

## Aron Alkalai In The Jewish Labor Groups



This is a photo from the Jewish labor groups. It was taken in 1943 near the town of Sandanski. I am the second on the left in the first row. I hold a guitar. We found some ways to have fun. In the evenings we were checked. If someone was missing, people from other groups came to cover him. We helped each other.

We started wearing [yellow] stars in 1942. There was a curfew and we were not allowed to go out in the evenings. We could only walk along the river in the Jewish neighborhood. There were special shops for the Jews. There were shops with the notice 'entrance forbidden for Jews'. But there were some very kind Bulgarians who helped us. My uncle Azarya and his family came to Dupnitsa. He was interned from Sofia. Relatives of his wife Sara also came. In every Jewish house there were interned people from Sofia.

All Jews who had not done their military service were sent to labor groups, created especially for us. In 1942 I was sent to the Tran gorge to construct roads and in 1943 I was in St. Vrach (present-day Sandanski), where a railroad was being constructed. We had a production quota of 4 cubic meters of soil to dig out and throw away at some distance. We remained working at the site until we fulfilled our quota. There was no mercy. We slept in sheds, there was no bathroom, we all had lice. Sometimes a special car came, in which we put our clothes to be boiled in steam against the parasites. In winter I put my socks over the fire and heard the lice creaking. Some people burned their clothes because they could not clean them. We dug manually crevices 2 meters deep in the rocks. I had to carry on my back three bags of cement, when we had to unload wagons. In 1943 the Aegean Jews deported to concentration camps in Germany passed by the labor camp in St. Vrach. [Editor's note: They were deported to the eastern parts not of Germany, but of the Third Reich. Poland was called that way then. The Aegean and the Macedonian Jews were deported to the Treblinka camp, not far from Osviencim (or Auschwitz). The Treblinka camp was set up and started 'functioning' in 1942. From 1942 to 1944, 77 000 French, 26 500 Belgian and 50 000 Greek Jews were killed there.] It was a narrow-gauge line with small wagons. We stood on the railway and stopped the train. There were people among us connected to partisans and supporters of them working as railway workers. It seems that the people in the train knew that they would be stopped,

because they stopped quickly. The train was full of Aegean Jews, among whom sick and old people. We gathered food and clothes and gave them to them. And instead of us encouraging them, they shouted at us, 'Courage, hermanos [Ladino: brothers and sisters]!' and they went on. Now people say that the Jews in Bulgaria were saved because of the deportation of those Jews. It is hard to prove that.