



The RIGHT Place at the RIGHT Time

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY *Ari Greenspan*

The trip was supposed to be short and sweet: Shabbos in Sofia followed by a bris in Belgrade. But things got interesting practically the minute Ari and Ari arrived





Giving thanks and praise. Ari Greenspan leads Sofia's paltry congregation in Aleinu after the bris

Shabbos, Sofia

A day of rest — before the adventure resumes on Sunday. We teach prospective converts about *mikveh* and host a community Seudah Shlishis.



Rabbi Cadik Danon at his grandson's bar mitzvah several years earlier. He experienced Serbia's glory, near-destruction, and slow rebirth



The hand-carved aron kodesh in Belgrade's beis medrash, still elegant and polished

Thursday, Sofia

9:20 a.m.: We land at the airport in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. We're looking forward to spending a relaxing Shabbos with friends before we drive to Belgrade (Serbia) on Sunday to perform a bris milah.

11:15 a.m.: We find out we're not the only newcomers to Sofia. A Jewish baby boy was born last week. He needs to have a bris. Maybe we would like to do it? Of course we say yes.

Friday, Sofia

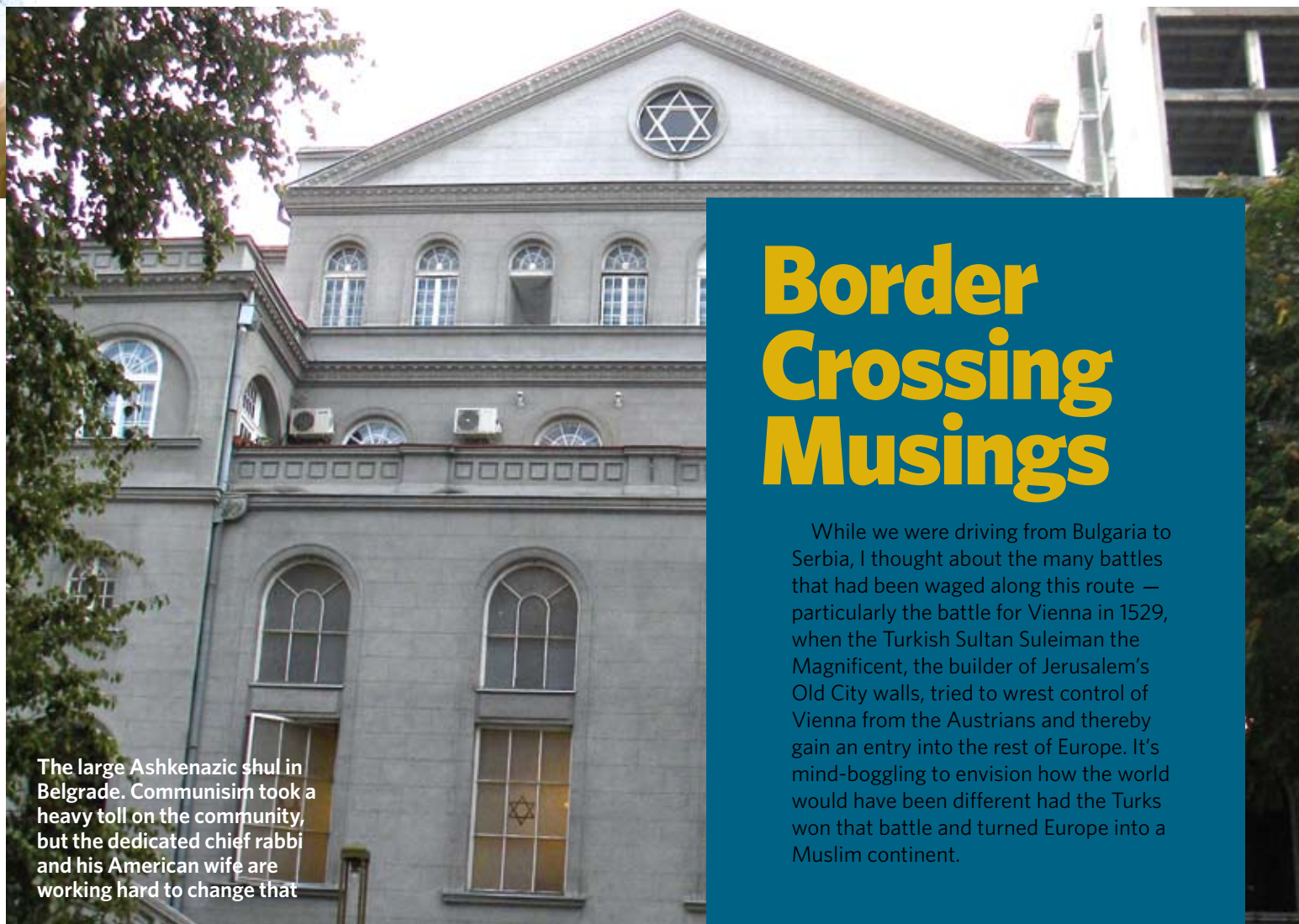
4:00 p.m.: We arrive at the Sofia Central Synagogue, which is magnificent. With space to seat 1,000 people, it's the third largest synagogue in Europe. We get our instruments ready for the bris we're going to perform during Minchah.

4:30 p.m.: It's time for Minchah to begin. 970 seats are still empty, but at least we have a minyan.

4:45 p.m.: A new Jew has entered into the Covenant of Avraham. We're putting away our instruments

when a 50-year-old man, Vasil, approaches. He clears his throat and, in halting English, explains that his mother recently passed away. While at the cemetery for the burial, he decided it was time for his own bris milah. (Later, he will tell us that his family name was formerly Ben Bassat, an old Spanish name. He'd like to know what would be a Hebrew first name that means "Hashem is in me.")

We look at our watches. There's no time to do Vasil's bris milah before Shabbos, so we agree to come back in December.



The large Ashkenazic shul in Belgrade. Communism took a heavy toll on the community, but the dedicated chief rabbi and his American wife are working hard to change that

Border Crossing Musings

While we were driving from Bulgaria to Serbia, I thought about the many battles that had been waged along this route — particularly the battle for Vienna in 1529, when the Turkish Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, the builder of Jerusalem's Old City walls, tried to wrest control of Vienna from the Austrians and thereby gain an entry into the rest of Europe. It's mind-boggling to envision how the world would have been different had the Turks won that battle and turned Europe into a Muslim continent.



Sunday, Belgrade

5:50 a.m.: Today's the day of the bris milah in Belgrade, the capital of nearby Serbia. We have a five-hour drive ahead of us, so we meet in our hotel lobby bright and early and wait for our hired car to arrive.

6:15 a.m.: We're still waiting. But in the meantime, we've found a great place to daven Shacharis: a fancy cigar-smoking room. After a breakfast of a coffee and banana, we're ready to leave.

7:00 a.m.: The car finally arrives. Why was the driver late? He thought we wanted to be picked up at 6 a.m. *Serbian* time, which is 7 a.m. *Bulgarian* time. In other words, he's arrived at our hotel right on time. Got that? We didn't, but at least we're finally on the road.

7:45 a.m.: We reach the border crossing between Bulgaria and Serbia. There are two checkpoints, one on each side of the border. At the first one, the Bulgarians are surly. They open all of our luggage to make sure we're not taking anything out of the country that we shouldn't be taking. Repeat 50 meters later, on the equally surly Serbian side.

11:00 a.m.: We arrive in Belgrade for the bris. This bris, the reason why we've made the trip, is the first one for a local Jewish boy in close to a decade. What makes it even more

poignant is that both parents are Jewish, something of a rarity in this corner of the world. And what makes it even more special is the baby's genealogy. His paternal great-grandfather, Cadik (Tzaddik) Danon, was the last of a great chain of rabbis whose family came to Serbia after the Expulsion from Spain. Cadik Danon worked for the Yugoslavian foreign ministry in the 1950s and was appointed ambassador to Finland. An exceptional man, he was awarded many medals for his work by his own country, Finland and Norway, and Israel.

11:30 a.m.: A mohel's nightmare. I hadn't mentioned this to anyone, but the night before, I'd had a bad dream. I dreamed that I arrived at the bris and only then realized that I had forgotten to bring the instruments! But it was only a dream, right? So I thought, until I opened my bag... and couldn't find my instruments. "We might have a little problem," I tell the rabbi, "but it's easily solved if you can get me a scalpel." The baby's father turns white.

11:40 a.m.: False alarm! The instruments, which I had sterilized in the Sofia Synagogue's oven after the Friday bris, were in my bag all the time. With great emotion, the *chazzan* sings a Ladino bris milah *piyut*. Rabbi Yitzchak Asiel, Serbia's chief rabbi, is the *sandak*.

1:30 p.m.: On our way to the airport for our return flight to Israel, we make a stop at the Sephardic Jewish cemetery. Graves really tell a community's story. Some of the gravestones have military symbols on them, expressing feelings of national pride by Serbian Jews who defended their country. Many also have photographs of the deceased, a common occurrence in former Soviet Union countries.

A fascinating 100-year-old grave is the one for the community's *genizah*. Oh, how we would like to dig that one up! But without a doubt the most amazing grave was one we



All in the Family

Cadik Danon and his great-grandson, the baby who had the bris, are related to the well-known Balkan rabbi Rav Moshe Danon, who was the rabbi of Sarajevo in 1815. A famous story concerning Rav Moshe Danon occurred a few years later, when a Jewish convert to Islam convinced the pasha to arrest a few prominent Jews, including Rabbi Danon, and hold them for ransom, on pain of death.

A member of the Jewish community went to the old Arab market the night before the slated execution and lamented the situation. He succeeded in convincing thousands of Muslims to intercede on the prisoners' behalf and the Jews were released. To this day, the Jews of Serbia refer to this incident as the Purim of Sarajevo.

As a gesture of thanks to Hashem, Rav Danon decided to make aliyah, and in 1830 he began to walk to the Mediterranean Sea. But his earthly journey ended when he passed away in Stolac, Bosnia/Herzegovina. He was buried in the Stolac Jewish cemetery and his grave, which is marked by a Hebrew-inscribed gravestone, became a place of pilgrimage for Bosnian and other Balkan Jews. Muslims also consider it to be a holy spot, and the same Muslim family has looked after Rav Danon's grave for generations.



Meet the Rabbi

Serbia's current chief rabbi is Rabbi Yitzchak Asiel. His *rebbetzin*, Rachel, is American. How did they meet? Fourteen years ago she came to Belgrade to do volunteer work for the Jewish community. She intended to stay for just one year. But then she met Rabbi Asiel and they got married—and 14 years later she's still helping the community.

There used to be many shuls in Belgrade, but that was before the war. The last remaining

structure — an imposing five-story building — was the Ashkenazic shul. Rabbi Asiel and his family live there. But while his "commute" to work may be short, the drive to the nearest *mikveh* is not. There are no longer any *mikvaos* in Belgrade, so people have to take a five-hour trip up the river to Vienna.

There is a strange mix of Islam and Christianity in today's Serbia, some of which can be traced back to the time when most of Spain

was a Muslim country. Rabbi Asiel is an aficionado of Jewish-Andalusian *piyutim* and music, which has an Arabic lilt and musical scale. Once a year he and his Ladino-speaking *chazzan* hold a concert for the public, accompanied by musicians playing traditional North African instruments. The concert takes place in the synagogue's large courtyard and it is a standing-room-only event that attracts people from all three religions.

encounter fortuitously—the *kever* of former Chief Rabbi Cadik Danon. I think nothing better portrays the wheel of Jewish history. On the one hand, Serbian Jewry was almost totally destroyed during World War II. After the war, Rabbi Danon and the remains of his *kehillah* suffered the religious desert of Communism; his own daughter intermarried. Yet his grandson, who is married to a Jewish woman, has come back to Yiddishkeit. And Rabbi Danon's great-grandson, who had his bris milah on this day, clearly represents a

hope for a better future.

3:30 p.m.: We arrive at the airport for our return flight to Israel, via Cypress. We needn't have rushed to the airport after all, since the plane has been delayed and won't take off for another four hours. We daven Minchah. Afterward, while looking at the runway, we agree that we have been blessed with something unique — the opportunity to meet interesting, unusual, and devoted Jews living in all parts of the world. ●

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