

BULGARIA:

Like Finland and Denmark, it refused to send its 50,000 Jews to the Nazi death camps. Today 90% of them live in Israel, 5,000 remain in Bulgaria.

By JACK GOLDFARB

The low-pitched drone of the electric tram snaps the noon silence along Exarch Yossif Street in central Sofia. Hundreds of townsfolk are afoot on the scrubbed, tree-fringed street in the capital of Bulgaria. But when the tram has rumbled past, the odd, trafficless quiet remains, a stillness rare indeed for a metropolis of 700,000 inhabitants in this seventh decade of the motorized 20th Century.

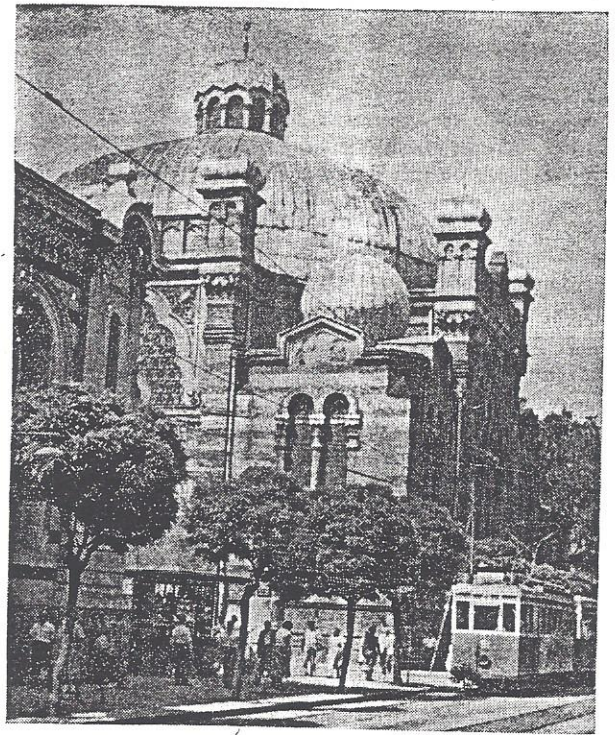
On the corner opposite the sprawling Gastronom Market, where the street of Exarch Yossif angles into an improbable junction with George Washington Street, stands a majestic, Byzantine-Moorish gray edifice topped by a Star of David.

The Great Synagogue, with its huge cupola, stilted arches, and bell-shaped turrets, is a massive monument to the once flourishing Sofia Jewish community.

Today it resembles a somber museum. Piecemeal the premises are being given over to communist government institutions. The immense ribbed dome, which had been blasted by R.A.F. bombers during the war and later repaired through the help of American funds, looks down on an ever-diminishing cluster of congregants, often scarcely reaching a *minyan*. A pitiful remnant of elderly folk gather before services in the small courtyard where they feel more intimate, chatting and reminiscing, than in the echoing hollow of the spacious synagogue. The vast, ornate structure, once the vibrant center of religious, cultural, educational, and philanthropic activities of Sofia's Sephardic Jews, today houses little more than memories of a historic past.

Jack Goldfarb recently returned from a trip to Bulgaria. A free lance writer and world traveler, he lives in New York, but has visited 50 countries on all five continents.—Editor.

The Great Synagogue of Sofia, as it appears today.



The chronicles of Bulgarian Jewry go back to the 2nd century, when the Roman Emperor Marcus Trajan, having conquered the Dacians and set up his administrative center at Serdica, now Sofia, approved the settlement of a group of Jews at Nicopolis on the Danube. In the 7th century the descendants of these settlers were active proselytizers; great numbers of Khazars, an Asiatic tribe, were converted by them. In the 9th century, Tsar Krum, the celebrated Bulgar warrior, brought back many Jews among his 30,000 prisoners from Thessaly. A century later, in 967, an influx of Byzantine Jews established the first synagogue in Sofia, called the *Kahal de los Gregos*. Late in the 12th century, when the Bulgars sought to oust Byzantine control of their commerce, traders from Italy, including many Jews, were encouraged to come to Bulgaria, where they set up a thriving merchantry.

A notable page in the annals of the Bulgarian Jews was written in 1335, when Tsar Ivan Alexander took as his wife a beautiful Jewess from Tirnova named Sara. She adopted Christianity and became known as Theodora, an intelligent, worldly-wise empress who helped her husband in affairs of state. She bequeathed a Judeophilic outlook to her son Ivan Shishman, who became Tsar in 1346. During his reign he offered a warm welcome to the Jews of Hungary when they were driven from that country.

Many Jews, uprooted by the Inquisition, most of them from Aragon and Castile, found a haven in Bulgaria. Among these 15th century refugees was

a lad named Joseph Caro, who together with his father wandered the length of the Mediterranean in search of a refuge. Joseph later took his place among the immortal Hebrew scholars by compiling the *Shulchan Aruch*, the authoritative code of Orthodox Judaism.

During 500 years of Turkish rule the Jewish communities in Bulgaria prospered. The Sultan in Constantinople had a tolerant attitude toward the Jewish subjects of his Bulgarian province, although frequently the Jews became victims of extortionate officials. Like so many of their co-religionists in mid-17th century Europe, the Jews of Bulgaria were aroused by the turbulent episode of Sabbetai Zevi, the erratic zealot from Smyrna, who proclaimed himself the Messiah. After the shock of his conversion to Islam, Nathan Ghazzati, his successor, fled from Turkey to Sofia, but by now his adherents in that city were thoroughly disillusioned. After Ghazzati died, his grave was nevertheless preserved as a shrine by the Sofia Jews.

A period of ordeal that ended with a bizarre honor came to the Bulgarian Jews during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-79, as a result of which Bulgaria achieved her modern independence. The Jewish population, seeking to remain neutral in the conflict, were violently put upon by the Bulgars. After being banished from the principal towns, many escaped to Constantinople. But in 1879, when the defeated Turks set fire to Sofia during their retreat, Jewish men and women fought the raging flames and drove away the arsonist soldiers. After they had extin-

guished the conflagration. Prince Alexander decreed that the fire brigade of Sofia should thenceforth be an exclusively Jewish detachment, and should assume a place of honor with the army in all public processions. In 1885, when Jewish soldiers excelled in bravery in the war against the Serbians, Prince Alexander again paid homage to Bulgarian Jewry, and called them "true descendants of the Maccabees." Their full rights as citizens were guaranteed by the Treaty of Berlin, which gave Bulgaria her autonomy in 1878.

In this century, the Bulgarian Jews lived in comparative peace, developing their community life with libraries, sports clubs, schools, hospitals, and journals. The Central Consistory in Sofia coordinated the activities of the local city and national councils of the Jewish communities in the smaller towns. Religious interest was strong, with over 15 houses of worship in Sofia, most of them Sephardic. Jews were prominent in the professions as scientists, artists, and physicians. In business they were mainly concentrated in the leather, clothing, and furniture industries. Zionism was actively advocated by a strong nucleus, from which it was exported to Sephardic communities in neighboring lands.

A temporary setback in good relations came in 1925, when a left-wing movement planted a bomb in the Sofia Cathedral, killing over 150 persons. Although Georgi Dimitrov, who later became Bulgaria's first communist prime minister, was sentenced to death *in absentia* for the crime, one of the others accused was a revolutionary named Friedmann. The spectre of anti-Semitism raised its head, but only briefly.

In 1939 the virus of race hatred from Germany reached Bulgaria. The *Ratnitz*, the Bulgarian version of Nazi anti-Semitic hooligans, began distributing handbills proclaiming, "Death to the Jews!" When people were attacked and stores plundered, the authorities moved to suppress the *Ratnitz*. At the same time the government of King Boris granted to the ORT the use of state farms for training agricultural workers intending to go to Palestine.

In 1940, with German pressure increasing on King Boris to join the Axis, anti-Semitic laws were enacted which prohibited Jews from living or owning real estate in Sofia, excluded them from schools and government work, placed their assets under government control, and required the wearing of the Yellow Star. As a solicitous afterthought, however, the implementation of the laws was put off for six months. In March, 1941, finally yielding to Nazi coercion, Boris permitted German troops to enter Bulgaria en route to their blitzkrieg in Greece, and the Bulgars joined the Axis—though passively. At the insistence of the Nazis, the anti-Semitic laws were rigidly enforced.

Jews were rounded up for forced labor on the railroads, and others were interned—but there were no deportations to the German death camps from Bulgaria proper, although a number of Jews were sent to their death from areas Bulgaria had annexed during the war.

When the tides of war shifted in 1943 and Italy withdrew from the struggle, King Boris, sensing the outcome, sought to follow the example of his father-in-law, King Victor Emmanuel III. Boris flew to Berlin to see Hitler. Shortly after he returned from his futile mission, he died under mysterious circumstances. When the regency government of Boris' infant son Simeon in the autumn of 1944 brought Bulgaria to the Allied side as a cobelligerent, one of the first acts was a repeal of all the anti-Jewish laws. In 1946, a code of laws harshly punishing anti-Semitic activity was promulgated. To the well-deserved credit of Bulgaria, it was one of the several Nazi-dominated countries (Finland and Denmark were the others) which refused to acquiesce in the forcible removal of its Jewish population.

After World War II, 50,000 Jews were living in Bulgaria, and the communist regime adopted an open emigration policy for those wanting to go to Israel. A B'nai B'rith District Grand Lodge had flourished in Bulgaria before the war, but most of the members emigrated to Israel, where they set up their own lodges. Any Jew who wishes to go to Israel today is still not hindered, but about 5,000 have chosen to remain. They are divided into three groups: the older folk who prefer to stay in familiar surroundings, the dedicated Marxists, and those still waiting to make up their minds.

Today the Bulgarian Jews represent less than one tenth of one per cent of the population. Few vestiges of the commu-

nity's former spirited life remain. One club, government-supported, maintains a library, classes and a singing group. Although Jews have played a very minor role in the communist regime, two Jewish representatives do sit in the *Sobranie*, the parliament. A single Jewish publication survives, in the Bulgarian language. As one member of the community observed, "We are few Jews, so we have few problems."

One of the problems, however, has been the case of the Grand Rabbi, Dr. Asher Hananel, who was accused of illegal transactions in foreign currency. Dr. Hananel, who had held his position since 1949, was convicted and sentenced to 3½ years in prison, but was released because of poor health and allowed to resume his post. In a recent turnabout, he was dismissed from his post by the Jewish Consistory and re-arrested.

Another problem is the still unsettled matter of the El-Al Israel airliner shot down by Bulgarian fighter planes in 1955 after it had strayed over the southwest tip of the country. Over fifty persons perished in the tragedy, and although the World Court awarded Israel two million dollars damages, the sum has not yet been paid.

Outside of the unpaid restitution, relations with Israel are good. There is a brisk commerce between the two nations. A number of Bulgarian communists who had once been critical of Israel were induced to travel there, and after their return home they refrained from any adverse comment.

Jews have lived in Bulgaria for more than 1700 years. But when the word came from Israel that the land was restored, an overwhelming 90% of them, ever-thirsting for freedom, returned to the ancient homeland.

A GENTILE YIDDISHIST

Student immerses himself in the language and culture

By SAMUEL KREITER

Recently a columnist of the *Jewish Daily Forward* published a letter written in Yiddish by a non-Jewish correspondent. In substance he expressed admiration, with charming awkwardness, for the language and its culture, said he

planned to specialize in both academically, and timidly inquired why Jews seemed to neglect Yiddish, in view of the fact that it had served them and their forebears for centuries as a vehicle for their ideas and folklore. The letter was signed by Robert B. Wilson, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Being a partisan of Yiddish myself, Mr. Wilson's letter intrigued me, to say the least. I wrote to him in Yiddish script, and he answered in the same, haltingly phrased, but correct in spelling. His letter was postmarked Austin, Texas. At the time I was also in Texas, not far

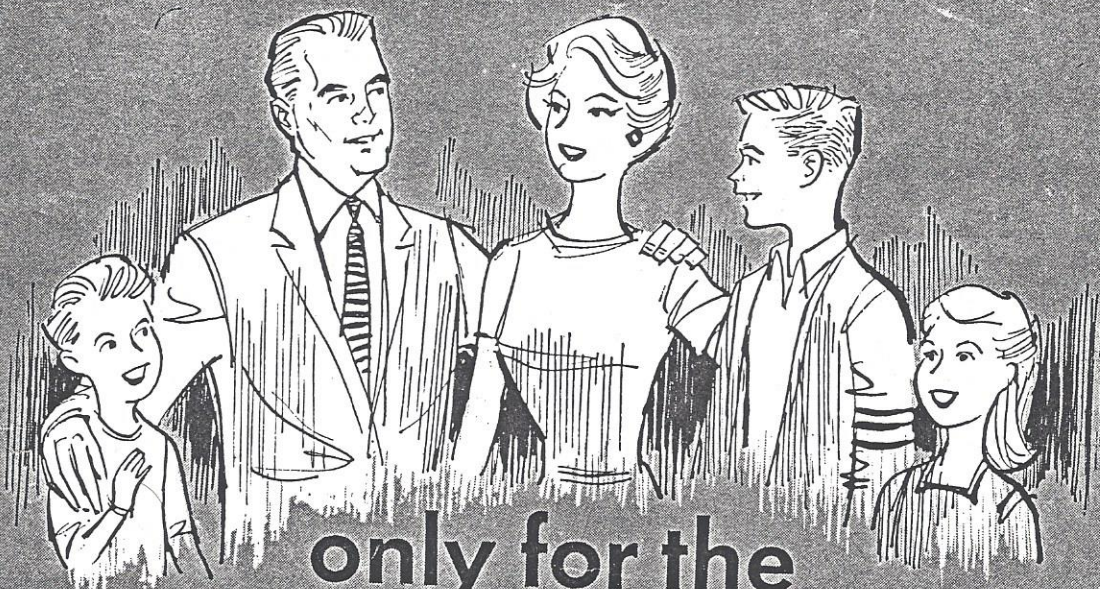
Samuel Kreiter is a free lance writer, book reviewer, and translator. He is also active in the community organization field, and has traveled widely on its behalf, especially in the South and Southwest.—Editor.

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