



## Early Shabbos in

# BUGGARIA

**There was no *eiruv*, no *Sefer Torah*, and the town's only shul hadn't had a cleaning in more than 60 years. But that didn't stop *Mishpacha's* intrepid travelers from fulfilling a promise they had made last year: bring Shabbos to the people of Pazhardik, Bulgaria.**

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When we journeyed last year to Plovdiv, Bulgaria, we conducted a Shabbaton in one of the only two functioning shuls in the entire country. It was the first time in recent memory that the Jews of Plovdiv had a community Shabbos with meals, davening, and *shiurim*. Afterward, we stopped in a small town called Pazhardik. There, smack in the center of town, stood a polished-looking building that on the inside was gathering dust. Constructed in 1850, this had been the local shul for decades, a reminder that at times this town's population was over 30 percent Jewish.

During the Communist era the building was first used as a local history museum, and then it was sporadically used as a warehouse. It had not been used for prayer since the 1940s. Looking through rusty metal grates and cobwebbed windows and stymied by a huge lock, Ari G. decided that this shul in Pazhardik would once again hear the singing of "*Lecha Dodi*" and the reading of the Torah. A year later that happened, and this is the story.

**For Old Times' Sake** Jews have lived in Bulgaria since at least the Mishnaic period.

A fourth-century mosaic tile floor with a menorah, from a shul in neighboring Plovdiv, still exists and is housed in that city's history museum. Unfortunately, it's not on display, although the current Israeli ambassador has assured us that he will speak to the mayor and try to rectify that situation.

Rav Yosef Karo, the *mechaber* of the *Shulchan Aruch*, married one of his wives, a native of Bulgaria, after he fled Spain in 1492. He spent 11 years as a *rav* in northern Bulgaria and wrote much of the *Beis Yosef* while living there. A learned core of *talmidei chachamim* lived in Bulgaria throughout the centuries,

attested to by some of the seforim that we found in the shuls, which were hundreds of years old. However, most people were not learned, and by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century a large number were irreligious.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Zionist movement was strong in many parts of Bulgaria, and a large number of the Jews learned Hebrew. Some of them are still alive, and although they are elderly they were able to share with us what Judaism was like in earlier days.

Before World War II there were about 50,000 Jews in Bulgaria. In early 1943, Nazi officials requested that its ally Bulgaria send its Jewish population to German-occupied Poland. A public outcry ensued and the king, Boris III, refused the request. He eventually partially succumbed to Nazi pressure and permitted the extradition of over 11,000 Jews from Bulgarian-occupied lands, over which he in actuality had little control. None of them survived the war. But Boris never permitted the deportation of “his Jews,” those who had lived in prewar Bulgaria. Boris defied Hitler face-to-face during the war, refusing many times to surrender his Jews, and he may have paid for that refusal with his life. After being summoned to Hitler by private plane, the king of Bulgaria repeated that the Jews of Bulgaria would not be taken. Hitler put Boris back on the plane and shortly thereafter, on Aug. 28, 1943, the 49-year-old king was dead, apparently from heart failure. However, to this day many people believe, with good reason, his death was caused by poisoning.

In 1948 the Communists, wanting a more homogeneous population, encouraged ethnic minorities to leave and banned religion. Close to 45,000 Bulgarian Jews made their way to the fledgling Jewish state, leaving behind about 5,000 souls, many of whom intermarried during the years of Communism. This is what led to the neglect of the synagogue in Pazhardik in the 1940s, and this is what brought us to Pazhardik for Shabbos all these years later.

**Decades of Dirt** There were so many logistical details to arrange that without our

Bulgarian partner, Dr. Ema Mezan — whose love of Yiddishkeit and efforts on behalf of her community are exceptional — the event could not have happened. While we took care of the spiritual aspects (and some of our physical needs), Ema and her team handled most of the logistics.

Today, most of us live in a world with *eiruv*. We don't know what it is like to spend a Shabbos without one, and we certainly don't know how to make one. Our first *eiruv* question came up when we realized that we didn't want to leave a *Sefer Torah* in Pazhardik's shul, for security reasons. But how could we

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carry it back and forth to our hotel room? When we arrived on Thursday to scout out the area, we found ourselves in a “Jewish courtyard” which included the shul, an old *beis medrash*, and what had been the Jewish school, in addition to some more modern structures. We were pleased to learn that it was all still owned by the Jewish community. Furthermore, it was completely closed off, and thus we needed no additional walls nor *tzuras hapesach* nor an *eiruv chatzeiros*. In fact, the original metal gates used to enter the area, which are rusting on their hinges, still display a Magen David and Hebrew letters.

Cleaning a shul this old and neglected would have been a big job for just the two of us, but fortunately we received help. Once people understood that this was going to be a significant weekend, a competition of sorts developed between the local group and the central Jewish community in Sofia as to who would have the honor of paying for the cleaning crew. Because there were so many decades

of dirt, it was only after repeated washings that a Magen David inset into the stone floor appeared. It took a crew of 10 professional cleaners 12 hours of hard work to produce a shul worthy of being davened in — and it was a good thing that we left the scrubbing and polishing to the professionals, who apparently had experience in safely cleaning old buildings. While Ari G. meandered around the shul during the cleaning process, a wooden piece of molding with nails sticking out fell off the *ezras nashim* and hit him on the head. Thank G-d the nails didn't penetrate, and the piece was not too large.

We had hoped we might find some forgotten Jewish treasures stashed in the shul's large basement. Alas, the municipality had rebuilt the entire basement; it and the main level were both sterile.

The *aron kodesh*, though, was still there and waiting for its *Sefer Torah* to be returned. A month before our trip, Ari G. had rummaged through the basement of the central synagogue in Sofia searching for a *paroches* (ark covering) from Pazhardik. He found one that had been donated in 1933, but noticed that the Hebrew spelling was “Bazhardik” — with a “*beis*” and not a “*peh*,” as we would have expected. We were told that the town's name comes from the word “bazaar,” denoting its former status as a business center. The *paroches* had been donated by a Mizrahi family. Amazingly, among the 60 Jews left in town there is still a Mizrahi family, and several of them joined us for davening. When that *paroches* was hung in front of the *aron*, a hush enveloped the room.



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**1. CLEANUP CREW** Ari Z. (L) with community members, making the shul habitable after so many decades



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**2. FURRY FRIENDS** Ari & Ari exploring the Bulgarian *shtreimel* factory



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**3. BRINGING LIGHT** Everyone wanted to light candles this Shabbos



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**4. BACK HOME** Israeli ambassador Shaul Kamisa-Raz kisses the Torah as it's being returned to its rightful place



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**5. ALWAYS PROTECTED** With the mezuzah in place, the ancient shul is ready

## Early Shabbos in Bulgaria

**A Dvar Torah in Bulgarian** In the courtyard a few paces from the shul was a small *beis medrash*, above whose door still hangs a stone dedication plaque from 1873. We had hoped to have an *oneg Shabbos* there, but it wasn't feasible since the community had only given notice a few days earlier to the current occupants — a piano bar — that they were not renewing the contract. When we entered the *beis medrash*, we were shown a wall with a brightly colored painting of a saxophone player and told that the *aron kodesh* was behind it. Tapping on the saxophonist, we realized it was only a thin board and the space behind it was hollow. We went outside to look at the outer wall of the *aron kodesh* and what we saw shocked us. On the outside of the *aron kodesh* was the remnant of a swastika painted on the wall.

By the next day the saxophonist was gone and the *aron* was exposed. The building is now slated to become a small Jewish museum, a branch of the local historical museum. We hope that all the Judaica belonging to the big shul and the *beis medrash* — including two *Sifrei Torah* and silver, which had been taken by the Communists and are currently in storage in the local city museum — will be brought to the *beis medrash*.

As excitement about the upcoming weekend increased, people began expressing interest in participating. Jews from a number of small communities and a delegation from Sofia arrived. We were told that the Israeli ambassador and his wife were coming for Shabbos, which caused some security concerns due to a neo-Nazi presence in the town.

We did not fully appreciate this until Shabbos afternoon. Sunset is quite late and Shabbos was not over until about 9:50, which gave us time to take a long Shabbos *shpatzir* with some of the locals. A young Jewish woman in her 30s, Dorita, told us about growing up in Pazhardik and then going to law school in southern France. She was terrified of the Muslim presence there, but quickly related how there is also plenty of anti-Semitism in her hometown. She was shocked when a friend told her that she hated Jews, not realizing she was speaking to a Jew. Dorita then explained that most of the local anti-Semites will readily admit to never having met a Jew. The xenophobia, though, has multiple targets. According to Dorita, the town has a real problem with Gypsies, who have many more children than everyone else, and are uneducated and involved in crime. She also

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**1. KABBALAS SHABBOS** Ari Z. and Ambassador Kamisa-Raz prepare for the holy day, with the security detail along as additional Shabbos guests

**2. SACRED COVER** Ari G. found the *paroches* from the old Pazhardik shul in a *genizah* in the basement of the main synagogue of Sofia. We replaced it after 70 years of disuse

**3. HEAP ON BLESSINGS** This original sign above the *beis medrash* dates back from 1873



said that many of the Gypsies are now receiving funds from jihadists and in return are converting to Islam. But we are jumping ahead and talking about the end of Shabbos before it had even begun.

As Shabbos approached, we finished our personal preparations. The Sofia community kept kosher pots locked away and we stored a gas torch in the shul in case we needed to kasher something for the community. As for ourselves, we set up in our hotel room a *plata* we had left in Bulgaria the previous year. After adding some local vegetables to a frozen chicken from Israel, we had a great cholent ready for Shabbos. That, together with some tongue and gefilte fish brought from Israel, ensured that gastronomically, at least, our Shabbos would be complete.

As for *ruchniyus*, Ari G. had his *dvar Torah* translated into Bulgarian — a language that seems to be made of only consonants and words 25 letters long! Interestingly, it is not only the Bulgarians' spoken language that is difficult; their non-verbal body language can also be confusing. Most of the world uses a vertical head nod to indicate agreement; Bulgarians signal "yes" with a horizontal, side-to-side movement. People world-over tend to show interest in what you are saying by making small nodding motions. In Bulgaria, in a bizarre and disconcerting twist, a conversational partner oddly shakes their head from side to side, as one might do in the US or Israel when disagreeing with what is being said.

**The Great Candle Controversy** At last, the people began to arrive. Almost 70 men and women came into the building, marveling at its beauty. Many of them had never before set foot in a shul and had never experienced a Shabbos. We started the Shabbaton more than an hour before Shabbos began so we could give a PowerPoint presentation and lecture about Jews and shuls around the world.

After the president of the local community affixed a *mezuzah* to the building entrance came one of the highlights of that Shabbos: we all lined up at the entrance to the shul and joyously danced in a procession to bring the Torah that was on loan from Plovdiv into the building and to place it in the *aron kodesh*. Many of the Plovdiv residents knew Jewish songs and enthusiastically escorted the Torah. It was a truly emotional moment. The feeling continued as people who had never before seen a *Sefer Torah* walked single file past the *aron* and gently kissed it.

Bringing the *Sefer Torah* from Plovdiv was one of the halachic questions we encountered during this trip. The Gemara questions the bringing of a Torah to the Kohein Gadol on Yom Kippur and permits it only because he is a Torah scholar. Based on this, the *Mordechai* prohibited bringing a Torah to Jews in jail, and as an extension the *Aruch HaShulchan* says



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that the custom is to be careful that when bringing a Torah to a house of mourning, it should be read on three occasions. We were not going to be reading three times in Pazhardik; however, Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Igros Moshe, Yoreh Dei'ah* 4:61) says that the halachah is that one can bring it even if it will not be read from three times. The important point is that it be treated with respect and housed in a respectable manner. Thankfully, the Pazhardik shul has a respectable *aron*, and the Jewish-owned hotel in the Jewish courtyard has closets that resemble an *aron*. And, parenthetically, the hotel has regular keys, not electronic ones.

In addition to the *Sefer Torah*, the *gabbai* from Plovdiv had brought a Torah *yad*. Of course, there is a story surrounding this prized possession. It seems that some Jewish kids found it being offered for sale in some marketplace as an antique; they redeemed it and gave it to the shul.

Things were looking good until an early dispute threatened to sour everything. The custom in Bulgaria is that a woman lights two Shabbos candles in shul before Minchah. An elderly woman close to 90 who traveled to be with us had asked to light the candles. However, a 90-year-old man was adamant that the two candles should be lit by a Pazhardik resident. The older woman was close to tears as she told us, “I have been lighting candles for 40 years and I must light here.” Ema, who could see

that a potentially explosive situation was developing, came to us and said, “You are the rabbis, make a decision.” While pondering what to do, we thought of Shlomo HaMelech — and suggested that two women should light the candles. Everybody was mollified and we continued happily with the program.

**Pazhardik Memories** Sophie Danon is an exceptional 88-year-old woman who was born in Pazhardik but now lives in the Jewish old-age home in Sofia. Her Hebrew is fluent, since she attended a Zionist school in the 1930s and lived for a time in Eretz Yisrael. Her quick wit and ready smile make her beloved by the community. As one of the few people in the world who remember when the Pazhardik shul was active, she was invited to speak

before Kabbalas Shabbos. She told us her memories of being in the shul as a child, having last been in this building in the 1930s. Clearly emotional, she told us where her father, the *gabbai*, would sit, and where the women sat in the balconies. Then, with a broad smile, she pointed to where the kids would play in the back of the shul.

Her mother, she said, rarely came to shul, because she had “no nice hats to wear.” One year, though, Sophie’s father gave her mother some money and told her to buy a hat for Yom Tov. But because there was only one hatmaker in town, every single woman in the women’s section, including her mother, was wearing the same hat! Sophie then launched into Ladino, understood by all of the older generation, to translate “*Lecha Dodi*” for the *kahal*. She concluded by giving a fire-and-brimstone sermon explaining the importance of Shabbos in the life of a Jew. Her rousing speech would have been the envy of any pulpit rabbi.

Next, “Uncle Sammy,” as 92-year-old Shmuel Ben Nun is known, got up and in perfect Hebrew — also learned before the war— explained what Kabbalas Shabbos was. His twinkling eyes belied his years as a partisan during World War II, when he lived in the mountains and fought the Nazis. As he told me, “Had the war not come, I would be living on a kibbutz in Israel today.” He is the *chazzan* and remembers

a handful of Sephardic melodies that were sung in shul before World War II. We felt transported back in time as we listened to the haunting tunes of pre-expulsion Spain.

Dinner was held in the courtyard and we sat at the table with the Israeli ambassador, Shaul Kamisa-Raz, and his wife. He is a lifelong resident of Chatzor HaGlilit and recently completed a term as mayor of the city. We were honored and impressed that he chose to join us for Shabbos. He has no religious background, but was more than happy to learn and participate. He made a communal *hamotzi* and the next day received an *aliyah*. For this Israeli couple it was also a Jewish learning experience.

No Friday night at a Shabbaton is complete without an *oneg*. It included songs, Ari G.’s Bulgarian *dvar Torah*, a message by Ari Z., and, most impressively, a well-prepared Baal Shem Tov story by Ema.

Few of the attendees are *shomer Shabbos* and we expected many, if not most of them, to leave Friday night. We were pleasantly surprised and very pleased when we arrived in shul Shabbos morning to find a huge crowd. The Jewish soul in these people had been touched and they wanted more. During the prayer service, we explained what was taking place, and there were lots of questions — basic, simple, *temimusdig* questions. Someone who apparently had attended a kashrus



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**1. JEWEL UNMASKED** View of the shul, in all its former glory, from the women’s gallery. The intricate floor mosaic is still intact

**2. SAFEKEEPING** Alberto Behar of the adjacent community of Plovdiv returns the Torah to Pazhardik, where there hasn’t been a Torah scroll since before World War II

**3. HOLD THE CHEESE** Alberto helps the Muslim pizza maker to knead the dough for challah



3.

## Early Shabbos in Bulgaria



A Jew embroidered his name on this unusual tallis bag. But while the design is traditional, the embroidered buildings have the Arabic crescent moon, indicating that they might be mosques

*shiur* we gave in Sophia, where we discussed *tvilas keilim*, asked if we could use the *yad* or if it required *tvilah*. They wanted to know why we covered the Torah between *aliyos* and we explained about *kavod haTorah*: using a *yad*, not leaving the *Sefer Torah* lying open, escorting it into the shul, etc.

For many of the people the aspect of the davening that they connected to the most was the memorial prayer for the dead. They don't often attend shul and they made a long list of deceased relatives for whom they wanted a prayer recited. We obliged, but also explained that their participating in shul was an additional, important merit for the departed.

After Musaf on Shabbos day there was a special treat. Everybody began to sing "*Ein Kelokein*," verse by verse, first in Hebrew and then in Ladino. This is one of two or three places left in the world that still sings "*Ein Kelokein*" to a 500-year-old tune.

At the communal *kiddush* the ambassador spoke about politics (expected) and the importance of the community continuing what was being started (not necessarily expected). Then Elko Hazan, a Sophia resident, architect, and author of a book on Bulgarian shuls, talked about the history of the Pazhardik shul. He pointed out which aspects were original and which had been restored by the government. Thankfully, when the shul had been repainted 30 years ago, they had left the nonfaded parts of the *pasuk* "*ma tovu ohalecha Yaakov*" painted on the wall; on Thursday, Ari G. had restored the outline for what was missing.

Toward the end of Shabbos we met with Dorita and her father, who walked us around town and showed us the old Jewish homes. We even found markings on the doorways from a mezuzah or two. We also visited the building that used to be the Jewish school. We then went to the Jewish community building where we made Havdalah, something that many people had never seen before.

We asked if there was an archive and, indeed, they have the lists of people who were buried in the Jewish cemetery. Several decades ago, the cemetery was taken over by a Jewish Communist who moved into a little building on the periphery and simply plowed up the entire place. Today the cemetery no longer exists, but the names of everybody interred there can still be found in the community files in both Hebrew and Ladino.

As our history ebbs and flows, there is a unique quality to touching the distant past. The experience is even sweeter when it is made part of Jewish learning in the present. It has been our blessing to be part of that in Bulgaria, where the Shabbaton was a memorable experience both for Bulgaria's Jewish community and for us. ●

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