

The Bulgarian Jews: Where did they come from?

Bulgaria – A Short History

Statistics accurate to the first several years of the 21st Century

Location: South-East Balkan Peninsula; **BOUNDARIES:** **West** - Serbia and Macedonia; **North** - Romania, **East** - the Black Sea and **South** - Turkey and Greece.

Country land mass size and population: 111,000 Sq. Km; ~7.5 million.

Capital: Sofia – more than 1, 5000,000 residents.

Currency: “Lev” (currently, US\$ 1.00 = ~1.2 Leva)

GNP: US\$ 4,000 (in Israel – US\$ 17,310)

Topography: Mountainess, in the center, the Balkan Mountains. In the north, the Danube river basin ~ 35% forested land.

Population: 86% Bulgarian-Christians; 9% Turkish-Muslims; 4% Gypsies; 1% Others.

European Union – Bulgaria is a member of EU since 1.1.2007

Historical Background

We can distribute the history of Bulgaria into four main divisions:

1. **679/80 A.D.**, Establishment of the **First Kingdom** - Until the conquest of the **Ottoman Empire in 1398**.
2. The period under **Ottoman rule** until the end of the **19th Century**.
3. **Till 1989** - Bulgaria independent but under foreign influence: **Germany and USSR**.
4. From **1989** - Independent entity, after the breakup of the **Communist Block**.
5. From **1.1. 12007** – Bulgaria is a member of the **European Union**.

1. The First Kingdom until the Ottoman Conquest

* The formation of Bulgarian nation – a long process that began at the beginning of the 7th Century A.D.

* Three ethnic components result to form the Bulgarian nationality:

Proto-Bulgarians, Slavs and Thracians, - the beginning of the 10th C.

* This process took place in 3 main geographical areas:

Dobrodgja, Tracie and Macedonia.

* Who were the Proto-Bulgarians? **Nomadic tribes originating in the Eastern Steppes that settled along the Volga River. The reason for their wanderings – struggles with the Khazar kingdom.**

* The first leader, Khan Asparukh, (Esparikh) established the kingdom and made its capital in Pliska (680 A.D.). Source of the name Bulgaria – a mountain in the region of Kazan, in the vicinity of the Volga – **Bulgar**.

The relations of this new people with their neighbors – both Pagan and Byzantine – continuous warfare, conquering and defeat.

* Different ethnic foundations and their contribution to the shaping of the Bulgarian people: The **Proto-Bulgarians** – Military know-how and combat prowess; the **Slavs** - gave the language that eventually became the spoken language and the **Thracians** - the cultural influences from Greece.

The First Kingdom (680-1018 A.D.)

* Adopting Christianity as the state religion (first half of the 9th C., A.D.).

* The Cyrillic form of writing as a unifying force that also assisted in the spread of Christianity, by the two Greek scholars, Cyrilus and Methodius.

* Strengthening and establishing Bulgarian independence:

Expansion up to **Pesht** in the West and **Salonika**, in the south.

* Byzantine conquest and the destruction of the first Bulgarian Kingdom (1018 A.D.).

The Second Bulgarian Kingdom (1186-1398 A.D.)

* The capital: **GreatTârnovo**.

* Achievements and failures: The expansion of lands under her control, incorporating peoples into the Bulgarian nation and their acceptance of Christianity; liberation from the Latin Church in Rome and accepting Byzantium.

* The important Kings at the end of the era: **Asen, Kaloyan, Ivan -Alexander**, his son, **Ivan-Shishman** and his brother - **Ivan-Stratsimir**.

* During the two brother's time – the kingdom began to crumble, its division to three kingdoms and in the end - its fall to the **Ottoman** conquest – the **Battle of Nicopol** (1396) and the **conquest of Vidin** (1398), by the **Sultan Bayazid the I** (1389-1402) – this spelled the end of the **Second Bulgarian Kingdom**.

2. The Ottoman Rule

There are a few central questions that we must clarify:

* Was this indeed a “dark and gloomy conquest”, a “national catastrophe” and years of “mourning and repression”? Today, **modern historians in general, diminish that negative view of this period of rule.**

* What was the situation of the Bulgarian entity on the eve of conquest? From an administrative and economic viewpoint?

The situation was extremely poor where remnants of Byzantine activities existed, of which the Ottomans improved.

* Ottoman rule lasted about **500 years** and was not a smooth period. There were ups and downs relative to their position on the world scene: During their successful conquests they treated their captive populations well but as their empire declined with increasing failures and economic decline, they became more intolerant of non-Muslims. Until the mid-17th C. following the success of the empire, the willing masses converted to Islam.

3. Towards an independent Bulgaria

* **The awakening of Bulgarian nationalism** – slow development beginning in the mid-18th C. The most outstanding feature of this awakening was the artwork in churches reflecting the **golden age** of the lost Kingdom and its folklore – stories and folk music.

* At the beginning of the 19th C. especially from the 1850's onwards – a **nationalist awakening of a political nature** occurred – the inception of the idea of **National Liberation** and putting foreign domination to an end.

* The **“April Revolt” 1876** and the spread of the idea of the threat of conquest. For the first time, the **OPPRESSED SITUATION AND THE NECESSITY** of revolt and uprising against the Ottoman rulers - was "exported" out from Bulgaria.

*The **1877/8 War** – Creation of the **Eastern Rumelia** – for the first time, an autonomous entity in part of Bulgaria.

* The **“Berlin Contract”** – The influence of power plays by the Great Powers on Bulgaria's borders.

* Choosing of **Prince Battenberg**.

* **The Unification** – **The 6th of September, 1885**, a quiet revolution, the Ottoman rulers did not object but the Russians were bitter.

- The **Serbo-Bulgarian war** (1886) and the Bulgarian victory;
- Abdication of **Prince Battenberg - 1886**.

The appointment of **Ferdinand of the House of Saxon-Koberg** – 1887; at the time of the “**Young Turks**” **revolt (1908)** – he declares himself as “**Czar**”. In an alliance with Serbia, Greece and Montenegro, he went to war with Turkey (1912-13) – the **First Balkan War** and won victory including the conquering of territory.

- In a political coup, Serbia and Greece declare war on Bulgaria (1913) – **The Second Balkan War** where Bulgaria lost, thus ceding vast territories that were won during the First Balkan War.

4. The 20th Century - the Kingdom moves towards a Germanic Orientation

* Following additional losses during **the First World War**, on the side of Germany and Turkey, Ferdinand abdicated his throne to his son,

Boris the III.

* Results from the war – **1914-1918**, for Bulgaria: loss of the **Aegean Coast**, in addition to what was lost in 1913. Thousands of Macedonian refugees flooded Bulgaria; there were internal power struggles and an initial embracing of the **Communist movement** – struggles against this trend accompanied murders and overthrows (**September Revolt - 1923**).

* Communist ideas were strengthened following the revolution of October and a strengthening of the opposing right wing movements, the capture of the government by these right-wing parties with the

assistance of the army and repressing a democratic trend – all of these factors were fertile ground for an orientation towards **Nazi Germany**.

The Jews of Bulgaria

Forward

There were a number of outstanding characteristics in the Jewish communities of Bulgaria, their communities were far distant from the Jewish centers of the Ottoman Empire, or in the language of those days: "**Be'yarketey Togarma**" (living on the **periphery of the Turks**). The way of life in the community, its organization and interrelations between it and the authorities, between the Jewish community and the non-Jewish population, are similar and are characteristic to other far-flung communities of the empire. A few were found to be part of the older communities throughout Bulgaria. It is proper at this point to move forward and present a short example of the something that characterizes the Jewish community of the landscape of today's Bulgaria.

1. The Early Period

*"The beginning of the history of Bulgaria's Jews does not start in the middle Ages; instead, **they arrived to that land before the Proto-Bulgarians crossed the Danube...**"*

This, as claimed by **Professor Katsarov** in an article where he brings forward Jewish writings but written in Greek script from the old city of **Oescus**, today

known as the village of Gigen, close to the city of Nicopol. The place is located in an area once called by the Romans **Moesia Inferior**, on the banks of the Iskr River which flows into the Danube. One important proof will be mentioned here such as a **Synagogues**, excavated throughout Bulgaria: The first was unearthed in the city of **Plovdiv**, ancient **Philippopolis**. The remnants of this synagogue were unearthed at the beginning of the 1980's; this site is from the Roman period. This find was brought to light by two Bulgarian researchers. For our purposes the main fact is that the first part of the synagogue is dated to the **2nd C. A.D. or even later, to the mid-4th C. A.D.** Greek inscriptions along with a **7-stem menorah** were found which proves that the site was used by Jews. Today, the site has been built over by residential homes.

Jews were intrinsically bound up with the life of the Bulgarian people from the outset, from the days of tribal nomadic wanderings of the Proto-Bulgarians from the Volga area beyond the Danube.

One of the reasons for these wanderings was the incessant fighting between these tribes and the **Khazar Kingdom**. Around the time of the **6th C. A.D.**, some of the Khazar leaders readily accepted some of the foundations of **Judaism**. One of the things we can learn from the Khazar-tribal relationship is that from the time the Khazar's leaders accepted Judaism, there was some influence on the Proto-Bulgarian tribes, crossing the Danube and settled on the south of it – their new homeland – Bulgaria. Later, **King Boris the I**, sent representatives of these newly-Christianized Bulgarians to **Pope Nicolaus I** (858-867). Judging from the questions asked, we can see the influence of Judaism on these representatives. We do not possess these questions but we do have the Pope's answers. The issues raised in this dialogue were: the bringing of the first fruits (ancient Jewish Feast of the Tabernacles). Observing the **Sabbath**, **Kashrut** (Jewish dietary laws) **Nida** (female purity laws), impurity and purity as a result of these observances. We shall bring just two examples:

Paragraph 56 (page 101) Answers a question as to **whether it is permissible to continue praying for rain during a drought or long dry spell?**

The Pope responds by saying that there is nothing wrong with that but it is advisable for those praying to do so through **their priests** as they are the conduit between their wishes and God.

First, the custom of praying for rain was acceptable amongst the Jews. Secondly, we can see the difference between the Jewish concept of the **direct and unassisted connection** between man and his creator, and the Christian concept whereby **the Priest is the interlocutor between man and God.**

Paragraph 63 (page 105) is it permissible for a man to be with his **wife on a day holy to God?**

The answer - Given the fact that one is supposed to **abstain** from anything secular on a regular day, it is even **more severe** if anything related to the pleasures of the flesh is performed on those Holy days.

Here again we see the differences from the Jewish religious codes.

The answers deals further with the requirement to bring the **first fruits** from the harvest and the Redemption of the **First Born** (Paragraph 89, page 117); for **Kosher slaughtering** rituals, but not the consumption of animals that were not slaughtered according to custom (paragraph 90, idem) judgment for **burial outside** of the boundary of the cemetery, for those that have taken their own lives (paragraph 98, page 120); is they **Christianity faith** a genuine one, if they have been Baptized in their native lands by **Jewish-Khazars?** – Are they still practice **idol worship (Pagans – Pagano)**, or proper Christians?

From these answers we can garner that the **Jewish influence was greater on the Khazars** and through them - on the rest of the population, even when they wandered throughout Bulgaria.

An additional point is the creation of the **Cyrillic alphabet**; here as well, we can see clear proofs of the use of a few Hebrew letters that the **Cyrius and Methodius** brothers from **Salonika** used, when they created the **Slavo-**

Bulgarian script. Take for example the letter **Б** is the Hebrew letter **ב** (Bet), turn back, the letter **Ш** is parallel to the letter **ש** (Shin) in Hebrew, and the letter **Ц** to the letter **צ** (tsadi) in Hebrew. These letters **do not** exist in the Greek alphabet.

2. The Byzantine Period

After about 200 years, in the **11th C. A.D.**, Jews are mentioned in Bulgaria, by virtue of some writings of which a few have survived. Take for example, **Tuvia Ben-Eliezer** the author of "**Lekakh Tov**". It is said that the city of his birth was **Kastoria, in the Bulgarian Kingdom**.

In the **12th C. A.D.**, there was a Rabbi by the name of **Avishay** from the land of **Zagora** who lived in Beroia, (in our day called **Stara-Zagora**). Rabbi **Yehuda Moscony**, born in **Ohrid**, lived in the **14th C.** and composed Torah commentaries on Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra at the age of 34.

The activities of these Talmudic scholars throughout Bulgaria during the Byzantine Empire hints at the continuity of the communal life and their cultural activities. These same Jews lived in the central urban areas that were also crossroads for trade. All of the aforementioned Jews were **Romaniots**, (Jews associated with the Byzantine Kingdom. "Rum" – the name given by the Ottomans to the Byzantine Empire, from the term Roma, the Eastern Roman Church).

A Hebrew letter sent from the 13th C. A.D. hints that the Bulgarian **King Asen II** (1218-1241) demonstrated a supportive relationship towards the Jews. He won military victory and captured Theodoros "The Greek", the Emperor of Nicea (1175-1222). From the document we learn of the brutal actions of this same Emperor against the Jews: forbade the use of the Talmud, stole Jewish property and carried out other attacks. Asen the II ordered three Jews to put out his eyes while he was a prisoner (even though this contradicts his "warmth" towards the Jews, because he used them as executers!), and this is how he was sent back to his native land. The letter relates to a Rabbi Yakov,

a physician who sent it to his cousin, Ya'akov de-Lates, from Carcassonne – it was written around the year 1264.

There is an interesting description, describes the union of two people, Bulgarians and Jews - the marriage of **King Ivan-Alexander (1331-1371)** to a Jewess named **Sarah (or Tamara)**. In order to be with her, the King divorced his first wife. His new bride from this point forward was called Theodora. Sarah-Theodora was the daughter of a Jewish family associated of **Târnovo**, and her son, **Ivan-Shishman**, was the **last Bulgarian King** to rule all of Bulgaria from its capital, GreatTârnovo.

Whatever strangeness arises from this story, we also have a reasonable view of those Jews who held senior, respected positions, close to the nobility, where they could come and go as they pleased from the Royal palace. It is hard to understand why the king would wed a common woman, though it is said she was a beautiful. It is also unreasonable that a King who weds a woman from the local Jewish community would turn his wrath against that same community's esteemed Jewish leaders, confiscate their property, and expel them from the city; the Jews of the city were wrongly accused without proof of wrong doing.

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The simple reason of this marriage was the need of the King of the Jewish leaders of the community, because their strong connections with the **Byzantine palace** in **Constantinople**. After the Ottoman conquest, Jews disappeared from the city of **Târnovo** and surrounding areas, but for different reasons.

There is a tradition which is not solidly backed up by documentation that seems to show the Jews in a traitorous light, as one of the Jews transferred the city to Ottoman army after it was under siege for three months. According to this legend, in July 1393, a local Jew hid in the tent of **Suleyman-Çelebi**, the son of **Bayezit I**, the senior local commander of the siege force. The Jew

gave the keys to one of the side gates of the city. Following this, Ottoman forces stealthily entered the city; beat, raped, pillaged and finally torched the capital city.

While Suleyman-Çelebi was waiting for the keys to the main gate of the city, this Jew came to him and asked for remuneration for his deeds. The Ottoman commander ordered that the Jew be beheaded and announced to those around him, *“This is the prize that a traitor deserves, today he hands over his city, tomorrow he will betray us.”*

The Jew’s body was thrown into a pit in the ground and for generations, every Bulgarian-Christian that passed by this site tossed stones into the hole and would say, “He was cursed forever” and this is the origin down to the present day, of the expression, **“The Jew’s Grave – Jidove Grob”**.

The legend appeared in a written form for the first time in 1886, in a book written by Peter **Baron**, The History of Târnovo

The main theme from this legend is that the Bulgarians identified the Jews as those who played into the hands of the Ottoman conquerors while they were in the process of looting them!

This story contains historical repercussions for those that would excuse the fall of the city on the one hand and to fulfill the anti-Jewish needs of the **Pravoslavnic Church**, on the other hand. It is also imaginatively similar to the New Testament story of Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver...

Due to a lack of evidence or proofs, it is hard to know how many Jews lived in Bulgaria during this several hundred year period, and their influence upon the local population. It is a basic assumption that the Jewish presence was very limited. They were usually not pursued or persecuted by the authorities, though this was not because they were warmly regarded by the population; the relationship cannot be described as continuously idyllic because the Bulgarians may have seen the Jews as the source from which they derived their culture....

Throughout the hundreds of years the relationship was a realistic one with each side knowing how to exploit the other to produce desired effects and benefits for itself: the Bulgarians exploited the Jews for their talents in trade and work that could assist in the economic development of their country, during both the First and Second Kingdoms. The Jews on the other hand, viewed Bulgaria as a land of refuge from the Byzantine persecutions, Wallachians or Hungarians, for the most part due to religious reasons. This is seen for example in a Papal edict by **Gregorius the IX** (1227-1241) to the King of Hungary - **Bela the IV** (1235-1275), where he complains about the King of Bulgaria (Asen the II) supportive relations with the Jews and other heathens, (the Bogomils).

3. The Ottoman Conquest

Most of the Jews living throughout Bulgaria on the eve of the Ottoman conquest were called by **Spanish Jews**, who appeared later, “**Gregos**” – **Greeks**, because their spoken language was Greek. These Jews were a major part of the Jewish population. They were also called “**Romaniots**”, as we mentioned above. Besides their language, what united and differentiated them from the Jews from **Hungary and Ashkenaz**, which were a minority, were their ritual and Halachic customs. In addition, there was a limited number of Jews from **France and Italy**.

Jews from **Hungary** arrived in Bulgaria after they were expelled by **King Lajos I** (“The Great”), (1342-1382) in 1376, and settled in the Northwest part of the country. The Jews of **Bavaria** were expelled from there in 1470. Some of them made their way to a number of cities in Bulgaria, where there were already established Jewish communities. The largest and greatest immigration wave came from the **Jews of Spain and Portugal**, after they were expelled and escaped from the Iberian Peninsula (1492 and 1497). Many Jews arrived in the Ottoman Empire some of which wandered from the great centers – Istanbul, Salonika and Adrianopol – to today's known Bulgarian cities. Their influence was decisive and they became the dominant community. The smaller Ashkenazi community that merged with the Jews of

Hungary and Bavaria, managed to keep itself autonomous with separate synagogues, kept its own orderly rituals, and also managed to pretty much keep its unique language – Yiddish. The intra-Jewish ethnic tensions that existed in large communities at the beginning of the 16th C. like Salonika or Istanbul, was also a problem shared by Jews in other communities known today as parts of Bulgaria. Here as well the Spanish Jews were the majority of the community. The struggle was for positions of power and subjects concern Halachic manners.

In a Halachic commentary written by **Rabbi Josef Caro** (1488-1575) he determined that it is wise to behave in K'K (Kahal Kadosh) Plevna according to the Spanish majority and that the Ashkenazim should accept this: "Ashkenazim should observe customs according to the Spanish Jews, although they came there before". And in reality, the first Ashkenazim that came (to Bulgaria) had to "surrender" their ways to the Spanish Jews and act according their (the Spanish Jews') manners .

These differences were also expressed in Sofia, according to the writings of **Rabbi Yitzak Bechar Adrabi** (1520-1584). There, the Spanish Jews had the permission to practice a particular Halachic way that they brought with them, even though the Hungarian Jews (Hungarosch), who arrived to the city before them – treasured a different custom. An additional custom that was different between the Jews of Bulgarian Romaniots and the Jews of Spain was the **sivlonot** – the gifts sent by a groom to his bride. The Romaniots saw this gift as a valuable item for sanctifying the bride; even if the ceremony did not take place, it was necessary for the drawing up of a "Ghet" (marriage annulment). The Spanish Jews did not recognize this custom and did not see the sending of such a gift as binding.

According to the answer of **Rabbi Shmuel De Medina** (1506-1589), which was sent to Sofia to deal with the issue of tolerance, it appears that most of the Spanish Jews who arrived to Sofia, trace their origins to **Salonika**.

We draw our key information about the Jews of Bulgaria from literature (questions and answers) known as the **Responsa**; certain information can also be taken from Ottoman documents from the 16th C. onward. In those

same sources we can learn about the Jews of Plovdiv (Phillipopol), Yambol, Dupnitsa, Provadia, Pazarcik and Samokov.

The central communities resided in Plevna (Plevna), Sofia, Nicopol and Vidin. All of these towns were crossroads for trade along land or water routes, the Danube as an example.

3.1 Demographic Data

We cannot always compare the data for the Jewish population and those who are excluded from that population, due to the lack of sources concerning the Jews. Despite that, we present data in Table 1 (below) on the non-Jewish population next to data on the Jewish population, in order to try to compare them for the same cities on which we do have data.

Jews				Non-Jews			
Years	Households	Single	Total Souls	Years	Non-Muslim	Muslims	Total Souls
<u>Sofia</u> 1554	21		126	(1520-35)	280	971	1291 households
				(1571-80)	204	1376	1638
<u>Philiba (Plovdiv)</u> 1519				(1520-35)	119	761	987
1530	32			(1571-80)	153	1119	1226
1520-1556	32	1					
1568/9	33	1					
			154				
<u>Plevna</u>				No data			
1560-1566			103				
<u>Provadia</u>				No data			
1529-1566	28	9					
<u>Yambol</u>				No data			
1593-4	3	3					

The data in the table shows that the number of Jewish residents was significantly smaller compared to the general population. A fact that arises from this data meant that in some towns, there was no Jewish cemetery and therefore the dead were brought for burial to a community where the Jewish community was larger. Take for example the city of **Karnobat** that in 1651 had, according to Ottoman records, 16 households, decease's were buried there from such far away places as **Burgas**, 50 KM East. One assumption brought forward by Tabakov is, that the Jews of Burgas originated from

Karnobat. They behaved similarly as the Jews of **Sliven**, who brought their dead to the cemetery at **Yambol**, where there was a much larger community, one of the oldest communities in Bulgaria.

The cemetery at **Karnobat** is large, amongst the **oldest** cemeteries that remain today in Bulgaria. Based on research I did there in 1991-2, within the framework of mapping and photographing the old cemeteries in that country, I found more than 1800 tombstones of which the oldest was from 1610.

Another conclusion that we can reach from the table is that from the mid-16th C. onwards, there was a significant increase in the **Muslim** population and a decline of the Christian one: Bulgarians, Greeks and Armenians. This is the beginning of the Islamization of much of the area today known as Bulgaria. This process was faster, especially in cities where households (**hane** in Turkish) were between 801 and 1600, as in **Sofia and Plovdiv (Filibe)**. This was a process of religious conversions and not internal immigration. The Jews despite that, maintained their numbers. The religious conversions happening to the Christians almost did not influence the Jews at all.

According to the conclusions reached by **Prof. Grozdanova**, in most of central Bulgaria the demographic ratio for most of the non-Muslims at the beginning of the 17th C. was 92.4% Christians (Bulgarians) compared to 7.6% Jews and Armenians.

Conclusions

Jewish genealogy up to the end of the Byzantine period is replete with historical gaps. Even though, there is more data available from the Ottomans, we cannot perform a thorough analysis of the demographics. What little we possess is similar to the social fabric of the Jewish community in the areas today known as Bulgaria, which was no different than her sister-communities throughout the Ottoman Empire. Their small numbers and wide distribution, upwards of thirty communities, limited tensions between them and the local populations, Christians and Muslims. We have no data regarding the

persecution of Jews during the period of Ottoman rule, due to their beliefs or some other reason. If there were instances of persecution, it was the exception, not the rule. The economic status for most of the Jews was reasonable but nowhere near the very wealthy; if there were a few of these Jews, this would have been again the exception, which does not reflect the majority.

The development of the Jewish communities throughout the Ottoman Empire is directly connected to the socio-economic events as it affected the Empire. The destiny of those communities that existed in today's Bulgaria was no different. As long as the Ottoman rulers continued to expand their conquests and establish their economy as an economic-military great power, the Jews enjoyed fair treatment and support to engage them in trade, as long as they collected taxes, thus enriching the Empire.

At the beginning of the 17th C., when the first cracks in the edifice and the attainments of the "Sublime Port", and parallel to and as a result of this, the financial crisis increased with the devaluation of the Ottoman currency - the situation of the Jews also grew worse. Some of the Jews, similar to other minorities, Greeks, Armenians, managed to retain a significant part of the accumulated wealth of the state. They were also involved in loans with interest, but mostly involved in local and international trade. The geopolitical situation which grew worse for the Ottoman rulers also seriously hurt them, and due to their position and involvement in economic centers and trade routes, the Jews were affected as well and the development of their communities halted. From this standpoint Bulgaria was no different. The Jewish community of Sofia for example, turned into the spiritual center for the majority of Jews in Bulgaria, only at the height of the 19th C. when it was declared the capital of the country. The Jews within the borders of present day Bulgaria were scattered, as I said before, into many small communities, the majority of which helped form their unique characteristics.

The three components of the Jewish population of Bulgaria were:

The Romaniots, Ashkenazi-Hungarians and the Spanish Jews managed to form quite a homogeneous life. This, albeit the friction and struggle for positions of power within the different communities, in addition to disagreements over essential Halachic points, which characterized these same communities. The tensions rose with the arrival of the Spanish Jews to this area of the Empire specifically from the Jewish centers of Salonika, Edirne, and Istanbul at the beginning of the 16th C. As the Spanish Jews established themselves as a majority, the tensions and conflict were forgotten.

The Ashkenazi Jews preserved their leadership and language in most of the communities where they had a hold, but the Spanish Jews turned into a dominant factor and in most areas of today's Bulgaria lived and remained as the only community. In cities where there were two communities like in Sofia, Pleven, Vidin, Nicopol, and later, Ruschuk, Burgas and Varna, both parties knew how to emphasize their common working relationship while preserving their own uniqueness and differences. It must be cited that those same **Ashkenazi Jews** who arrived at the end of the 14th C., almost, without exception, merged and assimilated into the Spanish majority - **Sephardic Community**. A memory of these days is found in the name "**Ashkenazi**" or "**Madjar**" who were for all intents and purposes, Spanish Jews. **The Ashkenazi "Modern" Jews**, who made up 10% of the general Jewish population in Bulgaria, arrived there in the 19th C. **from Moldova, the Ukraine and Poland.**

The Romaniot Jews managed to blend in, and except for an historical echo from their past, there is almost no trace of them left amongst the Jews of Bulgaria, except names and words from **Judeo-Espanol**, who still safeguard their heritage.

Bulgaria's Jews Today

Before immigrating to Israel in 1948-1950, Bulgarian Jews numbered more than 50,000. Usually there were no incidents of persecution or acts of

violence against them of a religious or any other nature. During the Second World War, Bulgaria's Jews suffered from a mistreatment and persecution, like the forced manual labor of males between the ages of 22 to 50 and the expulsion of the Jews from Sofia and other cities in the provinces, yet they were not sent to the death camps in Poland. The question of their survival is complex and subject to argument on what caused this unique phenomenon to occur. In contrast, the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia, in the lands under the occupation of the Bulgarian army, were taken to Treblinka and more than 11,000 were cremated.

At the end of the war and the rise of the Communist party to power, more than **40,000** Jews left Bulgaria and immigrated to Israel. The majority of those left behind was functionaries and belonged to the new leadership or those that were incapable of making these changes in their lives due to various circumstances. Communal life was virtually shut down and was almost non-existent.

At the end of the period of Communist rule, in **October 1989**, there was an additional wave of immigration, nearly **4,000 arrived in Israel**. Those left behind tried to rebuild their spiritual Jewish lives, as well as possible. Today there are about 2500 to 3000 Jews there, most of whom living in mixed marriages.