

JACOB CALDERON & DAISY CALDERON

BULGARIA/ISRAEL

WORLD WAR II

Interviewed by

Jack Eisner

&

Renia Perel

Hebrew dialogue translated by
Anney Keil (née Calderon)

(August 26, 1989)

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Interviewees: Jacob Calderon (J) & Daisy Calderon (D)

Date of Recording: August 26, 1989

Ident. Number: 02-1

Track Number: T1-S1

Interviewers: Jack Eisner (E) & Renia Perel (P)

Observer/translator: Anney Keil (née Calderon) (A)

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

E: You have to translate.

A: My name is Jack [Jacob] Calderon. I am an immigrant [to Israel] from Bulgaria. I was born in 1911 in Bulgaria.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: [I am] second generation Bulgarian.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: We are descendants of the Spanish Jews from Spain. Two generations before I was born, my ancestors lived in Turkey and from there they moved to Bulgaria.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: Before the war the Bulgarian climate was a political democracy and we lived in great prosperity.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: Until 1940 there was a democratic political system in Bulgaria and all the Jews lived with a very high standard of living.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: In 1940 the Germans arrived to Bulgaria during the war.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: And they have taken [took] over the political system in Bulgaria and turned it into [a] military fascist dictatorship.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: The sanctions against the Jews in Bulgaria had started.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: We were 55,000 Jews in Bulgaria at the time the war broke out.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: One of the first limitations was that the Germans wanted to identify who was a Jew and, therefore, the Jews were forced to wear [the] yellow 'Star of David' so that everybody will [would] know that they were Jews. The second thing was that we had early curfews. We had to stay indoors after 11:00 o'clock at night.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: We started hearing stories about Greek Jews and Rumanian Jews that were being deported to concentration camps outside of their towns. It wasn't quite happening yet in Bulgaria.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: The Bulgarian population, the non-Jewish Bulgarian population was very close to the Jews. There wasn't much of anti-Semitism felt in Bulgaria, and with the endorsement of the kings, ah...there were good relations between the Bulgarian non-Jewish population and the Jewish one.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: The Germans left the King, King Boris, to rule Bulgaria but

they forced the entire political structure under fascist dictatorial [rule] that they had controlled.

E: [Hebrew] Maybe you can tell us about the impact of all this on your family?

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: The capital of Bulgaria is Sofia. But we lived outside of the capital, in a different province, in a city called Yambol, about four hours by train south of Sofia.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: I was working for a Bulgarian company but with the limitations on the Jews the Germans did not allow Jews to work in Bulgarian companies, non-Jewish companies, and many people were fired.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: The Germans had closed down and liquidated many Jewish businesses and they collected all the men, under the age of 45, and sent them every year to a labour camp to work for six months building roads.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: There was an environment against the German Nazis in Bulgaria and many local Bulgarian people joined the partisan movement to fight the Nazis in an "underground" fashion. And many Jews joined the partisan movement and left the cities, hid in the forests, to try to fight the Germans.

E: [Hebrew] Excuse me, were you sent to a labour camp?

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: [Yes] In my case, I participated one year in a labour camp

where I worked for six months, but my employer managed to get special exemption for me as an important person in the plant and, therefore, I was exempted in the years after and did not serve, and was not drafted, to the labour camps like the rest of my friends.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: By 1944 no Jews were allowed to work in Bulgarian companies whatsoever, and in 1944 even my employer couldn't grant an exemption for me, and I was drafted as well, into a labour camp.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: Even from the labour camps many Jews managed to escape and join the partisan movement in the forests.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: The Bulgarian non-Jewish population was very sympathetic towards the Jews, and even though the Germans at first wanted to round up the Jews and send them to concentration camps outside of Bulgaria, the Bulgarian citizens staged demonstrations and protests and even the Christian, the Catholic and Christian deity [dioceses?], protested strongly against the removal of the Jews from Bulgaria and persuaded the King not to cooperate with the Germans, and that is one of the reasons why the Bulgarian Jews were not sent outside of the country to concentration camps.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: The King of Bulgaria, King Boris, was invited to Berlin for special sessions of consultations whereby the Germans tried

to convince him to cooperate with them against the Jews but he refused. And then when he came back, a few days after his return, he died. The rumours were that the Germans had poisoned him.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: In 1944 while I was serving in the labour camp building roads, this was the year that the Russians were advancing towards Bulgaria and in [on] September 9th of 1944 they entered this particular city where we were being held in the labour camp called..."Smedovo."

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: And we welcomed the Russian soldiers as liberators, with flowers and with cheers. We were very happy they were coming to liberate us from the Nazis, and ah...they did come and right away they took over the political system of the country and they removed the fascist government from power and put to trial the political regime that was at that time ruling Bulgaria, some of whom were Germans, and some of whom were...ah, some of the few Bulgarian collaborators, among them was the brother of the King who was ruling now Bulgaria. He was also collaborating with the Nazis. And they were all put to trial and many of them were put to death.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: The Russians...the Russian liberators, they liberated us from the Nazis but they brought communism to Bulgaria, something we did not know, and before too long they have confiscated all the privately owned industry, and all the privately owned

factories and turned the country into a Communist regime. Before the war we were in a very prosperous democracy and now with the Russian communism taking over the country we started suffering financially. There were all kinds of limitations that were only associated with the Communist way of life.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: In 1941 one of the things the Germans have done was to remove all of the Jews from the big cities, especially Sofia where most of the Jews have [had] lived. They were all removed from the cities and dispersed in small little villages and towns, and um...they were not allowed to return to their homes throughout the war. But when the Russians liberated Bulgaria in 1944 they allowed the Jews to come back to the cities and to return to their own homes.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: When the Communist regime took over the political system in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Jews received the same rights as the, the...their non-Jewish counterparts.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: We had no limitations in what kind of work we could do. We were allowed to do anything we wanted, just like the rest of the Bulgarians in the country.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: Myself, I was an accountant and I was hired as a civil servant, working for the government and um...I had all the rights like the rest of my fellow Bulgarians.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

E: [Hebrew] Did the Germans retaliate in any way against the Jewish population in the country?

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: Um, when the youngsters, the Bulgarian Jews, when the youngsters joined the partisan movement, as a punishment the Germans rounded up their parents and families and sent them to ghettos outside of the city. The rest of the Jewish population though was not sent to ghettos, only the parents and families of the young Jews who joined the partisan movement.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: The Jewish ghetto was in a town called Pleven...

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: It was about 300 kilometres away from Sofia, the capital. Pleven, and this is where the parents and families of the young partisans were rounded up and sent to. Once we heard a rumour that there was a big fire in the ghetto and nobody knew how it started but the result was that many of the families of the young partisans died in the fire.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: The rumour was that the fire was set on purpose to try to get rid of the families of the partisans.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: Mainly the old people [parents] died who could not run away and escape.

E: [Hebrew] What was the situation with your family?

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: After the war...not after the war. After the Communists, the Russians came and liberated Bulgaria, we all went back to live like we lived before the war. We went back to our homes and to our old jobs. I was working in a ah...government-owned industry, and in 1945 I married my wife Daisy, who is from the city of Plovdiv which is the second largest city in Bulgaria after the capital, Sofia.

E: [Hebrew] Daisy, where were you during the war years?

D: [Speaks Hebrew]

E: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: [Speaks Hebrew]

D: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: My name is Daisy Mitrani. I was born in Plovdiv in 1925. During the war I was still a student.

D: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: In Grade 11 they pulled all of the Jews out of the school, out of the high school and we were forbidden to come back and continue our education.

D: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: I was a member of the youth movement, "Betar."

D: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: All the youngsters in our city, all the Jewish youngsters were organized in one youth movement or another. There was a WIZO organization, there was a Maccabi, Young Judaea organization. I was in Betar.

D: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: In order to try to save the youngsters, the Jewish youngsters

from Bulgaria, there was an attempt to send them, with illegal transport, to Israel, to Palestine. And one ship... one such ship containing Jewish Bulgarian youth sank and never made it to Israel.

D: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: It wasn't a full-fledged ship. It was not [a] very seaworthy boat and probably that is why it drowned [sank], overloaded with youngsters.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

D: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: Only a few survived the drowning [boat's sinking], the rest have drowned.

D: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: My sister, who was a youngster at the time, we managed to send her to Israel via Paris with a forged passport.

D: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: We were...personally, we were Czechoslovakian subjects.

D: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: The Germans wanted to send all non-Bulgarian citizens out of the country and we were, because of my father...who had [a] Czechoslovakian passport, we were all considered Czechoslovakian subjects and there was a fear that we were going to be deported out of Bulgaria because we were not Bulgarian citizens or subjects.

D: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: And we were always ready, packed and waiting to be sent somewhere. We were sure it will happen and we were sitting on

our luggage so that when the day comes and we are going to be deported we were ready to go.

D: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: We lived right across the street from the fire hall in the city and my father was good friends with the fire chief of that fire hall and when the rumours were strong enough that all non-Bulgarian subjects will be deported, he had promised my father that he will hide us in the fire hall if the day came and we were to be deported.

J: [Speaks Hebrew]

A: From all the Eastern European countries and the Balkan countries, the Bulgarian Jews were the only ones who actually survived and did not experience the horrors of the Holocaust, probably because of the non-participation of the local population, with the Nazis.

[End of tape 1, side 1]

Interviewees: Jacob Calderon (J) & Daisy Calderon (D)

Date of Recording: August 26, 1989

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Track Number: T1-S2

Interviewers: Jack Eisner (E) & Renia Perel (P)

Observer/translator: Anney Keil (née Calderon) (A)

P: ...what kind of a city it was. If [your] father would speak about Yambol...

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: When we heard that the Russians were approaching Bulgaria, we were very happy and the Jewish partisans and the non-Jewish partisans who were hiding in the hills and mountains started coming down with the anticipation of the Russian army coming to liberate Bulgaria. However, one day before the Russians actually arrived to our city of Yambol, the local authorities managed to capture many of the partisans and kill them, just the day before the Russian liberators came to Bulgaria and one of them was a girl from our village, from our town Yambol, and in commemoration of her, of her efforts to free Bulgaria from the Nazis, there is a street now in Yambol called, after her name... "Mati Rubinova." You know, 'Rubin' with a Russian ending, 'Rubinova'.

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

P: That's a girl.

A: That's right.

E: [Hebrew] Jacob, tell us about your life in Yambol.

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: The city of Yambol had 30,000 population of which about 7,000 were Jews. We also had all the Jewish organizations and we were all active in them, but this was before the war. When the war broke out all this ended.

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: We had a very nice synagogue in Yambol, and every Friday night we will [would] go to the synagogue and pray and observe the Shabbat. But after the Germans took over they closed the synagogue and nobody went there anymore.

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: Every city in Bulgaria that had Jews, had a synagogue.

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: Especially in the capital, Sofia, there was a very, very luxurious synagogue.

E: [Hebrew] Daisy, what about your city Plovdiv?

D: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: My city of Plovdiv, population was probably about 100,000 and there was a sizable Jewish population there but I really don't remember exactly how many.

D: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: The life in Plovdiv from a Jewish perspective was very active. We had many organizations. I remember my mother was a very strong participant in a charitable organization that collected clothes for the poor, for the Jewish poor. They had a project called, "Dressing the Naked," in which they had collected money and clothes among all their friends who were

quite wealthy to provide for the children who did not have very much.

E: [Hebrew] Jacob, why do you think there were such good relations between the Jews and the non-Jews in Bulgaria, unlike other countries in Europe?

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: I don't know exactly why the relationship between the Bulgarians and the Jews there was so good, unlike in other countries like Poland and Russia. But the fact remains that we were all treated the same, we had the same rights as the Bulgarians and we were never discriminated against by the rulers. And we were just like brothers. We were treated exactly the same. Even now that we go, every once in a while, to visit Bulgaria, we are welcomed and treated just like old friends and neighbours. There was never discrimination because we were Jews.

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: Probably because of the government, there was no discrimination against the Jews.

A: [Speaks Hebrew]

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

D: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: We didn't know exactly what was happening in other countries to the Jews. We heard rumours and stories from, especially, young Greek Jews who managed to escape from their captors that were rounding up the Jews in all the Greek cities and deporting them. Some that escaped came to Bulgaria and told

us stories of Jews being sent to Germany and to camps but we didn't really know what, where exactly they were going and what was happening to them. Only after the war did we find out that those were concentration camps and death camps and that so many have died but during the war we really didn't know what was happening to the Jews in other countries. We thought that maybe like us...

D: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: We couldn't believe, we couldn't even imagine that anything like this was happening until afterwards when we found [out] the truth.

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: We were not allowed to listen to the British radio during the war and only in secret we would, ah...congregate in somebody's house, down in the basement, and very quietly listen to the news on the British radio, I guess the BBC, and that's how we found out a little bit of what was going on. Nothing from the local censored radio would tell us about anything that was going on.

P: Was there any open atrocities like the 'Aktion' that took place in other places wherever the Germans entered?

A: [Translates into Hebrew]

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

D: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: There were not too many pogroms in Bulgaria. In the small towns and villages there was none. And even in Plovdiv which was the second largest city, there was none. But we heard

that in the capital, Sofia, there were a few small pogroms which were particularly initiated by a few of the Bulgarian collaborators with the Nazis and with the Nazis themselves. But most of the population did not cooperate and did not initiate any such 'Aktion' against the Jews.

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: Quite the opposite, most of the population was marching and protesting against the Nazis and against any ah...special and malicious treatment against the Jews.

A: Do you want any of these things discussed? [Speaks Hebrew]

P: Do you want to talk about what he did while he worked in the camp, what kind of work it was because he [Jacob] was [there] a year.

A: Okay. [Translates into Hebrew]

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: The year that I worked in the labour camp we had to build roads and everybody had a quota of digging, ah...four square metres of earth, to prepare for the building of the roads. We slept, we lived and slept in tents. The food wasn't bad, but it was quite plentiful. We were not hungry and because we all had a lot of money we were able to bribe the guards and the soldiers and with that, better our conditions, better our food and a few commodities that we needed to get.

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: We were not allowed to leave the labour camp for the duration of our service but we wanted to visit our families so therefore we would bribe the guards and they will [would] let

us leave for a day or two or three to visit our families, depending on the amount of bribe that they got.

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: We probably suffered the least amount, among the rest of the countries around us, from the stories we heard, we did not suffer very much, and we don't know of any Bulgarian Jewish family that perished in the Holocaust in Bulgaria.

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

E: [Hebrew] Did Jews from other countries escape to Bulgaria?

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

D: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: The young Jews from Greece were put in a labour camp in Greece that was very close to the Bulgarian border and a Jewish organization in Bulgaria somehow managed to break into this labour camp and take a lot of the young Jewish Greek men out of there and quickly disperse them among Bulgarian Jewish homes, and I remember, we had one young Greek fellow by the name of Pepo and he lived with us and that is how many of the ones that were taken from the Greek labour camp have survived, living among the Bulgarian Jewish homes.

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: Many of the youngsters from Greece, meanwhile, got married in Bulgaria and probably stayed there. We left Bulgaria in 1949 to go to Israel and we don't know what happened to them after that.

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

E: Did any Jews escape from Rumania to Bulgaria?

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: Even though we had a common border with Rumania as well, we never heard of any Jews escaping from Rumania to come to Bulgaria. Only from Greece.

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

E: There were about 700,000 Jews in Rumania and half of them perished.

A: [Hebrew] In the early '50's about 200,000 Rumanian Jews came to Israel. During the war the situation in Rumania was completely opposite to the one in Bulgaria regarding the treatment of the Jewish population.

E: [Hebrew] A friend told me that in the port city of Salonika, Greece, there were so many Jewish merchants in the port, that on Shabbat the port was closed for business.

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: There was a very large Jewish community in Greece and in Salonika there were about 80,000 Jews most of whom perished in the war. In fact, some of the stories were that so many Jews were involved as merchants working in the port that in [on] Shabbat, everything was closed because the Jews were not working. In Rumania half of the population was killed in the war but not in Bulgaria. We don't know of anybody in Bulgaria who was killed in an organized manner except here and there, like in the fire that took place in this particular camp where all the families of the partisans were held.

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: Between 1948 and 1949, 50,000 of the 55,000 Jews in Bulgaria

left for Israel. Even though it was already [a] Communist regime, the rumours were that the reason why we were given permission to leave is because somebody paid for us to leave, we were bought out, so to speak, and within a year, six to ten months, a year's time, 50,000 Jews had left, all to go to Israel in boats [5,000 per boat]. My daughter was eight months old when we went to Israel and we took all our belongings that we can take on the boat and we left.

A: [Speaks in Hebrew]

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: The question is, "Describe your present feelings regarding the Holocaust and your survival" and my father is saying that "we feel very lucky that we survived when we see the Yad Vashem Memorial in Jerusalem and we see the movies now that have been coming out in the last years about the Holocaust and especially when we visited Dachau, Germany last year, we feel extremely lucky to have survived and very proud to have kept our Judaism intact."

J: [Speaks in Hebrew]

D: [Speaks in Hebrew]

A: We felt very strange when we visited Dachau last year and we saw the conditions under which the Jews probably have lived under, sleeping in bunk beds, and we saw the crematoriums, and the gas chambers, and we felt very sad and very lucky that we did not suffer such hardship.

P: [Hebrew] Thank you very much.

[End of interview]