

‘...The Road to the Sky Will Wait for Us Here in this Synagogue...’

by Becca Lazarova

As decreed by divine providence, our community managed to reach this day, which we shall never forget—the day which exemplifies the fulfilment of our long-standing dreams to erect a central synagogue for the Jews living in the capital of Bulgaria. The Jews have come to Sofia from different countries and in different epochs, starting from the 3rd century, and some of them came in the 14th century, during the times of the Byzantine Empire. During the 14th century Jews arrived from Germany and in the 15th century—from Catalonia and Aragon. Our generation has the high privilege to build this synagogue in such an important centre as Sofia. It is appropriate in relation to this synagogue to remember the words of Jacob, the patriarch of the Jewish people, who saw a dream: a ladder, which started from the earth, moved up and reached the skies. When he woke up, he cried: What a sublime place this is, a real divine temple, this is the gate to heaven! This synagogue exemplifies the same idea—to open the door to the skies, just as the ladder of Jacob, which started from the earth and reached the skies. When we need to turn away from the dust of earth, to take a rest from the noise of the street, from the daily worries and trifles, the road to the skies will wait for us here, in this synagogue. It serves to connect us with our ancestors and link us with future generations.

This is a part of the speech of Chief Rabbi Erenprize at the inauguration of the central synagogue in Sofia in 1909. I would like to add that the people of my generation had the honour and the responsibility to bring back to life the Jewish spiritual traditions and values, as well as the Jewish cultural monuments and incorporate them into our everyday life.

Those born after the Second World War in Bulgaria are often referred to as the lost generation. The generation that lived with the memories of our grandmothers about Jewish tradition but not with the tradition itself. The political changes after 1989 made us face crucial questions, and the answers to these questions, related to our Jewish identity, were deeply enshrined in our souls. ‘No way to extinguish the fire that refuses to die out’,

wrote a well-known Bulgarian poet. Hence, the spark of our Jewish identity would not die out throughout all these years.

The Jewish population of Bulgaria consists of about 7,000 people in 19 communities, some of which are quite small. Each one of us found his own way to join the Jewish community. We started with the children—Sunday schools, camps. The synagogues, the Jewish schools, and the cemeteries were state property, and only two synagogues functioned as such, the central Sofia synagogue and the one in Plovdiv. The synagogues located in other towns had been turned to storehouses or art galleries. A long process of restitution began, which has come to an end by now. We took a realistic approach to this issue. We had to restore what could be restored but could hardly manage it by ourselves. Friends and supporters from the big Jewish family offered us their helping hand.

I. Synagogues

The central Sofia synagogue was our main concern. It is a very beautiful and majestic building, constructed in 1909 in Hispanic-Moorish style, with 1,100 seats. Its excellent acoustic characteristics motivated the decision of Bulgarian government to turn it into a concert hall. The scaffolding in the prayer hall that was raised a long time ago remained there for 28 years, but fortunately the idea did not materialize due to shortage of funds.

We had the same problem in the beginning, being short of funds, but managed to find sponsors. The left gallery had been destroyed during bomb attacks in World War II. A lot of money was needed for the implementation of the whole reconstruction project.

Symbolic bricks were offered for sale, 10 USD each, and every one of us purchased as many bricks as he or she could afford. The Doron Foundation initiated a fundraising campaign in Israel and other countries all over the world. Some 350,000 USD were collected by the time the repair and renovation began. The assistance of the World Monument Fund, the Jewish Heritage Program, the honourable Ronald S. Lauder and donors from Mexico and Panama was vital for the renewal of the synagogue in its former splendour, so that it could resume its role as a centre of Jewish life. A museum of Bulgarian Jews is supposed to be organized in the crypt of the synagogue.

The Zion synagogue in Plovdiv has a history of 120 years. With the voluntary labour of the Jews in Plovdiv and the generous donation of the US Commission for Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, it is now entirely repaired and renovated. It is a real asset, a vibrant centre of Jewish life in Plovdiv.

Initially Rousse had two synagogues, one of which was nearly destroyed. The local Jewish community sold the site where it was located, thus raising money for the reconstruction of the Ashkenazi synagogue, which is now a comfortable community centre with a small midrash and ha haron ha kodesh.

The synagogue in Burgas is still an art gallery, which accounts for its good preservation. The small local community uses the neighbouring building as a community centre.

After the restitution of the Ashkenazi and the Sephardic synagogues in the town of Varna the local Jewish community managed to organize a fund-raising campaign in America with the assistance of foreign friends. The World Monument Fund participated in the project related to the restoration of the Sephardic synagogue.

Unluckily, one of the biggest and most representative synagogues, the one in Vidin, is in a deplorable state, with no roof, severely damaged after the 1976 earthquake. The Jewish community of Vidin is very small and can hardly do anything by itself to improve the situation. That is why Shalom, the Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria, is planning the conservation and partial restoration of the building with the assistance of the local administration and sponsors from abroad. A month ago we managed to complete the restitution of the synagogue in Samokov, a town with no Jewish community at present. It is a matter for the future to find financial resources for this small but very beautiful building.

II. Cemeteries

One of the main Jewish values is respect for the dead and the preservation of memories about them. Unfortunately, most of the Jewish cemeteries in Bulgaria are in a nearly critical state. In 1948-49 about 50,000 Jews left Bulgaria, leaving behind considerable memorial parks. Some of them have already disappeared, the state and the local authorities administering the former cemetery lots for different purposes. In the towns where there are Jewish communities they take care of the cemeteries on a voluntary basis; in other words, our community is still suffering from a lack of funds.

Acts of vandalism are often performed in Jewish cemeteries, especially in April, around the anniversary of Hitler's birthday. The situation is particularly dramatic in Vidin, and it should be noted that it is the town where the most ancient Jewish tombstone has been found, dating from 3rd century.

From the 16th to the 19th centuries, the biggest Jewish cemetery was situated near the town of Karnobat, where no Jews live at present but where the cemetery is well preserved but not so well managed. Shalom provided financial assistance for a team of the Archeology Institute to make an inventory of the tombstones and put up some of them. These findings have attracted the interest of the Diaspora Institute at Tel Aviv University as well, and it has already filmed all of the stones.

With the assistance of the Archeology Institute we managed to avert the implementation of a project planning the construction of a highway crossing this cemetery. We firmly believe that our voluntary efforts and enthusiasm will be backed financially, in order to preserve the dignity of Jewish cemeteries in Bulgaria.

III. The Written Word

One of the biggest collections in the Central State Archive in Sofia is the collection of old printed Hebrew books, which have belonged to famous Jewish families and synagogues. During the communist period there was a project for the foundation of an Institute of Hebraic Studies and the books were stockpiled for that purpose, but later on the institute was closed and the collections were put in cardboard boxes and sacks and stored in a village near Sofia. Having witnessed the way this collection was brought back to life, I think of it almost as my child.

After political changes made our contacts possible, our community began collecting old Jewish books, about 9,000 volumes, with the assistance of Mr. Jack Lunzer. We were sent from pillar to post, but finally we gained access to these materials. Mr. Lunzer himself as well as his librarian and seven or eight young volunteers started

sorting the books by place and year of printing. The boys who participated in this action listened to the story of each rare book while moving around the cardboard boxes and the sacks full of old books. The printing houses of Thessalonica and Livorno, Constantinople and Mantua, Venice and Smyrna, the publisher Sonchino, Alphassy and Rambam, illuminated manuscripts, Guttenberg—these were the topics and characters they discussed for months. The boys watched with excitement the way Mr. Lunzer would kiss with respect some of the books, and this experience slowly but steadily marked their feelings and views. I am deeply convinced that these activities were a source of precious knowledge for these young people, which taught them that they belonged to the people of the book and helped them form their Jewish identity. Almost all of them were volunteers of the first group, which performed Brit Mila right after this became possible. They took the road of the book, one of them studied for three years in yeshiva in Jerusalem, another in Bruclin; my son is about to complete his studies in Bar Ilan University in Tel Aviv. The books of the collection these young people helped to organize are displayed now in an exhibition hall in the centre of Sofia. The oldest among them are a Biblia Rabbinica dating from 1517 printed in Venice, followed by 11 volumes of commentaries of Rambam from 1575, and a Jerusalem Talmud, published in Constantinople in the 17th century. The particularly precious materials include 500 volumes I Ladino, most of them Responsa (Questions and Answers).

A large part of the expenses for their preservation were borne by Mr. Lunzer. The Central State Archive provided the necessary premises, while the rest of us assisted this effort on a daily basis, dedicating a part of our free time, our enthusiasm, our souls. Regrettably, some of the books are damaged by dust, moisture, worms. There is still

much work to be done in order to complete the inventory and the restoration of damaged materials, but our collection of old printed Hebrew books does exist. The Bulgarian Jews survived during the Holocaust years, and the resuscitation of our books is an irrefutable fact. When I think of it, I always recollect Heine's words that when books are destroyed, it is the same as destroying human life.

Our grandparents survived, so did their books and the synagogues. We brought back to life the Sephardic tradition, and the process of its revival is still ongoing, so that the small Jewish community on the Balkans will continue to exist in the future.