

EDITH'S STORY

My story is worthwhile knowing because it deals with some facts little known by the majority of Jews in the U.S. and abroad. The world is aware of the monumental tragedy of the Holocaust, as it should be, however very few know of the acts of courage and humanity which occurred in Bulgaria, a tiny country in Eastern Europe.

Bulgaria prides itself with the fact that it was the only country in the Balkans, where the church, members of the parliament and our King Boris III of Hapsburg were responsible for the salvation of its 50,000 Jews, inspite of the fact that Bulgaria was a satellite of Germany's Nazi party.

During WWII, Bulgaria was not exactly free of Anti-Semitism, not overt, but the inevitable bigotry was often experienced. We had to wear the Star of David on our clothes, we were displaced from our homes and all moneys and properties were confiscated. We were not allowed to listen to radio during the war years and we did have labor camps, mostly for young men and some Jewish dignitaries.

In 1943, we were given 24 hours to assemble 20 kilos of our belongings, leave our homes and whatever property, and get to the train station to be shipped to an unknown destination. We knew almost nothing of what was happening in other countries because of lack of information.

While waiting at the train station for our departure, we did see the passing death trains, which were transporting Jews from Yugoslavia and other neighboring countries. We looked at gaunt eyes, filled with terror, peering through the slats of the cattle

trains. At that point, we had no doubt that we were destined for the same fate.

It was during those undesirable moments that a miracle happened. The Archbishop of the Russian Orthodox Church placed himself on the railroad tracks of the trains and refused to move until something was done about the release of the passengers in the trains.

We stayed 2 days in the trains, not knowing why we were not moving. We had no water or food, but were allowed to come out and walk in the station. After what seemed like an insurmountable time, we were back on the trains, which stopped at small towns and villages and were told to leave the station and go to the community center, where the local Jewish families were waiting to take us to their homes.

Later, much later, we found out about the incredible acts of courage by the church and some members of the Parliament. There were very few Jews in the small towns and the villages in the mountains. The Germans were either unaware of their existence, or the Bulgarian government chose to keep it that way.

These acts of courage, were and always will be a thorn in the countries, where no one lifted a finger to stop these atrocities as this tiny country in the Balkans did to save its Jews.

It was easier, we assume, to claim ignorance of the horrible blowing smoke from the same stacks of the camps and spreading ashes of the millions of souls who perished.

We lived in exile for 2 years, always fearful that things will catch up with us and that our fate would be no different than all the

other Jews we were hearing about. Those were harsh years, unpredictable, scary, uncertain, but hope and the spirit of survival was in every breath we took.

We returned to Sofia in 1945, full of gratitude and love for our liberators, the Russians. The American forces left the Balkans in the hands of the Russians. We assume that this was a negotiated decision. Upon our return, we found nothing of our homes and properties and our assets. The Bulgarian government confiscated them all. When we eventually retrieved them, the Russians gave us time to rebuild and restore our properties and businesses and almost immediately nationalized everything all over again.

Here, started the new phase of our lives. Now, we were under Communist rule. At times we regretted having tasted freedom, because here we were again, prisoners of another impossible regime.

The Russians had a list of people (who were known to have been successful businessmen and had properties) whether they were Jews or non-Jews and their plans were to indoctrinate us and watch us. Any misconduct was punishable by being sent to labor camps. Now, the red Star replaced the swastika.

I was warned to quickly find a job in order to escape the watchful eye of the "red spies". Bulgaria had a very active Communist party.

Because of my knowledge of English (being a graduate of the American College) I got a job as an interpreter in the AJDC or the Joint Distribution Committee. That's where I met Fred Baker, who was sent from the Paris office of the JDC, to organize the resettlement of the Jewish population in Bulgaria.

This was 1948. The job was monumental. He had opposition wherever he turned. Not that the Communists cared about the loss of Bulgarian Jews, but the complications created by red tape, the obstacles, the trading of human lives for dollars, was an obscene but necessary means of accomplishing this very difficult task. Fred was our Schindler!

The American Embassy was most helpful to Fred in organizing secretly the emigration of the 45-50,000 Jews who lived in Bulgaria, a country of 7 million people. After the Nazi occupation of Bulgaria, which lasted from 1942-1945, the Communists aided by the local communist party, was more than happy to get rid of the Jews who were not Communists. We were sold per head, like cattle to the JDC.

Fred, who was my boss (I was his interpreter) made sure that my mother and I, left for Israel with the first *Alyah*, on a ship called the "PanYork". It was built for cargo and could house about 300 people. There were 700 of us, packed like sardines, with inadequate facilities (that's putting it kindly). Children were sick; seniors were suffering from all kinds of illnesses due to the interminably long 5-day trip under the worst of circumstances.

We were watched and followed by British ships, with daily threats that if we landed in Israel (then Palestine) - the port of Haifa, we would be taken to Cyprus, where many ships were held in quarantine.

We landed outside the port of Haifa and each one of us stepped into the waters, guided by Israeli volunteers, in the middle of the night, to the port. We were given shelter for the night; we showered, got clean clothes, food and then were transferred to camps, especially built for new immigrants. The euphoria was

great, although the word 'camp' sent chills through our bodies. We - i.e.- my mother and I were lucky, we only stayed in the camp for 2 days until family, which lived in Haifa, came to pick us up and took us to their home. Most of the people in the camp, unfortunately had no one to take them out of another constricted environment and languished there for a couple of years, until the Israeli government found placements for them.

To recount the exhilarating feeling upon setting foot in Israel is impossible to put into words. To breathe freely for the first time in years, not to be stared at, not to be afraid of being picked up and sent whom knows where. To see all the beautiful people walking freely and proudly, to know that we were among Jews, that we were safe at last, erased all of the horrible experiences of the last excruciating years. We couldn't stop crying and laughing although the new country was still at war, still in blackout, on the verge of its long awaited independence day, 1948.

Nothing, but nothing in the world was as important as being free again. We had arrived in Paradizo.

One year later, after Fred completed his mission in Bulgaria, he came to Israel, where we were married 55 years ago.

Edith