

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DBP-9

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Bulgaria (the second of five parts)

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Dear Peter,

This newsletter gives you a glimpse of some of the main things modern Sofians appear to be focussing on: sex and rock 'n' roll (well maybe Sofians see John Lennon as more than just a happy mop-top of the Fab Four), along with some English lessons and business courses thrown in for good measure. Former centers of culture, such as the last surviving synagogue in Sofia and the National Gallery are in sad shape, having been neglected for years.

Bulgarian Graffiti

As in Prague, Sofia also has a John Lennon wall. It's on Graf Ignatiev Boulevard, but Sofia's graffiti has more and larger notes of peace, love, and thanks to John Lennon than in Prague. In general, Bulgarian Beatlemania lives on in Bulgarian films and in posters that news vendors sell. It is the posters of Vitoshe Boulevard, however, that are an indication of some opening up of the economy to free enterprise. There was a poster for the first performance of South Korean (i.e., the non-fraternal Koreans) National Dance and another poster for a savings bank, which used a graph to illustrate the interest one could earn. On one lamppost someone was advertising a new Legal Service. Selling business knowledge is also to be expected, hence there were posters "Meridian 22, training business managers, for 1 to 3 months, 6 months, 1 year, every day, English lectures at Sofia University." There were also lots of two-month old SDS campaign posters -- sometimes in tatters and often with the candidate's eyes scratched out -- still glued to shop windows. Many say "Tomorrow is Ours," but tomorrow, now today, isn't theirs, since the renamed Communist Party won the elections.

It's not just my lascivious eye, but there is (as in Prague) a burgeoning sex industry. The Miss Monokini (spelled phonetically in the cyrillic alphabet) event was looking for contestants and advertised "first prize 500 levas, all participants receive 150 levas." (NB. 250 to 350 leva per month is the typical Bulgarian wage). The Novotel hotel, "Europa", had large posters advertising an erotic dance contest "from the chain 'Miss Erotic' 1990. First prize was one month's work in a night club, second prize was 3000 leva and a long-term contract with the Rosen Nikolev Agency. The poster said that they were looking for sponsors and that they "guaranteed effective advertising and

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Derek Paton, a Fellow of the Institute, is studying the  
arts and culture of Czechoslovakia

a high quality show." This poster was all over the main boulevard and even in English on the front door of the Sofia Hotel. Another large poster advertised a show entering the realm of the absurd:

20,000 viewers and participants  
lottery with the grand prize a portable radio-cassette player  
for the first time and only on 17 August

SPORTS-EROTIC SHOW  
on  
earth, air, and water

BIG NIGHT BATHING  
organized by the newspaper Patriot and Rumilfco.  
Pernik

PART I 6:30 p.m. at the "Miners" Stadium  
championship motorcycle race  
prize 2,000 leva

paragliding demonstrations  
marshal arts  
man and car through fire

Fashion show - boutique Rumilf  
Beauty contest for men, "Behind the Figleaf"  
"The Heart When Beating in the Trousers"  
for women "The Bewitching Breast"  
Prizes 2,000, 1,500, 1,000 leva

PART II 10:00 p.m. at the Public Pool  
Water and Emotions (of All Kinds)  
Leap into the Water with a Motorcycle  
Waterslide Championships

Lots of Cash Prizes  
Darling, Bathing Emotion  
Discotheque and Surprises

We are organizing this for the development of children's sports

During the whole event, there will be experienced sexologists  
providing consultation in the "confidence cabinet"

And where there's sex there are bound to be evangelists to  
counteract it; this time they have satellite technology:

Mission from God  
for Peace, Love, and Salvation  
of Bulgaria through  
the words of Jesus Christ will  
be announced through transmitters  
from 3 contacts points: America, Europe, and Asia  
1 Brazilian, 6 from the USA, 1 Polish,  
1 Austrian, 1 from Greece

But the sex ads only faced competition from one other source: omnipresent and perpetual, the 8x10, black-and-white death notices bear one small photo of the deceased. These notices are plastered, glued, tacked and stapled almost everywhere: lampposts, churches, trees in parks, shop windows, and the doors of apartments. Where the notices have fallen off or been pulled down, traces of staples and of dried glue remain.

### The Last Synagogue

The one and only Synagogue in Sofia is a very impressive building, the majority of which is currently out of use. It is unlit except for some soft daylight coming through the windows. Erected and not yet erected scaffolding is everywhere, and there are piles of boards all over the floor. After I spent a few minutes taking some photographs, one of the old men in the office by the front door came out and began to talk to us. My friend Silvia asked him for an English version of the one-page, typewritten descriptions of the synagogue, since there was none among the dusty German, French, and Russian copies lying on a table near the construction materials and pews that had been pushed aside. The blurry photocopy entitled "Short notes on the past of the Bulgarian Jews" has such a haughty style and bragging tone that it tends to render dubious the information it wishes to convey:

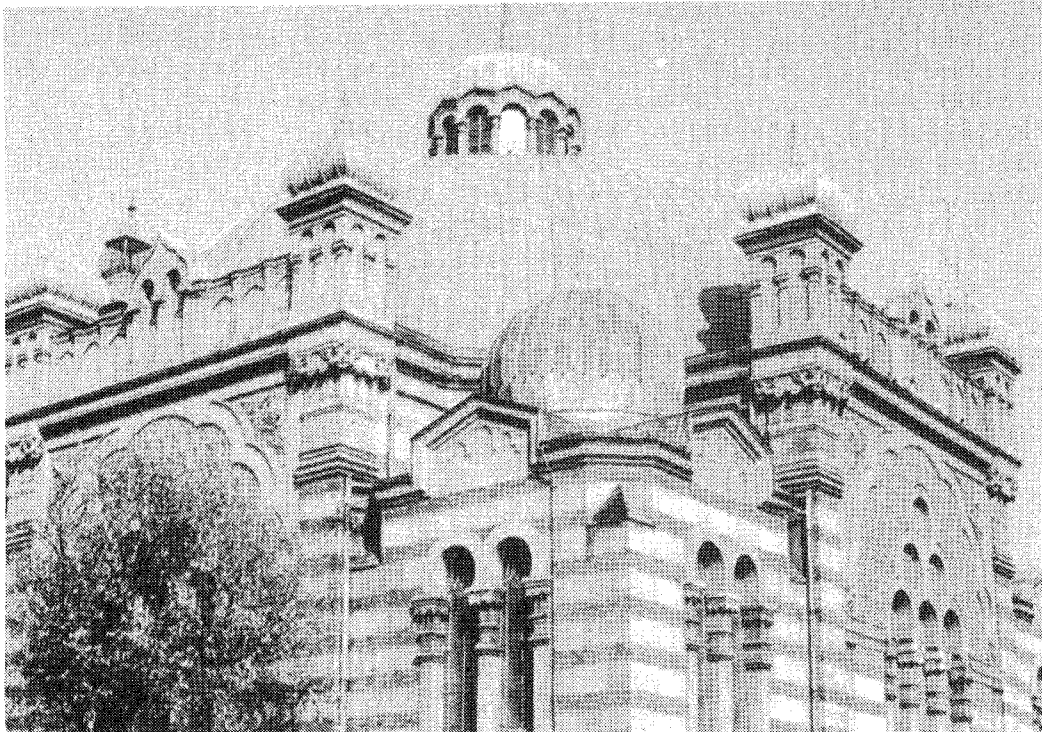
The most remarkable manifestations of friendly feelings of the Bulgarian people towards the Bulgarian Jews which should be emphasized are the following positive attributes of the Bulgarian nation: the revolutionary liberation movement during the second half of the nineteenth century, which recognized the equality of all Jews [...] the saving of all the Jewish population from death during WW II and the present situation of Jews in the People's Republic of Bulgaria -- free and equal citizens of their socialist fatherland.

This was followed by a few points about the synagogue: it was built from 1905 to 1909, in the Spanish-Moorish style. The architect was a Viennese named Grunanger who used as his model the Sephardic synagogue in Vienna, which was later destroyed in World War II. Thus, the Sofia synagogue became the largest Sephardic synagogue in Europe. The notes then continued with the same propaganda and prose, typically turgid to the point of ridiculous: "under the leadership of the BCP, the Bulgarian workers and intellectuals fought [sic] to stop" German policy and did not allow the deportation. There was a bit more factual information and then, the news that "The Bulgarian Jews are participating actively in the construction of the developed socialist society. A number of eminent Jews are working in the field of the economy, science, art and culture."

The synagogue, according the notes, "is being restored now with funds granted by the State". Silvia and I were told, however, that American and other Jews abroad had also contributed

a great deal of the necessary money. The materials had been brought to the synagogue, and construction had begun a couple of months ago, but shortly after they started, the workers slacked off and hardly ever appeared again.

Since the pamphlet said that there were 5,500 Jews in Bulgaria and 3,500 of them are in Sofia, and since it is the only synagogue in Sofia, we asked Mr. Levi where Sofia's Jews now go to worship.



He told us to wait a moment and went into his large office. I could see a colorful calendar of religious art of Israel on the wall. Beside it hung a small, framed photograph of the most famous of Bulgarian Communists, Georgi Dimitrov. Mr. Levi emerged with a yarmulke in his hand, which he put on as he led us into the small room immediately across the hall from the office. Another old man in a suit (whose photo I later saw in a September, 1990 issue of Time), came in and began to read the Bible to himself, while Mr. Levi told us in Bulgarian about the synagogue and Jews in Bulgaria.

The little room in which Sofia's Jews come to worship contains about 50 seats, mostly lined along the walls. Old religious tapestries of brightly colored silks and gold embroidery give the makeshift space a warm feeling. Mr. Levi showed us one wallhanging of purple silk, which was a gift from

the Japanese Embassy just after the turn of the century. Mr. Levi said that the war years, of course, were horrible for Jews, for although saved from death camps, they lived in camps and had to do forced labor. After the war, from 1947 to 1948, most Bulgarian Jews left for Israel. He told us that many of those who remained in Bulgaria did so because they didn't have the financial means to leave. When I left the synagogue, after having seen this sad old survivor and one of the minority who had stayed behind in Bulgaria, I felt I'd had a glimpse of the past as well as the present, and I felt miserable.

Following up on the mention of the exhibition "The Saving of the Bulgarian Jews," in the Hebrew Cultural House on Stambolijski Boulevard, I decided to go have a look. The Jewish Cultural House was built in the 1930s. The elevator, predictably, wasn't working, so after we rested in the cool lobby we made our way up to the fourth floor. We introduced ourselves to the secretary, a large woman with a dour expression, and I glanced around the office. On the wall near the door was a plaque from the B'nai B'rith organization commending the Center for its good work. A man, probably in his mid forties, in a blue polo shirt and white trousers, stepped out of the office and introduced himself as the Chairman of the Shalom Organization and asked if we wanted to interview him before we saw the exhibit.

We went into his spacious office and he sat himself down, or rather almost lay down, at a large desk about ten feet from us and lighted a cigarette. The discussion began with the synagogue that we had just seen. Apparently, the government decided in 1988 to renovate it. They sought contacts and managed to raise \$US 300,000 from the Doron Fund. The Bulgarians invested their share of another 5,000,000 leva. The chairman said that one of the main tasks is to create a Jewish museum in the crypt of the synagogue in Sofia. In the town of Kjustendil they also want to have a branch of the museum in the excavations of a two-thousand year old site. The current exhibition in Sofia will only be old sacred objects and objects of every-day use.

The chairman eagerly leapt to the topic of famous Jews of Bulgaria and was able to provide names as if reading them off a rollcall. Before World War Two, apparently, most of Bulgaria's famous Jews were painters (Sultana Surjon, David Perec, Jules Pasquin -- whose house in Vidin is being prepared as an exhibit and national monument), and there was a well-know composer, Pancho Vladigerov. Only 4,000-4,500 Jews remained in Bulgaria, he said. (This figure is lower than that on the above-quoted pamphlet). Most were intellectuals: about 7 known novelists, 200 journalists, 250 professors, 7 composers, actors, and directors. Now in Parliament -- Bulgaria's first democratic parliament, he was quick to add -- "there are six representatives of our community." Three are socialists and three are in the opposition. The three socialists are Angel Vagenstein, who is a screenwriter, Aziria Polykarov, who is a physicist and a philosopher, and Valeria Mevorach, a poet. In the opposition is Lea Cohen, a musicologist, Solomon Pasi, a mathematician, and Ilko Eskenazi, a lawyer. At this point, having heard every name but his, I decided

to ask the chairman of the Shalom Organization his name. He came out from behind the desk, introduced himself as Edi Schwarz, and sat down opposite us on a chair still quite far away. He is a theater director at the Experimental Studio in Sofia. The Shalom Organization, he explained, is a not-for-profit, nonpolitical entity that deals mainly with the cultural activity of Jews. It is an organization of non-elected volunteers of which he is one.

After he exhausted his preamble, I was able to ask my first question, probably the one he hears most often: Is there much anti-semitism in Bulgaria today? "Bulgaria was never anti-semitic," Mr. Schwarz said, "even though the pre-World War Two government was. There are certain small manifestations of anti-semitism; they are not, however, from organizations or official institutions, but rather made by individuals." He brought the discussion back to information about his organization, explaining that the new situation in Bulgaria allowed for the creation of new organizations outside the government's control (at least outside its direct control, I assume). So, some of the Shalom Organization's members decided to form a new organization with new rules and laws.

Since I wanted to hear as many Bulgarian opinions as possible on why there was never a strong cultural or political underground or samizdat publications in Bulgaria, I posed the same question to Mr. Schwarz as I had posed to almost everyone in Bulgaria. He maintained that there was a score of people who were opposition-minded. At least three were called "dissidents" and were persecuted for their views. The first is Valeri Petrov, who was a Communist before WW II, he was very active over the years but forced out of the Party several times. (Once, for example, he was expelled for having refused to sign a letter condemning Alexander Solzhenitsyn). He was a member of the Club for Glasnost and Democracy, which was the only opposition to the Bulgarian Communist Party. "There was no oppositional infrastructure," says Mr. Schwarz, "but besides that the Bulgarian authorities were never tyrannical in comparison with the Russians or Czechoslovaks; they acted more mildly, but were cleverer." Soon after this rather startling statement, our host apologized that he had to end our discussion and receive the next visitor.

We were escorted by the secretary who unlocked the padded leather door to the exhibit, and she led us inside. On our right was a larger-than-life, black and white photograph of the celebrated Bulgarian Communist leader, Georgi Dimitrov. On our left was an ancient stone with an inscription. Our guide spoke mechanically about Dimitrov and the stone and explained who the four men were in the photos on the wall. She then pointed beside us to a large map of Europe with huge arrows showing how the Jews flocked to the Balkan peninsula -- which on this map meant Bulgaria -- and sought refuge. Our guide, realizing that Silvia could do all the necessary translating, left us in the deserted museum. All the exhibits had almost exclusively Bulgarian explanations. There were the usual blown-up, often unflattering passport photos of resistance fighters, recent drawings of Nazis humiliating Jewish Bulgarians in the street, and some machine

guns and automatic pistols under glass. A large poster of Karl Marx and one of Lenin also begged the question what do these two have in common with Judaism, especially Marx who wrote hatefully against Jews. "This is dreadful," Silvia said to me. "It's even worse than the 'anti-fascist' exhibit in Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia." Indeed, it was clear that the purpose of the exhibit was not to explain the history of Jews in Bulgaria (either the ancient nor inter-war history), nor to explain their rescue, but to sing the praises of the Bulgarian Communist Party.

When we were at the exit of the museum, we looked through the visitors book. Germans praised both the exhibition and the Bulgarian people. Every Russian remark we read was like a parody of the Russian stereotype, something to the effect that "the exhibit was a moving and beautiful experience, which shook me to the depths of my very soul." North Americans from all over the continent, many apparently Jewish, remarked how they were so glad to learn something very instructive and essential about their history and about the brave and noble actions of the Bulgarian people. Whether they had understood or had an interpreter for all the Bulgarian explanations, I don't know.

Beside the visitors book was a pile of pamphlets (published by the Tourist Publicity Center -- which in itself foreshadows its official, i.e. Communist tone) in Russian, English, French, and German. I picked one up and began to read: "The selfless struggle against the Law of Defence of the Nation was directed by the Bulgarian Communist Party. The Party urged the working people to support the Jews." The pamphlet contains photos of Leo Tadger, "one of the first saboteurs against the German troops in Bulgaria" and of Emil Shekerdijski, "the political commissar of the Gragovishtitsa guerilla detachment," and of another gray statue -- typical for Bulgarians and their love of monuments. This pamphlet was as boastful and unsubtle as the rest:

The saving of the Bulgarian Jews from deportation and annihilation during the Second World War is a unique fact in Bulgaria's recent history. The standing exhibition arranged by the Jewish Public Cultural-Educational Organization in the People's Republic of Bulgaria provides interesting evidence on it.

Original documents reveal historical truth: the Jews in Bulgaria were saved owing to the Bulgarian people who inspired by the Bulgarian Communist Party, raised in defence of their Jewish fellow-citizens. The exhibition also tells convincingly about the participation of the Bulgarian Jews in the epic struggle of the Bulgarian people for national and social emancipation, about the friendship between Bulgarians and Jews through the ages. Under victorious socialism that friendship is an everlasting source of patriotism stimulating the Bulgarian Jews to be in the front ranks of the architects of free and flourishing Bulgaria.

Also available, but only in German during our visit, was a 16-page booklet printed on newsprint. I wrote in the guest book

that the exhibit was heavy on the Communism, and that I didn't think Marx or Lenin had much to do with saving the Bulgarian Jews. We walked out of the exhibition alone and left the big four-story building, which was apparently empty except for the two employees, two recently arrived guests, and a bored looking soul sitting on the bench by the front door.

### National Gallery Palace

Another example of an empty shell from Bulgaria's past is the building of the National Gallery on Bulgaria Square, once the palace of the Bulgarian Tsar Ferdinand and his son Tsar Boris. When the Communists took it over after the war, Dimitrov used it for his Council of Ministers. In 1949, Dimitrov died and within no time at all was entombed in a freshly built mausoleum directly opposite the Royal Palace. This mausoleum, the work of four of Bulgaria's leading interwar period architects, is a massive marble and granite box with columns, and it remained the sacred resting place of the old Bulgarian Bolshevik until August this year. The flamboyant honor guard were then relieved and Dimitrov's remains were exhumed for reburial elsewhere in a quiet ceremony that was more in keeping with Marxist philosophy and the spirit of 1989 Eastern Europe.

The National Gallery is worth a peek, at least for the sake of the lovely fireplaces of black and white rippled marble. The same cannot be said for the paintings. There are a few interesting and well done primitive style scenes of Plovdiv, some portraits by, and of, unknowns (artists and sitters), some strange nudes (e.g., a prostrate woman stretched out in a contorted pose on a polar-bear skin rug and checking out the bear's overbite with her fingertips.) There are a few other nudes, or better said women stripping, with proletarian titles, as well as some sculptures of melancholy workers and of partisans with machine guns (at least one was not brass at all but plaster, as the broken machine-gun barrel hanging limply from its reinforcement wire revealed). One of the most conspicuous objects was a stylized sculpture of Lenin's head, about two-and-a-half feet high and painted with gold leaf. About 30 minutes before official closing time, the guards (who may have been students) ushered us out as they were turning off the lights on their floor. Downstairs we were able to see -- once the staff turned on the lights -- one more room, which contained paintings that had been reconfiscated from Communist bigwigs who had had them in their offices. Our query as to where the toilets were was met with the remark that they were not for public use. Parts of the gallery have apparently been under renovation for years. Expected date of completion? Unknown. Maybe the plans include public lavatories.

Best regards,



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