Matilda Albuhaire

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Family background

My most distant relatives are my grandfather and my grandmother. I have no further knowledge of grand-grandparents.
I can tell a lot about my maternal grandparents. My grandpa's name was Mair Levi. I know nothing about their ancestors' origin. My grandfather was born somewhere in Galicia, in Eastern Europe, however he was a Sephardi, not an Ashkenazi Jew. They were Sephardi Jews, who used to observe all traditions. My grandfather was a rich merchant of fabrics and ready-made clothes. They had a large store in Plovdiv and a house in the city, which still stands there. Grandpa was married to Esther Levi. My grandma came from the Karlovo area. She also had many sisters. My grandparents had 4 sons and 2 daughters. The first child was called Buko, then came my mother Rebecca. They had brothers Vitali, Eliezer and Marko, and my aunt's name was Donna. This is the whole family on my mother's side. I know them all. My grandparents used to speak Ladino, but all the others – my uncles and aunts spoke Bulgarian.

My grandpa was a tall and handsome man, with a cloth cap and, because he was rich, he was able to go abroad to buy clothes, fabrics, etc. He used to go to Vienna regularly for medical treatment. He actually died in Vienna in 1923. My grandparents didn't live in the Jewish quarter.

Once they took me on holiday. I went to Chepino with them, where they used to go to the mineral spas. It was quite a trip from Plovdiv to Chepino by cart and oxen team. There were no holiday houses then. Everything had to be brought from home – mattresses, utensils, bed covers.

My paternal grandpa's name was Yacov Mercado Albuhaire. Before having him, my grandpa's mother had given birth to several children who then died. So, when he was born, in order to avoid the other children's fate, his parents gave him away. His name was 'mercado', meaning 'bought by another family', so that the Angel of Death didn't find him – this is why he had two names: Yacov Mercado Albuhaire. It is thought that the family name Albuhaire is the name of an area in Spain, Albuhare. But I have also heard that it comes from the Turkish 'al-bu-hair' and means 'take this good': 'hair' – good, 'al' – take, 'bu' – this.

My grandpa had come from Istanbul, where he was born. He was born in 1853 and came to Bulgaria in 1882 with his two-year-old son, my father, without his wife. He lived in Bourgas with his son and remarried a woman called Mazal, who was born in Dobrich. I was named after her, but I was given a more modern name – Matilda. My grandpa was a peddler in Bulgaria. I remember having been told that he used to carry the merchandise wrapped up on his back and this is how he went about. But after some time he made money and became a rich merchant in Bourgas. They had a shop on the main street. His firstborn son was my father, who came from Istanbul at the age of two, and his name was Solomon; and from his second wife he had two sons – one was called Avram and the other one, Isaac. My grandpa spoke Ladino. We spoke Ladino at home until my younger brother was born in 1924.

My grandpa was of medium height, rather stout, with an expression of kindness on his face. He was a very kind man and all of my girlfriends loved him. He always had candies in his pocket and whenever he saw my girlfriends, or the kids on the street and in the synagogue, he would inevitably give them some. He was very respected in the synagogue in Bourgas. He was a religious man, used to get up early in the morning and used to put on tefillin. I remember him always facing east, where Jerusalem, the temple, was. As I said, he was very respected – there was always a special chair for him in front of the tevah in the synagogue. Two persons used to sit in front of the tevah – my grandpa and a blind man from Bourgas, because they knew he was sincere and a believer-Jew, who abided by all traditions of Judaism. My grandpa lived only with his firstborn son, my father, since one of his sons disappeared, leaving no trace, and the other one married in France. He lived until 1932, more than 80 years and I have his genes, otherwise everybody else in our family passed away very young.

I don’t remember my grandma ever being healthy, she was very ill. My grandpa’s house was a two-floored one, where the tennis courts used to be at Slavyanska Street and Chernomorska Street. There was a servant in the house – granny Rahel, whom they considered as their relative, but they really needed her because my grandma had been bed-ridden ever since I remember. That granny Rahel used to cook, I don’t remember well, I was very young in that house. I had a Greek girlfriend there. We used to play knucklebones in the marble-tiled corridor. We only used to go to that house on holidays. They observed kashrut. When my grandma died, grandpa came to live with us. My grandparents didn’t live in the Jewish quarter; there were many Greeks and Bulgarians around us. They used to live well with each other and respected their neighbors.

There was a quarter in Bourgas where only Jews lived. There was a street not far from the school where many Jews lived. I remember the Hassons, a large family. They were very rich. He was a fabric merchant and he had a big store. All Jews knew each other. There was a Jewish community. There was a secretary of the community and a school board of trustees. The chairman of the community was Nissim Kohen. The community carried out social activities and maintained a soup kitchen for the poor pupils. I remember that every family supplied food for the children on a certain day. Let’s say that today was such-and-such a lady’s turn, and she provided food for the children. There was probably some social committee that made the arrangements and maintained the order. My mother was also engaged in supplying food and I remember that once she cooked white beans. It isn’t the easiest thing to cook but the children liked it best.

In Bourgas there was both a Jewish kindergarten and a school. The rich people used to give money to the school. There were many Jews in Bourgas, but I can’t tell exactly how many. Jews were

mainly engaged in trading. There were some dairymen, too, and the poor Jews were stevedores and baked seed sellers. There was a very beautiful synagogue in Bourgas – only one, a Sephardi one. There were only two Ashkenazi families. There was also a shochet and a rabbi.

My mother was born in Plovdiv and my father, in Istanbul. My father spoke Turkish and Greek and, because he needed it for his business – he was a merchant – he spoke a little French, too. My mother was illiterate. She had never worked. She had been a housewife since she got married. I can't remember how my parents met. Somebody did the match-making, because my father was a very introverted and modest person. I think they got married in Bourgas, probably in the synagogue. In those times everybody got married only in the synagogue. There was no other kind of marriage. My mother was very elegant; she used to wear a hat. My elder brother Jack was born in 1914. Until 1924, when my younger brother Mair was born, Ladino was spoken at home.

We lived in a two-story house. The kitchen and the guest room were on the first floor, and on the second floor were the bedrooms. My grandpa, my elder brother and I used to sleep in one bedroom, and my parents and my younger brother in the other bedroom. In the mornings, when we went downstairs to go to school, grandpa had already lit the stove, the kettle was boiling and it was always warm. Otherwise there was no heating upstairs because it was not so cold in Bourgas. The house was next to the Turkish bath and on Fridays my mother and I used to go there.

Bulgarians and Greeks lived next to us; on the right side was the Armenian priest with his son, and the bath itself belonged to a Turk. The house we bought belonged to a Turk, and before we bought it, we lived on the opposite side of the street in a Bulgarian house with a family, whose name was Ochidolovi. We used to call the mother in that family 'mummy', because we grew up there. At some stage my mother was very ill, and we kept on asking 'mummy' to come and see her. They used to help us a lot.

We had running water – a big faucet where we used to wash the dishes, but we had no bathroom. There was a small yard in front of the house. My father had planted an apricot tree – from a sapling and we, the children, used to go and watch it. I remember that there was a cupboard in the first-floor room, which opened like a piano. I kept on imagining that it was my piano, and that I played it. I had a friend, a pianist, and used to go to listen to her playing. I understood nothing about it, but I felt that music was something divine. This cupboard opened upwards. Later I realized that it was a cupboard in which my uncle, the lawyer, kept a basin and a porcelain jar to wash with – because there was no water on the second floor. When, at the time of deportation, people came to take it away, it was this cupboard I felt most distressed about.

Initially we had a maid in that house; it was very difficult to maintain tidiness. I remember some Yanka, a maid from the Gorna Oriahovitsa area. My mother was very ill and we occupied the two floors. Our neighbors had a very good attitude toward us. They used to bring us kozunak [special bread baked for Easter] and we used to give them burmulicus and matzah. My parents' friends were Jews and we used to live very well with our neighbors. We had a friendly family in Bourgas, the Benshushans. They were our closest friends. They helped us a lot.

My parents were well off. But when problems with money started, squabbles began; there was no peace. After my grandpa's death, my father and mother continued to observe the kashrut, but when we were not doing well financially, we didn't observe it.

My father wasn't drafted to the army; he didn't do national service because he was a Turkish citizen. My mother was a member and activist of the WIZO [Women's International Zionist Organization]. I think my father was a member of some Zionist organization called the General Zionists. After September 9, 1944 1, my mother was a member of the Fatherland Front 2.

Growing up

I was born in Plovdiv in July 1916. My mother went to Plovdiv to give birth to me because my grandma, my father's mother, had been very ill and there was nobody to help her. I was born a year and a half after my elder brother Jack. He was born in Bourgas. I don't remember my early years. I only remember a story: my mother, in order to be able to watch us both, used to tie him to the window with a cloth while leaving me in the baby carriage. One day, while I was yawning he dropped a small key in my mouth. I took a lot of efforts to save myself.

I have always been very stubborn – ever since I was young. Once, when I was in 2nd grade, my teacher reprimanded me, and I said I would never go back to that school. I was sent to Plovdiv for some time, but that was for a short while, because a Jewish school was established in Bourgas, and I went back to study there.

I used to read a lot. I best remember a book by one of the Italian revolutionaries, Garibaldi. [Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882), Italian patriot and soldier, a leading figure in the Risorgimento and a great revolutionary hero in the Western world.] I remember I read through the night and my mother kept on coming to tell me: 'Come on, we have to save on electricity'. Otherwise I used to read in the cold, too – my hands were frozen, but I kept on reading. My uncle had many books – on law, politics – in German, French, in many languages. I was a great speaker – whenever he came, I started holding speeches. While I was in kindergarten I used to sing very well.

A gentleman from Varna (he used to play with the Bourgas Symphony Orchestra) came to the Jewish circles. He was a wonderful man. All of us from the junior high school had a crush on him because he was very handsome. His name was Naphtali Assa, I remember him very well. He wanted to do something with the youth from Bourgas, and he staged two operettas. I starred in the main roles. One of them was entitled Children and Birds and I was the bird, locked in a cage and it, the poor thing, sang, 'I am so miserable for being encaged'. The second one was The Little Match Girl. It is a famous one, a fairy tale by Andersen, and a Bulgarian composer wrote the music to it. During the rehearsals for those two spectacles we, the youth, became very close with each other.

It was a great event for Bourgas, we staged the performances in the biggest theatre. Even the local press wrote about The Little Match Girl and the article was in the Bourgas Lighthouse daily. It was a great event, because all the Jewish children participated in it. There was a choir, ballet, and set-scenes needed to be made. But the most important thing was that snow had to be made– while action was taking place on stage, snow had to fall from above. And the kids, from the youngest to the eldest, had to cut sheets from old notebooks and books. And whole baskets were filled with such pieces of paper to imitate snow. Even now, if you meet someone from Bourgas in Israel, ask him to sing for you The Little Match Girl, and he will sing it from beginning to end. There is a lady here, in the old age home, who remembers me just as the little match girl.

I studied at the girls' high school – my friends were both Jewish and Bulgarian girls. My best friend was a Bulgarian girl, her name was Elena Sabeva. We shared the same desk. There was a Jasmina,

too. I had Jewish friends, too: Rashka Assa, Regina. We used to celebrate our birthdays, and celebrated with the Bulgarian girls a lot, got together, sang and played.

All the subjects in high school were my favorites. My math tests were faultless. In the logarithmic tables only the teacher's signature was in red. I used to read The Shipka Volunteer Force very nicely and expressively in literature classes. I used to read so well that my teacher took me to other classes to demonstrate it. When there were Religion classes in our school, we used to go to the Jewish school for Hebrew classes.

I had a school love affair with a boy from the economics high school. We dated. Actually, he was 'the bad boy' in that operetta. We used to go for walks to find secluded spots. There was a quay in Bourgas and we used to go there, to sit by the lighthouse, to watch the waves and kiss each other.

At school we had no spare time. We had engagements all the time. We had numerous lessons to prepare – math and narrative subjects, and trained in gymnastics, too. We never went anywhere on vacation with the school, but we used to go to the beach. Bourgas is on the coast, anyway. Our parents never stopped us from going to the beach. We used to go to the garden, too. As schoolgirls we used to have an evening curfew, but sometimes we broke it. Sometimes we went to the movies. On many occasions we, the girls, got together at home to do 'jours' [card game]. The big jours used to take place on Yom Kippur because our parents were not home – they had to be in the synagogue for the whole day. We didn't observe taanit. Who would do taanit, anyway?

We had different youth organizations but we never quarreled. There was the Hashomer Hatzair, the Betar, etc., but we all lived together and there was love between all of us, the youth. There were a lot of us then, about 20–25 young Jews.

There were no anti-Jewish sentiments in the elementary school, but there were in high school. We had a gym teacher. I don't remember what day it was, perhaps the day of the Leaders of the Bulgarian National Renaissance, but she was speaking about something, using some anti-Semitic phrases all the time. My life's greatest weakness is that I am very sensitive and cannot control myself. I couldn't stand it any longer, stood up and asked her: 'Haven't Bulgarian Jews fought for Bulgaria, haven't they demonstrated patriotism?' and I started crying. But I said it, anyway! That was before Hitler came to power. I had just completed high school. Around 1933/34 the legionaries wore tricolor ribbons on their lapels. We, a group of open-minded pupils from high school, used to tear them off, but I wasn't a regular member of the UYW. There were guys in Bourgas called ratniks [4] who used to beat up our boys. They beat them up very often.

On the eve of Sabbath my father and my grandpa went to the synagogue, then returned home and we lit the candles (I remember a time when we didn't have candles). We used to light them for Erev Shabbat. We used to say a prayer. I remember that my mother started preparing the meals on Thursdays, in order to avoid cooking on Fridays and Saturdays. We observed the kashrut because my grandpa was a very religious man.

There was a basement in the house. Apart from the big cabinet there, where we used to keep books, there was a big chest. We kept the utensils for Pesach in it. On Pesach we went downstairs to take out all those utensils, which are used for eight days only, and to put away the ordinary utensils. My mother taught us how to make Pesach roses from the serviettes, how to fold them so that they would turn into roses. That is how we prepared the table for Pesach. We were young, but

I remember very well that a lady-dressmaker was called to the house to make new clothes for us for Pesach.

Preparation used to begin a few weeks before the holiday – underwear and clothes were sewn first, and then the preparation of the utensils began. All chametz utensils were taken out, and everything was washed anew. Everything that was chametz had to be taken out to clean the crumbs – we knew how they were to be disposed of in the yard and how they were to be burnt there. The Pesach ritual was something very solemn. We gathered, my father and mother, grandpa and us, the three children. My aunt, her husband and their three children also used to join us, so we were eleven people altogether.

Matzah was not sold then, so we used to buy boleau. Boleau is only dough, flour and water. No rising, no salt – it's a salt-free bread. The Jewish community ordered it from a bakery and we bought it from there. The meal was prepared for the evening. Whatever was needed: charoset, lettuce, egg – everything was arranged on the table. And when the Haggadah was read, all rituals were observed. It was read by my grandpa and my father, both reading in Hebrew.

I remember going to the slichot service with grandpa – before Rosh Hashanah, where one asks for forgiveness. I went to the synagogue with my father, too. One has to go there at 4 o'clock in the morning, while it's still dark. There was a shammash there, who used to make coffee on a brazier. He would make it outside for after the service. Our boys used to go stealing quinces from the neighborhood back then. There was nobody at home at that time, and the boys would get up (otherwise they'd never get up so early) and would go to get some quinces for themselves. Then, for Yom Kippur they would stick carnations into them to have a pleasant fragrance spread about to avoid getting giddy while fasting.

Of all the holidays I loved Fruttas [Tu bi-Shevat] best because we used to eat plenty of fruit, and because they used to put all fruit on the table. Not one by one, but everything bought by grandpa and my father. Everybody would eat whatever he loved best, and a prayer was said. We used to make small bags full of fruit, which we exchanged on the day of the holiday itself.

I liked Chanukkah, too and we had chanukkiyah. Grandpa used to tell us about the holiday, we would light a candle every night – one candle is lit on the first night, then two candles on the second night, and so on for 8 days. We used to make halavah from semolina, which I liked very much, too. My mother used to make it very tasty and we cut it in pieces and ate it.

I haven't had bat mitzvah, but I remember when they performed brit milah on my younger brother and when my elder brother had bar mitzvah. There was a big celebration at home, but I cannot remember whether there was one in the synagogue. Then my father or grandpa gave him a pocket watch as a present (there were no wrist watches then) and he wore it for the rest of his life. It was flat, thin and he looked after it very much. My younger brother's brit milah was very interesting. Many people came to our place. A chazzan also came, and I remember how they held the child in their hands, how he started crying. There was plenty of food – masapan [almond and sugar dessert], drinks and so on.

When I finished the teachers' course after high school in 1936/37, I spent two years in Sofia, and I had a hard time there because I had a throat infection. Then, between 1938 and 1943, I was employed as a teacher in Bourgas – actually it was until 1941, but on record it says until 1943,

because the time I was unemployed was recognized as working experience. I was a Hebrew teacher at the Jewish elementary school and I was paid by the Jewish community. The children loved me very much. I loved them, too, because I was very young, 21 years old. We celebrated all the holidays. We had a very intensive Jewish life before the war. During the war the Jewish school was closed in 1941. For some time we were sent to an old school which was later transformed into gendarme's barracks.

Before the Holocaust, a lot of young people used to come to Bourgas on their way to Israel – there was a lot of illegal immigration then. There were people from Hungary and, because they invariably looked up the Jewish community, they used to come to the club. We knew each other and usually saw them off to the ship. Once a cousin of my mother's came with her family – her husband and three children – two girls and one boy. They came from France to go to Israel via Bourgas. My mother took me to meet that family. They, however, got on a ship, which took on board more people than it should have and it sank. That steamer was called Salvador. Shippers used to gather more people for illegal immigration in order to get more money. That was such an insecure matter – it wasn't a boat, it was a steamer, but it couldn't keep afloat, and capsized. And most of the people drowned. Only the father and one of the daughters survived.

During the war

At the beginning of the war we Jews in Bourgas were not interned. The Jewish school was closed in 1941 and until September 9 1944 I was unemployed. I worked in a candy factory, because I had to do something to make ends meet. Everything then was done by hand – candies were wrapped by hand. I worked in that factory for some time, but when the labor camps were organized and my elder brother who used to work for a mill was drafted, I went to keep his position absolutely illegally. That mill used to supply wheat for the gendarme and whenever they came to load wheat, I had to go upstairs to hide. I used to wear a yellow star. We had worn them since 1941. If you didn't wear one, and if you got caught: prison. We could not go out after 9 p.m., because we had a curfew. In some towns Jews weren't even allowed to go shopping during the day. There was no such thing in Bourgas.

In March 1943 we received notice that we were going to be interned and that we had to prepare our luggage. I was very affected, because at that time my brothers were in labor camps. My father's illness had reached an advanced stage; he was bed-ridden. We were given a schedule for leaving our houses. At that time we used to live in a house by the railway station, and I remember very well the lined-up horse wagons on which we were supposed to be loaded. And then came the canceling order. That was why we were not interned. We were supposed to be taken to Poland, like the Aegean Jews. We didn't know what it was like in Poland. We thought we were going to work in the agricultural sector. I only remember that I went to a doctor to be examined. He was my aunt's neighbor. His name was Dr. Fashnov, he was not a Jew, but Bulgarian. It was said that he had contacts with the British, because he had been their informer about what was going on the front. I said I wanted him to examine me because I had pains in my back. And he said: 'You have to come for an examination, but you don't know what's happening to Jews. I heard it had nothing to do with working in Poland, but with gas chambers'.

Post-war

After the war my mother stayed in Bourgas. My father didn't recover. He died in 1948 in Bourgas. I wanted to study, and came to Sofia, enrolled as a student, and a job was found for me in the Jewish school. We were paid very small salaries in the Jewish school. Initially it was not a state school, but later it did become one and salaries became more secure. The question about my family's going to Israel was not relevant. My father had been bed-ridden for two years already. I was in Sofia in 1948. Then my mother joined me. While she was still alive, my mother and I used to celebrate holidays in our own way, but only the two of us. We didn't get together with the others. The synagogue was destroyed, bombed down. My mother died in 1959 in Sofia.

My brother Jack graduated from the economics high school and for some time worked for the mill. Later on he worked for a bank, then went to Sofia where he worked for Balkantourist for some time and finally, was employed by the trade unions. This is his employment record. My younger brother Mair was an active member of UYW 3 and has been recognized as an active fighter against fascism. I remember when they organized some campaign for 1st May. We had a curfew. He came back very late and said, 'We scattered fly-sheets; something may happen to me'. He had just graduated from high school when he was taken to forced labor camp. He was tormented by the thought that we were short of money, and during the summer vacations he worked whatever jobs he could find – taking coal to a hat workshop, then working for a drug store. He used to steal medications from there and give them to the partisans – medications, needed for the wounded. After September 9 1944 he was sent to the School for Officers of the Reserve and became an officer with the rank colonel. He graduated from the Pedagogy and Military Academy. He worked for the Military Film Studio for many years. He retired from there.

My brothers lived in Sofia, and I have always stayed in touch with them. I maintained contact with my relatives in Israel. All my uncles, my mother's sister and four brothers went to Israel with their families. We maintained contact with them. Although after the war we could not write to each other but only get news from others. I went to Israel in 1973. The wars there had an impact on us, of course. At that time we thought that the Arabs were right, meaning that the information which we used to get meant that they were the martyrs – and it is only now that it's becoming clear what really happened.

When I graduated from university with my Ph.D. Degree, I was appointed lecturer at the university for some time. I had numerous problems, but I don't want to talk about them anymore. Initially I was given one subject, which was later removed from the syllabus, then I started looking for a job etc. Longest of all, I worked for the school, which is now called Pencho Slaveykov.

When Jewish life started to be resurrected here, I joined in. I founded the Zdrave health club, because for some time I had been a member of the veterans-sportsmen group of Levski-Spartak sports club. We also organized a Hebrew-Speakers' Club, as well as the Golden Age Club, where we retired people get together on Saturday afternoons and organize very interesting events. I attend all events in the big hall. Sometimes, whenever I can, I go to the synagogue, too. I always go there on holidays, I have been to weddings and mar mitzvot, and I receive assistance from the Joint.

Glossary

1 9th September 1944

The day the communists officially took power in Bulgaria.

2 Fatherland Front

After 1945 in Bulgaria the so-called Fatherland Front was created. It was a broad left-wing political coalition, including the social-democratic party, etc., which meant to lead communists to absolute power.

3 UYW

The Union of Young Workers. A communist youth organization, which was legally established in 1928 as a sub-organization of the Bulgarian Communist Youth Union. After the coup d'etat in 1934, when the parties in Bulgaria were banned, it went underground and became the strongest wing of the BCYU. Some 70% of the partisans in Bulgaria were members of it. In 1947 it was renamed Dimitrov's Communist Youth Union, after Georgi Dimitrov, the leader of the Bulgarian Communist Party at the time.

4 Ratniks

The Ratniks, like the Branniks, were also members of a nationalist organization. They advocated a return to national values. The word 'rat' comes from the Old Bulgarian root meaning 'battle', i.e. 'Ratniks' fighters, soldiers.

5 Legionaries

Members of the Union of the Bulgarian National Legions. The UBNL was a pro-fascist non-governmental organization, established in 1930. It aimed at building a corporate totalitarian state on the basis of military centralism, following the model of Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy. It existed until 1944.