

## Nissim Kohen's Family



This is a photo of my father Mihael Kohen, my mother Sarina Kohen, who are on the first row and my sister Sofi and I - on the second row. The photo was taken after 1944 in Sofia.

My whole family - my parents, my sister and I, were interned to Dupnitsa.

In Dupnitsa I received a summons for the Jewish labor groups and in June 1944 I was sent to Lovech. We built the road Sofia - Lovech. From there we observed the American bombers, also called 'fortresses', which were flying to Romania and we hoped that they would bring us freedom. Once the camp was attacked by partisans with the goal to frighten the commandment and release some people. We filled a cart for them with walnuts and food. That took place in August 1944 when Prime Minister Bagryanov was replaced and we were allowed to take our Jewish badges off. Around September 7-8th the same year we were already anticipating the coming of the Soviet army and the labor camps were disbanded. There were six labor groups around Lovech. We left the camps. No one could stop us any more. We traveled to Pleven. In the evening I took the train to Sofia together with the political prisoners from the Pleven prison who had broken free. So, on September 9th 1944 I was in Sofia. There were soldiers everywhere. I traveled to Dupnitsa and arrived at noon. The people there were waiting for the Red Army and the men of Zhelyu Demirevski. When I left my baggage at my parents', I enrolled as a volunteer in 3rd Guard Regiment led by the legendary partisan commander Zhelyu Demirevski. There were a lot of other Jewish volunteers too. I think we were around 50 people. Overall, around 60 -70 Jews from Dupnitsa took part in the Fatherland war. Some of them were mobilized and others were volunteers.

We fought in the area between 1st and 2nd Bulgarian Army. That was the region of the volunteers' division commanded by Slavcho Transki. Our task was to liberate the town of Boyanovats and intercept the Germans between Skopje and Belgrade. Many people died in the fightings, including the regiment commander Zhelyu Demirevski. I returned in the end of December 1944. Some of the soldiers volunteers or the so-called 'guards' from 3rd Guards Regiment were discharged because they had already done their military service. Those who were younger were also discharged. And the others, like me, who had not done their military service yet, had to do it in the country.

My military service was in Sofia. We were accommodated in the school 'Vasil Drumev' and 134th School which were close to our house. In the end of May 1945 we were moved to Botevgrad. Then an order was received that those who had already spent some time serving should be discharged. In August 1945 I completed my military service. I started working in a warehouse doing repairs, but I got sick and quit for some time. Then until 1949 I worked in the glass factory Stind in Orlandovtsi district as a sorter and worker. Later I started work in the co-operative 'Mashinostroene' [Machine Construction] and I was in charge of the supplies for the workers - I rented flats for them and arranged the food supplies. Then I started work as head of the personnel department in the machine construction company 'Orel' and worked there until 1950.

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