

## **Oral History Interview with Dr. René Arav**

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**This summary was provided by the interviewer.**

**February 12, 2022 in Neuilly, France**

Dr. René Arav was born on November 29, 1928 in Sofia, Bulgaria. Both his parents were from well-to-do Sephardic families with French citizenship and their marriage was arranged. His mother's family, the Arié's, was well-known.

René Arav's grandfather, owned a small bank and real estate holdings. René's father, Albert, studied law in Berlin and the University of Berne, where his doctoral thesis on the duties and obligations that occupying powers owed to vanquished countries was highly-regarded. However, upon returning to Bulgaria, who could not practice law because of his French citizenship.

René's mother was 15 years younger than her husband. 14 months after René's birth, his sister Emmy was born. A German nanny or "Schwester" took care of them, so their first language was German, and they also spoke French with their parents and Judeo-Spanish with their maternal grandmother. Their knowledge of Bulgarian was sparse.

Albert Arav was a bridge champion and even taught people how to play. This gave him entry to exclusive clubs, where he socialized with diplomats and even German soldiers during the war. He had friends, not only at the French Embassy, but also the Spanish, Italian, and Turkish ones and this would prove crucial later on. René remembers meeting the papal nuncio Roncalli, who later became Pope Jean XXIII, at an embassy reception.

The Arav and Arié families were part of the Bulgarian upper-middle class and entertained friends who were Catholic, Russian Orthodox, and Protestant, as well as Jewish. The Arié family was extensive and gathered for shabbat and the Jewish holidays, but was not particularly observant.

René attended a French Catholic private school, as did his sister. Many of the other Bulgarian students were, according to René, "Little Fascists" who supported Germany and mocked the French government, so he was exposed to antisemitism even before the war began. When the anti-Jewish legislation went into effect, the other students deliberately bumped him in the hall and called him names. The school director, Father Pierre-Marie, protected him and allowed him to leave for the midday meal earlier than the other students, having one of the priests accompany him safely to the tram.

He remembers returning to his *lycée* in September, 1940, and seeing trucks, probably brought from France, with special motors, parked in front of the establishment. They were to be used by the Nazis in Greece and Yugoslavia, and later to transport troops to the Eastern front.

Dr. Arav gives many details about European royalty and the family of King Boris III. He explains that many Bulgarians were opposed to fighting with the Axis powers and never did until the United States entered the war. It just so happens that René celebrated his bar mitzvah on December 13, 1941, giving a speech in French, when the Bulgarians first learned this news. All present at the synagogue were convinced that they were “saved”, but he reflects years later that, on the contrary, hardships for the Jews started at that point.

He explains that when SS-Hauptsturmführer, Theodore Dannecker arrived from France, King Boris III made what he qualifies as “Sophie’s Choice” and “sacrificed” the Jews of Macedonia to save the Bulgarian Jews.

The Jewish star was imposed, real estate, businesses, factories and banks were confiscated, and finally, Jews were expelled from the city of Sofia. However, René’s father’s good relationship with French diplomats worked in his favor. There were meetings with the Bulgarian Ministry of the Interior, Grabowski, and the Arav family, though on a deportation list, was allowed to remain in Sofia. He says that his family was also protected by Bulgarian deputies.

He recounts that his mother’s brother, who ran a large cosmetic and soap factory coveted by the Bulgarians, was falsely accused of black marketeering, and sentenced to death. The Spanish Ambassador, His Excellency Julio Palencia, tried to intervene and defend the uncle, but to no avail. The ambassador did arrange to care for his two young cousins. René learned of his uncle’s fate one morning as he passed a kiosk and saw the headlines.

During the war, he and his sister continued to attend school and he does not remember rationing or extreme hunger. There was a curfew and Jews were excluded from cinemas and pools, a stiff tax was imposed upon Jews, and the family belongings were auctioned off to pay it.

René recounts an incident when his mother told him to go get bread, close to curfew. A group of young people surrounded him in the street, preventing him from getting home, and said they threatened to drag him to the police station and report him for violating the curfew. At that moment, a Bulgarian couple walked by. The man was wearing something that indicated he was a WW I veteran. He intervened and chastised the group of girls and boys, but admonished René to do his errands earlier in the day from now on.

René’s father was working at the French Embassy, where he learned there was to be a round-up of the Jews. It was decided that after dark, he would bring his family, with just the essentials, and they would be hidden in the basement of the embassy for several days. When the situation calmed down, they could leave. Although the French diplomats reported to the Vichy regime, they secretly were providing essential information to the Free French, and Albert Arav helped.

On January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1944, Allied bomb raids had everyone rushing to the public air raid shelters. When the Arav's emerged, they found the windows shattered at the family apartment. The French organized a transport to take all the diplomats and those working with them to safety, 60 kilometers from Sofia in Samokov. All the ski chalets and vacation homes there had been requisitioned for the staff of all the foreign embassies.

René and his family spent the next months until September, 1944, in Samokov, awaiting their fate.

He later learned that a relative by marriage, an American OSS officer stationed in Berne, Fred Baker, was organizing the air raids over Bulgaria....

The family did return to their pillaged home and life started again. René passed his baccalaureate exam in 1946 and his sister passed hers in 1947.

He pays homage to the brave diplomats who risked their lives and careers to save his family: Jules Blondel, Henri Roux, Charles Colonna-Césari, and the marquis Edgar de Kergariou.