

Zvi Keren

The Bulgarian Jews

Zvi Keren

The Bulgarian Jews

Senior Editors & Producers: Contento

Translated by:

Editor:

Book and Cover Design: Liliya Lev Ari

Copyright © 2015 Contento and Zvi Keren

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be translated, reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from the author and publisher.

ISBN: 978-965-550-???-?

International sole distributor: Contento

22 Isserles Street, 6701457, Tel Aviv, Israel

Netanel@contento-publishing.com

www.ContentoNow.com

Zvi Keren

The Bulgarian Jews

Table of Contents

Introduction

The purpose of this collection is to shed some light on the history of a splendid Jewish community, the circumstances of which have kept it in obscurity. The reasons for this vary and do not necessarily result from negative intent. Some involve the community's distance from the large Jewish centers, and, further, Bulgaria stood closed to Jewish historians because of their limited knowledge of the languages in which most of the Jews in that country were fluent: Judeo-Spanish or Bulgarian. A further reason, regrettably, is the small number of scholars, or well-known figures from that Jewish community, whose numbers decreased when the Jews exiled from Spain migrated to the Jewish centers in the Ottoman Empire: Istanbul, Salonika, and Edirne. The few who remained—known from their writings or from their rulings published in the questions and answers, the responsa—also left and moved to those centers outside Bulgaria.

Before us is a collection of events from everyday life or times of war from the 16th century onwards until the end of World War II in the communities of Vidin, Nikopol, Rousse, Kazanlık, and Stara Zagora.

At the same time, the articles tell of those Jews' environment: the Christians and Moslems of the country, the simple folk and their Ottoman rulers and, later, the new rulers of Bulgaria that ceased to be under foreign rule and became an independent entity, and the fabric of the life common to all these people.

The sources I have used mainly rely on the responsa of the greatest rabbis living in the centers of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th to 18th centuries and on Ottoman documents, mostly from Istanbul, France, and Israel. The archives of Bulgaria: Vidin, Rousse, and of course the Central Archive and the National Library in Sofia played an important part in my research.

The collection also contains two articles on the days after Ottoman rule. One records an upheaval during several months in 1885 between the Jews and the non-Jews of the Rusçuk community in a dispute over to whom the city's Alliance school building belonged. The second is a comprehensive article on the Jewish community of Vidin between the end of the war of 1877/8 and the end of World War II in Bulgaria in September 1944.

As well as this series of articles, among others, attached is the Journal of Avraham Israel Rosanes, father of the historian Shelomo Rosanes, translated into English with an introduction, appendices, and footnotes and published here for the first time. The journal throws light on expressions from Jewish sources and provides explanations related to the period in which it was written. The original Hebrew material is with the Toledo family of Tel Aviv who are descendants of the family. This document mirrors the story of the Rusçuk community in the second half of the 19th century: the family life and the people who were active then among the Jews, the rulers, and the foreign consuls in the city, and others. Indeed, it is Rosanes' personal view; however, the story of this important community clearly depicts the end period of the Ottoman Empire until the beginning of the 1870s. Deciphering the Solitreo script and my written clarification of the material's source express another angle of what we know of the man and his time.

In writing the articles in this collection and in my work on the journal, I received support from many people whose advice and comments prevented me from unnecessary pitfalls. Among them

are researchers from Israel and Bulgaria, to whom I owe thanks. If any errors or mistakes have occurred, they are mine and I take responsibility for them.

I mention here some of the many people whose advice and opinions I had the pleasure of using: Prof. Minna Rozen, Prof. Leah Makovetsky-Bornstein and Henri Meirov, all three from Israel. From Bulgaria, I wish to mention Prof. Nadia Danova, Dr. Svetlana Ivanova, Dr. Evgeni Radushev, and Dr. Roman Kovachev. I thank specifically the archives of Vidin and Rousse, the Central Archive of Bulgaria in Sofia, and the National Library, the archive of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* in Paris (AIU), the British Archive in London (PRO-FO) and, with equal thanks, the Central Archives of the History of the Jewish People, in Jerusalem.

Ms. Debbie Nevo, to whom I owe special thanks for her professional work and her important comments, translated most of my articles and the journal. Various professionals translated the other articles, and their names appear at the end of those articles in the collection.

It is my pleasant duty to thank the *American Research Center* (ARC) for their generous support to publish this collection, and the Havatzelet Fund for their contribution to publishing the articles.

Finally, I thank Contento de Semrik of Tel Aviv, the publishers of this book, for their joint work that has enabled this volume to reach its public readership.

Enjoy reading in the hope that meeting these Bulgarian communities, whose history is one stage in the research of Jewish communities everywhere, will be a source of knowledge and recognition for the readers to the importance of that Diaspora, far away among the mountains of the Balkans and its impressive scenery.

Sincerely, Zvi Keren
January 2015

Rules for transliterating words and names from Hebrew

The Hebrew words and names appearing in this work are transliterating according to the method of Professor Minna Rozen: *The Jews in Turkey and the Balkans, 1880-1945 I*, Tel Aviv 2005, pp.13-14.

With respect to the transliteration from Hebrew, the letter '**ain** is indicated by inverted apostrophe (‘) preceding the vowel.

The letter **het** is represented by the letter “**h**” or capital “**H**”, with **dot** beneath it.

The letter **kaf** is rendered as “**kh**” when it is not accented and “**k**” when it is accented. The letter **tsadi** is represented by the letter “**z**” or capital “**Z**”, with **dot** beneath. The letter **qof** is indicated by the Latin letter “**q**” or capital “**Q**.”

Pronunciation of Bulgarian and Turkish letters

Bulgarian

Ц ц - *Ts ts* - Bukovets - like Metz

Ш ш - *Sh sh* – Nish, Niš - like Sheraton

Ч ч - *Ch ch* - Chiprovtsi - like Charly

Turkish

c - as **cizye** - the English **j, jam**

ç - as **çavuş** - the English **ch, channel**

ğ - (silent) - **yoğurt/yourt**

ı - between **i** (big) and **u** (bug) - in English, **cousin**

ö - **örö** as the French **eu** - **Europe**

ş - **devşirme** as the English **sh, sharp**

ü - **gümrük** as the French **tu**, **La Turquie**

English equivalents of the Bulgarian Archive Terms

F. – RG (Record Group)

Op. – List

a.e./ f. – File

List of the names of cities today and in the past

Dupnitsa – Stanke Dimitrov

Edirne – Adrianopolis, Adrianopol

Kjustendil – Pautalia, Kostendil

Montana – Kutlovitsa, Ferdinand, Mihaylovgrad

Nikopol – Nicopolis

Plovdiv – Philippoupolis, Philippoul

Russe – Rusçuk

Shumen – Şumla

Sofia – Serdika, Sredets

Stara Zagora – Eski-Zağra

Svishtov – Sistova, Ziştovi

Târnovo – Veliko Târnovo

Vidin – Bdin

What is a Tudesco looking for in Sephardic Shrines?

Despite my Ashkenazi descent, the blood of Sephardic Jewry flows in my veins, owing to my two grandmothers, may they rest in peace. In my youth I was exposed to both Yiddish and Ladino, the latter used by my parents to convey information they believed as unsuitable for children. On most occasions, however, we spoke Bulgarian. Despite the disagreements and tension between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews:

Non ajo dulce, ni Tudesco Bueno

“No garlic is sweet, no Ashkenazi is good.”¹

My parents did not hold any such negative views and managed to achieve a harmonious balance between the two worlds.

I began studying this splendid branch of Judaism at a later age. I did not seek to discover my roots; the “responsibility” for that was assumed at the time by my master’s thesis supervisor, Prof. Minna Rosen, who graciously guided me to this rich fountain of

¹ Alexander-Friezer, T., *Words Are Better than Bread, A Study of the Judeo-Spanish Proverb*, Jerusalem-Beer Sheva 2004, p. 292 (hereafter: *Proverbs*).

knowledge, from which I earnestly drank. On finishing my thesis, “The Communities of Nikopol and Vidin between the 16th and 18th Centuries,”² I left under the support of Tel Aviv University for my home country in search of epigraphic artifacts in surviving cemeteries, and copied the many thousands of documents found in the Sofia Central Archives and in various other towns across the country. While doing so, the appeal of this culture was not diminished in any way, and consequently was supported and guided by the professor who opened me a window into the Balkan world. Later, I completed my doctorate thesis on one of the most notable Bulgarian-Jewish communities: the Jewish community of Rusçuk.³



And so I became captivated and enchanted by that culture, of which I knew very little:

-
- 2 See my two publications: “The Jewish Community of Nikopol...” and “The Jewish Community of Vidin...,” published in this compilation.
 - 3 See the cover of my book, *The Jews of Rusçuk, from Periphery to Capital of the Tuna Vilayeti*. The book was written in Hebrew and translated into Bulgarian and English (hereafter, Keren, *The Jews of Rusçuk*).

“Ken a buen arvole se arima, Buena solombra lo cujiva”⁴

He who rests under a fair tree shall enjoy a pleasant shade.

My first trips to Bulgaria had two objectives: mapping, cleaning, deciphering and photographing ancient cemeteries, and organizing the documents situated in archives across the country – the images were to be initially sorted and then captured by video camera.⁵

My first objective entailed the many hardships of locating and identifying the remains of cemeteries that had suffered greatly due to the passage of time, and, more significantly, due to ongoing man-made destruction: wars, neglect, and the transformation of cemeteries into fallow lands or their replacement with other structures. Of the many ancient cemeteries that have survived in Bulgaria, my research deals with only six of them: Karnobat, Vidin, Plovdiv, Provadia, Shumen and Pazardjik. Some even contain a few gravestones from the 18th and 19th centuries.⁶

4 Moskona, Y., *Pninei Sefarad (The Pearls of Spain)*, Two Thousand Proverbs by Sephardic Scholars, Tel Aviv 1981, p. 94 (hereafter: Moskona).

5 It should be stressed that this would be a first and significant step for me personally - but more significantly; it would also be of great significance for the research on which I had been focusing since that time, namely, the history of Bulgarian Jewry, from the Ottoman period until the end of World War II.

6 The most ancient remaining cemetery in Bulgaria is found in the city of Karnobat in southeast Bulgaria. When I first began my research it contained over 900 gravestones, some of which are broken, and some of which contain illegible or undecipherable inscriptions. I recently published a book on this small community and its famous graveyard: *The Jews of Karnobat | Chapters from the Depths: The History of a Vanished Community*, ARC, Sofia 2014.



The remains of Vidin Cemetery (contemporary)

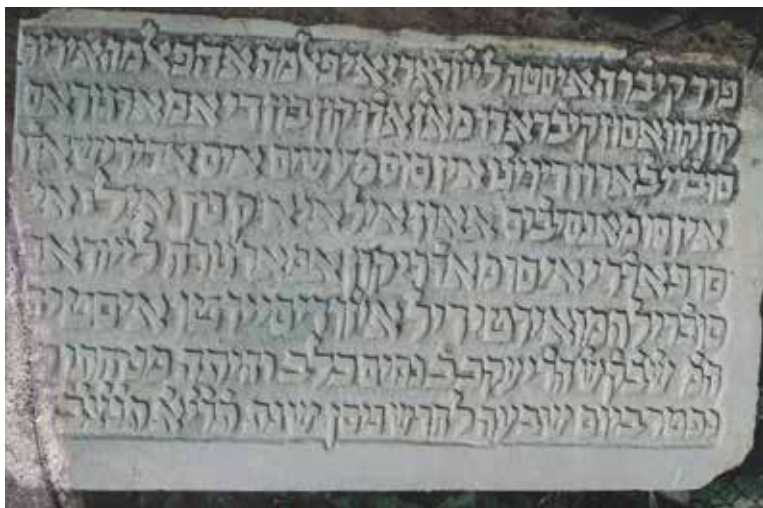
The language in which elegies and lamentations were inscribed on the tombstones will no doubt fascinate researchers studying the cultural evolution of these communities. Without delving too deeply into the particulars or analyses of inscription methods and contents, I should nevertheless stress that the language used for these tombstones provides us with a mirror that reflects the ways in which language and its usage had evolved in each community: the ancient tombstones are inscribed in Hebrew, and it is notable that the letters were inscribed by highly-skilled artisans and that the wording used was both articulate and lyrical. At later periods, Hebrew was spoken by a very select few, and Hebrew was eventually replaced by Judeo-Spanish/Ladino. The earliest tombstones inscribed in this language are dated to the 18th century (primarily the 1790s). Their wording is poetic and inspiring.⁷ The following is an excerpt from a tombstone I found outside of a house in Vidin (I shall elaborate more on this later):

7 The earliest tombstone inscribed in this language can be found at the Karnobat cemetery, dated 1744.

פור קיברה איסטה ליירארי אי פאלמה אה פאלמה אירין
קון קוראסון קיבראדו מאז און קון בוז די אמרגוראס
סוברי בארון דיוינו אין סוס מעשים איס אדירישא זו
אין סו מנסביס אאון איל איא קנן איל: אי
{ סו פאדרי אי סו מאדרי קון אמארגורה לייראנו }
סוברי לה מואירטי דיל איז'ו דיסירטו איסטי הה

Upon this tomb we shall weep and clap our hands in grief
With broken hearts our cries and sorrow shall be voiced
In lamenting the passing of our virtuous son him we shall praise:
Departing in the cream of his youth
His father and mother shall shed a tormented tear
Over the death of their beloved off spring, aha⁸
Here lies Rabbi Jacob B. Nissim Kalev, may his soul ever rest in
tranquility
His mortal body had transpired upon the seventh day of Nissan,
the year 5611,
May his soul be bound in the bundle of life

8 Dr. Gila Hadar graciously provided the Hebrew translation. For more on the Vidin Cemetery, see my paper, "The Vidin Jewish Community between the End of Two Wars: March 1878 - September 1944," published in this compilation of my articles.



Tombstone found near a house in Vidin

The house next to the tombstone pictured above is located in a neighborhood founded in the 1930s. I found the tombstone's contents and location somewhat "suspicious." My assumption was that the new neighborhood was built, in part, on an ancient Jewish cemetery, although I had no evidence to substantiate this proposition. Years after I saw the tombstone, one of the most remarkable tombstones I had the good fortune of photographing during my travels in Bulgaria, I finally found proof to support my hypothesis thanks to the Vidin State Archives; the Jewish community eventually acquired a document recording the parceling of the neighborhood built on the cemetery. The community agreed to relinquish the holy site in exchange for land situated at the cemetery, which had been used by the Jewish community since the early 20th century.⁹ Somewhat sarcastically, the document notes that negotiations were protracted due to the unwillingness of Jewish institutions to reach a compromise as to the price of the property and the tombstones located in it... Indeed,

9 VSA, F. 9K, op. 1, f. 116, pp. 10 and verso; f. 160, pp. 8 and verso.

the (non-Jewish) elders of the city had noted that when the train station was built during that period (early 1930s), its foundations and some of the walls were composed of stones sold by the Jewish community.¹⁰

As for the new Jewish cemetery in the early 20th-century Vidin, ancient tombstones situated there were probably relocated to the cemetery at a later stage, and these contained poetic Hebrew inscriptions. Later tombstones were inscribed in Judeo-Spanish. This was the case in other cemeteries, as well; at Shumen, Plovdiv or Karnobat, Judeo-Spanish inscriptions reflect the transition from Hebrew to the spoken tongue of the Sephardic Jews, Ladino. It should be noted that a number of tombstones in Vidin and Plovdiv were inscribed in German or French, indicating the Ashkenazi minority living in those communities. The linguistic evolution of tombstone inscriptions goes even further: in the late 19th century and, at greater frequencies, from the early 20th century onwards, tombstones are found inscribed in Bulgarian as well as Judeo-Spanish. As years went by, the national language was more commonly used, and only a few tombstones were found inscribed in Judeo-Spanish (written in Cyrillic alphabet!).

The wanton destruction of these tombstones was carried out mostly during the communist regime, a tragedy that also afflicted the cemeteries of Muslim-Turkish communities and even of Bulgarian Christians. In large communities, such as Russe, Varna, Stara Zagora, or Pleven, no memory or evidence remains of the burial site of Jewish inhabitants, and the tombstones erected there are forever lost to us. In communities with negligible Jewish minorities, the

10 Dr. Asher Hananel, Bulgarian Chief Rabbi, also pointed out this fact when visiting Vidin in 1947 to collect holy books and artifacts from the local synagogue. ASA-Sofia F. 1568 K, op. 1, f. 424, 1947-1948.

deceased were buried in separate plots in Christian cemeteries. That, I'm afraid, was far from the end of the troubles:

“Los fikiros en la vida no se escapan”
The misfortunes of life shall never perish¹¹

Not only are there so few cemeteries, but also among them many are currently in a state of considerable disrepair, mainly due to Gypsy looters and plunderers or due to pure vandalism or anti-Semitic sabotage. For example, the Vidin cemetery, in which I had conducted my survey, mapping, and photography mission in 1992/4, is now almost completely gone; most tombstones are shattered and what remains has been used by the locals—Gypsies and Bulgarians—as building material for their homes or yards. The Sofia Jewish Center is considering selling this property to the city due to its high real estate value, given its close proximity to the Danube port.¹² In Plovdiv, even though the remaining Jewish community is larger than the one still residing in Vidin (only two listed *Minyans* are still in existence – about 20 persons), the community is also facing constant friction with Gypsy families who extend their hold slowly yet unabashedly into the tombstones, and some graves are already located between their homes.

Jewish cemeteries in Bulgaria are now almost entirely wiped out, and the few that remain are threatened by the vagaries of time and man-made destruction:

¹¹ Moskona, p. 136.

¹² See above photograph of the cemetery as it stands today. Note its regrettable state of neglect and disrepair.