

Chapter I

About Bulgaria

A: When did you first become aware of Bulgaria?

D: Coming from a family where my mother and maternal grandparents fled the Soviet Union and detested communism all their lives, it wasn't long before I learned about the Cold War and which countries were on what side. Bulgaria was on the Soviet, in other words the wrong, side.

I was a child of that Cold War. I remember the civil defense drills we had, in my New York school, in the event of a nuclear war. And, most vividly, I recall the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962, when I went to school in the morning, as a 13-year-old, not sure if I would return home in the evening or be killed by a nuclear bomb.

A: Your interest in these geopolitical issues only increased, right?

D: As I grew older, I became ever more focused on the East-West divide. One of the things I kept hearing about was that Bulgaria was in a different category than other Soviet satellite states.

Unlike Romania, it never deviated from Soviet policy. And unlike Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary and Poland, it never had significant anti-Soviet protests.

In fact, I remember hearing in university that Bulgaria was sometimes referred to as the Soviet Union's "16th republic," meaning it was so loyal, so aligned, that it could well have been added to the existing 15 republics.

And the explanation given was that the two Slavic countries had so much in common culturally and linguistically, not to mention everlasting Bulgarian gratitude for Russia's liberation of Bulgaria, in 1877-8, from Ottoman Turkish occupation.

In other words, unlike Hungary, Poland and the other East European nations, Bulgaria saw Moscow as a liberator, not an occupier. At least, that's what I learned.

And that's pretty much all I knew about Bulgaria until 1978, when I was studying in Britain.

A: What happened then?

D: On September 7, 1978, a Bulgarian dissident in exile and journalist for the BBC World Service, Georgi Markov, was assassinated on a London street by the Bulgarian secret police. He was the victim of a ricin-tipped umbrella stabbing. This made headline news. Everyone around me in Britain seemed to be talking about it. Even given my limited understanding of Bulgaria, the assassination didn't come as a complete surprise.

A: Where were you when Pope John Paul II was shot in Rome in 1981 and rumors surfaced that there was a possible Bulgarian connection?

D: By then, I was back in the United States. Of course, I had no information other than what was being reported about this assassination attempt by Mehmet Ali Ağca. There were various theories about motives that quickly developed.

One involved Bulgaria and the belief that the Kremlin was terrified by the prominence of this Polish-born Pope, who had no love for communism and was focusing much of his attention on East Europe, so it turned to its henchmen in Sofia to figure out how to get rid of the pontiff.

Again, for me, there was a logic to it, even as competing theories also emerged and uncertainty prevailed.

But notice, until this point I was not viewing Bulgaria through a Jewish lens. I knew nothing about any Jews who might still be living there, and nothing about modern Bulgarian Jewish history. Actually, one thing I did know -- Elias Canetti, a Nobel Prize winner in literature in 1981, was born to a Sephardic Jewish family in Bulgaria, but left the country with his family at a young age.

And regarding the Middle East, I was aware that Sofia had followed Moscow's instructions to break diplomatic ties with Israel in 1967, and that Bulgaria provided material and political support to Israel's enemies, both state and non-state actors.

A: When did that view of Bulgaria begin to change?

D: Later in the decade of the 1980s. First, I began to hear fragmentary reports that Soviet Jews who resettled in Israel and were cut off from family members left behind in the USSR were now quietly able to meet them in Bulgaria, which was one of the few countries to which Soviet citizens could buy travel packages to visit. And, interestingly, Bulgaria, even without diplomatic relations, was relaxing entry requirements for Israeli passport holders.

Then, of course, came the dramatic events of 1989-90. Todor Zhivkov and his communist regime became history, and multi-party elections were held for the first time in six decades.

And in 1991, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir made his first official visit to Bulgaria. He was accompanied by his wife, Shulamit. And I learned something game-changing for me about Bulgaria.

A: Which was?

D: Well, first, I learned that she was born and raised in Bulgaria, that she had quietly been back to Bulgaria during the decade of the 1980s, and that she had genuinely warm feelings about her country of birth, which was in such stark contrast to so many Jews who had left other parts of East Europe, including Poland and Ukraine.

A: Why such warm feelings?

D: And here's the game-changer. I began to hear about a little-known aspect of World War II history. I knew that Bulgaria was an ally of Nazi Germany. And, frankly, that's all I thought I needed to know. But it turned out to have been much more complicated.

Despite its link to the Third Reich and repeated requests, but thanks to the successful intervention of some in the parliament, the church, the royal family and the partisans, Bulgaria refused to deport its Jewish community, numbering about 50,000, to the death camps. I would especially wish to mention the lifesaving role of Dimitar Peshev.

And, though the Jews' wartime lives weren't always easy, they all survived. What a story! Why hadn't I known it before? An ally of Hitler refusing his demand to send the Jews to their certain deaths?

A: It sounds like this was a story that couldn't be told while Bulgaria was in the Soviet orbit, strange as that may sound. Was any book written about it?

D: Yes. The first book I read was written by a respected Bulgarian-born historian who arrived in Israel in 1948, Michael Bar-Zohar. Titled *Beyond Hitler's grasp: The heroic rescue of Bulgaria's Jews*, it was published in 1998. Other books, as well as documentary films, have also appeared in the years since.

A: As remarkable as the rescue story was, it was not perfect, was it?

D: You're right. Bulgarian troops were operating in occupied Macedonia and Thrace, and they participated in the round-up and deportation of about 11,000 Jews. Very few survived. It took quite some time for officials in democratic Bulgaria to acknowledge this painful chapter, but eventually they did.

A: How did Bar-Zohar get to Israel in 1948, if the communists were already in power in Sofia?

D: This is another remarkable story. The Bulgarian government allowed those Jews who wished to emigrate to Israel to do so. The vast majority did. They settled in Israel very successfully and contributed enormously to the country's development.

A: When did you first meet members of the Jewish community in Bulgaria?

D: As soon as contact was possible with re-emerging Jewish communities in the post-communist era, we began inviting representatives to join us in Washington for our annual Global Forum.

I remember that Solomon Passy, a future Bulgarian foreign minister, and Viktor Melamed, a future AJC colleague, became regular participants, and we bonded quickly. Others joined them as well, and the links grew, including an eventual, and fruitful, partnership agreement with "Shalom," the national Jewish community group that emerged and is led today by Dr. Alex Oscar.

A: And do you remember your first visit to Sofia?

D: At this point, regrettably, I don't recall the year, but I do vividly remember the feeling I had. I have been fortunate to visit dozens and dozens of countries in my life. Truth be told, in some cases there's an instant chemistry, in others not. In the case of Bulgaria, there was.

Maybe I was predisposed to like it because of the history I learned. Maybe it was the wonderful people I had come to know. Or maybe it was seeing the church, mosque and synagogue built near each other in the center of Sofia and meant to send a message of religious coexistence.

Whatever, I was excited to arrive and sad to leave. But I returned perhaps 10-12 times in the ensuing years -- and always had the same feeling of connection.

A: Bulgaria has honored you twice. The country's leaders have cited your support for lifting the restrictions of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which smoothed bilateral links with the United States; your efforts on behalf of Bulgaria's admission to NATO; and your contributions to building friendship between Bulgaria and the global Jewish community. With so much else going on in the world, why did you devote this much time and effort to these issues?

D: For two reasons, above all.

First, as I have said elsewhere in this book, I thought the extraordinary events that enveloped East Europe and the Soviet Union from 1989 to 1991 were a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to help reimagine the world and extend the reach of liberal democracy and human freedom.

And second, as a Jew, I felt this was my way of saying mnogo blagodarya to the Bulgarian people who helped save the lives of 50,000 Jewish compatriots -- and created a glimmer of light in a world almost totally enshrouded in darkness.

A: Now we come to the terrorist bus bombing at the Burgas airport in 2012. How did you first hear about it?

D: It was actually a phone call from Nickolay Mladenov, Bulgaria's foreign minister and a dear friend. He told me what happened and assured me that Bulgaria would do whatever was necessary in the aftermath. The death toll was five Israeli tourists and a Bulgarian bus driver. The investigation led to Hezbollah, the Iran-backed terrorist group in Lebanon.

A: Did Bulgaria fulfill its pledge to do whatever was necessary?

D: I believe it did. Such investigations are not always easy, especially for smaller countries that don't necessarily have a large intelligence capability in the Middle East. And, to be frank, there were some opposition political figures in Bulgaria who discouraged pursuing the trail to Hezbollah. Too dangerous, too risky, for Bulgaria, they feared. But the government of Prime Boyko Borissov was undeterred.

That created another big challenge for Bulgaria -- and another reason for my admiration.

Some powerful members of the European Union, of which Bulgaria had been a member since 2007, were not keen to confront the question of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. For years, in fact, they went to great lengths to avoid it.

But what occurred in Burgas was on EU soil, and the Borissov government insisted that it had to be addressed. A separate incident involving Hezbollah in Cyprus, another EU member, reinforced the point.

While the EU only went halfway, artificially bifurcating Hezbollah into a "military" wing and a "political" wing, and only listing the former, it was still a big step forward -- and one that would not have happened without Bulgaria's leadership and insistence.

A: The Soviet Union may be gone, but Russia is still trying to influence, interfere in and destabilize Bulgaria, isn't it? And one of the many ways that caught my attention was in

2017, when Moscow insisted that credit for the rescue of Bulgaria's 50,000 Jews during the war actually belonged to Russia, not Bulgaria. You spoke up, didn't you?

D: Yes, I did. It was outrageous. Here's what I said at the time:

“Now Moscow wants to claim credit for the Bulgarian wartime action to save Jews. This is another example of Russian attempts to distort history and interfere in the lives of its neighbors and former satellite nations. Moreover, for all of Russia’s invaluable actions to vanquish the Nazi regime, the record of Stalin’s virulent prewar and postwar antisemitism is beyond dispute, as is his record of preventing emigration for Jews in either period. AJC honors the Bulgarian rescue effort and will pay tribute to it next year, which marks the 75th anniversary, when we will welcome Bulgarian Prime Minister Borissov to our 2018 Global Forum in Jerusalem.”

A: You just mentioned the invitation to the prime minister to speak in Jerusalem. Why did you choose to invite him for this special occasion?

D: We wanted to highlight some of our true friends at this historic gathering in Jerusalem to mark Israel's 70th anniversary. Bulgaria was certainly a true friend. And we wanted to share the story, for younger generations, of the rescue of Bulgarian Jewry -- and the powerful example of humanity and compassion that the world needed then, and now, and always. The prime minister gave a memorable speech and also, it turned out, celebrated his birthday in Jerusalem.

A: And by then, you had taken the decision to open an AJC office in Sofia and appoint Viktor Melamed as its director. Why?

D: For all the reasons I have tried to explain about the importance we attached to the country. And Viktor was the ideal candidate for the position.

We had known him for many years. We collaborated with him on many projects, including starting an annual exchange program, in honor of Bulgaria's wartime rescue of Jews, that brought a talented young Bulgarian to the U.S. as an intern under our auspices.

And we felt that Sofia could also be a good vantage point to stay in touch with some neighboring Balkan countries and Jewish communities.

To this day, I am proud of that decision to open the office.

A: You've had many meetings with Bulgarian leaders over the years. Without asking you to go into details, what were some of the main themes of those meetings?

D:I lost count of the number of meetings, whether in Bulgaria, elsewhere in Europe, the U.S. or Israel.

But I haven't forgotten some of those leaders who really made an impression on me, including Prime Minister Philip Dimitrov, one of the very first officials I ever met; President Rumen Radev, whom I saw both in Sofia and Warsaw; Foreign Minister Nikolay Mladenov, who went on to serve in several high-profile international posts; Kristalina Georgieva, who could have made an excellent UN Secretary-General and been the first East European to hold the post, had circumstances been slightly different; Ambassador Elena Poptodorova, who

represented Bulgaria so skillfully in Washington during two tours of duty; Stefan Tafrov, Bulgaria's ambassador to the UN when it had an all-important two-year term on the Security Council; Tsvetan Tsvetanov, who was Minister of the Interior at the time of the Burgas attack; Foreign Minister Daniel Mitov, with whom I stayed in close touch; and Romyana Bachvarova, who served with distinction as Bulgaria's ambassador to Israel.

I must apologize to those I haven't mentioned. The list would go on for pages!

As for themes, they varied, of course, from year to year and meeting to meeting. That said, here are a few:

First, Bulgaria had an ongoing challenge. It was not well-known in the United States, and its diaspora community there was small and not well-organized. Yet Bulgaria understandably wanted America's attention and support, so how could it strengthen its voice and impact in Washington and across the nation? And also how could it encourage investment and tourism? Second, as I mentioned earlier, Bulgaria's wartime protection of the Jewish community was not nearly as well-known as it deserved to be. How could the story be told more widely to reach potentially interested audiences? And could the lessons of that Bulgarian story, decades ago, have contemporary relevance in a world where antisemitism was on the rise and inspiring models of action and compassion are again needed?

Third, what could Bulgaria learn from Israel, including about how to maintain ties with the diaspora community and how to create strategies to attract talented and entrepreneurial Bulgarians back to Bulgaria from their jobs abroad, thus boosting economic and social prospects at home?

Fourth, the issue of Bulgarian complicity in the deportation of Jews from occupied Macedonia and Thrace was a difficult one for many Bulgarian leaders to address. How to find the right approach, the right balance, came up in many meetings.

Fifth, Bulgaria had a strong bilateral relationship with Israel, but many Israel-related issues came up at the UN in New York and Geneva, in the European Union and at NATO, all venues where Bulgaria actively participated. How far was Bulgaria prepared to go in these multilateral settings to stand up for Israel when there was often resistance, and when Bulgaria might have to take into account other national interests as well?

This is just a small sample of topics discussed. What was special, I felt as a veteran of literally thousands of political and diplomatic conversations on every continent, was the friendly, open and trusting way in which the get-togethers with Bulgarian friends always took place.

A: I know we can't cover all the facets of your relationship with Bulgaria during more than three decades, including your many meetings with political leaders, your efforts to help rescue the Bulgarian nurses (and Palestinian doctor) held unjustly for nearly three years in Libya, or the exchange programs that were set up by AJC. Perhaps in the next book! But any last thoughts about Bulgaria for this book?

D: Sure. I shall always feel a special bond with Bulgaria.

Today, I am heartened to see it firmly anchored in NATO and the European Union, and enjoying a strategic partnership with the United States. That's amazing progress.

Plus, the Jewish community may be small, but it is robust, energetic and determined to continue to play a meaningful role in the life of their country. It's an inspiring story.

And finally, I believe in Bulgaria's potential. I have met incredibly impressive Bulgarians, whether in the country or abroad, including a number of brilliant students studying in American and British universities.

Yes, Bulgaria has some daunting challenges. It is still one of the poorest countries in the EU. It faces the reality of a brain drain and demographic decline. Corruption hasn't entirely disappeared. And Russia still casts its malevolent eyes on Bulgaria.

But I am optimistic that the Bulgarian spirit will prevail and the country's best days lie ahead.