

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Norbert Yasharoff
November 22, 1992
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Norbert Yasharoff, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on November 22, 1992 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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NORBERT YASHAROFF

November 22, 1992

01:00:15

Q: Would you tell us your name, please?

A: My name is Norbert Yasharoff.

Q: Where were you born?

A: I was born in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria in 1930, to the family of a prominent, successful Jewish lawyer by the of Yossif, or Joseph, Yasharoff and my mother, Nelly the daughter of Bulgarian Jewish parents who lived in Egypt, Cairo, prior to World War One. And then after the death of my grandfather, my grandmother and her three daughters, including my mother, came back to Bulgaria.

Q: Tell me about growing up in this household. What was your early childhood like?

A: To the best of my recollection, the early childhood was a very pleasant one: a life of comparative plenty, of wonderful vacations either in the mountains or the Black Sea in Bulgaria, with fine clothes mostly bought by my father on his business trips to Paris and other Western European capitals, a peaceful life, a very family life. Our extended family was quite large, and our house, especially while my grandparents was alive – on my father's side – was the center of that life. So major Jewish holidays and any other festive occasions were festive, quite festive. We had a large house in downtown Sofia, not far from the Fire Brigade Headquarters -- which was a landmark at that time – with a huge courtyard with a gazebo and wonderful trees and flowers. And memories from family gatherings either in the gazebo or just sitting in the courtyard in the early evening are really etched in my memory. In sum, until almost the fall – autumn of 1939, all my recollections are one of a pleasurable, warm and happy childhood.

Q: Do you have any sisters or brothers.

A: Yes, I have a sister. She was born in 1936. She lives in Israel today with her family.

01:03:13

Q: What was your awareness of being a Jewish child in Sofia?

A: Yeah, that a — my first clash, so to speak, with the reality of being slightly different from the other children in the public school which I attended when, in the second grade,

we started having so called religion lessons, verouchenie¹ in Bulgarian “study of the faith,” which I had to attend, or at least I thought that I had to attend. I was being teased by other children about the role or the Jews in killing Christ and so on – which first took me aback and then, of course, became very unpleasant until my parents arranged for me to be excused. And there was no problem – I was excused. But that was the only awareness of being different and being sort of set apart or being teased about it. Very rarely, the other children would use the Turkish word chifut², which I understand it to mean “infidel,” or somebody of another, inferior, faith. But that occurred very rarely until, as I say, the Autumn 1939, and the outbreak of World War Two. Incidentally, we were vacationing in a wonderful hotel, in a spa resort in Bulgaria, Soludervent. And we were – this was the eve of our return to Sofia at the end of the vacation, August 31st, when in the evening over the radio came the news of the outbreak of World War Two. I was nine and a half years, my little sister was three. The only indication that...of course, I knew war is not a good thing, but what shook me at that time was...were the worried glances exchanged between the adults. We were all gathering in the social hall of that lovely hotel and then one of them -- men, the Jewish friends -- in a group exclaimed, "Oh my God. What is going to happen with us now."

01:06:01

And that shook me because I always regarded that man as a rock of strength and a power always cheerful and, and witty and he indeed looked distress and sort of, as though he suddenly got diminished in size in front of my eyes. My father was also very worried, but he didn't say much. And then we went back, of course, to our home. Life continued normally, but for the first time, not only newspapers, but the radios started carrying very openly antisemitic statements. Some of them even attributed to officials. For example, I remember on the way to school at newsstands reading the bold, in bold face, headlines speaking of the international conspiracy of Jews and many other things which I didn't even understand at the time but I had to go back home and ask my father for the meaning of those words. But the impressions are -- they are engraved in my memory of the name Jews and all the other epitaphs and adjectives that came with it. That was the Autumn of '39. Apart from this, the beginnings of an anti-Jewish campaign in the press I don't recall anything worse happening. Of course with the press and officials openly castigating the Jews, a lot of other people, who until that time we thought were friends, especially in my case, other children Christian children that lived up and down our street – started using the word chifut more and more often. And by -- in early 1940, I remember, and that particular Christian boy was -- I considered him a close friend because he would come and play in our front yard almost every day. So he started really teasing me and harassing me but -- and even getting very, very offensive -- telling me all that he had obviously heard at home about the Jews this or that. And I remember myself, a normally well behaved boy actually retorting with a curse, "I wish you were dead." Now I mention

¹ Religious instruction (Bulgarian)

² Kike (Bulgarian)

this because a few months later, this boy got a sunstroke and died, and I felt such tremendous guilt that I sneaked at his funeral and watched a little bit the church services preceding the actual burial in secret, in a sort of childish attempt at atonement that what I felt was probably a death that I had brought about my intemperate reaction to his teasing. But these are all very, very strong things for a 10 or 11 year old to experience. I guess I was 10 at the time. So that was 1940, things like that were happening. The anti-Jewish campaign, as I say, was growing.

Q: How were your parents reacting to all this? What was it like in Poland?

A: Yeh. At home, of course the main topic of conversation was the War, how it was going, tremendous concern about the failure of the anti-Axis forces, especially the fall of France, and the fall of most of the Western Europe. Daily bulletins and consultations between my father and his friends. They didn't conduct normal conversations about war. They always would pull out a actual map of Europe and would move little pins on the map to see what had been lost to the Germans and so on. Growing concern. A lot of talk about what had happened already to Jews in Germany and what was probably happening. In 1940, of course. there was no information about that at all reaching us. At that time, we still were...were still allowed to own radios so we can listen to the BBC and to other radio stations including the Voice of America, clandestinely of course. Bulgaria had not joined officially the Axis yet. This occurred toward the end of 1940, but this were the kind of conversations at home. The thing that stands out in my mind is that younger members -- younger relatives would -- who belonged to Zionist organizations -- would speak about Palestine and immigration to Palestine being the only salvation for Bulgarian Jews. And my father, the well accepted, well adjusted not assimilated in the religious sense, but culturally assimilated Jew would always oppose that. Even at that time. As late as 1940, he could not imagine any circumstances under which it would be better to leave native and familiar Bulgaria for life in a murky, little known, uncharted territory in a British colony in the Middle East. So, I vividly remember those altercations with my younger -- well, younger relatives, male relatives, with my father always coming out against Zionist. He, of course, lived to eat his words and ended up in Israel as probably I'll talk about this later, at the end of War Two and with the establishment of the State of Israel.

01:13:11

Q: Go back to that room and pins on the maps.

A: Yeh. The pins on the maps. Nineteen forty-one, of course, Hitler finally, in spite of his pact with the Soviet Union, non-aggression pact orders the invasion of the Soviet Union, the Operation Barbarasa, if I recall. That was frightening for us for a number of reasons. That brought about the Bulgaria's official joining of the Axis, and by March of 1941, if I am not wrong. Yes, yeh, I remember it exactly, and I'll explain in a moment. Bulgaria by signing the pact also agreed to allowing passage of German troops to Bulgarian territory.

As a matter of fact, March 25, '41, the day my Grandmother died and that was the day of her funeral, coincided with the arrival of German troops in Bulgaria. Why do I remember? Because just opposite our front courtyard, there was the one and only Mercedes Benz dealership in town, and the first German troops that arrived started using that garage, that dealership, as a sort of small local headquarters. And a lot of these young, blond eyed and basically rather likeable young men were coming and using the fountain in our front yard to wash in the morning and so on. And so the Germans were there! Next door to us. Now this did not happen exactly on the 25th. This came later. But what happened on March 25th we had a very impressive funeral procession for my grandmother. My father, being quite prominent in the Jewish community and very active in the Jewish orphanage of Sofia, the children of the orphanage would march first, then all the active Rabbis, four of them if I am not mistaken, would march after them, and then, of course, the coffin and the long procession of relatives and friends after that. Through the streets of Sofia, on foot, all the way from our house in downtown Sofia, to the Jewish cemetery which was a good 3 miles away. Now at one point, just as our procession proceeds down one of the main streets of Sofia, a detachment of German soldiers comes from the opposite direction. And this is my recollection of myself suddenly freezing in my tracks and...and looking at both processions, and registering that while the ours veered a little bit to the side in order for the Germans to pass, none on both...no one on either side looked at each other's eyes. They just passed along side each other totally ignoring the existence of each other. And that is my recollection. That was March of '45.

Q: '41.

A: Forty-one -- Sorry! Forty-one. And a major thing happened in January of '41. Yes. By the end of 1940, under German pressure the Bulgarian Government decided that anti-Jewish laws modeled on the Nuremberg laws would have to be promulgated. This was a very firm demand on the Germans that neither the, by now, Fascist government of Bogdan Filov nor the King³ were prepared to oppose. They felt that this is the least they can do to accommodate the Germans. So they, they had appointed by that time a so called Commissar of Jewish Affairs of one of the most virulent antisemites in Bulgaria, a member of the right-wing antisemitic group, Ratnitsi⁴, Aleksandur Belev, who was sent to Nuremberg to study the German legislation and bring back a Bulgarian version. Well, he did, and by the end of 1940, that legislation, after debates and some quite vocal opposition in parliament, was adopted, signed by the King in early January, and its enforcement began in January of 1941. And now, why do I remember all this? Because suddenly -- and that preceded the death of my grandmother. She was very ill. But apart from our concern over her health, the other two major concerns that were discussed every opportunity at home were, especially for Father, how to come up with a large sum of ready cash in order to pay our assessment under the so-called "unique tax" that was

³ King Boris III of Bulgaria

⁴ Ratnitsi Napreduka na Bulgarshtinata [Champions of the Bulgarian Advancement] (Bulgarian)

imposed as a first step toward ultimate confiscation of Jewish property and “b” how to find documentary proof of his service some 25 years earlier as a military prosecutor with the Bulgarian Armed Forces -- a service that under the law could exempt him from some of the restrictions, especially the restriction on professionals to practice their profession. If I may jump into a little bit further into the future, he ultimately was able to prove that and for a while he enjoyed that privilege of continuing to work and not wearing the normal star -- the yellow Star of David, but a yellow little pin which indicated that he was a Jew, but a privileged Jew. So, back to ‘41.

01:20:15

Q: What else was happening in your household. It's January '41. You hear these arguments. What else is going on?

A: Well then the death of my grandmother, of course. The Germans already being in Bulgarian the unease -- especially of our family -- of having to confront German soldiers daily from early morning. That side by side with an ever growing anti-Jewish campaign in the Press, already with anti-Jewish legislation in force. We were already marked as enemies of the people, as exploiters. We weren't wearing yet the yellow Star of David, but we were easy prey for anyone. Now the other stipulations of the law, which applied to Jews not being able to possess radios, telephones, began to be implemented. After the first payments of the unique tax, then Jews had to dispose of property. They were allowed for the time being to keep an apartment or some other dwelling for their own use, but even that became questionable by the Autumn of 1941, when a new regulation was published that Jews were not allowed to live in the general areas of the Capital but had to live either in or very close to the Jewish quarter of Yuch Bunar. Well, we ended up by October in the house sharing the apartment of relatives in a place very near to the Jewish quarter, but not inside of it. But prior to that, we had to undergo another dislocation. In our own house, which was a three story building, we occupied the second floor, which was the best designed, and we had lived in it for many, many years. But as I said with the Jews being easy prey for anything, a Bulgarian lawyer married to a German woman had cast his eye on our apartment and he wanted it. Through his contacts with the Fascist authorities, we were given the order to vacate it in less than a week. We moved downstairs into the apartment that was used before as an office. And what stands out in my mind is that they -- the Bulgarian lawyer and his German wife moved in, they conducted a sort of cleansing, religious ceremony with holy water and everything, but expressly done in order to cleanse the Jewish spirit out of the apartment. And we were even asked to be present at that time. Now I don't remember this myself, but I remember the mortification of my parents when that ceremony was over, to that extent. And we were supposed to continue living in the same house! From this point of view, it was lucky that we were forced to move into the Jewish ghetto where the Bulgarian authorities felt that we should be concentrated. Little did we realize at the time that this was the first stage in a plan to eventually expel us from the city of Sofia, and as the original plans were, to ship us away to Poland.

01:24:24

Q: You are now in this bottom apartment? What was going on? Your father, you told me, was involved in the Jewish community? Did that have any impact on this situation?

A: Not very directly. Well, of course, he continued his work with the orphanage primarily. And, as a lawyer, who was also accredited to the religious -- Jewish religious courts because he could appear in personal status cases, divorces and so on, so he continued. Well, he was being consulted very often by the, by the very active members of the Consistory, to -- what to do to alleviate the plight of some Jews from this stipulation of the law or another. And this is what the Bulgarian Jews did very well. They pulled their resources of friends among the Bulgarian community, especially lawyers, doctors, intellectuals, writers, and so on, in order to -- here and there -- help each other obtain an exemption or alleviate some other case. So to that extent he was very he was very active because he had contacts especially among the Judicial circles of Bulgaria. Some people did not turn their back on the Jews immediately. But here I have to -- if I may want to tell you of a little incident that occurred that showed me that not all former friends were ready to maintain the friendship and not turn their back. And this may have been naturally earlier in 1940. I know because I was 10 years old with another 10 year old Jewish friend. We went to wait for a girlfriend of ours who lived opposite the Soviet Embassy -- and of course, Bulgaria never cut off its diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in spite of German pressure -- and she was a little delayed, so we went -- waited downstairs. There was, what we thought, a cab station of taxi cabs. My friend was the mischievous type. He started playing with the tires of some of the cars. Of course, I was not. I was too well behaved to even think of that. But he did it. And suddenly, what again we thought were the cab drivers, two of them rushed after him, trying to catch him. A third one came to me and he immediately pulled out a police badge and said, "Well, we are from the Secret Police and you are going to lead us to where your friend is." I was stupefied, I didn't know what was happening. Playing a little joke like that, yeh, it's bad enough. But why would the police suddenly -- and people who were cab drivers? Well, we ended up, both of us, in the -- in what they called, well the headquarters of the Secret, Secret police, the Bulgarian equivalent of perhaps the KGB. And you can imagine trying to investigate two 10 years old which involved writing depositions slowly in our calligraphic style.

01:28:30

Finally, my father was brought in, and I'll never forget. Apparently the chief investigator knew my father very well from appearances in courts, he himself having -- being a lawyer, the investigator. He never turned to face my father. He was looking all the time at the window. And he gave him a lecture in my presence, which is the first time that I had ever seen anybody talk down to my father. For me, my father was the one who would talk down to anyone else, including myself. Suddenly, I see my father, as

elegantly dressed as ever, but almost like shrinking inside, and I think I mentioned this before, but this is what happened in the vision of a 10 year old where all these strong men suddenly under the pressure of humiliation and degradation, shrink in size in your eyes. Because they, they cannot do much to defend themselves and, and then you -- for a moment, you start to lose a little bit even your previous respect for them. But there was my father silently listening to this sermon about the way the Jewish families raise their children in an anti-Bulgarian, anti-nationalist, anti-governmental spirit. My father who had been the epitome of good citizenship throughout his life -- a Jew who insisted we speak -- that without any trace of Ladino or other Jewish accent -- the Bulgarian language because he spoke it that way. He had to listen to this petty functionary who didn't have even the guts of turning and walk -- and looking him in the eye, for half an hour. Finally, the verdict was 500 leva which quite a bit of money at that time, almost 500 dollar fine, and the warning that should I be caught doing such subversive things in the future, the consequences will be much, much harsher. Now what was the whole thing about? What did it turn out to be? Those so called taxi cabs were actually Secret Service people in disguise stationed at a reasonable, but still very convenient distance from the Soviet Embassy, and with orders to be ready every time a car pulls out from the Soviet Embassy to follow it. So the assumption was that we had been sent by someone to sabotage the Secret Police's attempts to monitor the movements of the Soviets in the Capital.

01:31:37

But by the time of our release, I'm sure that even that antisemitic investigator was convinced that there was no plot here and no conspiracy, just the act of a foolish boy, and watched and not prevented by another small foolish boy. So, I took you back to 1940, but to go back to the end of 1941. As I mentioned by October of that year, we had relocated for a second time and began living in the ghettoized area of Sofia. Another almost traumatic experience of the time was the fact that the Bulgarians, being under constant German pressure to make the life of Jews more and more miserable in order to prepare Bulgarian public opinion for an eventual deportation of Jews, the Bulgarian government brought to trial a Jewish industrialist, the only one who was allowed to continue working under the anti-Jewish legislation, as a manager of his expropriated plant, a textile plant, was suddenly brought to court on the charges of economic crimes. They were trumped up charges. My father, who had been his lawyer for many, many years, began defending him in this case. Well, for all those who -- for all Jews who were watching the trial and knew about what an economic crime charge meant and what it would bring, it was obvious that the man will not -- his life will not be spared. But my father invested all of his Judicial talent in the hope that maybe through effective -- an effective defense, he could save him. Well, he did not. And not only that he was sentenced to death, but my father was -- I mean the client was sentenced to death, but my father was forced to observe the actual execution to hang him. And I will never forget this man and his face when he came back from that execution that afternoon. I had never seen him more devastated. Totally devastated and blaming himself for not having done

enough when everybody knew that it was -- this was just a show trial. The Bulgarians had to have something to show both the Germans and also the general populace that the Jews were economic exploiters and criminals who, in spite of all the legislation against them, were still prone to commit crimes. So that was end of 1940 -- 1941.

01:35:13

Q: What was life like for you at that point in the Jewish camp?

A: Did I say '41?

Q: The end of 1941.

A: Yeh. No, I am sorry. All this happened toward the end of 1940 -- 1942. Yeh, 1942.

Q: Okay.

A: All the events of the trial and also the relocation occurred in 1942. Life while we still were not -- we were not restricted in our movements.... We could go out. Yeh, we could go out, there were no prohibited streets. I think toward the very end, in the beginning of 1943, some night curfews were imposed on Jews. Imposed in the sense that we were not supposed to be outside on the streets after nine o'clock. But some Jews did not fully comply with that and because the wearing of yellow Stars of David was not fully enforced yet, some of them could get away with breaking the curfew. But by early 1943, every Jew from the age of 10 up, including myself, had to wear the yellow Star of David. My father wore for awhile just the yellow pin. By that time he was still practicing, but in a very, very limited manner. Our lives were mainly revolved around the synagogue, the central synagogue of Sofia, to which we went more often than ever before. And, of course, there was another synagogue in the proper Israel -- Jewish quarter proper, the Yuch Bunar, but we mainly went to the central synagogue. Friends and family would gather and that was our life. Of course, living in much -- in cramped quarters, sharing -- two or three families sharing one apartment. Luckily we had a room and a half so that I had at least a separate place to sleep than my parents. It was bearable. Strangely enough from a childish viewpoint all of these things had also a funny and, and exciting aspect about them. It was never boring. One had to adjust to new situations. Some of them were very, very joyful because people were thrown together more with family and with friends. And when people tried to alleviate their plight, you know, they become very resourceful and there was always entertainment of some kind. This continued even during the darker years of the expulsion and the resettlement outside of Sofia. Some of these aspects.

01:38:35

Q: What about food? Did you have any trouble getting food at this point?

A: No, again. No, not at this point. Most Jews of Sofia were middle class Jews. Of course, the Jews of Yuch Bunar were less educated and more impoverished. But nobody at this point starved yet. The people, in spite of all the, the taxation and the expropriation, and being prohibited from working and holding jobs, people still could survive on savings and on loans from family and so on. Incidentally, as early as the summer of 1941 and through 1942 and through most of '43, Jewish men from the age of 18 through, I think 38 or 40, were all called up for service in what at the beginning were labor brigades within the framework of the Army and Corps of Engineers in Bulgaria and later under the Ministry for Public Works. This was, in effect, forced labor. These were forced labor camps so which they were not paid anything. They were away from their families. And when the time for the expulsion of Soviet Jewry arrived, many families did not have their males with them in order to help organize the quick departure and everything. I touch on that in a letter that I wrote in June of 1943 from the northern city of Pleven to a cousin of mine who, because he was so much older, I called "Uncle" – addressed as "Uncle." And he was one of those Jewish males who had been away for almost two years serving in labor camps and away from his own family when they had to leave Sofia, so in a way my letter describes to him the day when we saw his own family off at a time when he was not around. But that was when we were expelled ultimately to Pleven. Since we are touching on that, why don't I go into the quickly developing events of the Spring of 1943.

01:41:34

By May 19th, suddenly through the grapevine -- because we no longer had access to radios, but some people did listen clandestinely at the homes of Bulgarian friends, but mainly from newspapers, which of course we could still obtain -- the news came that Radio Berlin had announced that the Bulgarian government was planning the deportation of all Bulgarian Jews from the old boundaries of Bulgaria to Poland. Immediate panic and chaos! Although we didn't really -- we had no firm news about the fate of the Jews in Poland or those Jews who were being deported to Poland, but the feeling was that nothing good was happening there. So tremendous fear and panic! Some Jewish families within two days started getting the first orders for so-called resettlement in the provinces. The orders gave them between three to five days to get ready to leave Sofia. By the evening or night of May 22nd, 23rd, and this is another thing that I describe in the letter I mentioned, the news become bad. Jewish leaders in their attempts to get firm news from the authorities from the court, from -- were unable to reach anyone. Obviously, even the King had left the city at that time, in spite of the fact that this was the eve of a major Bulgarian holiday May 24th, Saint Cyril and Methodius, which is the day of education, the day of Bulgarian culture, with the King usually present at the parades that take place in the city. But he was no where to be reached. Finally, some Jewish leaders managed to get hold of the head of the Bulgarian Orthodox church --

Archbishop Stefan⁵, known for his pro-Allied sympathies in spite of the fact that he was at the head of the Bulgarian church at the time when Bulgaria was already allied with the Axis. And he immediately started calling people -- top people in the government -- and personally went even to the King's palace. He was unable to talk to the King but he left a strongly worded note there warning the King, that God will not be merciful if he signs the death warrant of the Jews by expelling them, the assumption being expulsion first from Sofia to other outlying areas close to the Danube for eventual shipment to Poland. Whether this worked or not, the fact is that none of the expulsion orders were rescinded but the original plans developed by that Commissar for Jewish Affairs under German pressure and with an explicit agreement with the German Ambassador to Sofia, of which we learned later, the plans were to -- the expulsion to be only the first phase of a two phase process -- the second being shipment to Poland for extermination. Well, the second phase was never carried out, which explains the facts that all of us Bulgarian Jews who numbered about 48,000 at the time of these events, survived with a few exceptions of Jewish partisans and others who took part in the resistance against the Fascist regime.

01:46:02

Q: Let's go back. You are about to be deported to Pleven. Tell me what happens to you then?

A: Well, those were horrible days, especially the night of May 22nd, 23rd which remains engraved in my memory as the most horrible night that we went through when we, we knew that we're going to be sent to Poland. That was the conviction at the time, that this is what it meant. We didn't sleep at all. The four of us, my little sister, mother and father, hugging each other and crying, at one point my father saying that, well the need may arise for my mother and him to leave the two of us, my sister and I, in the care of others in order to save us. We, in turn, started crying and saying that, no way, we were not going to part with them no matter what happens. The morning finally mercifully put an end to that night, but with even worse news that more Jews had received eviction -- expulsion notices. And stories from our own members of our family who lived in the Jewish quarters that people are running to the Jewish Community Council asking for help. The Jewish functionaries being even more confused than the poor people themselves, being totally of no help. Finally, a lot of Jews congregating in the central synagogue where the Chief Rabbi tries to sooth them and assure them that everything possible by way of protest and intercession will be done. The Jews dispersing that evening feeling a little more encouraged, but still very, very worried. The following day, the holiday that I mentioned, May the 24th, Jews again congregate in, or try to congregate in -- at the central synagogue, but they find it locked because some of the Jewish leadership decided that it will be too dangerous to allow a large crowd to assemble because the Fascist authorities immediately will try to disperse it by force.

⁵ Metropolitan Stefan of Sofia

Besides the feeling was that with the pent up emotions and fear and panic, a demonstration may occur, which again will end in bloodshed. Some of the leadership or most of the leadership was in favor of trying to enlist the help of sympathetic Bulgarians and the Church and the courts rather than engage in demonstrations and clashes with the police. In spite of all that, in the Jewish quarter proper, a group of 200 and more Jews did organize themselves and started a demonstration which was put down with tremendous cruelty by the Bulgarian police and agents of that Commissariat for Jewish Affairs. As my cousin, who is exactly my age told me at the time -- and he went -- recently when we met after so many years. He was watching the whole thing from the balcony of their house and the Bulgarian authorities had brought the machine guns. Of course, guns and every conceivable weapons against totally unarmed, but young and strong Bulgarian young -- Jewish young men. There was a scuffle. Some of the policemen were hurt simply by the physical strength of some of these guys, but eventually everybody was rounded up, beaten, and some of them even ended up being sent to the only concentration camp that was established in Bulgaria -- a real Nazi-style concentration camp. It's not far from the city to which we were eventually banished, Pleven. The name of the place of Somovit. Later, Jewish leaders, especially those who were very active in the protest action and enlisting help of sympathetic Bulgarians, were rounded up, arrested, and banished to that same place. When I say "Nazi-style," of course, I mean the day-to-day treatment, but they all survived. No one was killed. Other Jews, who had been apprehended as partisans fighting with the Communists or other anti-Fascists resistance ended up in special concentration camps for partisans which were harsher. They were not sent to the same one, Jewish concentration camp.

01:51:45

So this is --we are speaking about May 24, 1943 -- the demonstration in the Jewish quarter crushed the attempts of Jewish leaders to cancel the orders of expulsion failed, but at least intervention of the Church and other members of the intelligentsia seemed to have convinced the King to rescind the order for the further -- for phase number two, namely the shipment to Poland. That is very important to note because if that was not -- if that ultimate shipment was not postponed, we would have ended up like all the other 6,000,000 Jews in the gas chambers. By postponing it, even for a few months it made a whole difference because in the meantime events like the Battle of Stalingrad and the Allied landings in Italy -- in one word, the beginning of Germany's defeat had already become a process which was watched carefully by the Bulgarian authorities, by the King. Historical experience had taught them that in 19-- in World War One, as Allies again of the German lead entente, they were losers, dismembered in terms of territory and so on. So the beginning of caution and a little of putting a little bit of distance between Bulgaria and the Germans had begun, at least in the minds of the King and some other leaders. From -- which in turn mean that it would be most foolish at that point, with Germany obviously losing the War, to hand them over the Jews and thus be branded as a collaborator of Germany and a very humanitarian issue, while by saving the Jews, Bulgaria could score some points in a future peace conference and get more

lenient treatment. That was the thinking as, of course, we learned after the War from many, many writings on the subject both from ex-officials and others on the outside. Eventual shipment to Poland was cancelled as a plan, but our expulsion from Sofia took place. Our own family had to leave three or four days after May 24th, we landed in Pleven, which we had asked for as a matter of fact.

01:54:56

Q: Back up a moment. Before we get there, I would like to know about that journey.

A: Yeh. Well, the journey itself was rather pleasant, you know, packing and, of course, disposing of most of our stuff either by selling it or passing it on to Bulgarian friends for safekeeping was a very painful process, especially when my mother was ill at the time and in hospital, so my father and I virtually had to, had to do the whole packing. But again, I, as a child, for me these were tremendous responsibilities and the very fact that I was able to, to be of some constructive help gave me tremendous satisfaction. We were ready by the day mentioned in our expulsion orders. My mother, luckily, had fully recovered, and we all went to the train station. And again, here, friendships and, and the fact that most Bulgarians, especially urban Bulgarians, had no history of virulent or deep seated antisemitism. Little acts of help and assistance and moral support were not uncommon. In our particular case we were met at, at the train station by a Bulgarian friend in a high position with the Bulgarian railroads who quietly led us to a compartment, almost a first class compartment. The rest of our brethren had to travel third class, but again, there were no, no cattle cars which our other brothers were carried in to their deaths. No, it was a regular Bulgarian train, and we were given a very nice compartment. The men helped us quieted the whole time, but before bidding goodbye and a very curt goodbye, we saw that his eyes were filled with tears. He was afraid to speak openly in order not to be seen being so kind to the enemies of the people as we were being to be at the time. But he wanted to say silently and through his tears that there are Bulgarians who feel that this is a tremendous and crazy injustice being done to us. It was a very moving moment at that time. The trip itself was very pleasant. Of course, for two children like my sister and I, we looked at the June sunny sky and it was fun.

01:58:05

Q: At that point, let us stop please. I want to change -- we have to change tapes and then we'll pick it up.

A: Yeh.

End of Tape #1

Tape #2

02:00:34

Q: Would you tell us what happened when the train arrived at Pleven?

A: We were met at the train station by the sister of -- well by the sister of the husband -- my aunt's husband. They were originally from Pleven and that's why we actually pushed to get sent to Pleven because we had some family there on, on my aunt's side -- her husband's side. So these nice people were there waiting for us, as they had probably done it for many other friends and acquaintances from Sofia. They took us directly to their own house. A small house, but on three floors, already filled with other expellees from Sofia. And they gave us their own bedroom and they moved to the attic in order to accommodate us. It was unbelievable. After all the shocking and enervating events of the days prior to our departure from Sofia, spending two days in the warm and cheerful hospitality of Mrs. Visa and her husband -- that was her name -- was very, very recuperative. By that time the old house where I would call him Uncle Isaac, the husband of my aunt was born and raised, his native city of Pleven and which was occupied by another sister of his again became partly available for us. I must mention that my Uncle Isaac and my Aunt Lisa and her two children also came with us on the same, on the same train to Pleven. So whatever -- what living arrangements were made, they were all made for the two families. Of course, with us always being given a little bit of priority because we were the guests so to speak and they were returning home in a way. Well, eight of us were accommodated in one truly large room with nice access to the back yard. These are one story houses in Pleven, very rustic, but we had a roof over our heads and at the beginning, you know, we were treated as guests, always having food prepared by those who already were living there, in the Pleven branch of the family.

02:03:43

So the first few weeks were, weeks of adjustment to a totally new -- to a totally new reality. But strangely enough, we arrived -- solace and even enjoyment -- when discovering that what we had thought originally that was going to be even worse did not materialize. So for example, we would compare notes with other cities about which we were getting information about restriction on Jews. If we had, let's say only four hours of curfew a day, as opposed to -- as compared to other cities where the Jews were not allowed in the streets at all, for a while at least, which did not happen, or if we had more parks available and open to us while other cities did not allow their Jews to go to parks. We derived pleasure from such little comparisons as to what can we get away with. And indeed after awhile the local authorities in Pleven saw in that influx of Jews from Sofia basically a tourist bonanza of sorts. Well some of us, regardless of the fact that we were not allowed to hold jobs and not own officially property, but some of us had money that was either given to Bulgarian friends and then smuggled monthly back to us, but some

money was brought to each of these outlying areas by the more prosperous Jews. Now, the majority were not in that situation. The majority had to be quartered with other Jewish families and this was supervised by the Commissariat of Jewish, of Jewish Affairs very strictly -- sometimes cramming three or four families in a very, very small three room house. But no one was left without a roof over their heads. There was no need, and I am speaking of Pleven but I think the same happened in the other cities to which Sofia Jews were banished. There were no large concentration style camps or barracks established for Jews.

02:06:19

They were all quartered with other Jews, other local Jews. Now, while housing was taken care of unsatisfactorily -- but still was taken care of this way of course -- the question of food was not. Many, many Jews didn't have the financial resources to buy food. So again, Jewish organization began to, to occur. The already existing Pleven Consistory of Jews was expanded with members among the new arrivals from Sofia, my father included. These people quickly organized soup kitchens to ensure that those Jews who could not afford to buy their own food will have two hot meals daily. The money came primarily from those Jews who, who had some money, and some money was provided by the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs, the very, very bare minimum of course. Other resources must have been coming from somewhere, but I really have no recollection. I clearly remember the, the long lines twice a day of the Jews waiting to get their soup. All this happened -- would occur in the Jewish school of Pleven where -- which was the center of all Jewish activities from soup kitchen to lectures to concerts that we organized. Even a Jewish school was organized there. Although we were not prohibited from attending Bulgarian high schools -- and I, in fact, began my first class of high school in Pleven wearing my Star of David -- but yes, Children up to the age of 13 could not attend public schools for some reason. I don't know why. I remember it because I used to take my little sister to the Jewish school in the morning and pick her up at noon. So she could go only to the Jewish school in the same place that I described a moment ago where everything else took place, including a school. But surprisingly everything functioned superbly.

02:09:08

Both the school, the soup kitchen, all the cultural activities that were organized with a lot of talent, of course, being present among the Jews there to keep up the spirits of that community. And to that extent I am very proud of my father for being one of those who, who helped organize all this, and in that comes a story. Now, of course, they were all under the watchful eye of the antisemitic Commissariat for Jewish Affairs, but apart from being personally liable for any infractions of the law, they were in no way to be compared to some of the Judenrats⁶ in, in Eastern Europe during the War. Of course,

⁶ Jewish council (German); term used for Jewish administrative boards appointed by the Nazis to

their circumstances were much more horrible with the Germans being actually there. And a matter of life and death -- I'm not sarcastic here -- making any judgments, but the Jewish Consistories in these Bulgarian cities were totally different from the Judenrats. So these are my impressions of Jewish life there and, and they are not unpleasant impressions obviously. I was not one of those who had to wait for soup on the -- I might have felt totally differently. But there was a lot of togetherness. Many Jews became more Jewish during that time. Many Jews became exposed to Zionism for the first time. There were lectures on Zionism. Many Jews started studying Hebrew for the first time. So there was a Jewish reorientation, per force perhaps, but nevertheless a positive phenomenon. There were, of course, the outside world. How did the outside world treat us. After all, we were there. We had curfew hours, mainly the evening at night. our movements were not that restricted even in the beginning, because it was felt that it would be good for the local economy to allow Jews to go to the movies whenever they wanted or to the few places that had some, some sweets or -- remember this is the war with rationing and everything, so many, many foods were absent. As I said, I was attending school. In my case I was the only Jew in class.

02:12:06

And again, a little episode here which I think is worth mentioning. The non-Jewish members of the class, of course, treated me very badly -- mainly verbal abuse. Occasionally on the outside, in the street young members of the...of the youth Fascist organization Branik who really resembled very much in their uniform, the Brown, the Brown shirts in the Hitlerjugend⁷ in Germany. I knew in advance that if -- when I saw a couple of them that I will be beaten up. So I used to brace myself for that. I would pass by. They will slap me in the face, or do something else. I knew that I shouldn't do a thing. You know the Nazi, to provoke them further because there was no telling what will happen and just proceed, go on my way. This happened at least once a week to me on the way to school or back. But in school proper, the amazing thing was that the teachers would very often stand up in my defense or would give lectures to, especially a teacher of German -- of the German language -- which I was forced to learn at the time. And when she heard some remarks in class and or saw them pushing me in the corridor, finally one day, she started speaking about Heine⁸. And she pointed out, "But do you know that Heine was Jewish." She turned to the class, "And what does that mean? That a person can be a Jew and can be a good German, a great German poet and writer, just as we have Jews in our country who are poets and writers and mathematicians" -- because of a major, prominent mathematician was among the Jews expelled from Sofia and living in Pleven at the time, and he was well known. So I will never forget this kind of support from this woman who was basically educated in the German language and had traveled extensively to Germany, but remained totally uncontaminated by Nazis on the

oversee Jewish communities and ghettos.

⁷ Hitler youth (German); Nazi youth organization.

⁸ Christian Johann Heinrich Heine

crazy hatred of Jews. On the contrary, she stood up. She even exempted me from giving the Fascist salute. Here I should back up and say that every, every class in different subjects -- be it Latin, or Bulgarian language and literature, or German language and literature -- would start with the people's jumping to salute when the Heil Hitler sign or the Bulgarian equivalent of it. Be it in Latin "Pro Regia in Patria Parati Summus,"⁹ "For the King and country, we're ready to die." The same thing in German, and the same thing in Bulgarian. Well, she allowed me to remain seated when she would enter the class and the rest would have to give the Fascist greeting to her in German. Yeh, so this was still 1943. Yeh, 1943. By that time, not only the attitude of individuals like this teacher, but it began to be obvious that even the authorities had embarked slowly and tacitly without any announcement on a sort of benign neglect policy vis a vis the Jews. In other words, all the anti-Jewish legislation had to be carried out, but without the same fierce -- without the fierceness that characterized that implementation at the beginning.

02:16:47

And this again was due to the fact that Germany was losing the War. The Soviet Army was advancing rapidly across its own territory. I do not remember whether it was early 1944 or end of 1943 that the Russians had virtually expelled all Germans from their territory and were now advancing across Europe. No, it must have been early 1944. But anyway -- oh, the major event which I have to come back to in 1943 the sudden death of King Boris, the King of Bulgaria mysteriously -- mysterious death following by two days his return from a meeting with Hitler at Berchtesgaden at Hitler's request. The King at that time must have been in his early 40s. We all knew him as a very athletic man, a hunter, a man who exercised and hiked a lot. The official story was that he had died of a -- from thrombosis, from heart ailment. Nobody believed that at the time, but we didn't know any better. Only after the War did we learn that at that fateful meeting in Berchtesgaden, Hitler had asked him very firmly for two things: to finally hand over the Jews, and to finally send an expedition in force to fight the Soviets on the Eastern Front. The King rejected both demands off hand at that time. It would have been suicidal for him to agree to such acts at the time when Hitler was already losing the War and he maintained diplomatic relations with, with the Soviet Union until the very last moment. In fact, it was the Soviets who after even the establishment of the very pro-Allied government in Bulgaria by September fifth of 1944, they declared war on Bulgaria for political reasons. But to go back to the death of the king, that was a tremendous event.

02:19:23

Obviously, we, the Jews did not know how to feel because we weren't sure how helpful he had been to us. He obviously had acquiesced with a lot of the persecutions against us, but still a King is a King and we were watching with the rest of Bulgaria the news reels of his, of his funeral which was really very dramatic with hundreds of thousands of

⁹ For King of our country we are always ready (Latin)

people lining the routes of the funeral procession in Sofia and so on. After his death, his son, who was still a minor, was proclaimed King, but he had to rule with the help of a council of regents made of three people. One of them was the Mr. Filov who, until that time, was Prime Minister of Bulgaria and was responsible for most of the antisemitic actions of Bulgaria during that time. The fact that he became a regent and someone else, again from the Fascist party, came to power at least explains the benign neglect towards the Jews, the -- that occurred towards the end of 1943. They were preoccupied with other things and besides, the new Prime Minister, although a Fascist, was not such an ideological fanatic as Mr. Filov who and the other Minister Gabrovski¹⁰, Minister of Internal Affairs.

Q: Bring this back. How did this affect you and your family?

A: You mean that period of the--

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Of the benign neglect?

Q: Yeh.

A: Well, life was getting more hopeful. It was obvious that even the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs did not, did not bother so much about, about supervising every little detail of the -- of life in the Jewish Community of Pleven and my father being one -- a member of the Consistory, that was a relief because they didn't have to be called up and lectured or abused verbally about the little local commissars. Conversations at home or when visiting friends and relatives, of course, would continue to be conducted on -- with little maps about the War. How we got our information? Apart from newspapers, it was very difficult, but some Jews managed to smuggle -- no, to smuggle themselves into the houses of Bulgarian friends and listen secretly to the BBC and the Voice of America and then, of course, pass it on to the rest of us. So we were informed about the, the progress of Allied advances all over Europe.

02:22:44

And becoming more and more hopeful that if nothing had happened until then, it was obvious that we, we may not be sent to Poland. That fear was lurking all the time. So the prayers were, "Let the Allies arrive as quickly as possible and liberate us." Now we did not know that last minute death marches occurred in Hungary and anything -- a lot of similar things could have happened to us. But you know, when you want to believe, you believe that you may be saved somehow. And things continued improving in winter and spring of '44. It was felt slowly that Bulgaria was trying to disengage its -- to put more

¹⁰ Petur Gabrovski

and more distance between itself and the Axis. Not by any terribly dramatic overt actions, but simply by, by doing less of, let's say, antisemitic propaganda in the papers. Not rescinding any of the existing laws or regulations, but not introducing new ones. And by end of May of '44, a new government under I think the name is Bagrianov¹¹ came to power. Mr. Bagrianov made a speech at the beginning which sounded very, very encouraging more by what he omitted to say against the Allies or in favor of Germany than by what he said. He organized his government. We began feeling that some of the restrictions were quietly lifted against us, but minor restrictions, like restrictions on movement. For example, the night curfew by that time was quietly dropped -- at least in Pleven, that's what I can speak about.

02:25:10

By August -- and I remember the date because it was the date of the speech, the speech of Mr. Bagrianov for the radio about which we knew somehow in advance. We must have gotten the word through a Western Radio station that he will make a major speech. And in that speech he openly started speaking against Germany, about the desire of his government to leave the Axis, about his desire to meet Allied terms, reasonable terms for peace, and about the abolition, the abolition in the new future of all anti-Jewish legislation. And, indeed, by August 30th of the, of the same year, all anti-Jewish laws were rescinded. That was nine or 10 days before the Soviet Army entered Bulgaria. Feelers to the Allies for a separate peace were sent out. They didn't work. In the meantime, the Soviet Army was advancing. Several governments were toppled and came to power. The most recent -- on September second -- of Muraviev¹², a very pro-Western, liberal person, who openly declared war on Germany, but did not get any peace offer from anyone else. So, for a few days Bulgaria was at war with all the countries in the world, both with the Allies and with the, with the Axis. Then the Red Army marched into Bulgaria unopposed on September ninth. This coincided with partisans of Bulgarians and among them Jews coming down from the mountains and taking over power in the major cities. I was there when this occurred. I was outside. I don't know why I was on the street -- on the main street, actually, when the partisans came down from the mountains in Pleven, took positions with guns. By that time the Fascist police had totally disappeared. And then some of them, I think, some of the Jewish partisans who could spot the Jewish young boys like me -- I was 14 at the time -- will recruit us on the spot to come with them while searching the homes of prominent Fascists, especially former police chiefs and things like that.

02:28:05

I was taken by one young partisans to help him go through the pockets of the just-deposed Chief of Police of Pleven. It was quite an experience for me. I was shaking,

¹¹ Ivan Bagrianov

¹² Kosta Muraviev

shaking more, more violently than the man himself who knew that he will be shot almost the same day, and I think he was, by the partisans, summarily without any.... But you couldn't blame them knowing what the local police had done against partisans, bombing entire houses with the people in them when they would get word that the partisans were hiding and this again, we eyewitnesses to that. So a personal experience was helping a young partisan while he was holding the gun pointed at the local Chief of Police and I went through his pockets and searched him bodily, him and his wife and his young daughter. Another impression deeply engraved from the same day when the partisans came down -- I remember one Jewish partisan marching into the Consistory, and then at gun point marching out all the members of the entire leadership, including my father. Now, this partisan was a Communist who felt that the previous -- the Jewish leadership who had helped the Jewry -- the local Jewry really survived the impact quite well, but that they were not progressive enough for his taste. This very soon was taken care of because obviously this Jewish partisan was acting on his own, and not with the knowledge of the Fatherland Front which was the umbrella organization of all anti-Fascist forces, with the Communist Party, of course, playing a very leading role in it. But it was a wide coalition at that time. And they had -- they were very well informed. They did not consider any Bulgarian Jew as a collaborator of the Fascists. So this was taken -- but it was a very ugly thing for these people, finally on the day of liberation, rejoicing, having kept the spirit, to be marched out as criminals by an over zealous Jewish Communist.

02:30:54

Q: Were you there when that happened?

A: Yes. I remember my father coming out. I was next to them because the home of the former Chief of Police, whom I had helped search, and the Jewish school were very close to each other so after having helped the one partisan in his job, I was already free to go, and went naturally to the Jewish school. And suddenly I see my father being, being marched out at gunpoint together with the five or six other members of the Consistory. But it lasted very briefly. Apparently, they were just taken to -- I don't know -- to a local headquarters of the partisans and within the hour, they were released with apologies. This was -- but I was very shocked, and very, very deeply hurt, because I knew how we had all prayed for the partisans, for the liberators, for the Allies to come and here we are suddenly again the enemies of the liberators. That was really ridiculous. But it was handled properly. That was September 9, 1944.

Q: How did your family now react? What was happening to them?

A: Well, with tremendous joy because obviously we were free again, free to return to Sofia. A little worried as to what a Soviet occupation of Bulgaria would mean. After all, we had read that and seen movies about life in the Soviet Union prior to that. The news about the agreements at Yalta became finally filtering to us and we began realizing that

Europe had been sort of divided into spheres and that we unfortunately belonged to the sphere that would be under Soviet control. But again the joy of just being free again, of being alive, of having survived it all and of going home soon was tremendous. And indeed, within the week, we were already back in Sofia, back in our apartment. I have no recollections as to how. Oh yes, the previous occupants as very involved with the with the Fascist authorities had escaped, had escaped, and I think they had escaped by the wife pulling out a pistol on a domestic flight and forcing it into Turkey. Yes, that, that was it. Yeh. So we found our apartment. We did not conduct any religious cleansing services as they did. Maybe we should have, but we were happy to be back and, and with us came the family of my Aunt Lisa, and her two children, and we were only too glad to give them one of the three apartments in the house. The third floor became theirs because their house had been demolished by an American incendiary bomb during -- there were two or three bombing attacks on Sofia by Allied planes. It was mainly American and one of them was in February, I think, of '44.

02:35:00

Q: Let's just stay where you are.

A: So, yeh. So, we are back in Sofia, resuming our lives as best we could. I remember that I immediately had to worry about my next school year. It was obviously past September first, when the school year would really start. But because of the chaos and the changing governments and everything we were getting extensions, but by October I enrolled in, in one of the better Sofia public high schools.

02:35:55

Q: Before you go in to the high school, take, take a few minutes. Tell me please the affect of the Soviet occupation. You were in Pleven first and then Sofia.

A: Well, in Pleven, of course we, on the date when the Russian Army finally reached Pleven, they had, of course, come to -- from Rumania and to the Danube, through the Black Sea, but troops obviously entered every major Bulgarian city. We all went out to greet them out of curiosity, but also in a fact they were our liberators. But at the back of my mind, I remember -- for example, people, Jews -- Jewish people on the eve of the arrival of Soviet troops in Pleven would urge each other, "Well, take good care of your jewelry and whatever little gold you have because, you know, you never know with the Soviets." And in deed, some of the -- now I have not personally seen that or experienced it, but many, many people were telling of the way Russian soldiers, once they arrived and would start marching down the streets or become traffic policemen or whatever, would stop people and simply rip their watches off their hands. They were very, very hungry, if I can use that word, for the basic amenities of the West. Because, by their standards, Bulgaria was the West at that time. Other excesses really I have not seen or observed. They were behaving as a sort of benign occupation army. Because, after all,

Bulgaria did not offer any opposition. The old Bulgarian gratefulness to the Russian people for their liberation from the Turks back in 1878 is a thread that really passes through Bulgarian history. No matter what happens, the Bulgarians will never be anti-Russian or even anti-Soviet in the sense that some other Eastern European countries can be, because of that historical indebtedness that Bulgarians feel toward the Russians. There were, were no excesses. But of course, one could feel the firm grip of the Soviet occupation forces in the sense of organizing the government. The Fatherland Front was set in place with Parliament what -- in which all of these anti-Fascist forces were represented. But what gradually started happening from '44 -- from the end of '44, '45 was a gradual reassertion of the Communist element of that coalition. The gradual and quiet disappearance of opposition leaders without any explanation. It transpired that they were liquidated physically, one by one, gradually to the point that by 1947, when elections were held, the Communist Party had already solidified its control over the whole government and the rest of the so-called coalition partners were really figure heads that didn't, didn't count for much. But that's -- this is already jumping ahead.

02:39:51

Q: You are now. This is now '45 in the Fall, in October and you are going back to high school?

A: No, '44, October.

Q: Forty-four, October. You are going back to high school. What happened to you? What was your life like at this point?

A: Yeh. Well, it was a very exciting time to be back at school because after so many years of suppression and oppression as a Jew, this time, we, the Jews -- the few Jewish pupils - - students in every class would feel that we are now in power. And at the beginning, we indeed felt that way. We could see how former Fascist or former members of those youth organizations that were there, and we knew how they behaved, cowered in our presence, were afraid that we might denounce them or take some other revenge which we did not. But it was very pleasant for awhile to feel on top of the world in this case. Some of us with childish and or youthful enthusiasm and naivete began believing very sincerely in the goals of the Fatherland from this wide coalition of forces opposed to such bad things like Fascism and Imperialism, and so on. We were very quickly disabused from that original idealistic sympathy, because it was obvious who was running the show. After a while it was obvious that every, even the Fatherland Front meeting would ultimately become a session of typically Communist criticism of self criticism. And we had read enough by that time of Marx literature which was fed to us at school to know that these were purely Communist ideological tools and were not typical of, let's say, the progressive agrarians or some of the other smaller parties that were in the coalition. A strange phenomenon also began. A new form of antisemitism based on the revulsion of some even progressive Bulgarians, from some of the ideological and other excesses of

Jewish Communists. And with time, we began -- we Jews ourselves began to be quiet annoyed and in some cases, quite resentful of that attitude. Well, I will come to that in a few years. My own experiences in one of those so-called volunteer labor brigades.

02:43:08

Q: Well, let's move a little. Let's talk about -- you are in school. By '47, you had been in school now for two years. What happened? Things begin to change?

A: Well. Yeh. Actually by '47, I had been for three academic years in school and I graduated because the new government had abolished the so-called eighth grade of high school, which would be equivalent to the American -- well, the last grade of high school. So I graduated very young at the age of 17, and, of course, had to think about my higher education. Now this was already in 1947. The elections took place, supervised by the Communists, and the Communist Party was returned by 99.9 percent. I leave it to historians to judge the voracity of those results, but those were the results. The Communists were firmly in control which meant -- especially to us Jews who were so hungry for Western culture -- especially after the War having -- meaning from the free West, American movies, American books, American magazines, British films and so on. For a while, for two years, '44, '45, part of '46, we were allowed to watch such movies and to have access to foreign books. I remember being a member of the British Consul Library and the small reading room established by the Youth Information Agency in Sofia. By '48, they had been abolished. But suddenly in '47, one could not see a single American western movie in town or an important Western magazine. Nothing. That was very bothersome to us because it was such an infringement of the newly acquired freedom and a foretaste of things to come -- especially after the Communists had firmly established themselves in power. And then news from other Eastern European countries, from Czechoslovakia for example, the events, the death of Masaryk¹³ and the overthrow of the last truly democratic government there. A close friend of mine was the son of the Bulgarian Ambassador to Czechoslovakia during that time so I heard it firsthand as to what had happened. That was in 1947. I mention this because this fact plus the elections plus the events in the Middle East with the passage of the Partition Resolution of the United Nations in -- was it November of '47? All of these factors combined within the hearts and minds of Bulgarians Jews, and I felt, like anybody, else that the time to go has arrived. Now, with the return of the Communist Party to power, the return of Jewish property, which had started in 1944, was stopped and new laws expropriating all property from all Bulgarian citizens, Jews and non-Jews alike, was taking place. So, we saw that in several respects we were even worse off than under the Fascists, under a new Communist legislation. So the feeling was, "If a State of Israel is proclaimed, we should go as quickly as we can."

02:47:45

¹³ Jan Masaryk

And indeed, that's what happened. When the State of Israel was proclaimed in May of 1948, Bulgarian Jews by that time had organized themselves in every conceivable type of Zionist organizations. The lists of potential immigrants were -- had already been drawn up. So we were ready and the Bulgarian government received permission from the Soviet Union, just as the governments of other Eastern European countries, to allow every Jew who wants to leave for Palestine to leave. I will not go into the rationale for this, for this Soviet policy, but obviously it had some very pragmatic reasons behind it. Now -- but to go a little bit back again to '47, I became active again in Zionist organizations. I had decided that if I am given the chance to leave for Israel or for Palestine, I would leave. But in the meantime I had to think of the immediate future, and that was higher education. To qualify for admission to Sofia University, or any other university, unless you had very good Communist Party credentials, the only other thing that might give you a chance to be considered for admission was to volunteer for service in one of the many labor brigades organized by the government when the young people go to build roads or a little villages for children and so on. I participated in one such village which we toiled hard to build, but never came to pass, because it was just work for work's sake. It was just to say that you are doing something. So I joined a brigade like that and was unfortunate to have as my brigade commandant a Bulgarian Jewish Communist. He made my life a misery, knowing that I am a Jew, and knowing that I am the son of a prominent lawyer, a non-Communist, somebody who was active during the War and so on. It was obvious that that class struggle mentality was there as though we, the Jews were enemies of each other. No Bulgarian Jew had ever exploited any other Bulgarian Jew in order to carry the class struggle to that point. But that was the ideological predilection of these people. So he gave me hell during that time. I remember that and I mention that for one reason: Later on by the time some of the Bulgarian Jewish Communists fell in disfavor with the Bulgarian authorities, especially after the Six Day War in Palestine, this particular man immigrated to Palestine. And I saw him in the street. I ignored him, but others who had suffered under different circumstances gave him a sound beating there. If he is alive I wish him well in Israel.

02:51:36

Q: Let us take it to the point now. We have 10 minutes left on this tape. I would like to take it to the immigration to Israel. You have brought us to that point.

A: Yeh. So, the -- from the vote on the Petition of Palestine in the fall of 1947, Bulgarian Jewry was freely aflame with Zionist fervor if I can say so. I will never forget the manifestations. Yeh, the march through the streets of Sofia with, with lit candles. I am trying to remember whether this was the night of the Partition Resolution or the date of the Proclamation of the State. No, I think it was the Proclamation of the State. That was something unbelievable. In a country already openly ruled by the Communist Party, a spontaneous demonstration, which really the authorities -- although they were officially very anti-Zionist, anti-Zionist with all the permission on the part of the Soviet Union for

Jews to immigrate into Israel, but the official policy was against Zionism because Stalin did not believe in Zionism -- but the Bulgarian authorities allowed us to march in support of the new State of Israel and it was very touching. And you could see that all these people who are not allowed, or whose little demonstration on May 24, 1943 was crushed, were here marching freely in a Communist country in support of the newly born State of Israel. A memorable evening!

02:53:39

A: Now already in, in late '47, a lot of Jews began immigrating to Palestine, taking the risk of being stopped by British ships and diverted to Cyprus. Even relatives of mine did that, and lived in -- on Cyprus for almost, what -- seven months until the establishment of the State of Israel, when the borders opened. So Bulgarian Jewish immigration began already in '47. Primarily younger people but some young families as well. The mass aliyah¹⁴ -- the mass immigration, began really one day after the establishment of the State. Already on May 16, Bulgarian Jews were leaving. Of course, aliyah depended on the transportation capabilities of the young State. Strangely enough within a few months, two major ships were already put at the disposal of Bulgarian Jews for immigration: The Pan York, the Pan Crescent. I came on the -- to Israel on the Pan Crescent in December of 1948. Within a period of -- a period from let's say June of '48 through February, March of '49, all 48,000 or more of the surviving Bulgarian Jews -- obviously, they all survived World War Two -- immigrated to Palestine. A very small number of Jews, either Communists or very old people, people who did not feel that transplanting themselves at that point in their lives would be advisable, stayed behind. And this in itself was amazing to see: an entire community which had lived for most of the time very peacefully and in prosperity almost 500 years among, in the Balkans, among Bulgarian Slavs, suddenly transplanting itself to the Middle East and starting a new life in the newly re-born State of Israel.

02:56:27

Q: What happened to you? What was your trip like? What was it like for you to arrive in Israel?

A: Yeh. Well, I together with a group of other boys, young Bulgarians, we registered knowing that we will be conscripted on arrival in Israel. We knew that we would join the young army and that was our desire. That was December of '48, the time of the so-called second truce in the fighting in the War of Liberation of 1948. Well, excitement! Not knowing to what we are going. I had never been very, very sportsman-like or anything like that. I had no idea of how to hold a rifle, but I was prepared to go and so were some of my friends. On our way there, by this marvelous, newly-acquired ship, Pan Crescent, which left the Yugoslavia port of Bar and also took a great number of Hungarian Jews

¹⁴ Immigration of Jews to Israel (Hebrew)

who had also come to Yugoslavia. Of course we reached Yugoslavia from both countries by train, a lengthy three day journey in tremendous cold. But once on the ship, it was like a festival really of people who are free and are going to fight in a war. They don't know what expects them, but it was fantastic. The spirits was very high. I, who had never been really separated from my parents, I forgot all about my family and got carried away in this wave of enthusiasm. Of course, reality has a way of denting enthusiasm of every kind. On arrival the prosaic reality of being picked up from the ship and sent to transition military camp, which was horrendous, of course. Jews -- young Jews from all over the world without the common language arriving there. It was no fun, especially knowing that or not knowing exactly where they will send you and so on.

Q: Could we hold it a minute. We need to change tapes.

End Tape #2

Tape #3

03:00:38

Q: You have just arrived in this camp with Jews from all over the world. Tell me what that period was like.

A: It was exhilarating in some aspects, but very worrying in others. The reason being primarily that until we arrived there in this camp, I had not heard about the Gate. Of two other groups of young Bulgarian Jews who had arrived in Israel on previous ships, and who apparently with a minimum of training, almost none, and with a minimum of arms had been sent on a particular day, on the afternoon as I understand it, to Latrun in so-called triangle between -- halfway between the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, a very strategic place of tremendous importance in the attempts of the young State to stop the onslaught of the five Arab armies that had invaded Israel. In this case, of course, the main threat was the Egyptian Army, and I think the purpose was not to allow them to make -- to break through it -- Latrun -- in order to converge with other invading Arab armies. Reinforcements apparently were not available. Ben-Gurion¹⁵, Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief at the time had to make a very, very fateful decision of using these young Bulgarian new arrivals almost as gun fodder by sending them there and trying to use them to just hold the fort until proper reinforcement would arrive. Well, they did held the fort; Latrun was not lost. It was saved, but all of them lost their lives. Again, I may be mistaken, but I think the number reached 600. Well, you can imagine to a 17 year old, when you are told all of this and obviously a fact that had happened several weeks prior to your own arrival in Israel, you really don't know what to do. You don't have the benefit of your parents' counsel. You listen to what the other guys tell you. This guy was telling me, "Well, if you don't want to end up this way, try to somehow join the Air Force." He had, somehow. And I will not go into the details of how I managed to get into a force that was exclusively volunteer. There is a Hebrew word for that Mahal, a abbreviation for "Mitnadevei Hutz La'Aretz,"¹⁶ "Volunteers from Overseas." But Mahal meant the people from English speaking or other affluent countries. All of us who came from Eastern Europe were known as the category of Gahal, "Ge'us Hutz La'Aretz,"¹⁷ "Conscripted from Overseas." We were conscripted, they were volunteers. Well, somehow with the help of the little English that I knew at that time, I did join the Air Force. I was privileged to be a member of the first course in the history of the Jewish people for radar technicians and I became one of Israel, Israel's Air Force's first radio technicians using naval radar equipment for detecting planes. But that part of it was very exciting being amongst so many young Jews from all over the world. And especially getting to know American and British and Australian English speaking young Jews, and see that: the depth of their commitment, of their volunteerism, of their Zionist. I am bearing in

¹⁵ David Ben-Gurion

¹⁶ Foreign volunteers (Hebrew)

¹⁷ Foreign draftees (Hebrew)

mind all the time that they came there out of choice. Most of us came from Bulgaria also out of deliberate Zionist choice, but we also at the back of my mind --of our minds, we had the lack of future under the Communism. But these young, young people did have a choice, and they still decided to come. So, it was very exciting. The beginnings of a culture if you wish, cross-fertilization with other, with other parts of the Jewish people. For us -- especially Bulgarian Jews who had been raised in the European Sephardic tradition with a very small Ashkenazi minority -- that was the first really contact with Jews that were different from us and we had to make a lot of cultural and emotional adjustments.

03:06:15

Q: Would you encapsulate now at this point and tell us what happened to you and to the Bulgarian community. Where did they settle?

A: Yeh. The Bulgarian community arrived at the time when the formerly Arab town of Jaffa, which is almost adjacent to Tel Aviv, because of the flight of its inhabitants at the height of the fighting during the War of Liberation, was virtually empty. The abandoned Arab property was put under the custodian of absentee property and was available for new immigrants. So around the time that the Bulgarian aliyah immigration wave was at its height, Jaffa was almost empty and open for resettlement. And that is where I would say the majority of the Bulgarian Jews, at least 20 to 25,000 settled at first. And pretty soon, Jaffa became a Bulgarian city, with Bulgarian signs on shops with Bulgarian translation on movies and began to thrive. Very few Bulgarian Jews remained in the immigration transition camps, Mahanot Olim¹⁸, in Hebrew, where people from other countries sometimes stayed for two, three years before they could find their own way out and had to rely on the Jewish agency or government assistance. Bulgarian Jews very quickly took care of themselves, primarily by settling in places like, like Jaffa or Lydda, another Arab town, which population had fled the country or Ramla, another Arab town so these were newly created Bulgarian Jewish communities. Very enterprising and self-reliant with, with many craftsmen and artisans and people of free professions like lawyers, engineers and doctors among them. The Bulgarians did very well for themselves, and after awhile began leaving those original areas, like Jaffa, Ramla and Lydda, and settling in the more affluent areas of Tel Aviv or Jerusalem or Haifa.

Q: When did you leave. What happened to you after the War?

A: Well, my family arrived in February of '49. By that time I was already serving in the Army. I had found them a place to live. My father, as I mentioned, had to make the very painful adjustment from being a prominent lawyer in his native language into -- and at that time, he didn't even know whether he would be able to practice again -- so what he did at first was just work anywhere, usually clerical jobs because he already knew some

¹⁸ immigrant camps (Hebrew)

Hebrew. But he also applied himself very, very devotedly and strenuously to studying not only the Hebrew language but taking the special courses that were devised for lawyers coming from overseas. He studied hard for three or four years and passed the Bar Examination, the special Bar Examination again, and at the age of 65 began practicing again. So we settled in Tel Aviv. My mother had some money in Palestine from an inheritance from her father, who as I mentioned lived in Egypt and at that time had the forethought of buying some property in Palestine which came in handy later. At first, I -- after completing my military service, I enrolled in the Haifa Technion, thinking as a majority of my friends did, that only a real trade will, will do in Israel and especially in my case, observing the tragedy of the readjustment of my father when you have a profession that relies on the language. Well, I made the wrong choice. It was very pragmatic, but I was not cut out for engineering. After two years, I dropped out, began writing for the local Bulgarian -- for the Tel Aviv Bulgarian language daily, which was quite a necessary cultural and even absorption instrument for the Bulgarian, Bulgarian Jewry during the time since their arrival for the necessary five or six years until they cultural integrated into the life of Israel.

03:12:01

Q: You worked for them awhile. How long did you live in Israel before you came to the United States and why did you come?

A: For 20 years, for 20 years. I lived there for 20 years. I graduated with a BA in political science from the Tel Aviv branch of the Hebrew University, which now is the Tel Aviv University in -- my degree was in journalism and diplomacy. I soon after graduating, I joined the staff of the U.S. Information Service at the American Embassy in Tel Aviv as an Israeli citizen, a local employee. Worked successfully for the U.S. Embassy for almost nine years in the capacity of Assistant Press Officer and editor of both English and Hebrew publications. That, combined with my studies of political science and diplomacy, developed in me the great desire to become a diplomat. And I started knocking on the doors of the Israel Foreign Ministry. Unfortunately -- at the time I hope this practice has been abandoned -- the distribution of jobs of this foreign ministry was based on the so-called "party key." Well, I did belong to the right party, Mapai¹⁹. But that was the party of the majority and we Bulgarian Jews were not sufficiently a pressure group so as to justify giving me a job without attaining any particular or further any particular political interest because it was like preaching to the converted. They had our support. Well, I stayed on with the American Embassy, but after a trip to this country as guest of the U.S. Government as some -- I think my well deserved training and orientation after almost seven years of service with USIA²⁰ -- when I was given a chance to visit coast to coast for three months and, and fall in love with a country that I had been selling to my fellow Israelis for the years prior to that. I decided that, if given a chance, I

¹⁹ Mifleget Po'alei Eretz Israel [Labor Party of Israel] (Hebrew)

²⁰ United States Information Agency

would like to come here. Especially after having taken part in three wars and having a five and a half year old son, whom I wanted, unlike me, to taste life especially in his formative years, in a country, where at least the country itself is not at war or is not the passage ground of occupying forces and things like that. Of course, the Vietnam War was raging, but the United States itself -- the territorial United States was at peace, and I knew that by the time he grew up, that war at least would be taken care of.

03:15:13

So it was my own fatigue with living for survival's sake. War after war, adjustment after adjustment, politics determining my life. I was sick and tired of that, and this coupled with my desire to allow my son to taste something different from what I had gone through, and the fact that I fell in love with this country when I visited it extensively in the spring of '67. And when the chance presented itself that I was offered the position at the Hoover Institution at Stanford²¹, I came to this country. But I was very honest with myself. I did not come here just to study. I obtained release from the Army. As an immigrant, I took immigrant visas for myself and for my former wife by using respectively the Bulgarian and the Polish quotas, I left the country to which I had gone to participate in its War of Liberation somewhat discouraged, I must admit. Disillusionment, of course, but disillusioned was more my problem. It's when you raise too many unrealistic expectations about people or countries, you're bound to be disillusioned if they don't live up in real life to that. But it was more my lack of faith or lack of ability to see down the road what would happen in that part of the world in terms of peace. And I thought that I owed it to myself before beginning the down slope ride in terms of age, at least a chance to see the world from a perspective of non-involvement, at least immediate non-involvement, in such events as continuing warfare and living in a -- just a struggle for mere survival. I wanted to give myself this chance. Of course, I could remain deeply interested in the State of Israel. My entire family lives there, sister, aunts, cousins and so on. I have a tremendous stake in the survival of that country. I would do gladly anything to further the cause of peace because I think that only through some political accommodation in peace will the future of that small and beloved country be assured.

Q: Okay. With that note, we shall end it. And I thank you very much.

A: Thank you.

03:18:13

End of Tape #3

Conclusion of Interview

²¹ Hoover Institute on War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford University