

The doors of the old shul in Pazardzhik are locked. What dusty secrets lie inside?



Although Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second-largest city, was once home to a vibrant Sephardic *kehillah*, much of the city's Jewish history has been forgotten. But cobweb-filled rooms and padlocked closets have never stopped a Mishpacha reporter before, and this time, as well, this Balkan gem revealed more than a few of its hidden treasures

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY *Ari Greenspan*

# UNLOCKING *Plovdiv's Past*



**R**ecently I decided to go back to Bulgaria. I wanted to spend Shabbos in the Bulgarian town of Plovdiv with a family I had met during an earlier trip, but there was a catch. No, the Bulgarian government hadn't refused to give me a visa; the days of Cold War suspicions and Communist bureaucracy are long gone. The hitch came, *davka*, from the United States Supreme Court.

For those of you who haven't been following this particular story, my travel partner, Ari Zivotofsky, has a son who was born in Jerusalem. Ari would like his son's US passport to say that the boy was born in Jerusalem, *Israel*. The US government objects to the "I" word. Ari took his complaint all the way to the US Supreme Court, which has agreed to hear his case. So while Ari Z. is busy with his Supreme Court battle, I meanwhile embarked on an adventure of my own. Instead of



Plowing through the *genizah* in Plovdiv, a world of ancient books is revealed

traveling with Ari, I brought along my daughter Etanna. That turned out to be appropriate, since this particular visit was very much about family.

**Tallis or Tablecloth?** The first time I went to Bulgaria, it was for a bris. It wasn't just any bris, but the first bris that was done on the eighth day in this former Communist country in over seven years. Actually, there were two brissim that day: a teenager and the baby.

I soon realized that there was something very special about the baby's family. First, both the mother and the father were Jewish, something that is quite unusual these days in Bulgaria or any former Communist country. Second, both the grandmother and the great-grandmother of the baby were fluent in Hebrew. How did they learn Hebrew in a country where religion and religious instruction were banned?

The grandmother, Emma Mezan, who is from Plovdiv, told me her story. She was a young girl in the 1950s, when Communism was at its height. One day she decided to surprise her mother, Sarina Molcho (the baby's great-grandmother), by cleaning up the apartment and making a meal so that everything would be ready when her mother came home from work. When it was time to set the table, Emma looked for a tablecloth. Not finding one in the usual place, she peeked inside a closet and there she found a big old cloth that she didn't recognize. Since the cloth didn't quite fit the table, she took a scissors and trimmed it to size. After the table was set, Emma sat down and waited patiently for her mother to return home.

When Sarina opened the door, her initial expression of delight quickly changed to one of horror. "What have you done to my father's tallis?" she screamed. "What's a tallis?" Emma replied. At that moment, Sarina understood that she needed to pass on to her daughter everything she could about Judaism.

Whatever Sarina did must have worked. Emma was able to pass on her knowledge of Judaism to her own children, and the bris of Emma's grandson, which took place three years ago, was

Even the horse knew his mission. The *chevra kadisha's* funeral cloth made sure the animal pulling the wagon was also dressed for the solemn occasion



It's impossible to experience a real Shabbos without Shabbos food, but what do you do when not one person in the community keeps kosher?

the first one to be performed *b'zman* in close to a decade. Today Emma is one of the central figures in Jewish education in her town.

Since that first visit I've been back to Bulgaria a few times, but I've never spent a Shabbos in Plovdiv. When I mentioned the idea to Emma, I could sense a kind of yearning. Together with the new religious committee chairman, we decided to make a community-wide Shabbos. We never dreamed how special it would be.

**Who's Got the Plata?** It's impossible to experience a real Shabbos without Shabbos food, but what do you do when not one person in the

community keeps kosher? In this case, I arrived at Plovdiv's Jewish community center building, which has a nonkosher kitchen, with my gas torch in hand. (I kept it stored in Sofia with my communal leader friends for just such occasions.) In my other hand was the *plata* I had schlepped from Israel, since no *plata* exists in Plovdiv, and I wanted the members of the community to taste a real cholent. (I left the *plata* with the community for the future.)

The kosher chickens came from Sofia, Bulgaria's capital, but where would we find a challah? I was ready to bring some from Israel or bake my own for *lechem mishneh*, but Emma said a fellow named Alberto had made the community

challah in the past, and that he would take care of it for our *seudos*. Alberto, who comes from an old Sephardic family, rents a store to a Muslim-owned pizza shop. I went over to the pizza shop and kashered one of the pizza ovens. Then I taught Alberto, who was wearing his *kippah* for the occasion, about taking challah from the dough. And so in this *treif* pizza shop, where the dough was made by a Muslim, Alberto and I took challah and braided the dough for the challah rolls that would be eaten during this special Shabbos.

It was agreed that the only hot cooked food to be eaten at the *seudos* would be the cholent that I was going to make together with members of the community.

A group of Jewish women, many of them speaking Ladino — the language that Spanish Jews brought with them to Plovdiv after they were expelled from Spain in 1492 — came to help.

These preparations for Shabbos brought back many memories of their youth and of their once-thriving community, including memories about food. The women discussed both Bulgarian and Sephardic classic dishes that they remembered from their childhood homes. Even though the only dishes they could bring to our Shabbos meals were cold salads and fruits, everyone agreed that this Shabbos — which had brought back so many happy memories — would be memorable.

While cooking together, I asked about the town's *mikveh*. Nobody seemed to know where it was. In fact, I was firmly told that not only is there no *mikveh* today, but that there had never been a *mikveh* in the town.

"Really?" I asked. I then turned to Emma and said, "Let's ask your mother."

Sarina Molcho thought for a minute. Then she said, "Yes, there was a *mikveh*!" After some more discussion, all the older women agreed that the *mikveh* was in a building in the old Jewish area that is today a furniture store. We set off to find the store, but it was closed.

I wondered what sort of *mikveh* could be housed in such a building. I got my answer the next day, when I was able to go inside the furniture store. The building was an old Turkish *chamam*, or public hot bath. It was very similar to the one that Ari and I had been told about when we visited Izmir, Turkey (see Issue #360), which was also used by the Jews as their *mikveh*. As we went into the old, cobweb-filled room, we wondered about the generations of Jews who had used this structure and where their children and grandchildren were today. Then our attention was attracted by beams of light coming in through the domed ceiling of the central room. Looking up, we saw that the ceiling's windows were

# Plovdiv's Ups and Downs

Plovdiv is one of the oldest cities in the world. Already by the fourth century BCE this Thracian town was a thriving center of trade, a fact that caught the attention of Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. Philip attacked it, captured it, and gave it a new name: Philippopolis, or the City of Philip.

Jews arrived shortly afterward. It's thought that these early Jewish settlers were mainly tradesmen and craftsmen. We do know that they built a synagogue, since parts of a beautiful mosaic floor and panels depicting a three-legged menorah were discovered by archaeologists digging in the old part of the town. Judging by the quality of the craftsmanship, the archaeologists believe that this early Jewish community must have been a wealthy one.

During the centuries that followed, Plovdiv/Philippopolis changed hands and names many times. The Romans captured it and turned the metropolis into an important regional center. Energetic builders, the Romans left behind the ruins of a number of impressive buildings, arenas, and baths for modern tourists to visit. After the Roman Empire collapsed it was the turn of the Slavs to capture the city and put their imprint upon its stones. From the 600s to the 1300s, the city seesawed between being part of the Byzantine Empire and the Bulgarian Empire. The matter was settled in 1364 when the Turks captured the city and made it part of the Ottoman Empire, where it remained until 1878, when it became part of the Principality of Bulgaria.

The fortunes of Plovdiv's Jews had their ups and downs during the Middle Ages. That early synagogue, for example, was damaged when Plovdiv was sacked in the fifth century. But despite the persecutions that followed with regular frequency after the region became Christian in the 600s, the Jewish community managed to give the synagogue a new floor, demonstrating that the *kehillah* had recovered its wealth and position, at least temporarily.

According to historians, the Ottoman Empire brought stability to the area and was generally "good for the Jews." During these centuries the Jews of Plovdiv, who could trace their origins back to both the Greek-speaking Romaniots and Ashkenazim from European countries such as Hungary, generally prospered. The Ottoman Turks also put out the welcome mat to the Jews who had been expelled from Spain. Some 300 families settled in Plovdiv, bringing with them their Sephardic rituals and heritage, including

Ladino, the language of Spain's Jews that is still remembered today by some members of Plovdiv's *kehillah*.

During the seventeenth century the community was led by Rabbi Yeduda Sid, the author of *Ohr Emes* and *Ner Mitzvah*. He was succeeded by Rabbi Avraham ibn Aroio, author of the responsa *Mayim HaChayim*, who spearheaded the building of a new synagogue in 1786. After that the historical evidence of religious life in Plovdiv begins to fade.

It is known that Jews were active in the fight for Bulgarian independence during the late 1800s. They contributed badly needed funds and one Jew — Eliezer Kalev — saved several Bulgarian revolutionaries from death. The nationalistic fever sweeping the country provided fertile ground for Zionism and secular thought to take root, which led to a weakening of Plovdiv's traditional religious communal structure during the years before World War II.

Although there was some anti-Semitism in the new country, in general relations between the Bulgarians and the Jews were good. Things changed for the worse when war broke out and Bulgaria's King Boris III aligned his country with Germany. In the summer of 1940 the Bulgarian government adopted anti-Jewish legislation that placed many restrictions on the Jewish community. All Jews were forced to wear the yellow star, and thousands of Jewish men were sent to labor camps, where they were forced to work for a few months out of the year. But when the Nazis ordered Bulgaria to send its Jews to the death camps in 1943, the people of Bulgaria said no. In a rare display of solidarity with the Jewish People, Bulgarian politicians, intellectuals, clergymen, and simple people joined together to protest, and King Boris was forced to cancel the order. But while Bulgaria's native Jewish population was saved from death, some 11,000 Jews living in lands that Bulgaria had annexed during the war — parts of Yugoslavia and Greece — were deported to Treblinka, where they were killed.

After the war more than 35,000 Bulgarian Jews made aliyah to the newly created State of Israel. They left behind a community of about 15,000 Jews, whose numbers continued to dwindle in the face of the country's next challenge — Communism. The Communist Party was ousted and a new constitution was passed in 1991. But by then this ancient Jewish community had dwindled to just a few hundred souls.

— Libi Astaire

carved in the shape of a Magen David. How poignant it was that these Stars of David were guiding us to Plovdiv's *mikveh*, which had been forgotten for more than half a century.

**Hidden Treasure** In the courtyard of Plovdiv's present synagogue there once stood a shul built in the seventeenth century. The shul collapsed a long time ago. This courtyard also had a small stable that housed the two horses used by the *chevra kadisha* to take the bodies to the cemetery. But while these structures have vanished, there was something from Plovdiv's Jewish past that was still in existence: a real old-fashioned *genizah* — a treasure trove of old Jewish books, letters, and artifacts.

I get excited whenever I get near a potential *geniza*, particularly when I'm visiting a community that has old roots. Since the *Mechaber* himself, Rav Yosef Karo, lived in Bulgaria, before moving to the Holy Land, you can imagine the level of learning that once existed in this country. Part of my goal and job that weekend was to help Plovdiv's community sort through what was stored in ten ancient-looking pad-locked bookcases standing against the back wall of a beautiful shul that dates from the 1880s. While a few members of this community are fluent in spoken Hebrew, written Hebrew and particularly the language style of rabbinic texts of learning is virtually unknown. And even though Ladino is written in Rashi script — in fact, Rashi script was originally Ladino script — I doubt if there is more than one person in the entire country who could read Rashi's commentary and understand it.

We arrived at the shul before 8 a.m., itching to get filthy with "*genizah shmutz*" — a unique type of dust and dirt that accumulates during the hundreds of years that books and ritual items such as a *paroches* sit hidden away. It is infused with the magic of Jewish history and is truly a unique link that makes you one with the past. Emma, together with Albert Behar, the shul's *gabbai*, opened the little locks. They then stood to the side, to give me room to explore.

As we went into the old, cobweb-filled room, we wondered about the generations of Jews who had used this structure



Today no one can read the script, but these holy artifacts testify to a once-vibrant community

What I found amazed me. Close to 350 years of learning and living were stored in those cabinets. There were hundreds of Tanachs with Ladino translation, as well as many old siddurim and Tehillims — seforim that were clearly used by the community on a regular basis. Many Mishnayos also were sitting in the dust, revealing that this was a town that had supported a *chevrah Mishnayos* that regularly learned together.

Most of the seforim were from the early to mid-1800s, but a few dated back to the 1700s. In one cabinet I found some responsa, some Talmuds, and some serious halachic works, clearly

indicating a community of scholarship and Torah leaders. While almost all of the titles were familiar to me, there were some I'd never heard of. Bringing myself back to the twenty-first century, I popped open my laptop and found a weak WiFi signal that connected me to the Internet. It was almost surrealistic. Here I was in a 130-year-old shul, seforim piled up all around me, and I was surfing the web to identify a few of the books or figure out the edition of some of the others.

Then my daughter joined me and we began to empty another closet, which contained a *paroches* and other Jewish



We were filthy with "*genizah*" — a unique type of dust and dirt



What's Shabbos without challah?

The ceiling of the Turkish *chamam* indicated there was a holy *mikveh* underneath

# She had figured out the cloth's secret: made to cover the animal from head to tail, it was perhaps the world's last funerary outfit for a horse

ritual objects. When we were done, the entire floor and many of the shul's seats were covered with old Ottoman *aron kodesh* curtains, all of which told a story. There were wax-spotted table covers that had been used for Havdalah over the years, as well as a large *paroches* embroidered with the names of the Jewish soldiers who were killed during the 1913 Balkan War fought against the Ottoman Empire. One small *shulchan* cover was given in memory of a young Jewish man from Plovdiv who was killed in Yaffo during the Arab riots of 1921. A very unusual piece looks like it might have been a tallis bag. It is as Turkish as can be: the Jew's name is embroidered in Hebrew, but there is also an embroidered mosque with the Arab crescent moon sitting on top of the building. Also embroidered on the bag is an inscription, written in letters

similar to old Turkish script, which reads "Book of books."

Out of the thirty or so fabrics, one stuck out like a sore thumb. All of the 250 Bulgarian-Ottoman era textiles that I have studied were colorful and rich in texture, with a characteristic weave and feel. This one piece was made from simple, black wool and decorated only with some Magen Davids in the corners. Moths had made holes in several places, but there were two holes that had been sewn in the fabric. I quickly realized that the fabric must have been used by the *chevra kadisha*. Perhaps, then, the fabric was used to cover the body, and the two holes were for the sticks of the stretcher holding the body?

However, when we laid it out, we noticed that the material wasn't rectangular. While I was pondering this puzzle, my daughter Etanna put the

fabric on her head. She looked like she was wearing a black Klu Klux Klan outfit. But when she started neighing like a horse, I started to laugh. She had figured out the cloth's secret: made to cover the animal from head to tail, it was perhaps the world's last funerary outfit for a horse.

We never think about the horses that a *chevra kadisha* used to pull the wagon. But here in Plovdiv, at least, the *niftar* was shown every possible respect; even the horse pulling the cart was dressed solemnly for the occasion. Later, we found a Gypsy out in a field. We tried the cloth on his horse for good measure and the picture speaks for itself.

Other goodies we found in the *genizah* were some Torah crowns; an elegy in Ladino, written by the town's last rabbi, that mourns the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash; a bound weekly Ladino newspaper from Izmir, Turkey, printed in 1897; and a few non-Jewish books written in Hebrew that reflected Plovdiv's secular Zionist past. There were also some old shul lanterns and lights sitting on a shelf. When we disturbed one book, letters and old black-and-white family pictures spilled out. Hiding behind an old refrigerator were a beautiful silk challah cover with an image of Yerushalayim and the text for Kiddush for Shabbos and Yom Tov that was printed in Austria. And, finally, there was a history of the Bulgarian Jews, with pictures, that was written in the 1930s in Ladino.

**First Shabbos** During a recent Shabbos afternoon, I sat with a friend who speaks Spanish and together we deciphered the Ladino, written in Rashi script, of that book. When we came to the last page, we had a clear understanding of just how remarkable this community was.

And still is.

Back in Bulgaria, it was time for Plovdiv's first community-wide Shabbos since before World War II. Close to a third of the town's Jews participated in the different classes. The women, who are strong and hold their traditions dear (there is actually a women's Rosh Chodesh club) made a particularly

strong showing. About thirty women came to the *shiur* on *Megillas Rus* that began our Erev Shabbos program. When the *shiur* finished they all stood up and performed a beautiful ritual: they held hands in a circle and mentioned their names and the names of their mothers and grandmothers as a way of showing solidarity with their past and hope for the future. I was so moved that I thought of my own grandmother and tears pricked my eyes.

On Friday night about fifteen people came to shul, almost three times more than usual. By Shabbos morning the word had spread and some fifteen people from a nearby town also showed up for the davening. It was possible that they had never before in their lives been in a shul to pray. What was certain was that there were forty people in a shul that had not seen a Shabbos minyan for the better part of a century.

Their "*chazzan*" is ninety-year-old Samuel Ben Nun. As an adult he had been a card-carrying Communist. But in his youth he studied in the town's Zionist school and he is fluent in Hebrew. He is also the one who remembers some of the old tunes. Samuel, along with Alberto Bechar (the challah man), a young man in his thirties, and a Turkish Jew make up the small group that know a little of the *tefillos*.

I had planned on teaching the *kehillah* a beautiful old-new *niggun* for *Ein Kel-okeinu*. It's a Sephardic *niggun* chanted in only three communities in the world these days; the song is sung line by line in Hebrew and Ladino. But the remarkable Jews of Plovdiv beat me to it and reinstated the *niggun* in their shul a few weeks before I arrived.

My last meeting, which was with Plovdiv's younger generation, took place after Shabbos. Their community has a

Sunday school, and the teenagers have been trained to teach the younger children. It's a good try, but not yet perfect. At our meeting, which coincided with their end-of-the-year party—a barbecue held out in a forest—they immediately welcomed me and asked me to join them and have a hot dog.

I couldn't, since the food wasn't kosher. Yet I couldn't help but feel a tremendous optimism after I took their leave. Who would have imagined that after the twin disasters of the Holocaust and Communism that there would still be a spark of Yiddishkeit alive in Plovdiv? There is no doubt in my mind that their Sephardic heritage is partly responsible for their deep and strong attachment to their Jewish identity. But hopefully a couple of Ashkenazim named Ari and Ari will be able to continue to come back and help guide them in their return to their ancestral faith. ●



Community members show off a 100-year-old silk challah cover printed with the Kiddush text, framed for preservation