

Nissim Kohen With His Father Mihael Kohen



This is a photo of me, first on the left, and my father Mihael Kohen on Klementina Str (present-day Alexander Stamboliiski Blvd) in Sofia in 1940.

It was typical for Jews in Luchbunar to say that their education ended after junior high school. In Ladino that was the expression 'skapado di shkola'. We had to look for work and we went from shop to shop and workshop to workshop to ask if they needed apprentices or workers. I started work as an electrical engineer for some Bulgarians. I installed chandeliers. I also went to electrical technical courses organized by the organization for professional development of Jews 'Ort'. That was from September 1938 until January - February 1939. Then I got sick of typhus and could not continue. Later, in 1942, I started work in a trade company. The anti-Jewish laws were adopted then and its owner, who was a Jew, had to close it down. Then I started work in the enamel factory.

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

way my father was able to support us and helped the people in the neighborhood. That continued until the passing of the anti-Jewish laws when he was forbidden to work.

The Jewish school was the focus point of all Zionist organizations. Those were Hashomer Hatzair, Betar and Maccabi. Other organizations such as Akiva and Akara gathered in the Jewish People's Home. I was a member of Hashomer Hatzair. All organizations educated their members during meetings, marches, gymnastic exercises. In Hashomer Hatzair they focused on scouts education, cultural activities and preparation for leaving to Israel as pioneers in the new country. In Maccabi they focused on exercise and Betar - on military discipline. There were neverending disputes between the members of these organizations.

Before Hashomer Hatzair I was a member of Maccabi, when I was a student in third or fourth primary grade. Soon after that our whole group transferred to Hashomer Hatzair. We were there until 1941 when Jewish organizations were disbanded and then I became a member of the UYW [The Union of Young Workers, also called Revolutionary Youth Union, a communist youth organization]. Hashomer Hatzair was a left scouts organization. It was an educational organization characterized by a love of nature and freedom. Once or twice every week there were meetings of the boys' groups, the girls' groups and the mixed groups. There was a group uniting the members at a certain level of development. That level was defined by age - children, students and adults. During the meetings we discussed books and exchanged information on many topics. We discussed a famous book at the times 'Discussions with a philosophy teacher' by Trachtenberg. That is a German author, whose book was on Marxism. The discussions were in Bulgarian. We played Kuntsovi games - in quickness of wit and guessing.

Political issues were seriously discussed in Hashomer Hatzair. There was the so-called 'Court of War'. That was in the beginning of 1939. Each of us took the position of a certain party in a conflict, which was controversial at the time and we discussed the issues of war and peace. I represented China, others represented Germany or Russia, England, France. Everything was like a game. We invited all members of the organization and we sat on a table in front of them as judges, prosecutors and defenders. The idea was to defend peace and condemn war.

In Hashomer Hatzair we prepared ourselves to become pioneers and leave for Palestine. With the announcement of World War II, the chances of leaving decreased. That is why, we, the members of Hashomer Hatzair, in our desire to fight fascism became close with UYW and many of us joined UYW. That merge happened in June - July 1941 when Germany attacked the Soviet Union. The UYW were organized by the community houses in the neighborhoods. Our meetings also took place there. The structure was the following: there was a neighborhood leadership, below it a section leadership and below it UYW groups working in a specific sector. I was working in the crafts school in Sofia. The goal was to establish UYW groups there through meetings and propaganda. The meetings were done at houses, during an excursion or in a park. My parents knew about my activities, because some illegal UYW friends spent the night at home. My parents were sympathetic to us.