

## Bulgaria

*The first time I visited Bulgaria was in December, 1985 and I spent a dozen years visiting the Jewish community. Before the revolution in 1989, there was almost no organized Jewish life to speak of, and what there was, was run by Communist apparatchiks. All that changed radically when the Communist government was thrown out.*



*Saving the Jews of Bulgaria conference, Sofia, November 1988*



*Dr Josef Astrukov, president of the Bulgarian Jewish community until 1989. A picture of Bulgaria's long-serving Communist ruler, Tudor Zhivkov, is on the wall behind him. The picture was made in March, 1989.*

Snow had been falling over Bulgaria for days in November 1988, clogging streets, closing airports and slowing trains to a crawl. I had been in Sofia to attend a round table discussion on Bulgaria's refusal to deport its 48,000 Jews to the Nazi death camps and after the conference, with the weather's insistence, I stayed around to visit people I'd met. Being my fourth trip to this Stalinist holdout of a country, I'd been notoriously unlucky in meeting Jews not connected with the regime, all of whom had parroted the Communist party line: all religions were bad, Jewish life was finished and the young in Bulgaria wanted nothing more than to continue on the road to socialism.

Yet those Jews I found outside official channels were hardly more optimistic. Yossif Davidov, a reporter at the Bulgarian News Agency, told me I was wasting my time if I thought I'd find Jews interested in their community and physics professor Azaria Polikarov stressed it would take a change in government policy to bring them back. But one elderly woman scoffed. "Of course young people aren't interested. The ones in charge work very hard to keep it that way!"

When I mentioned some of the leaders by name, including Dr Josef Astrukov, president of the Jewish Cultural Association, she summed them up with one damning word: "kapos."

"Right now there doesn't seem to be much of a future," she said, "but we've had Tudor Zhivkov (Bulgaria's hard line Communist party chief) for almost thirty five years and when he goes, perhaps we'll see share in some of this perestroika going around."

More than just perestroika, or openness, arrived a year later when Zhivkov was removed from power and multi-party democracy began in Bulgaria. Professor Polikarov, who had mentioned "change in government policy" became a member of the democratic opposition in Parliament. By January of 1991, 1,000 of the country's 5,000 Jews had emigrated to Israel. The irony was that for the first time in more than forty years, Bulgarian Jews

were eager to learn about being Jewish; what it meant, their place in the world, and their own long history, all without the blinders of communist ideology to guide them.



*Azaria Polikarov in the Academy of Science*



*Elias Canetti's home in Ruse*



Evidence of Jews in Bulgaria dates back more than a thousand years, from Roman times, to Middle Age settlements along the Black Sea, through the Byzantine era. Jews fleeing persecution and expulsion from other lands, Hungary among them, sought refuge in its towns and villages during the 1300-1500s. Once part of the Turkish Empire, Spanish Jews and their descendants made their way inland, working as peddlers and artisans, and in time, manufacturers and merchants. Trade in river towns along the Danube, especially Vidin and Ruse, was concentrated in Jewish hands. By the 20th century, some 48,000 Jews were spread throughout the country with the majority in the capital Sofia, followed by Plovdiv.

Bulgaria's six decades of independence, beginning in 1878, saw assassinations, coups and four wars that tried to add Bulgarian territories, real and imagined, to its map. But antisemitism was not one of Bulgaria's problems (compared to neighboring Romania, for instance). In fact, the well-connected Jewish community built its turn of the century synagogue in the very heart of Sofia. That Czar Ferdinand presided at its opening in 1910 says even more.

Jews felt comfortable in their country and Elias Canetti, in the first volume of his memoirs, *The Tongue Set Free*, describes in detail Sephardic family life in Ruse (then Ruschak) between 1905-1911. In their own way, Bulgarian Jews were living — not unpleasantly — between worlds and had acceptance from their neighbors in the way that much of Central Europe was tolerant then. Canetti's Ruse was a mixture of Armenians, Turks, Jews, Romanians, Bulgarians and Russians, its Danube port being its major calling card. His family lived in a neighborhood of Sephardic Jews, those who traced their ancestry to the expulsion from Spain in 1492.

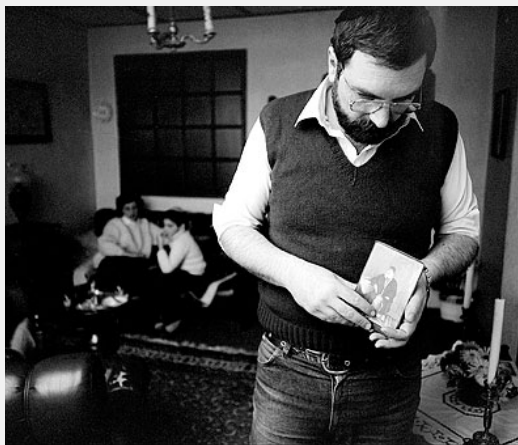
Canetti described how his grandmother would sit on a low Turkish divan smoking and drinking strong coffee, how the family would feed the Gypsies each Friday night before the Sabbath and their pastel-colored, middle class turn-of-the century houses stood behind elegant iron gates. When I visited Ruse in 1989 and stood on that same "dusty and drowsy" street Canetti described, I was relieved that virtually nothing had changed. Only there were no more Jews on the street, even if everyone knew of Canetti: he had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981.

If tolerance for minorities was a Central European trait that vanished under the pressure of the Nazis, it held true in war-time Bulgaria. At first, however, the pattern was grim and familiar. Yellow stars made their appearance on clothes. Businesses were expropriated. Jews were forced out of their homes. Men went into labor

brigades. The entire Jewish population of Sofia (20,000 plus) was resettled into camps and small towns in the country's interior. And when orders came that Jews in occupied Macedonia and Thracian Greece be transported out of the country, the government dispatched 11,000 Jews to transports, almost none of whom returned.

But when the same order demanding Jews in rump Bulgaria be deported, the government balked. Members of Parliament protested, the head of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church joined in. The government postponed, procrastinated and finally refused. A year later, in August of 1944, Jews returned home. A few weeks afterwards the Soviet Army arrived, bringing Communism with it. And Bulgarian Zionism quickly moved from the theoretical to the practical.

Always one of the most Zionist communities (Herzl himself wished others could be so enthusiastic), more than 80% of Bulgarian Jewry emigrated over the next five years. Entire families made aliya, leaving behind approximately 5-7,000 Jews. Those who chose to stay were — more often than not — orthodox believers: in communism, and ideologues were soon in charge of Jewish institutions. Every country in the bloc went through this phase but in the decades that followed, most had softened their views considerably. Bulgaria's lumbered on as hardline as ever.



*Jean Solomon in his Sofia apartment*

Not all young Jews were marching on the road to socialism. In fall, 1989, I visited Jean Solomon, who lived in an attic apartment with his wife and son on the edge of town. A journalist himself, Solomon helped Sofia's aging cantor with services every week and within the confines of his own home, had created as Jewish an environment as he could. He and his son donned yarmulkas when they came home, paintings of Israel hung on the wall, yellowed photographs of his Sephardic ancestors stood in a cabinet, and not far away were stacks of prayer books, a silver wrapped megillah, a fine menorah. Solomon took pride in his little collection as well he should have. I asked what kind of services he would have for Hannukah. "We can't have a Hannukah service," he said flatly. "Haven't had for years." But all that was going to change a lot sooner than he imagined.

On November 18, 1989, 100,000 people took to the streets of Sofia to welcome a fledgling democracy being born. Soon after, a group of younger Jews went to the Jewish Cultural Association and "invited" Astrukov and his colleagues to retire. They did, the Cultural Association vanished and the Shalom Association took its place as they elected theater director Eddie Swartz, a novelist and playwright, to be its president. Swartz himself soon stepped down and a younger cohort took his place.



I had never seen a Jewish community change so rapidly. Young Jews in Sofia came to the community center building and set up clubs and associations. Stefan Oscar, a young activist, said to me, "A community needs to have as many doors as its members have interests. It's the way to bring them in."

In the early 1990s, Ronald Lauder underwrote the founding of a Jewish school, and with Bulgaria's struggling economy, the Joint Distribution Committee, with funding coming from the Conference



on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, began providing meals on wheels for elderly Jews, opened an old age home and set up seniors' clubs as well.

Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, the community became stronger, bringing in younger leaders until, by this writing in 2017, all community structures are being run by people in their twenties to forties. Despite its small size, then, Bulgaria's Jewish community is vital, lively and responsive to the needs of its members. The country's biggest problems, however, have to do with a very weak economy and a series of corrupt governments. Still, young Jews remain, hoping to see an improvement. They continue to build a community as if they do have a future here and one can only wish that other communities in the region were quite as forward thinking.