed everything. I believe that she was happy when she got to the camp, that is to Monopol [see Monopol Tobacco Factory] [23](#), in Skopje. Everyone was there. But Dario, Albert and I were not there. And Roza wasn't there and she knew about Roza. I believe that she was happy because at least we were saved. And we could not help her at all.



I met Roza Kamhi, my wife, through the Party. That is we met through Hashomer Hatzair. She was in the women's youth group and I was in the men's group. We decided to marry right after the war. Roza worked in finance, with money and budgets. She worked in this field until she retired. I don't know when she retired. But you see I wasn't free. Macedonia was liberated. Macedonia participated in the battle of the Srem Front with one corps. And I was one of the leaders of this corps. Srem Front was a rough battle; the battle began around April and lasted until the end of May, uninterrupted fighting. Then I was in Zagreb. From Zagreb I was transferred with my division to Bosnia to the battle against the Chetniks [24](#) and the enemies of the revolution. From Bosnia I went to Serbia with my division. And there we also led a battle against the remaining Chetniks. This all happened until the autumn of 1945. And in the autumn I left my division to take a party course in Belgrade. From there I was transferred to Skopje. Then I was transferred to Nis. And then I returned to Skopje in 1946. That is when we married in 1946. Before that I was in Kraljevo [120 kilometers south of Belgrade], Belgrade, Nis and Skopje.

I think Roza and I married in 1946. I can't remember the date. Why is that important at all? I don't remember the order of that day. But it was like we went out to buy something and had to finish it quickly and go home. There was no celebration. Roza and I married on the same day that my brother Dario married his wife. It was me, Roza, my older brother Dario, Dora, his wife. Dora's brother, Pepo Nahmijas, was the best man on her side. Zozef Kamhi, Roza's nephew, was also there. And there was Boce Lamdeski, my friend from the war and Roza's friend from Resan. He is dead now. He was our best man.

The two married couples lived in one room with one bed. It was great. We alternated who slept on the bed. This is where Roza lived before she married. At that time apartments were allocated through one's workplace. I was in the army and the army fought for my apartment, not me. Then you could not go and rent a place because all the apartments were nationalized. Where Roza and I lived the owner lived there to. The whole house was his. All of it was taken from him. He was given one small apartment on one of the floors. The rest was nationalized. Apartments were all filed and divided up by the municipality. All the rooms were inventoried. Apartments were very modest back then. The army asked the municipality for another room for us. Then Dario came and we asked for another room. While we were there we already had two rooms, a kitchen and I don't know what else. In the end we had a full apartment.

Then I was transferred to Nis and we left that apartment to my brother.

After the war Dario got a job in Skopje as a mechanic. Dora was born the same year as Roza and worked as a clerk. In 1945 or 46 he enrolled in the faculty and studied agronomy and finished a year or two. Actually he wanted to study engineering, which was his profession but that department didn't exist at the university in Skopje. When he went to Israel he had some knowledge about agriculture. In Israel he became a farmer. He got some land and became a modern farmer in Petach Tikvah. He dedicated himself to this. Surely it wasn't easy but he created something. He had two children, Salina and Isak. They were born in Skopje but live in Israel. Neither of them married or have children. My brother died in Israel; his wife is still alive.

I was sorry when my brother went to Israel, but I understood him. I was studying in Belgrade and went with him to the station. We kissed each other and all. When it comes to this point, my younger brother could not understand him. My other brother, Albert could not accept this. I don't

know why he could not accept it. Albert and I participated in this revolution while Dario was in a camp. He didn't live through what we did. And he could not feel as deeply for this country as we did. We gave our blood for this country. He was there and he always lived in the fear that it should not happen again. The only security was in Israel. So it was normal that he went there. I didn't make problems for him. In the end it didn't only depend on him he was married and he had two children. His wife wanted to go because her brother was there. She and her brother were very close, inseparable. Life went a different way for my younger brother and I. Albert never went to Israel. I would like us to go together now.

Albert married a non-Jewish woman from Rijeka named, Anka, who he met while he was working there. He has two children Jadranka and Srecko. Albert got used to life there and one would say he is more from Rijeka than anywhere else. When Yugoslavia broke-up I never had any problem between my brother [Albert] and I. Today we still go there and we don't need any special visa or anything. Of course we need our passports because we are leaving our republic. We could always visit one another without any problem. He comes here often to visit us. He was here this year and we went together to Ohrid for a summer vacation.

I became a general in the Yugoslav army [see Yugoslav National Army (JNA)] [25](#), Tito's [see Josip Broz Tito][26](#) army in the 1960s. I always say that I was really a partisan general. But I finished all the schooling, otherwise I would not have been able to advance. It is no good to advance only on praise, one needs knowledge as well. After the war I did three grades and final examination in one year. I worked hard but it was very difficult without an education. [The army] approved that I go to school. I finished two years at the Djuro Djakovic [27](#), communist party political school in Belgrade with great results. With this school and a few more exams a person could finish the philosophy or economic faculties. I could not because I had a lot of work. After that I worked in Belgrade a year and continued at the military college there, which I finished with very good results. I finished all of this between 1950 and 1954. After that I was on a specialized six month training course at headquarters. And with that I finished my schooling. It seems to me that I was one of the more capable generals, professionally capable.

I became a candidate for the rank of general and was promoted [a year later] in 1960. There was a practical and theoretical exam. I had to write a paper connected to my work: moral and political education in the army as a factor for combat readiness. I had to prepare this paper, 50-60 pages, and type it up. I got a good score which meant I passed the theoretical test. Then I was called to Cavtat on the [Adriatic] sea. There we had the practical group exam; all the candidates for general that year [were together]. There were about 15 of us from the whole of Yugoslavia. It lasted almost a week. There I passed the practical exam. They give the promotions usually on the Day of the Army. For generals this was a command from Tito, President of the Republic of Yugoslavia. You got the rank of general and funds to make a new uniform: one work uniform and one dress uniform.

I retired in 1970s, at age fifty, but actually I didn't retire. At my own request I was put at the army's disposal. I am sure I had a reason why I asked to go to pension early. The basic reason was because I wasn't satisfied with myself. It was different in war. At one point a lot was demanded. For five years I went to school non-stop. I started my schooling at the rank of colonel. I needed to finish elementary education, then political school, military academy, practical school, maybe all that had an effect, I don't know. Today, I still can't answer this question.

But I didn't stop working. I accepted the first position they offered me after I was put at their disposal. I was appointed as the first commander of defense for the city of Skopje. I held this position for ten years working full time just not in uniform. I felt restricted in a uniform, very restricted, I don't know why. And after that I accepted to be the representative of the reserve officers and held that position for three or four years. And today I am still active. I get together with friends. I go to the fighters' organization.

I met Tito only once. I was already retired and was the president of the reserve officers of Macedonia. As the president I was a member of the Federal Committee of Reserve Officers. I think it was two years before Tito died. I can't remember where it was. Maybe it was at Karadjordjevo (140 km north-west of Belgrade). It was at a big estate. He welcomed us nicely but one could already feel his age and the seriousness of his illness. At that time he had already been operated on. This was a special event for me. I spoke directly with him. There were four of us in the delegation. I think his secretary or adjutant was also there. We talked for almost an hour. Everyone had a chance to say something. I don't remember what I said. I don't remember what he was like and when you take into account the fact that he died two years later it does not much matter. But we, all of us who were there, were very excited. It was a real occasion. Before this, I was also at a reception with him here in Skopje, when I shook hands with him. Then I was part of his final procession. I was in the honor guard at his funeral.

I was a pallbearer at Tito's funeral. At the time I was president of the organization of reserve officers of Macedonia. As president, with all the representatives of the republics and the president of the federal committee we carried the coffin. I was there during the whole funeral.

Roza and I agreed that we didn't want our children to be singled out. We wanted them to be far away from the things that our families had lived through. Not to hide our origins but not to single them out. Let them live their lives and when they mature let them decide what they will do and how they will do it.

We gave them the names they have as a memorial. And so that they should know their origins. We didn't hide this from them. But we didn't want to make backward Jews of them.

We enrolled them in Serbian schools. Skopje was the main garrison for Yugoslav troops in southern Yugoslavia. Officers from all parts of Yugoslavia came here. At the time the national language was Serbo-Croatian. I could have been stationed anywhere in Yugoslavia for five years, two years, I didn't know. If my kids had learned Macedonian what would have happen when they went to Nis or Belgrade. We did this so the children didn't have problems when they went somewhere else in Yugoslavia.

Vida was born in Skopje and Berta in Nis. They finished high school in Skopje. And then Vida went to the electro-technical department at the university and then got a master's degree. And Berta finished medicine and specialized in pediatric surgery. They both work in these professions today. They both married and have two children each. Vida's children are Tanja and Jasmina and Berta's are Bojan and Maja. Bojan, finished the eletro-technical university and now he works in some American company, I don't know which, in his field. Jasmina also finished the electro-technical faculty and specialized in informatika. She also finished post-graduate work and now works in her father's computer company. Tanja finished electro-technical faculty and works at USAID [United States of America International Development] as a director, she has an important position there.

She finished post-graduate work but didn't get her diploma. In the meantime she had a baby.

My son [Isak] was a passionate alpinist, mountain climber. He was a mountain climbing instructor. He finished the mechanical engineer university without any problem. But he was restless, he could not find peace. He was all over Europe, Africa and Asia. But it wasn't enough for him. First he went to Sweden and worked on fields there. We thought he was on his way home when he called to say he was in Africa. He called from Africa to say that he was on his way home. When, suddenly he went to India. From India he called to say that he was in Nepal investigating the terrain for climbing the Himalayas. He went to Triglav [60 kilometers northwest of Ljubljana] because it is a special terrain for alpinism, a preparation for Himalayas. He finished the climb and was very excited. He was already unlocked from his belt when he slipped, fell and died. We have fond memories of him. He was good.

I never regretted that I didn't get on that boat to Israel that didn't arrive. I hadn't the faintest idea that I would be in the military. I got a chance for a second development. There is no reason that I should not be proud that I had the opportunity to participate in a revolution, the anti-fascist battle and to be one of the leaders of that fight in Macedonia. When I became a soldier I thought if I reach the rank of first sergeant, if I go to non-commissioned officer school that would be an accomplishment. And, I came out of the war with the rank of general. This was simply fantastic.

Earlier we would go with the family every year on vacation. We went by car and enjoyed both hotels and nature. There is no place on the Adriatic coast we didn't go to. We were on the Montenegrin coast. We were near Split. We were on Brijuni (Brijuni islands, found along the southwestern coast of the Istria region of Croatia) a few times. Now we go to Ohrid or to Macedonian natural springs, especially Strumicka spa (100 km from Skopje). But mostly we go to our weekend house.

One of the reasons I retired early, that that they put me at the army's disposal, was so I could go to Israel. As a general I could not go. Military personnel didn't have the right to go abroad without authorization. I was there twice, but only the first time was good. The second time we arrived in Israel, we ate a good dinner, we were all excited and we went to bed. In the morning my brother had a heart attack, he went to the hospital and died there. So instead of seeing Israel we buried my brother. There you go, that is how we spent our last trip. We were closed up those seven days, how long, and we didn't see anything in Israel and we went home. Albert didn't come then. I have been talking to Albert for two years now that we should go to Israel together but we still haven't gone.

Roza traveled a little more than I did. Ten years ago, maybe fifteen, Roza and I went to Spain. We were in some summer resort near Barcelona. We were there for fifteen days. We went there because it was a good price, a nice group of people. Most of the time we went by bus and we had a good guide from Belgrade, I liked it.

I am not much for moving around. If I want to go somewhere I will find a place in Macedonia to visit. Although I like Belgrade very much I don't even feel like going there. I don't know why. I am not for traveling. I am difficult about traveling especially now that someone needs to drive me. I don't like to travel by train. Years make their own. Roza tells me that she very much wants to go places. It is tiring. At this age I am not much for adapting myself to some new place. It is late for adapting.

Now we don't have a car but before we had a 'Stojadina' which I drove for 20 years. I bought it in Skopje. First we had a 'Fica'. We traded the 'Fica' for a '1300'. These were all cars produced in Kragujevac in cooperation with Italian Fiat. Then we had a 'Peze'. They were all new cars. And for the last twenty years we had the 'Stojadina'. It is a 'Fiat 110' or a 'Zastava 110'.

Now that I am fully retired I do what I want. I go to my weekend house. When I first went to pension I received severance pay which I used to buy the weekend house. Some of my friends convinced me to buy it. It was a good idea. I have free time and I like to practice my trade. I am in love with my trade, mechanics. I love to do physical work. Construction workers built the structure and I did everything inside. Even today I am still making things there. I have a whole workshop in my garage.

Through the years I wrote a lot, gave speeches and statements. From the front I wrote a feuilleton. I want to collect and fix all those things in one place. I would like to make a book from all of that material. To collect it all in one place so that it does not get lost. Today I made a plan how it should look with the contents of the book. I can't write now I am only going to include the things that were already written and fix them where necessary. But this is not my main occupation. The main occupation is that today I am still active in the fighter's organization. Roza and I are both active. Active means that every Monday from 10-12 we go to the club. We all get together. Old people go there and they exchange ideas. We go there and talk about current events in the world, in our country, about all sorts of things. It is a very dynamic atmosphere. Things develop and we have a lot to talk about each Monday. For this kind of meeting you have to be prepared. You must have something to say. You must listen to the news, read the papers. And this is how we succeed to keep our brains active. These are dangerous years. A person can lose his ability to remember. We were on vacation so we didn't go for two months. Now we will start again.

We also take care of our physical condition. We take walks. Especially Roza. She is very persistent. She wants to take a walk every day. I am a little lazy.

We follow one, two, three generations of family problems and successes. We follow these things but we try not to get too involved. You can really see differences between generations. Every generation has its own problems. The differences are enormous. And I don't know how wise it is to get involved in these problems. When I was young there wasn't such a great difference between my generation and my father's not even my grandfather's. Today these problems are enormous. Then people lived in one family. Today that is unheard of. Today, a child when he is 15,16 or 20 years old, if you don't let him [go] he will run away from home. So that today you must create conditions for him to leave. It is too hard for two generations to live together. And then three generations lived together. Today that is impossible. It is absolutely impossible. We don't do that here because we live separately. We are together and not together. We live under one roof but each one has his own finances. And that is why from the beginning we made this wall.

This last war in Macedonia ended without any upset. Independence was declared. Macedonia created her own army, with a little help. The Macedonian army has its own commanders. I fought for Macedonia and for Yugoslavia. But when Yugoslavia started to fall apart, as they say busted at the seams, then it was important for us to save this. So that we didn't endanger anyone. That is why for some time, I don't know if you heard about this outside, but we declared Macedonia an oasis of peace for Yugoslavia. Everywhere they were fighting but here there was peace. We lived in

the Royal Kingdom of Yugoslavia, then Tito's Yugoslavia. But we lived with that Macedonian nation all the time. During the Royal Kingdom of Yugoslavia and during the time of Yugoslavia and now during the time of independent Macedonia. We feel like Macedonians and Yugoslavs. We still long for Yugoslavia. But in the first place we feel like we are here.

We don't celebrate Christmas and Easter either. We are atheists. We celebrate holidays as a tradition not as religious holidays. They are traditions that need to be cared for and remembered.

I respect myself and since I respect myself and my understanding I respect the understanding of others. I have been an atheist for as long as I can remember. I can't change. I respect those who believe in this or that. That is his personal thing and I respect that. I rarely go to the synagogue and I can even say that I don't even have a desire to go to synagogue. I only go when I have to. But I respect those who go and what they believe in. [Editor's Note: The Jewish community of Skopje built a small chapel on the second floor of their community building in 2001. This is the first synagogue to exist in Macedonia since the war.]

When they laid the cornerstone for the museum that was a big event, a very important event. This was a great success of the Jewish community of Skopje and the board that was specially chosen to construct this Holocaust memorial. [Editor's Note: the cornerstone for a Holocaust Museum was laid in September 2005. The museum and accompanying offices and commercial space will be built with funds given by the Macedonian government as restitution from WWII.] Because Jewish organizations, in general international impression of Jews after the Holocaust and all of that, all of this development, especially the formation of the State of Israel and the role of that country and the role of Jewish organization in the world, is such that it is very important especially for a small country like Macedonia which had a similar fate, to have a lot of understanding for the Holocaust and that it should have good relations with those Jewish organization which are dominant in the world. And for Macedonia it is very important because Macedonia is very dependent. And she is still equal in one situation where she needs help and that help, especially in development, in joining these collective organizations, NATO, Europe, etc. This is very important because Macedonia by herself, without help, will not survive.

I feel like I am a Jew by origin. When there is a census I state that I am a Macedonian of Jewish origin. I never hid this and it is obvious from my name. I am not an Israeli. I can't feel like an Israeli. What they live through over there is their problem. I follow it and complain about all that is bad but I feel it only indirectly. Indirectly I feel like something of mine is there. It is mine but very distant. The Jews are spread all over the world it is good that they have a country. Any kind of country and to support that country. All of our friends and relatives who went to Israel in the beginning they were pioneers, real fighters for the State of Israel.

#### Glossary:

1 Jewish Pale of Settlement: Certain provinces in the Russian Empire were designated for permanent Jewish residence and the Jewish population was only allowed to live in these areas. The Pale was first established by a decree by Catherine II in 1791. The regulation was in force until the Russian Revolution of 1917, although the limits of the Pale were modified several times. The Pale stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, and 94% of the total Jewish population of Russia, almost 5 million people, lived there. The overwhelming majority of the Jews lived in the towns and shtetls of the Pale. Certain privileged groups of Jews, such as certain merchants, university



graduates and craftsmen working in certain branches, were granted to live outside the borders of the Pale of Settlement permanently.

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

3 First Balkan War (1912-1913): Started by an alliance made up of Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, and Montenegro against the Ottoman Empire. It was a response to the Turkish nationalistic policy maintained by the Young Turks in Istanbul. The Balkan League aimed at the liberation of the rest of the Balkans still under Ottoman rule. In October, 1912 the allies declared war on the Ottoman Empire and were soon successful: the Ottomans retreated to defend Istanbul and Albania, Epirus, Macedonia and Thrace fell into the hands of the allies. The war ended on the 30th May 1913 with the Treaty of London, which gave most of European Turkey to the allies and also created the Albanian state.

4 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.

## **5 Capitulation of Yugoslavia**

On 6 of April 1941 Yugoslavia was invaded on all sides by the German's and their allies. After less than two weeks, on 17 April 1941, the Yugoslav armed forces surrendered and the state ceased to exist.

## **6 Rabbi Avram Romano (1895-1943)**

He was born in Sarajevo. He began his career in Bijeljina where he served from 1919-1923 and then in Dubrovnik before becoming chief rabbi of Bitola in 1931. When he arrived in Bitola he was astonished that such a large community was in such poor economic and financial straits and began a campaign to bring this situation to light in the rest of Yugoslavia. He was also a supporter of the Zionist cause and used his position to promote this ideology. He served as the last chief rabbi of Bitola. He was killed in Treblinka. [Source Plima i Slom by Zeni Lebl]

## **7 Tehelet Lavan in Yugoslavia**

Moderately leftist Zionist organization. In Yugoslavia it was founded in Novi Sad (Vojvodina), where it opened its office in 1937. It began work in Bitola in 1934 and when a branch was formally established in Bitola in 1925 there were more than 300 members. In Bitola this organization attracted mostly working class youth.

## **8 Hashomer Hatzair in Yugoslavia**

Leftist Zionist youth organization founded in 1909 by members of the Second Aliyah, many of

whom were active in revolutionary movements back in the Russian Empire. In the diaspora its main goal was to prepare Jewish youth for the hard pioneering life in Palestine. It was first organized in Yugoslavia in 1930. It started in 1931 in Bitola and by the end of the year it had more than 400 members. The ken was situated in the 'La Skulika de la Kaleza.'

## **9 SKOJ (Alliance of the Communist Youth Yugoslavia)**

The organization was established in Zagreb in 1919 and was closely tied to the Yugoslav Communist Party. During World War II many of its members were imprisoned, others joined Tito's partisans and participated in the anti-fascist resistance.

## **10 Rabbi Shabtai Djaen (1883-1946)**

He was born in Pleven, Bulgaria into a zionistic family and studied rabbinic studies in Istanbul with Rabbi Avram Danon. After his studies he taught Hebrew in Nis, (where he married Zimbulom Nahmijas), Travnik and Belgrade before accepting the post of Rabbi of Bitola in 1924. He was a strong proponent of Israel and worked hard to encourage emigration to Palestine. During his tenure he also raised money in the Americas on behalf of the poor Jews of Bitola. He left Bitola in 1928 and accepted a rabbinic post in Argentina. In 1931 he was called by the Bucharest Sephardic community to be their chief rabbi. In addition to his rabbinic talents he also wrote many widely popular plays on Jewish and Biblical themes. He was in Romania at the outbreak of WWII. He was detained several times before his connections at the Spanish and Italian consulates helped free him from prison. He died in Argentina. [Source: Plima i Slom by Zeni Lebl]

## **11 6 April 1941**

On this day Hitler's forces, in alliance with the Hungarians, Italians and Bulgarians, invaded Yugoslavia and Greece. Hitler intervened in the war in this fashion to secure his southern flank in anticipation of the imminent invasion of the Soviet Union.

## **12 Jewish participation in the National People's Army**

By 1941 many Jews had begun to cooperate with the communist partisans who fought against the occupying forces. By 1942, 30 Jews from Bitola belonged to the Communist Party, another 150 had joined the Federation of Communist Youth (SKOJ) and about another 650 assisted the partisans. The great many of these were deported but some 50 survived and joined the partisans [Source: Mark Cohen].

## **13 German Occupation of Macedonia in WWII**

The Germans attacked Yugoslavia on April 6, 1941 and took Belgrade a week later. From the Bulgarian border they entered into southern Serbia and were in Skopje by April 7 and April 9 in Bitola. On the 15th of April they continued on towards Greece leaving Macedonia and parts of Southern Serbia (Piro, Vranje) in the hands of their Bulgarian allies.

## **14 Yellow star in Bulgaria**

According to a governmental decree all Jews under Bulgarian occupation 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.

## **15 Bulgarian Occupation of Macedonia**

Bulgarian Occupation of Macedonia in World War II: In April 1941 Bulgaria along with Germany, Italy and Hungary attacked the neighbouring Yugoslavia. Beside Yugoslav Macedonia Bulgarian troops also marched into the Northern-Greek Aegean Thrace. Although the territorial gains were initially very popular in Bulgaria, complications soon arose in the occupied territories. The oppressive Bulgarian administration resulted in uprisings in both occupied lands. Jews were persecuted, their property was confiscated and they had to do forced labor. In early 1943 the entire Macedonian Jewish population (mostly located in Bitola, Skopje and Stip) was deported and confined in the Monopol tobacco factory near Skopje. On 22nd March deportations to the Polish death camps began. From these transports only about 100 people returned to Macedonia after the war. Some Macedonian Jews managed to reach Italian-occupied Albania, others joined the Yugoslav partisans and some 150-200 of them were saved by the Spanish government which granted them Spanish citizenship.

## **16 Yugoslav Communist Party (KPJ)**

It was first established in 1919, after the new state of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians came into existence after World War I. Many communists were killed and imprisoned in the purges during the royal dictatorship, introduced by King Aleksandar I in 1929 (the so-called 6th January Dictatorship, 1929-34), and the Central Committee of the KPJ went into exile in Vienna in 1930. The KPJ set up the first partisan units in November 1943 and organized resistance throughout World War II. The communist Federal Republic Yugoslavia, with Tito as its head, was proclaimed in November 1945. Yugoslavia became a communist dictatorship with a one party system and with the oppression of all political opposition.

17 German attack on Soviet Federation: Hitler and his commanders developed plans for an invasion of the Soviet Federation as part of their routine operations. Hitler named this Operation Barbarossa in honor of Frederick I, the twelfth century Prussian King who was prophesied to rise from his grave and restore Germany to world power. Operational orders were given in January 1941.

The plan called for a ten-week campaign that would start on May 15, 1941. But events around the world changed the plan; the Afrika Korps landed in North Africa in February; Yugoslavia, a supposed ally of Germany, threw back the offer of German assistance; and Italy needed help to conquer Greece. The invasion was pushed back five weeks to June 22. the German High Command on the Eastern Front, massed the greatest army ever assembled to invade the Soviet Union. One hundred forty-eight divisions were recruited to take up the invasion. A total of 3,050,000 men, 7184 artillery pieces, 3,350 tanks, 2,770 aircraft, 600,000 vehicles, and 625,000 horses were arrayed in three prongs aimed at the Soviet Union. When the barrage opened on the morning of June 22, 1941, Red Army units were slow to react. Stalin was paralyzed by Hitler's

betrayal of the Nazi-soviet nonaggression Pact and by the destruction and did not react to the crisis in time. The Germans destroyed Russian units and rounded up large numbers of prisoners. As the Germans advanced as much as twenty miles a day, the Red Army slowly began to reorganize in the face of the enemy.

**18 Internment of Jews in Bulgaria:** Although Jews living in Bulgaria were 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.

### **19 11 March 1943**

On this day all of the Jews of Macedonia were collected and taken to a temporary collection center in Skopje at the Monopol tobacco factory. This round up and deportation of the Jews from Bitola was executed by Kiril Stoimenov, the Inspector of the Commission for Jewish Questions. At two in the morning the city was under a blockade, at five the carefully assembled forces informed the Jewish population to prepare for a trip and at seven they began the deportation to Monopol tobacco factory in Skopje.

### **20 Gurjev, Damjan (1871-1906)**

Revolutionary and organizer of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO). He was an organizer and fighter in the unsuccessful Ilinden Uprising that began on 2 August 1903. He was killed in an Ottoman raid. A Macedonian partisan detachment was named after him.

**21 Sandanski, Jane (1812-1915):** A figure in the national revolutionary movement in Pirin, Macedonia (today Bulgaria). He was the first president of the national federative party in Turkey. He was killed by paid mercenaries of the Bulgarian king Ferdinand and is a Macedonian national hero. A Macedonian partisan detachment was named after him.

### **22 Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ)**

Was established on 29 November 1945. The new nation consisted of six people's republics: Serbia (including two autonomous regions of Vojvodina and Kosovo), Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, with Tito as Premier. This federal union began its demise after Tito's death and was finally dismantled when Slovenia announced independence in 1991.

### **23 Monopol Tobacco Factory**

The Monopol factory is situated on the periphery of Skopje and was made to be the ghetto for Macedonian Jews in WWII. Within the complex there were five four story buildings with a large yard and high fence. Train tracks ran through the factory property. When the Jews were brought to the factory, on 11 March 1943, everything was taken from them and they were not fed at all for the first five days they were there. There was no toilet in the facilities where they were held. They

remained there for eleven days before the first of three transports transferred 7,148 Macedonian Jews by cattle car to Treblinka in Poland. Almost 98% of the Macedonian community was annihilated in this action.

## **24 Chetniks**

Serbian nationalist movement named after the armed irregulars fighting the Ottomans during the Serbian uprisings in the early 19th century. During World War II, after the surrender of the Yugoslav Royal Army in 1941, the Chetnik movement became successful in fighting the Germans under the leadership of Draza (Dragoljub) Mihailovic. The Chetniks at first cooperated with Tito's partisans, however, they turned against them later. Britain and America preferred the Chetniks to the Yugoslav partisans but they switched support in 1944 when they realized that the partisans were more effective. After the war Tito persecuted the Chetnik movement and had its leader, Mihailovic, executed in Belgrade in 1946.

## **25 Yugoslav National Army (JNA)**

Established from anti-fascist partisan units during World War II, the JNA was the strongest army in communist Eastern Europe. With a predominantly Serbian leadership, the JNA was instrumental in maintaining Serbian supremacy in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. From the end of the 1980s, the JNA played an active part in Serbian expansionist aspirations. In the Croatian and Bosnian wars, which lasted from 1991-1995 and were the bloodiest armed conflicts in Europe after World War II, the JNA represented Serbian national interests (the inclusion of all Serbian lands into a Greater Serbia) and fought alongside Serb irregulars. After the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995, the JNA withdrew from Croatia, although the Serb irregulars continued fighting.

**26 Josip Broz Tito (1892-1980):** President of communist Yugoslavia from 1953 until his death. He organized the Yugoslav Communist Party in 1937 and became the leader of the Yugoslav partisan movement after 1941. He liberated most of Yugoslavia with his partisans, including Belgrade, made territorial gains (Fiume and the previously Italian Istria). In March 1945 he became the head of the new federal Yugoslav government. He nationalized industry but didn't enforce the Soviet-style collective farming system. On the political plane, he oppressed and executed his political opposition. Although Yugoslavia was closely associated with the USSR, Tito often pursued independent policies. He accepted western loans to stabilize national economy, and gradually relaxed many of the regime's strict controls. As a result, Yugoslavia became the most liberal communist country in Europe. After Tito's death in 1980 ethnic tensions resurfaced, bringing about the brutal breakup of the federal state in the 1990s.

## **27 Djakovic, Djuro (1886-1929)**

He was a metal worker in Sarajevo and already in 1905-06 he participated in the first workers' strikes in Bosnia. This was the first in a long career of activities on behalf of the Communist movement in Yugoslavia. At the IV Congress of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (Dresden 1928) he was elected as the organizing secretary of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. In April 1929 he was arrested in Zagreb, tortured and taken to the Yugoslav-Austrian border where he was killed on 25 April 1929. Twenty years later on 25 April 1949 his remains were transferred to the Kalamegdan Park where a monument in his honor was erected. A school for party members was established in Belgrade with his name.