

Interview with Albert Cohen

March 4, 1990

(The interview starts with a mention of a Genealogical Tree that Albert Cohen's father started documenting in 1974, but whose information starts in 1856, and that it is still updated.)

All of Albert's grandparents, as well as his parents, were born in Bulgaria. They were born in a little village named Samukov (?) by the side of a huge mountain (Chamkuryia?) known as a ski resort, and also because of being the location of the winter palace of King Boris and of his father Ferdinand. There were not many Jews there, maybe 1,000. Even before Albert was born, his parents-and many other Jews-relocated to Sophia. There was a Jewish School there and many knew Hebrew. Albert was born in Sophia, in 1932. He has one sister. He is a successful actor in Israel now.

Albert's father was an optician, and had his own store. He had studied Dentistry in Germany, but couldn't finish. (Because of that, he was able to receive reparations from Germany later on.)

In praise of the ability of the Bulgarians to sing, and mention of many artists from there. Albert himself was a disciple of a well-known dramaturg, Boyan Danovsky (a former Partisan.) Also, Albert mentions the influence of Russian and Yugoslavian music on the people.

Albert's parents spoke Spanish between them, but with the kids they spoke Bulgarian. They also spoke French, as befitted cultured people.

Albert lived in Sophia until 1942-43, when Nazism was already taking hold. (They didn't know at all about the persecution and extermination of the Jews.) When the Nazis forbade the Jews from living in Sophia, they chose to relocate to Dubnitsa (?) where an aunt lived. The father opened an optical store there too. First time Albert was exposed to Judaism was by visiting a library there, with Jewish subject and authors books (Sholem Aleichem, Mendele.)

Albert played guitar, accordion, piano and trumpet, and organized musical evenings for the displaced Jews in Dubnitsa. The day after the war was over, Albert's family returned to Sophia, to their own house that had been taken care of by a neighbor. Albert left at the end of 1949 for Israel to pursue his Zionist ideals. He did not feel hatred from his neighbors, and the majority of his friends were not Jewish. The Bulgarian people also loved the Russians for having delivered them from the Turkish regime, and later from Fascism.

Albert never visited a synagogue. There was one beautiful one in Sophia, made by a famous architect, which was a tourist attraction. The family did not observe any Jewish holidays.

During the time of the Nazis, some of Alberto's colleagues in school, and also some neighbors, learned to hate Jews. The non-Jews started youth groups with the sole purpose of "defending the

motherland. "That translated into hurting Jews. Some of the slogans were: "Moshe: go to Palestine. This is not your land. You crucified Jesus."

For the most part, life was with no incidents because of the war. The Germans even patronized the father's store, as he spoke German. The German did nothing against the Bulgarian rules. That's the reason why King Boris was "liquidated" by the Germans, because he even refused to have his soldiers help their enterprise. A Fascist Triumvirate was formed afterwards to govern, and decided to start sending Jews to Auschwitz in August, 1944, but in September the war finished.

Starting in 1942, the Jews had to wear a yellow star in their lapel. Albert's father, who had been a hero in the Bulgarian army during the wars in Macedonia, Serbia and WWI, had to wear only a small yellow button, in consideration of his heroic service (for which he won many medals.)

Jews had fought together with the native Bulgarians against the Turks, and they were loved for it. The Turks hated and killed Jews and Bulgarians without any difference.

Mention of one Isidore HersHKovitz, one of the Partisans, and later an accomplished stage director in Israel, in the HaCameri, Haifa and Haohel Theatres.

Rationing and hunger in Dubnitz, as the food went to nourish the soldiers. There were about 100 Jewish families relocated to Dubnitz. The bombs that fell over that city came from the Allied planes that emptied their supply after bombing their targets on the way back to their base. Many Partisans operated there.

Jubilation on the day the war ended, and public hangings of those who had collaborated with the Nazis.

The years after the war, during the Communist regime, were uneventful for Albert and his family. His father continued operating his store, contrary to the owners of large plants that were demoted and forced to be managers.

In his teen years, Albert entered the Stanislawsky School of Drama. He managed to get some roles there as a very young actor. He worked in the People's Theatre. Ben Gurion visited it in 1947, and urged the Jews to help to build the new country of Eretz Israel. He convinced the entire community of 50,000 Jews who immigrated to Israel.

On the boat that took Albert and his friend actor to Israel, there was an envoy who asked people about their professions. When Albert and his friend answered they were "artists" the envoy interpreted that as being "fakers" and discouraged them. They also suffered from the lack of Hebrew, which Albert managed to acquire during his army service.