A TOWN CALLED MONASTIR

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Uri Oren

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Translated from the Hebrew by Mark Segal

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Prologue

One day in the summer of 1970 the telephone at my home rang and on picking up the receiver I heard an unknown voice. It was David Abikzer, who introduced himself as a former resident of Haifa and more recently Hazzan at the Sephardic Temple of Cedarhurst, New York. He sought an appointment and we arranged to meet at my home on the following afternoon.

My guest turned out to be a youngish man, of middling height and a firm visage. He spoke a somewhat throaty Hebrew, replete with literary turns of phrases, and speedily got to the point of his call.

It turned out that he had been a week in Israel already on a mission for a Jewish philanthropist, Mr. Louis Rousso, a resident of New York. Mr. Rousso has been a munificent donor to all kinds of charitable institutions in Israel and of late contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars for the establishment of a University Preparatory School on Mount Scopus to serve students from the Sephardi communities. Mr. Abikzer had been asked to represent Mr. Rousso at the corner-stone laying ceremony of the project. That was his first mission, while his second one had brought him to me.

I pressed him for details.

My guest related how Mr. Rousso was born in a small town in southern Yugoslavia where he spent most of his

childhood. One of his closest friends of that formative period in his life had been a man named Leon Kamhi, and whom he had not met since he moved to New York at the age of 15.

Leon Kamhi was an unusual man for that environment. A devoted Zionist, he saved literally hundreds of his fellow Jews from the Holocaust by persuading them to settle in Eretz-Israel during the 1930s. He, himself, kept postponing his own immigration for he did not wish to abandon his community.

He suffered the fate of European Jewry, and in 1943 was deported to the Treblinka death camp together with the rest of his community. Louis Rousso wished to establish a living memorial in the form of a book that would tell his life-story and the annals of his birthplace. He asked me to write the book.

"What is the name of the town? , I asked.

"Monastir", the Hazzan explained.

I had never heard of that town before.

"The name written on the map is Bitol", Abikzer told me. It turned out that Monastir was the Turkish name of the place, and following the Balkan Wars and the break-up of the Ottoman Empire the name was changed to that of Bitol.

That name meant nothing to me either, after all geography had not been my speciality.

I picked up an old school atlas and together with the Hazan we picked our way through the map of southern Yugoslavia, until we found the place. A small town, registered in tiny letters at the junction of the borders of Yugoslavia, Albania and Greece.

In recalling my feelings at the time, I can only define them as a blend of hesitation and a sense of strangeness.

I wondered to myself: How could I possibly focus my magnifying glass on these forgotten letters, to such an ex-

tent as to be able to discern a living town? How could I possibly tell the story of a vanished community, most of whose members perished in the gas chambers and the remnants dispersed to the four corners of the earth? How could I possibly succeed in fashioning a person of flesh and blood and breathe a living spirit into the shadow of a person, of whom I had never heard before and who passed away when I was still a child?

Time passes and endures, and with it come the answers that seemed to unavailable to questions that have assumed a profounder meaning.

Today at the conclusion of long months of research, work and study, I find myself deeply grateful for the opportunity afforded me and for the very special experience I have undergone. I visited the town and persuaded its non-Jewish inhabitants to talk of their dead Jewish neighbours. I took photographs of the streets and and places wherein occured the events related in this book I spoke to practically every person living in Israel who had known Leon Kamhi. Thereby I compiled and assembled the memories of his life's work.

Gradually but surely the image of this man began to emerge. I talked at length with many people, mostly the aged, whose retentive memory astonished me on the whole. One element added to another until the visage cleared through the mists of the past.

I think it only right and fit to register my personal tribute to Mr. Rousso for the project which he initiated and which has enriched my personal experience. I think it would be to the best if I utilise this space to quote from a letter he wrote me a few months ago when I began to work on this effort.

It was an illuminating letter:

"I arrived in the United States of America in 1913. I left behind me all my childhood friends in Monastir, and after a few years elapsed some of them began to reach the

American continent as well.

"Of all my friends who remained in Monastir, I remember best of all one boy named Louis Maurice Kamhi, a most promising and brilliant youngster. He was a year my senior and studied in a higher class.

As far as I can now recall he was the most brilliant boy in our school.

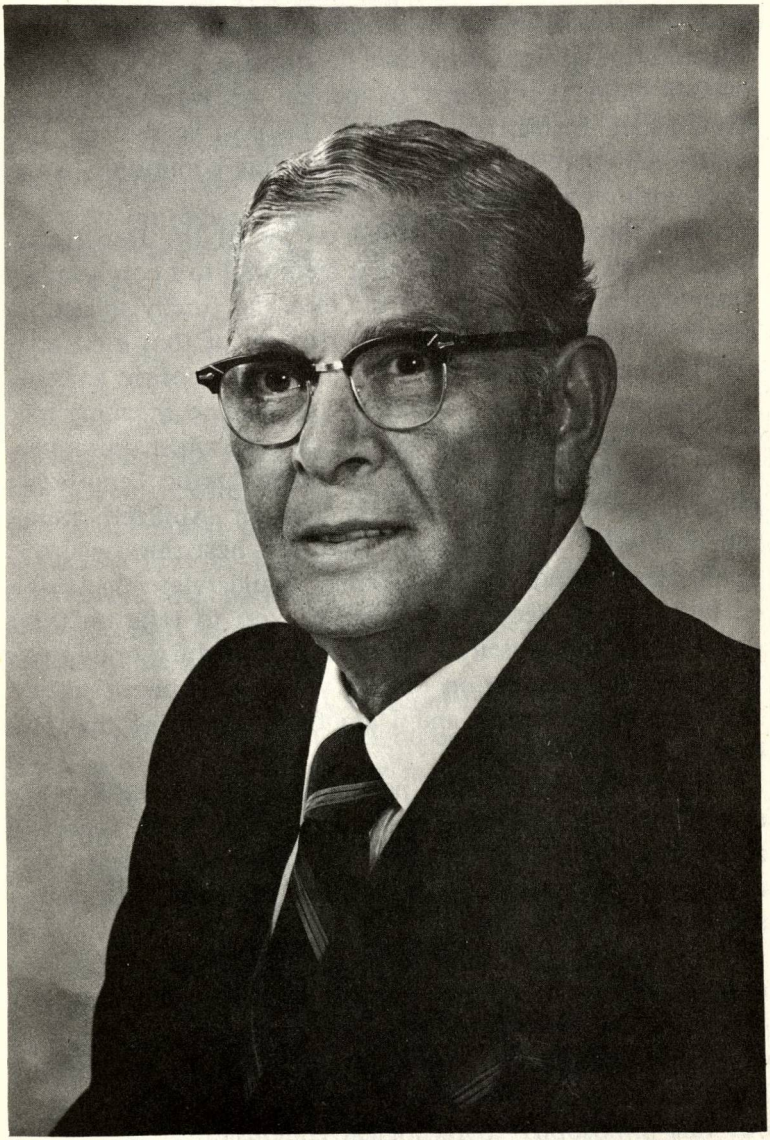
Fifty-five years after I left Monastir I came to Israel on a visit and took a room at the Dan Hotel in Tel Aviv for a few days. While there I got a call from my cousin, Nissim Rousso who lives in Haifa. He told me that three men wish to see me on a most urgent matter and asked me to allow him to send them to see me. They were former residents of Monastir who had been living in Israel for the past 35 years. They begged of me to back an idea of theirs, which they had been considering for some time.

"It concerned Leon Kamhi who perished in the Treblinka death camp together with three thousand fellow Jews from Monastir in 1943. They felt that this man, who saved the lives of hundreds of his co-religionists during the 1930s, was not being suitably commemorated. They said he deserved a worthy memorial.

"I gave my agreement in principle.

"I do not doubt that Leon Kamhi was an exceptional individual in his concept of life and in his courageousness. He predicted the oncoming catastrophe and did all that he could to send members of his community to Eretz-Israel before it would be too late. His efforts reached their height during the late 1930s, and the outbreak of World War 2 in 1939 found him still in Monastir. As a brave captain he refused to abandon the sinking ship. He struggled as long as he could until it was too late to rescue himself and the members of his own family. They all perished amid the smoking chimneys of Treblinka.

"No one envisaged the horrors of the Holocaust



Mr. Louis E. Rousso

beforehand and even Kamhi did not imagine such a dreadful end. However, he admonished and warned of the impending dangers. With that he dismissed the entreaties that he join the groups of people he was sending to Eretz-Israel. Instead he stayed at his post to the end. He would say that he could not leave his community as a flock without a shepherd.

"The three men who called on me at the Dan Hotel urged that I set up a monument memorial to Leon Kamhi. I devoted much thought to the idea and finally turned it down. I believe that a stone monument of that kind was not the most appropriate form to commemorate a man, because in the course of time it will have no meaning for the young who will only see a name inscribed on stone.

"Rabbi Marans, the Rabbi of the Sephardic Temple in Cedarhurst, New York, and the Hazzan Abikzer, were the ones who convinced me that the best memorial to Leon Kamhi would be a book that would relate the story of his life and deeds. I would like you to take on this mission. As for myself, I consider myself duty bound to facilitate the publication of this volume because I knew this man in my youth and I am fully cognizant that he deserved such a tribute.

"It is my hope that those people who knew Leon Kamhi during his life and the many more who will become acquainted with him through this book, will learn to appreciate the meaning of human devotion and self-sacrifice.

"The late Leon Kamhi gave us a lesson that must be remembered. Men do not come into this world only in order to live out their lives and enjoy their pleasures, without a thought for others. Whosoever considers that his life's meaning is in public service and indeed carries out this philosophy to its logical conclusion gives a new significance to the lives of us all.

"It is painfully sad to think that Leon Kamhi did not live long enough to witness the renaissance of Israel and the establishment of the Jewish State. For that was the purpose of his life since his early youth. The Almighty placed him where he did in order to give life to hundreds of others. Accordingly I do believe that Leon Kamhi was a martyr in the most noble meaning of the word."

I have reproduced Mr. Rousso's letter in full, because it contains one of the finest testimonials to the memory of Leon Kamhi. I also consider that due tribute should be paid to Mr. Rousso for his contribution to the publication of this work with all the efforts and endeavours involved thereby.

I was given the opportunity of meeting Mr. Rousso in person when he visited Israel for a second time in 1970. I found a man of dignified mien. We discussed the content of the memorial project, after I began to assemble the material. I told Mr. Rousso that history had hardly left any testimonies to Leon Kamhi's life's work, while the town of Monastir had hardly earned any mention in the history books besides a few lines.

Most of the material I gathered from the recollections of men who were born and raised in Monastir – Bitol. Likewise I assembled my raw material from the General Archives in Belgrade, from the newspapers of the periods, from the memories of the men who worked side by side with Kamhi in his Zionist efforts, and from the slim volume brought out by the township of Bitol in memory of the destroyed Jewish community.

On March 11, 1943, the Germans and the Bulgarians deported three thousand Jews from Bitol and despatched them to their deaths. Only six persons managed to survive. All the others perished in the gas chambers.

I wish, therefore, to tell of the life and work of Leon Kamhi against the backdrop of the Jewish community of

Bitol. Not only because thereby I sought to establish a living memorial to an entire community that was erased from the face of the earth, but because Leon Kamhi's life was lived out amid a profound identity of fate with that of his community. The fact of the matter is that Leon Kamhi hardly had any private life of his own. He did not find time to setup his own family until the age of 40, some five years before he met his death under such cruel circumstances. Literally no one could speak at length of his personal life, but only of his public work and Zionist activity.

1 A Small, Weak Voice

The Archives of "Yad Vashem" in Jerusalem, housed in the basement, contain a file of horrifying documentary proof. One finds three registers within hard covers, which have slightly faded as time takes its toll. They contain the registrations of the Jews of Bitol who perished in the maw of Nazism. Somehow, by some miracle this material found its way to the Archives of the Holocaust. They were compiled by the local authorities in the second half of 1942. This took place within the framework of the first phase in the planning for the deportation of the Jews of Bitol to far-off Poland.

Each and every head of the local Jewish families were ordered to report at the Registry Office together with photographs of himself, his wife and children. Some of these photographs of people no longer among the living are still to be found in the appropriate page of the register. However many more were either lost or removed by the surviving relatives. From the photographs that remained there peer the faces of the Jews of Bitol – youngsters, middle-aged and elderly, the faces of men and women who had aged with toil and honest labour. That was the image of the Bitol community in the last days of its existence.

These registers are most unusual documents. There is nothing to resemble them in all the records of other

Jewish communities that were liquidated in Europe. For it is of Bitol alone. Only that community perpetuated the names of all its members, their personal details, their addresses and portrait photographs. No wonder that years later, in 1959, three literary men – one a Jew and two Macedonians from Bitol resolved to decipher these registers, to expand them and compile other details so as to create a more complete documentation of the identity of an entire community that had been liquidated. The three worked diligently and produced a work of over 800 closely typewritten pages, comprising a collection of short biographies of the 3,013 Jews of Bitol who perished in the Holocaust.

The authors are Yacub Arroyisti, Dusko and Milos Constantinov. They persevered in compiling sparse personal details and published them in alphabetical order. Each life-story is given in precise form, and concludes with the same unchanging phrase: "Deported on March 11, 1943, by the German-Bulgarian Fascists to the mass murder camp of innocent people." This phrase repeated itself three thousand and thirteen times.

Among the hundreds of families and thousands of names there appeared on Page 349 details about Kamhi, Moshon Leon and his family.

Thus: "Kamhi Moshon Leon was born in 1899 in Bitol to his mother, Esther and to his father, Moshon. He worked as a commercial representative for a number of companies. For a number of years was Chairman of the Jewish Community. His work, his integrity and his industriousness brought him great honour and respect from most Jews in Bitol. At the end of 1942 he was arrested by the Bulgarian occupying forces and deported to Bulgarian territory as a hostage for young men who had joined the partisan units. On March 11, 1943, he was sent to the mass murder camp of innocent people."

"Frieda, the wife of Kamhi Moshon Leon, was born in 1909 in Salonika, in Aegean Macedonia. She was a housewife. Deported on March 11, 1943 by the German-Bulgarian Fascists to the mass murder camp of innocent people.

"Batala (Batya), daughter of Frieda and Kamhi Moshon Leon, born in 1938 in Bitol. Deported... "

"Esther, mother of Kamhi Moshon Leon, born in 1884 in Bitol. Helped her daughter-in-law in the household chores. Deported... "

"The Kamhi Moshon Leon family resided at No. 141 Dr. Reis Street."

The authors conclude by writing: "This document is aimed at reminding people of this generation of the wicked deeds of the Fascists who acted like evil beasts. The data included in this work is aimed at serving as a testimony for the coming generations concerning the most dreadful barbarism in history which men of our times witnessed with their eyes and their blood. The German and Bulgarian Fascists murdered in cold blood 3,013 men, women and children, their only sin being their Jewishness. Data for this material was compiled from the original records drawn up by the Bulgarian police at the temporary camp in Skopje, shortly before the Jews were handed over to the Germans... "

In the summer of 1971 I visited Bitol in order to prepare this literary project. I sought out the remnants and witnesses of the existence of this glorious Jewish community that had survived for centuries as one of the most pulsating centres of Jewish life in the Balkans. All I found were somewhat faded relics. Of the large Jewish quarter only a few buildings survived. Out of the thousands of Jews there remains only one survivor, whose consciousness has suffered confusion under the burden of memories. On the ruins of the Great Aragon Synagogue, has arisen a new hospital. In the open space fronting the hospital is a monu-

ment erected by the Town Council to commemorate those of its Jews who were destroyed.

Only in the Archives of Bitol can one find clearcut testimonies to the fact of the existence of a Jewish community. Of no less value were the recollections of elderly Macedonians who were willing to lead me through the town's narrow alleyways and show me where the Jews worked and where they prayed.

Outside the town, on the slopes of a lofty range, lies the old cemetery of the Jews of Bitol containing thousands of gravestones like so many pieces of masonry. There being no one to take care of the cemetery, the graves have become overrun with weeds, and the inscriptions on the stones have been erased. At first sight it looks like just any other wild field strewn with stones, and only with some effort does it emerge as a holy place, and the stones covered with moss are there to commemorate the dead. This tragedy gains greater poignancy at the sight of the German Military Cemetery. It was laid out at the peak of another hilltop, even higher up, which overhangs the township. This is a well-ordered place of burial surrounded by a high wall protecting the dead from ill-wishers. Here they brought for common burial the soldiers of the German Army who died in World War 1. A huge sign tells of "their heroic death in their glorious battle to conquer Bitol". The German Government bought the cemetery and pays for its care for the past three generations and the township of Bitol allows the Germans to treat this burial place as their own territory.

What a sight! On the one hand a neglected and disappearing Jewish cemetery, and on the other hand – the graveyard of the German invader, shining and polished as if it wore uniform. 3,406 German soldiers were buried there, a similar number to that of the Jews of Bitol put so cruelly to death by that same Germany only a generation later.

2 Standing on Mount Nevo

Bitol is a rather picturesque town and one needs a panoramic vision to appreciate its beauty. It rests in a small but deep valley encircled by lofty mountains rift by a tiny river, its swift but disciplined waters race down the slope along an unswervingly straight course. That is the River Dragur that joins the waters of the great River Cjerna not far from the town.

I have heard many tales from former inhabitants of Bitol, now living in Israel, about this river which filled their childhood memories. They told of the tiny wooden rafts they would sail on, of the journeys they would make along its banks with their families during the summer evenings, and of the river's powerfulness, when it would overflow its banks in the winter and flood the entire surroundings.

But in reality I found a deep, somewhat frothy, canal, five or six metres wide, criss-crossed by many bridges connecting the two parts of the town. Long rows of miserable-looking trees and stone pavements line the paved banks of the canal. Just as in the past the local people like to promenade arm in arm alongside the Dragur. The path dips down towards the lower valley where the town suddenly peters out and the river vanishes behind a mountain-rock as it makes its way to the mighty flow of the Cjerna.

Nearby one finds the heights of Mount Prister. It is 2,600 metres high and its peak is eternally white. It looks

like a snowcap that never melts even during the hot summer months. Other white peaks are glimpsed from the other side of the township. They are much further off, facing to the east, in the direction of Bulgaria.

Bitol is enveloped within this small valley and its houses are crowded and crushed together like so many chicks in an incubator. From the peak of Mount Prister they look very picturesque with their red rooftops, just like a field of poppies. But on approaching near one perceives this ancient town, so poverty stricken and tired with age which has seen and suffered so much in its fluctuating fortunes, when it changed in countless succession its rulers, its invaders and its inhabitants.

Most of the houses are one - or two-storey high, displaying the proof of old age. Their walls look very shaky and seem to lean on each other for support. The roadways between them are made of large and uneven stones. The surface is therefore very rough indeed with some stones sticking out, and others sunk into the ground. Any travelling over it in a harnessed waggon or carriage (of the kind that used to bear Moses Montefiore through the streets of Jerusalem) would undergo a very shaky passage, that would thoroughly agitate his innards and deafen his ears. Like the roadways, so the rows of houses are neither straight nor parallel. One house stands out, another recedes and the pavements follows them in a crooked line. Mosques spring up all around, an ever-present reminder of the period when the Ottoman Empire ruled for centuries over Bitol, and the Turkish community was the largest of all the groups populating the town. Nearly 60 years have elapsed since the Ottoman rule ended in 1912, and with it has disappeared the once-mighty Turkish community, leaving behind a remnant that hardly suffices to tend to the plethora of mosques.

In the epoch dealt with in our book, the 20s and the

30s, before the Jewish community had been wiped out and the Turks had moved out, Bitol was an oriental town that hummed with a mixture of languages, cultures, customs, market places and businesses.

It contained Bulgars, Rumanians, Greeks, Serbs, Albanians, Turks and Jews – each community preserving its language and unique way of life, and all of them living in pleasant coexistence and amid mutual respect.

As for the Jews – most of them lived in houses in all quarters of the town, and part of them were concentrated in the "Mellah". (The name conferred on the Jewish ghetto which is so similar to the Mellah, the North African Jewish ghetto). These were poor houses with inner courtyards, still surviving in the Meah Shearim quarter of Jerusalem, with the difference that the houses in Bitol had courtyards replete with vine-covered trellises and verdant with trees and other shrubbery. Laundry was hung on ropes suspended between the houses and across the courtyards. Life was conducted in the open, in the public eye and lacking all false modesty.

On the hot summer nights when the rooms of the little houses were too stuffy and stifling to contain all members of the family, the mothers would bring out the mattresses and place them in the narrow stone alleys. Hundreds of Jews would spend the night in common slumber with the men, women and children of their neighbourhood. With the dawn they would depart to seek their daily bread from occasional and humble occupations. Their livelihood was very modest indeed. The menfolk wore long, heavy and colourful robes, their hems sweeping the ground. They wore belts and sashes, and a fez on their head. The hours of the day they would devote to scraping a living – whether as porters and cobblers or as vendors of vegetables and haberdashery. Even outside the ghetto area there are to be found some streets that indicate by their names that

they were once inhabited by Jews. Thus "Moisevska Street" (from the word Moses), or "Breska" (Hebrew), or "Sinakogska" (synagogue), and so forth. There was also the Street of Courtyards that was a purely Jewish street and another neighbourhood named Little Courtyards. The Jews would relax here of an evening counting in a monotonous tone the yellow strings of beads which they constantly fingered, while smoking the nargila as the Gentiles would do. Or they would pick up a pinch of snuff, breathe it in deeply and sneeze with great relief.

On Sabbath morning the vista of the Jewish street would undergo a radical change and take on a festive garb. Groups of Jews returning from the houses of prayer to their breakfast after reciting Shaharit the morning service. The elders of the community would call on members of the community who were celebrating their sons' marriages or Bar-Mitzva (Confirmation). Sabbath as a whole passes amid quiet rejoicing and a collective warmth, and would conclude with the Havdalah ceremony, when the wine is blessed and one incants "Almighty in the Heavens" and sniffs a lemon. Thus one prays to the Lord with all one's senses: one tastes the wine, one sniffs the lemon, one hears the prayer and one sees the candlelight.

When the Jews rested from their trading, the entire city ceased from business too, because of the considerable role played by Jews in the community's commercial life. The non-Jews accepted this fact with tolerance, for Bitol accepted a week-end that lasted for three days: Friday was holy to Moslems, Saturday to Jews and Sunday to Christians.

The Jews like other residents of Bitol would spend their holidays by either making expeditions along the banks of the river, or going out to Alexander's Hill via the Corso promenade which struck out upwards along the hill slope. It was a verdant place to the south of the city, facing the

railway station, and one would find well-arranged paths, with terraces cut into the hillside and a small cafe to relax in. Below lay the city stretched out, greenish-red and encircled by mountains, cut off from the rest of the world. Here flourished the inhabitants in their first bloom of youth, here would bloom young love, and here would stroll Leon Kamhi and his pupils inculcating them with love of Zion and igniting their hearts with a yearning for the far-off Promised Land, far away beyond the mountains and the oceans.

Occasionally the youngsters would stray in the direction of the small villages in Bitol's vicinity – mostly in the direction of the Greek frontier. They were very picturesque places, each with its own special characteristics. The residents of one village would make their living from weaving heavy, coloured cloth; their neighbours would grow plum trees and cherries, while the other communities were engaged in manufacturing cheese and luscious flowers. This was their first encounter in preparation for a life of farming in Israel.

There were few riches in Bitol. The Jews like other communities were not very prosperous. But their diverse occupations added colour and character to the life of this small city. The Romanians specialised in kachkeval cheese; the Bulgarians and the Turks sold yogurt, special kinds of dairy products and diverse sweetmeats, the Greeks concentrated on confectionary, while the Serbs made up the white collar elite which provided the functionaries, the teachers, the priests, physicians and other professional men.

Each lived off the other, although they conversed in seven different tongues. Moreover the Macedonian mountain villagers would descend on the town to sell their produce or the icecubes they would quarry in the mountain tops. They used to arrive in wagons hitched to

mules with screeching wheels banging away on the rough road surface. They used to unload their produce in the noisy market, and the icecubes wrapped up in pine needles, they would display from door to door.

While most of the houses were impoverished looking and the streets somewhat mean, here and there one would come across fine homes. They were the residences of wealthy Greeks. One building, that of the Gymnasium – the high school was a rather impressive structure, and nearby stood the empty Turkish secondary school which had remained unused for years. The city also boasted a fairly spacious national theatre, but it had remained rather desolate since the 1930s. It was sited quite near the main street which was full of cafes and confectionaries, where people would promenade of an evening, for that was all there was to do of a leisured hour.

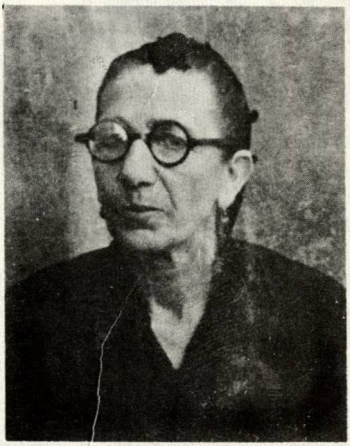
The Bitol of today is not much different from the Bitol of the early 1900s, except for the rash of new building erected at its southern approaches, plus the doubling of its population. They are multi-storeyed housing estates – of the kind one sees in all European cities since the end of the war. These new neighbourhoods neither coalesce into self-contained communities nor create new urban centres of their own. The old Bitol still reigns supreme, and its oriental character is heightened even more against the background of exterior artifacts of an encroaching civilization that has so far failed to establish its domination.

The main thoroughfares are replete with uptodate travel agencies displaying in their windows an array of photographs of jet airliners rending the heavens. However only ten metres away there lies snoozing on his cart, the old and faithful porter who still wears a thick rope around his waist. One sees the tiny stores with the cobblers squatting before them – where cramped quarters are the rule. The Turkish halva and sumsum are still being displayed on

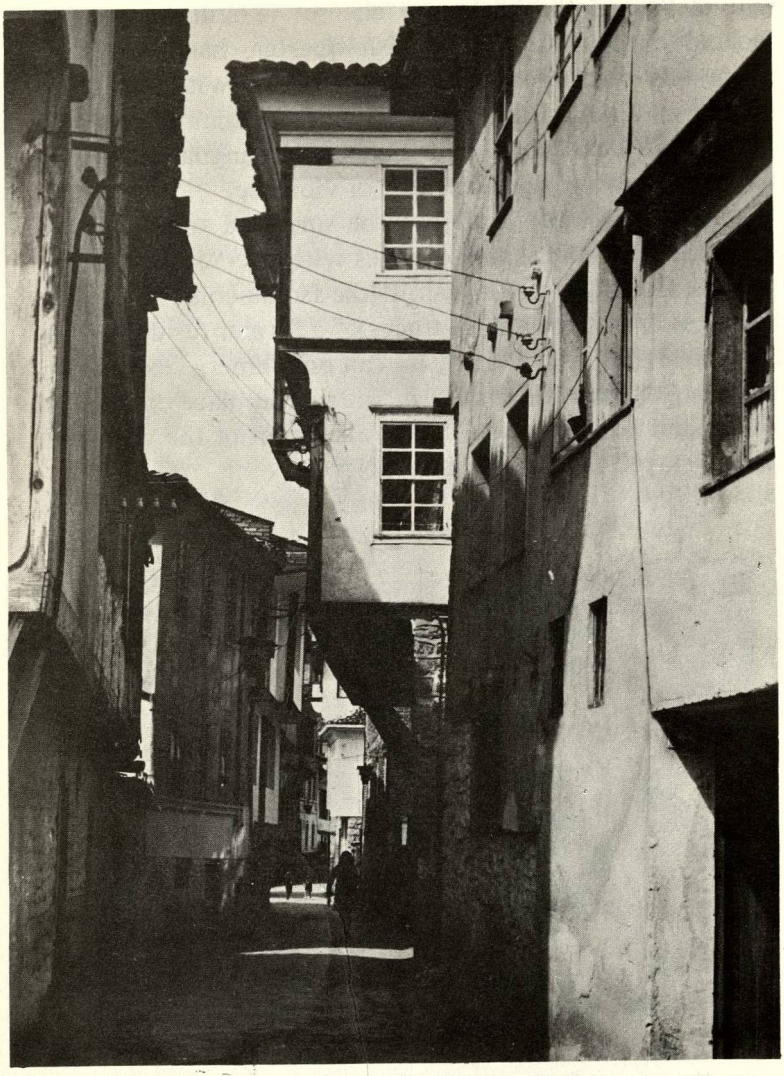
small stalls and the kachkeval cheese is still being sold. The old market, in the Turkish quarter, has altered its appearance with iron structures covered with pleasant-looking materials. However that same bargaining of old is being conducted with that same multi-lingual noisiness lacking, somehow, signs of anger or violence.

A guest coming to Israel will be surprised to encounter on one of the stalls some oranges with the "Jaffa" brand imprinted on them in English. If the Israeli comes here as I did, to seek out the erased traces of a former resident who devoted his life to Zionism, he can only emerge excited at the thought that this orange in the marketplace of Bitol is a juicy and golden proof of the fulfillment of the vision of he who stayed behind on Mount Nevo.

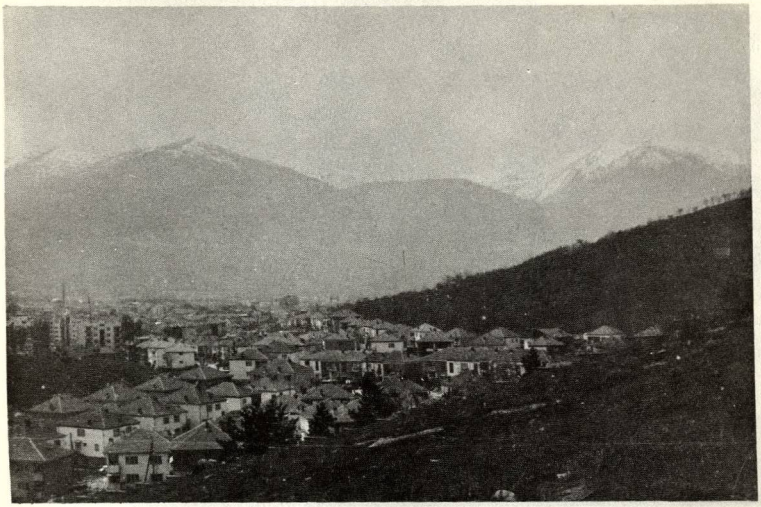




Leon Kamhi and his mother, Esther, in photographs taken by the Bulgarians as part of their plan to expell the Jews in 1942.

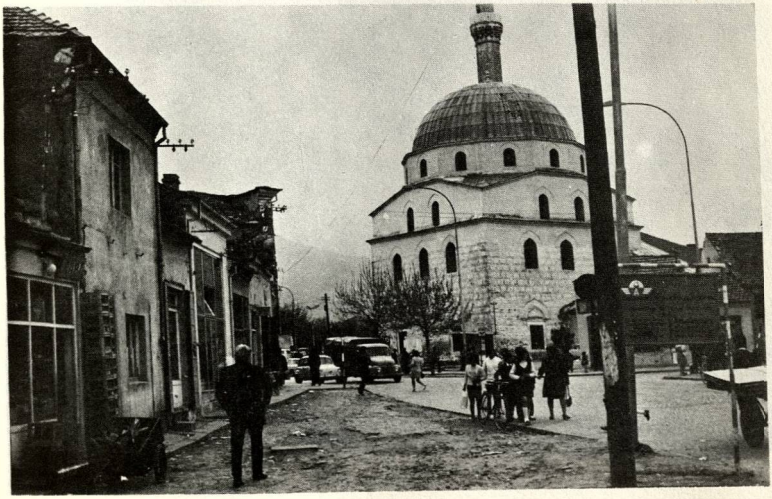


A typical street in old **Bitol, 1971.**



Bitol – encircled with mountains.

The Bitol City Square

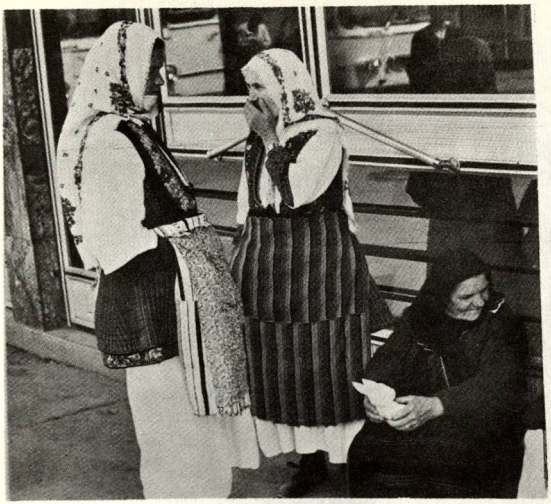




The Old Town in Bitol.

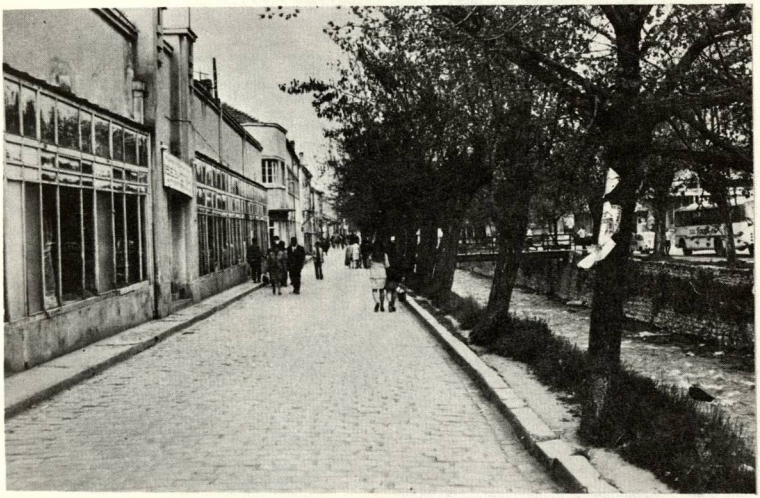
The new quarter built after World War Two.





Women in Monastir cling to the old styles of dress. But they are only a minority.

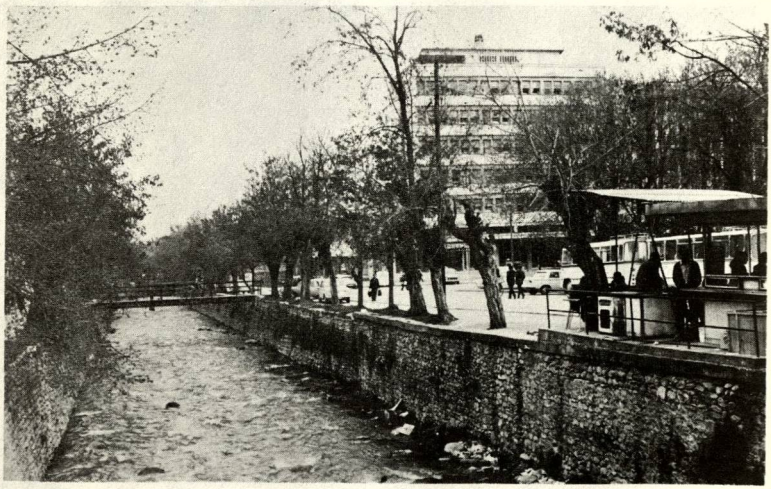
The promenade along the river banks.

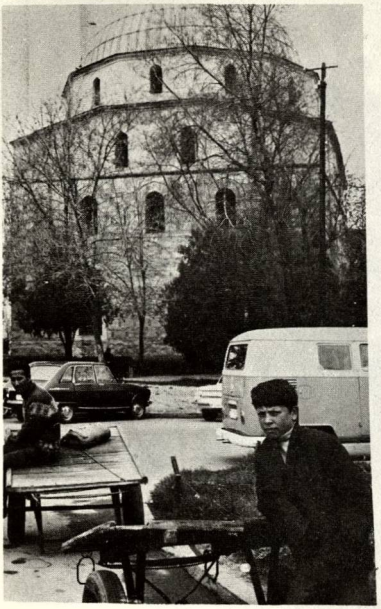




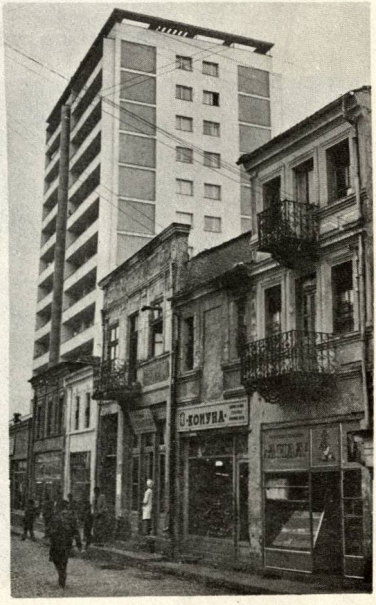
Contemporary fashions in an old-world atmosphere.

The River Dragur.

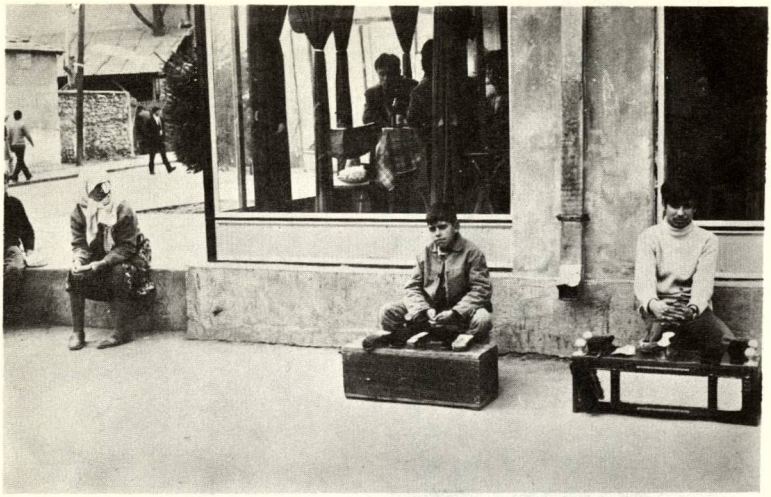




The mosque and the porters' cart still dominate the landscape of Monastir in 1971.

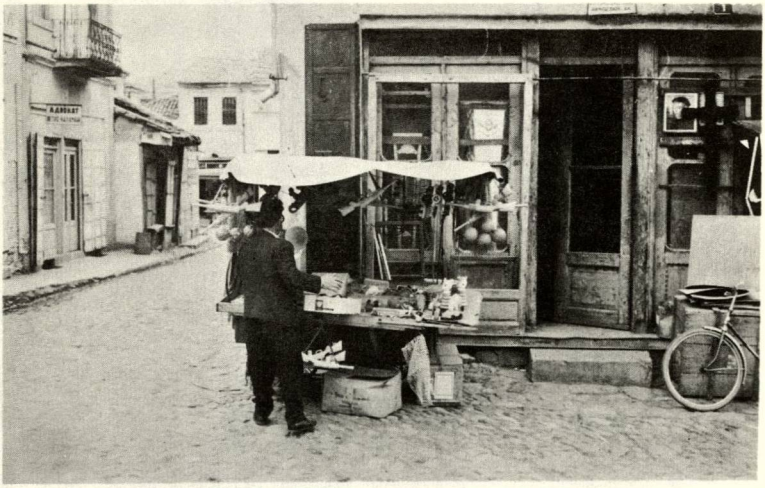


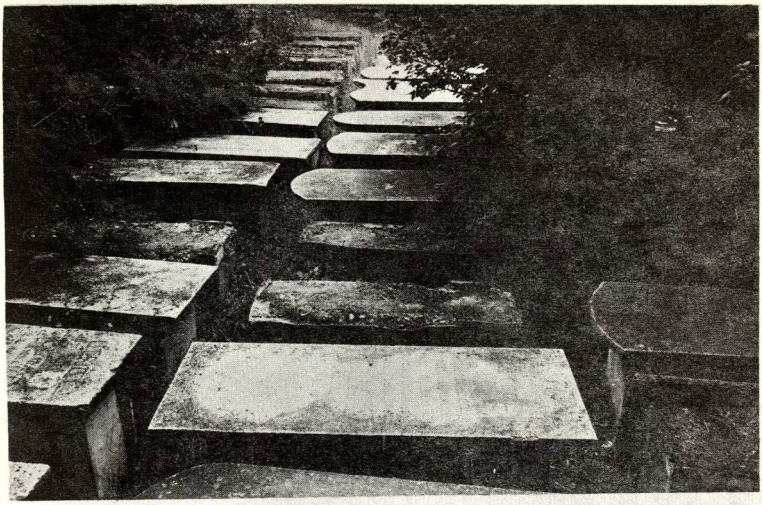
A new modern building in the old-world street of Bitol.



Shoe-shine boys still wait for customers as in the old days.

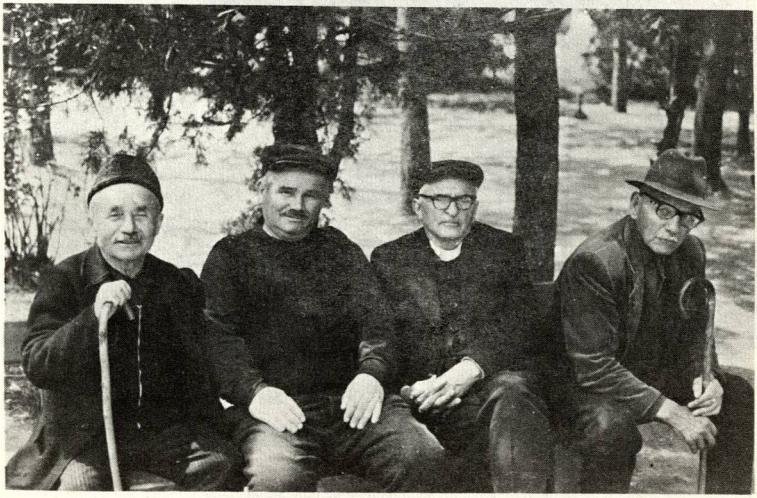
A miserable-looking pedlar at a street-corner, 1971.





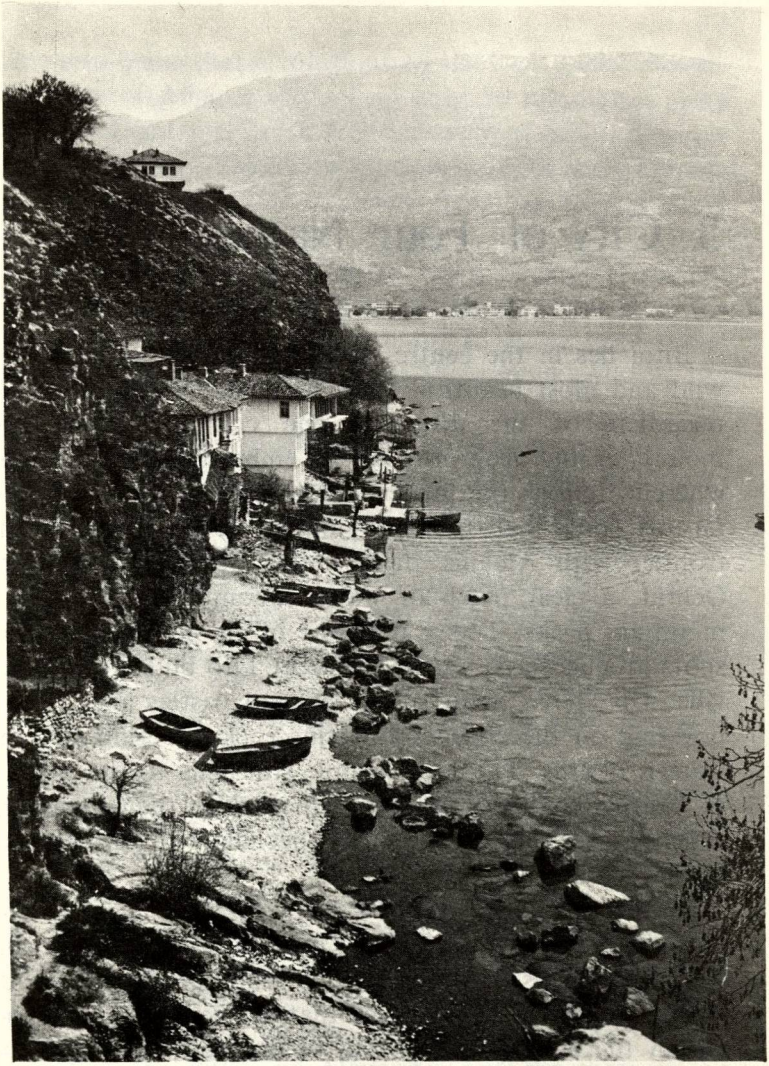
Gravestones that have faded completely in the Jewish cemetery of Bitol, the photograph was taken on the eve of the Second World War.

Old-age pensioners in Monastir.





The magnificent gateway of the Jewish cemetery still stands. But the cemetery is very neglected, and its gravestones have tumbled down.



The peaceful banks of Lake Ochrid, an hour's journey from Bitol.

3. City of Four Names

Bitol lies in the centre of Macedonia in the heart of a wild and most beautiful land. Any path leading to Bitol, regardless of the direction one comes, must cross mountains and drop into valleys, embracing a fruitful land wherein flourish the tobacco plant and the fruit tree. Not far off, only half-an-hour's journey away towards the frontier with Albania there nestle the waters of Lake Ochrid, a clear patch of water encompassed by snowy mountain peaks. Today it is one of the loveliest holiday spots in Yugoslavia where President Tito built his summer villa. Up above there sprout ancient castles and palaces hovering on the edge of towering rocks, peering into the water's depths. The local people still cling to the custom of wearing colourful peasant clothes which the womenfolk excell at weaving. They also specialise in carpets and leather work.

In the good, old days of Bitol, at the height of the Ottoman Empire, the city used to trade with its hinterland and knew spells of prosperity. It stood at the crossroads leading to towns and villages that are today to be found within the borders of Albania to the west, Greece to the south, and Turkey and Bulgaria to the east. This geographical position accorded it a key role as a trading centre, which was utterly ruined with the outbreak of the Balkan wars and the First World War. Thereafter new frontiers

came into being that revolutionized the local political man. The State of Albania was set up only 30 kilometres away from Bitol and the Greek frontier arose at only a distance of 12 kilometres. These new borders brought trade barriers and the city of Bitol declined from its former local greatness.

The historical roots of Bitol reach back into ancient times and are an intrinsic part of the background of the land of the Macedonians which for so many generations has witnessed the collisions between various cultures and civilizations.

The importance of Macedonia in the ancient world is dwelt on in the writings of the Greek historian, Herodotus in connection with a number of events. One treats with the active part played by Macedonia in the intrigues and plots of the Greek city-states in the period preceding the war with Persia. Another chapter deals with the conquest of Macedonia by the Persians, and its attempts to establish links with the city-states and involve itself in their internecine strife, although it was still under the invader's yoke.

Macedonia acquired its independence and proceeded to forge ahead to glory during the 4th Century BCE under the rule of King Phillip and his son, Alexander. The father succeeded in welding the city-states of Greece into one political unit, and the son, Alexander the Great proceeded to conquer in the East, thereby confirming the supremacy of Macedonia over all of Greece, and expanding Hellenistic civilization over a goodly part of the ancient world. Following the death of Alexander and the wars of the succession that led to his Empire's disintegration, Macedonia slipped off the stage of history and became just another Province in the Roman Empire.

In 1382, Macedonia fell to the Turks who reigned supreme for 530 years of unbroken rule until 1912.

Irrespective of this lengthy domination, the Turks failed to wipe out the traces of the previous rulers of the land and their Christian faith that took root under the Romans and held sway under Moslem rule.

The many peoples living in Macedonia succeeded in benefitting from the relative tolerance of the Ottoman rule, which weakened as its end grew near. This weakness played a major role in the strengthening of national consciousness that began to emerge among the local nationalities during the 19th century. The pressure for self-determination of these national groups was a major factor leading to the outbreak of the Balkan Wars and the First World War. Today Macedonia is divided up between Greece, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. From a geographical viewpoint it comprises one unit that is difficult to divide up. It is a very mountainous country, criss-crossed with valleys, where difficulties of communication and transport intensified its isolation from the more progressive northern lands, even in later periods, and contributed no little to its backwardness and neglect.

Until this very day one can see peasants tilling their fields with wooden ploughs hitched to oxen, or even mules, while two-three hundred kilometres to the north one comes across modern farming machinery.

Bitol is today the second most important city in Yugoslav – Macedonia, after Skopje, the capital of the Republic. (In Yugoslavia, Macedonia is one of six Republics). The city has 75,000 inhabitants compared to the population of 45,000 on the eve of World War 2. Most of its residents are Macedonian Slavs, plus a mixture of Albanians, Serbs, Turks, Greeks and so forth.

According to ancient sources the city was first established in 358 BCE with the name of Heraklea Linkositis. Here passed the Via Agnetia, the famous Roman way linking the port of Dores on the Albanian

coast and Salonika in northern Greece. In 194 BCE, the decisive battle took place in the city between King Phillip the 3rd of Macedonia and the Roman Consul. Phillip was defeated and the Romans conquered Heraklea Linkositis, converting it into their regional capital. In 479 BCE, the city was razed by Theodorio, the king of the Ostrogoths. With its reconstruction as part of the Eastern Empire – Byzantium – its name was changed to Phlaginia, after the valley it lies in. Soon the Byzantine name faded from people's memories and from the 11th Century its inhabitants began to call it by the Greek name, Monastir after the many monasteries that had sprung up in the vicinity, This name survived long than any other.

Only after the city was incorporated in Yugoslavia following World War One did it resume the Slavic name of Bitol. This was awarded more than a thousand years ago during the short period of Bulgarian occupation.

Few relics of the city's ancient days have survived and we know nothing of its annals under Byzantine rule. The golden age of Monastir took place during the Ottoman Empire when the city took precedence even over Skopje, the regional capital. After its prosperity waned, it languished as a backwater, almost cut off from the outside world. One proof of this can be discerned in the fact that it was only in 1891 that the railway line was laid between Monastir and Salonika, 200 kilometres away. But even the railroad did not improve the town's lot and it remained sunk in its obscurity.

A scholar and author who visited the city in the 1920s in order to study the nature of Ladino, the local jargon of the town's Jews related the following:

"The railroad is the worst possible. The train is called 'Express' but it takes eight hours to traverse the distance between the two towns. The carriages are nothing but

boxes on wheels, accidents happen frequently, and delays are the rule."

Although this eye-witness report was made some decades ago, little has improved since then. It took me nine hours to reach Bitol from Salonika aboard this train in 1971!

In the final analysis it would seem that the local inhabitants have benefitted to a certain extent from their isolation, for it helped to preserve their mutual tolerance and facilitate the peaceful coexistence of Christians, Moslems and Jews in this part of the globe.

At the beginning of the 20th Century there were in Bitol, a cathedral of the Greek Orthodox Church, nine mosques, six synagogues and dozens of small chapels of other faiths.

In 1913 Bitol fell into the possession of Serbia and most of its Turkish inhabitants left. Two years later when the combined Austro-Hungarian and German forces defeated the Serbian army, the Bulgarians took advantage of the situation and moved in to take Bitol. By 1916, the French army reached Bitol together with Serbian army units after a most bloody campaign which left many French graves behind in the huge French military cemetery adjoining Bitol.

Between the years 1919 and 1941, Bitol was part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and after its conquest by the German army in April 1941, the town was annexed together with all of Yugoslav-Macedonian by Bulgaria. In 1944, with the collapse of the pro-Nazi regime in Sofia and the liberation of Yugoslavia, Bitol reverted to the latter.

Ever since Macedonia was partitioned between Greece, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria after World War One, a steady decline has set in the fortunes of Bitol. Not only did that war cancell out Bitol's importance as a trading centre but

set off a pattern of immigration, and its population began to dwindle and even many Jews departed for more prosperous climbs. Some immigrated to North and South America, others to Eretz-Israel, while others moved northwards to the main urban centres of Yugoslavia.

According to the Encyclopedia Judaica, there were 7,000 Jews living in Bitol in 1910, out of a population of 50,000, whereas other sources put the community at 8,000. In 1929, there were some 4,000 Jews in Bitol out of a population of 30,000. With the outbreak of World War Two, this number had dwindled to approximately, 3,500.

4. The Jewish Community of Bitol

The first real testimonial of the presence of the Jewish community in Bitol survives from the 12th Century – according to the Encyclopaedia Hebraica (Volume E). But it is feasible to assume that Jews lived in the area even before that time, and this prognosis is supported by a number of Yugoslav scholars.

The historians are divided in their opinions as to the exact date of the arrival of the first Jews to the Balkan Peninsula, but they concur that the Jews preceded the Slavic tribes, who reached the area in the 6th and 8th Century. There is evidence of the existence in Macedonia of the ruins of synagogues dating back to the 3rd and 4th Century C.E., and there is even earlier proof indicating the presence of Jews on Yugoslav territory. In the city of Seni in Croatia there is a marble tablet with an inscription in Latin from the 2nd Century C.E. and it mentions the Jew, Ureli Dionisi from Tiberias.

There are those who go even further and place the advent of Jews in the region at a much earlier era. The Macedonian historian, Alexander Matakowski, who published a study on the liquidation of his country's Jews (also published in the Yad Vashem collection of research papers, Volume 3, 1959) raises the supposition that the first Jews who settled in the Balkans and Macedonia reached there following the campaign of Darius against the Scythians in in 521 BCE. Other historians surmise that this took place

following Alexander the Great's invasion of Asia Minor in 334 BCE, while another group of scholars believe that the first Jews made their appearance in this area after the fall of Jerusalem and the conquest of the Balkan Peninsula by the armies of Rome. These assumptions have no clearcut underpinning, yet Alexander Matakowski does not doubt that the Jews preceded the arrival of the southern Slavs in in the south of Europe by quite a considerable margin of time.

Matakowski leans heavily on Josephus Flavius who told of the Jews' close ties of friendship with Alexander the Great, and how many Jews joined his armies. Basing himself on this premise (in his foreward to the liquidation of the Jews of Macedonia), he assumes the presence of Jews in the Balkan Peninsula as far back as that early historical epoch. Indeed, archeological diggings have revealed a column on which is inscribed a reference to the existence of a synagogue in the Roman colony of Stobi, not far from the Macedonian city of Titov Vellas. The existence of such an ancient synagogue strengthens the prognosis that already under the Roman Empire there existed in Stobi a Jewish community that was sufficiently large to warrant a synagogue.

Herod the Great, who reigned in Judea between 10-40 CE, referred specifically in his letter to the Emperor Caligula, of the existence of Jewish colonies in Macedonia. They were also mentioned by his contemporary, Philo the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher.

Few details have survived the ages on life in Macedonia during the 9th and 10th centuries CE. It is only known that the process of converting the southern Slavic tribes to Christianity was completed during the 9th Century. One hundred years later the Bulgarian ruler, Samuili established the first Bulgarian Empire that encompassed all of Bulgaria, practically the whole of Macedonia and parts of Serbia and Bosnia. Samuili set up his capital at Ochrid, not

far from Bitol. There was constant warfare between the Bulgarian Empire and the Kingdom of Byzantium until the 11th Century CE when the Byzantine Emperor, Basil 11 managed to defeat the Bulgarians and conquer Macedonia. During the period of Byzantine rule, the process of Hellenization deepened throughout Macedonia and with it, apparently, came the first wave of Jews and Armenians. (This theory is supported in "The Annals of Yugoslavia" published in 1963 in the Soviet Union by the Soviet Academy of Sciences). It would appear as if the Jews reached Macedonia in the wake of the First Crusade.

In the 12th Century CE there were some well-established Jewish communities in a number of Macedonian cities including Bitol. A most interesting evidence of this was given by Benyamin of Tudela in his chronicles of his travels through Macedonia in 1170. Benyamin of Tudela related that he found a large number of Jews in places like Skopje, Bitol, Ochrid and so forth. During the period between the 11th Century CE and the 14th Century CE there lived a number of famous Jewish scholars and authors in Ochrid and Struma, not far from Bitol. Their manuscripts are still preserved in the libraries of the University of Oxford in England.

At the end of the 11th Century CE and the beginning of the 12th Century, there appeared the first Serbian kingdom under the rule of Stefan Nemania. It reached its zenith under the Czar Dushan (1331-1335). Its rapid territorial expansion turned the kingdom, for a short period, into the greatest and most powerful country in all of South-Eastern Europe. The Jews are mentioned in that period as having engaged in agriculture in Macedonia. One of the most important documents from the days of Czar Dushin entitled, "The Golden Scroll of Traskowitz" mentions the existence of "The Valley of the Jews" and the "River of the Jews". Other testimonies indicate the impor-

tance of the Jews in international commerce of that period.

Ten years after he established "The Empire of the Serbs and the Greeks" (1345), Czar Dushan died and his glorious empire crumbled amid a bitter quarrel among the Serbian aristocracy. In the end, the Serbian Kingdom was harshly defeated by the Turkish armies who had invaded the Balkan Peninsula and the decisive battle took place on June 15, 1389.

The Turkish hordes under the leadership of Sultan Muret 1, vanquished the Serbian nobility captained by Prince Lazar. The Sultan was killed but his son, Basil, completed the victory. This started centuries of Turkish rule which was interspersed with constant uprisings against the regime. These wars of the Serbs and the Macedonians have been celebrated in endless folk songs and poems that have been included in their most beautiful epic works.

The position of Jews under Ottoman rule was improved in comparison to the Byzantine Kingdom, but even so they were subject to trials and tribulations. Sultan Muret 111 forebade all non-Moslems in his empire to wear clothes of silk (1595), and the Grand Visier Deltaban Pasha enlarged this command (1702) to prohibit Jews and other non-Moslems from wearing yellow shoes and red fezes. In 1821 a pogrom was held among the Jews of Greece and many of them reached Bitol where they joined the local community.

When Bitol was taken by the Turks it already contained a considerable number of Greek-speaking Jews. The Encyclopaedia Judaica relates that the Jewish community there had synagogues, schools and rabbis of repute. However, from the 16th Century CE onwards, the original Jews of Bitol assimilated among the Spanish exiles. They forgot their Greek and instead they began to speak Ladino.

It may be said that the personality of the glorious community of Bitol was fashioned by Jewish exiles from Spain

who were deported in the 15th Century from that Most Catholic Kingdom. In the 16th Century, their numbers were increased by refugees from Albania and during the ensuing 17th, 18th and 19th centuries there came waves of refugees from Aragon and Portugal who conducted a dynamic Jewish way of life, replete with a deep spiritual and religious content. Out of the 90,000 exiles from Spain and Portugal, some 2,000 reached Macedonia, with a third finding their way to Bitol.

The Spanish exiles also demonstrated considerable efficiency as businessmen and artisans, and soon they took over the leadership of the Jewish community of Monastir. But their main contribution was in enriching the congregation's spiritual life, and thereby altered beyond recognition the local Jewish community. For the exiles included a large number of rabbis and learned men. They assimilated the indigenous community not only to their language, but also to their manner of dressing, and their special version of the prayers and liturgy. Monastir soon became a major spiritual centre for the Jews of the entire Ottoman Empire, and took second place only to the glorious community of Salonika.

The rabbis and sages of the community of Monastir would respond to the questions sent them in writing by hundreds of Jews living in the various regions of the vast Empire. That same period witnessed the crystallization of the Jewish community of Monastir in the form it retained until the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. The general atmosphere of tolerance provided a broad basis for the evolvement of a ramified religious literature, and the renown of the rabbis and sages of Monastir spread far and wide.

Among the most important figures of Jewish history whose names are linked to Bitol, one may recall that of Shlomo Molcho. Of Portuguese origin, Molcho was a some-

what tragic personality. He remained in the town for some time in his search for tranquility. Here he wrote his messianic treatises and brought out his "Sefer Hamefuar" (N.B. Consult Max Brod's book on Shlomo Molcho).

Rabbi Yosef Ben Lew (1502–1588) who was born in Monastir, gained fame in Salonika where he published four volumes of responsa. During the 18th Century CE, the Rabbi of Monastir was Rabbi Avraham Ben Yehuda D. Buton, the author of the religious work: "Mahaze Avraham". In the latter part of the 19th Century, the seat of Rabbi was occupied by a converted Greek named Rabbi Avraham Ger-Zedek.

This cultural affluency was intrinsincally linked to economic and cultural prosperity which reached its height during the 16th-18th centuries. Despite their minority status, the Jews of Monastir controlled most of the city's trade. They did business with Serbia, Salonika, Sofia, Constantinople, and even with the Republic of Venice.

In the official Archives of Constantinople, one comes across a document dated 1593, from which we learn that the Jews of Monastir were also engaged in the wine trade. According to that same document the Kadi of Monastir was ordered to investigate the charge levelled against the Jews that they had sold wine to Moslems, despite the prohibition on the consumption of alcohol and wine imposed by Islam on the true believers. Other testimonies exist, demonstrating that the Jews of Monastir also engaged in the importation of spirits, olive oil, salt and pickled fish, and in the exportation of wool, silk, woven cloth, copper, skins, grapes and so forth. Among the Jews of Monastir there were a number of very wealthy men, and some of their descendants still held on to their properties until the very last days of the community in 1943.

Bitol differed from other Jewish communities in the region in that, there emerged a fairly broad stratum of

Jewish artisans and craftsmen. They engaged in tannery, decoration, goldsmithery, and worked as cobblers and tinsmiths, and even in such agricultural occupations as the manufacture of cheeses and the growing of tobacco plants.

Under the prolonged rule of the Turks in Monastir, the Jews of that town came under the rulers' influence in matters of custom, behaviour, dress and culture. However, at the same time, they succeeded in preserving their unique personality amidst this conglomeration of peoples and religions.

During the 19th Century, with the commencement of the decline of the Ottoman Empire, a very sharp but constant deterioration commenced in the economic situation of the township and their sources of livelihood began to wither. The political instability of the Balkans and of Macedonia in particular, put an end to the region's role in international trade and its economic situation became aggravated. If that was not bad enough, in the year 1863 a great fire destroyed 2,080 houses in the city, including 1,008 Jewish homes. This natural catastrophe combined with the unsettled economic and political situation, was the first stage in the emigration of the Jews from Bitol to other lands.

In fact already a few years beforehand there had been a movement to Eretz-Israel, particularly to the Holy City, which had had a Sephardic community since early times. However, this time the emigrants turned northwards – to other parts of Yugoslavia, to the United States and the Argentine, and as of the early 1900s to Chile as well. (In Chile one can encounter an emigree community in Tumaco led by a Monastir Jew named Alberto Levi). However, the Zionist inspired emigration to Eretz-Israel began in the period betwixt the two World Wars.

The Alliance Israelite endeavoured to assist the Monastir

Jews and ameliorate their lot and in 1895 opened a vocational school for boys and in 1903 another for girls, within which framework the younger generation acquired technical skills enabling them to earn an honorable living.

The community, having made considerable acquisitions during its zenith, endeavoured to help the poor by providing them with free housing. Likewise they leased homes that were communal property and the rent was paid into the coffers of the charitable agencies that operated in Bitol. However, all these efforts could not curb the flow of emigration which reached its height after World War One.

As noted above the Jewish community numbered over 7,000 persons in 1914, and had eight synagogues. Four of them were ruined during the First World War including the Central Synagogue: "Kahal Kadosh Portugal". The second largest synagogue, "Kahal Kadosh Aragon" remained intact, but was destroyed during the Second World War.

During the inter-war period, the Jewish community dwindled to half its former numbers. In 1931 it comprised 3751 Jews; in 1942 with the incorporation of Bitol in Bulgaria there were 3,422 Jews living there; and a year later in March 1943 when the time of deportation arrived there were to be found 3,269 Jews who were sent to the detention camp in Skopje in readiness for their final journey to Treblinka. Out of this number: 250 persons holding Spanish passports were let go, six managed to escape and 3,013 were sent to their deaths.

A number of illuminating details on the communal and religious life of the Jews of Bitol in recent times can be found in the afore-mentioned work of Arroyisti and Konstantinov.

The organization of the community's internal life and its measure of autonomy were codified in a list of regulations that was officially authorised by the Yugoslav Minister of Justice. The powers of the community were

defined (Clause 4) as follows:

"The community tends to, within the limits of the laws of the State, to the religious and cultural needs of its members and facilitates the observance of religious customs. This function is performed by the community in the establishment and maintenance of synagogues, houses of prayer, and other cultural and social institutions."

The final sentence indicates that the Government of Yugoslavia bestowed wide powers on the community above and beyond the purely religious sphere – namely the solution of social problems and according a cultural-spiritual content to communal life.

The communal constitution delves into such details as the number of the members of the Communal Council, their duties, their manner of election and their salaries; itemizes disciplinary measures for not fulfilling duties, absenteeism, taking leave of absence, dismissals and so forth; likewise are outlined the details of the community's income and expenditure, the authority of the various functionaries, ways to amend the constitution and so on.

The constitution is drafted in keeping with the norms of a modern democracy. It is illuminating to read in Clause 16 how efforts are made to exclude the possibility of favouritism, and it determines quite clearly: a member of the Communal Council is not allowed to take part in meetings which discuss questions affecting him personally, his family or even his associates.

The revenue of the Bitol community came from the following sources: "contributions" (taxes) levied on members of the community according to their standing, 30 dinar per annum for the poor and one thousand dinar for the very rich; payments for permanent pews in the synagogue; income from various services provided by the houses of prayer; voluntary donations and contributions (including monies given by the Town Council); revenue

from last wills and testaments, holy institutions, and communal funds and agencies; income from renting communal buildings and other real estate owned by the Communal Council. (The Community owned 40 different buildings and received rent for 173 homes held in trusteeship).

Communal funds were mainly devoted to setting up and maintaining synagogues and schools and to helping the poor. The latter had at their disposal three special funds, which may be regarded as social welfare agencies in the modern sense.

The "Bikur Holim" (Sick Aid) fund supported families left without means of support following the illness of the breadwinner. The latter category included not only the father of the family, but also the elder son who provided the family's livelihood. This fund worked as a modern 'National Insurance' fund, although it operated on a purely voluntary basis without any clearcut committments on anyone's part. The manner whereby the grant was made was in a personal form. It would be given every Thursday (to provide for Sabbath Eve) by two special agents who would call on the families of the sick men.

The "Matanot Le'Evyonim" (Gifts for the Poor) fund was aimed at improving the diet level of poor pupils. They would receive breakfast and luncheon in a special eating place not far from the school.

Likewise the "Malbish Irrumim" (Clothing the Naked) fund was aimed at helping poor schoolchildren. Its monies would purchase clothing, footwear and study equipment for these children. Moreover the fund would also pay for private tuition during the summer holidays when the less brilliant pupils would be coached for the entrance examinations of the coming school year.

These three communal funds served ramified social welfare aims, the kind which welfare states now provide.

In addition to the aforementioned there also operated in Bitol the WIZO organization that took upon itself to mobilize dowries for the brides of poor families. This was a weighty financial burden because most of the community's brides were not well off and the tradition of giving a dowry to the bridegroom was deeply rooted in the Jewish community of Bitol.

The funds were managed by committees, each with a membership of five to seven persons, and each committee had a chairman, a treasurer and a controller of its own. These management committees kept in constant contact with former Bitol Jews who had emigrated to the New World and prospered there. Their former fellow congregants sent fairly respectable donations at regular intervals. In 1927, for example, the "Malbish Arrumim" fund received donations to the value of $1,000 from North American lands. That was a considerable sum for those days.

But the most regular and orderly source of the funds was a special tax named "Pecheh" which every member of the Jewish community was expected to pay, in keeping with his capacity to give. This tax also paid for buying wood for heating the stoves of the poor in the cold winter months, and also for buying flour for the needy during Festivals.

Another income, that served for these and similar services, came from holding special religious ceremonies. For example the Rabbi would sell in the synagogue by public sale, every Sabbath, the right to untie the silk band that enwrapped the Scrolls of the Holy Law (the "Glila"), and in the same way was auctioned the right to read from the Holy Law.

Among the characteristic customs of the community, worthy of mention, were the preparations for weddings that obliged the bridegroom (and not the bride) to remain concealed in his home for eight consecutive days

before the wedding day. Prior to that there were held negotiations between emissaries of the bride's family and the parents of the bridegroom on the marriage arrangements and the level of the dowry - and the bridegroom would allocate two per cent of the money to the community's coffers.

The ritual of purification of the dead and burial ceremonies were managed by the "Hevra Kadisha" (Burial Society) to which belonged men and women of 50 and above. A group of ten members of the Society would call at the deceased person's home in order to purify the body and dress it in a festive garb specially tailored to its size immediately after his/her death. The bereaved family would honour the members of the Society with hardboiled eggs and spirits. The wealthy would pay for these services while the poor did not. After the burial ceremony the bereaved family would shut themselves up at home for two days and for the coming year an 'Eternal Light' would burn in their home for the salvation of the deceased person's soul.

Sabbath was very strictly observed in Bitol and the concept of "Goy of Sabbath" (a Gentile who made the fire and performed unavoidable duties around the house) was also in currency here too as in East European communities. When the emergency arose of paying the non-Jewish help before the Sabbath was out, he was asked to take the money by himself from the drawer where they kept their valuables.

Religious values only were imposed for many years on communal education and until quite recently the children were only educated in religious classes. In addition Bitol had five houses of religious study with 250 students. Only at the turn of the 20th century was there opened a French Jewish school where the children were taught a general curriculum by Jewish teachers.

After the First World War Jewish schoolchildren in Bitol started moving over to State primary schools and high schools. It was then that the first Jewish youth movements entered the scene - Hashomer Hatzair and Techelet Levan - which educated to Zionism and they numbered at their peak some 250 boys and girls.

In the period betwixt the World Wars when Leon Kamhi was active in Zionist leadership in Bitol and sent hundreds of youngsters and entire families to Eretz Israel, the erstwhile prosperous Jewish community began its steep decline. Indeed its position was worse economically than other Jewish communities throughout Yugoslavia. Statistics indicate that out of the 823 Jewish families living in Bitol in 1932 there were 46 categorised as wealthy, 138 belonging to the middle class, 267 poor families and 331 in utter poverty. The Jews engaged in peddling, porterage, cobblery, and other diverse trades bordering on the unskilled, and Jewish women were forced to be domestic servants for the wealthy Jewish families in the cities of Yugoslavia and Greece. Some 450 out of the 823 families were supported by the Communal Council and the various charitable agencies.

The fact of sharp poverty which was the lot of so many in the Bitol community brought many to emigrate and facilitated the Zionist awakening, and thereby saved over half of its members from destruction.

After the Second World War a few dozen Jewish families who had escaped from the fate of the rest by virtue of their Spanish passports still lived in Bitol. But they too abandoned the town in the matter of a few years.

Today there only remains in Bitol one lonely Jew.

The synagogues have been destroyed, the Jewish cemetery that served the community for over 500 years now

is overrun with weeds and its gravestones are broken and their inscriptions erased. Only a modest monument, to be found near the Town Square, reminds the older citizens of Bitol and informs the newer ones that not so long ago the city had an ancient Jewish community that was wiped off the face of the earth. As if it had never been.

5. Out of Despair - Comes Hope

In 1936 the Zionist Federation of Yugoslavia was brought to extend economic and moral assistance to the Jews of Bitol, half of whom had reached a desperate situation and were on the verge of starvation. Leon Kamhi, the leader of the community, sought the solution of his community's distress in two ways: by encouraging Jews to leave the place and go to settle in Eretz-Israel, and by establishing an emergency fund for aiding the needy. These two ways obliged him to resort to the aid of the Zionist Federation of Yugoslavia, with whose leadership he was in close and comradely contact.

In order to have his fellow congregants gain entry to British-ruled Palestine, Kamhi had to obtain immigrant certificates and these were allotted to Yugoslavia by the World Zionist Executive in a rather limited form. Leon Kamhi would entreat the Executive of the Zionist Federation in Zagreb to allocate to Bitol a much higher number of certificates than his community's relative percentage as per the entire Jewish community of Yugoslavia. However, he succeeded in his purpose year after year. Not only did his power of persuasion help him in his entreaties with the men who handed out the certificates but the fact that he managed to establish in Bitol a warm and enthusiastic Zionist Movement.

The need for finding material means to support his

community led Leon Kamhi to Zagreb also. Apart from the fairly heavy tax he imposed on the wealthier Jews of Bitol – and there were few of them at that – Kamhi also sought to share the lion's share of the burden with the Zionist Federation of Yugoslavia.

Traces of his activities we can find in the report of the Federation for 1936:

"The conditions of want and utter destitution wherein live the Jews of southern Serbia (Macedonia) and especially in the town of Bitol have obliged us to devote special efforts to finding suitable ways of providing constructive aid to this part of our community. A special effort has been made to amass data whereby we can ensure a more decent living for these Jews, particularly the youth".

As part of this operation, the General-Secretary of the Federation, Dr. Rudolf Buchwald left for the south of Yugoslavia. Accompanied by Leon Kamhi he toured the Jewish communities of Macedonia and paid special attention to Bitol.

The Zionist Archives in Jerusalem contain a most illuminating report that emerged from Dr. Buchwald's visit to Bitol's Jewish community. This is a most colourful reportage, written in the best tradition and style of Central European journalism. Dr. Buchwald provided us with a very tangible and lively description of the way of life and conditions of living of the Jews of Bitol in those days. The reportage was published in the organ of Yugoslav Zionists - "Zhidov" (The Jew) - a weekly that was printed in Serbo-Croatian in the inter-war years. Its special value lies in the accurate report of the Bitol community, and thus I found it fit to include its translation.

Dr. Buchwald's article was entitled: "Via the Jewish Neighbourhoods of Southern Serbia". And I quote as follows:

"I encountered them amid a volume of tongues and multiplicity of folk styles, whether amid the colourful garb of the villagers of southern Serbia, or among the agile fez-wearing Turkish men and their veiled wives, or among the white-capped Albanians with their broad sashes on their waists; amidst the horrendous noise of the Levant, I saw them progressing like so many shadows, their beards descending to their waists, and from their eyes peered the wisdom of generations. These Jews walked around amid all this, wearing their kaftans and fezes, with a special kind of nobility. Many are garbed in tatters, the relics of the uniforms of the various armies that have marched through these regions: the Turks, the Bulgarians, the Serbs, and the Germans. These Jews who were so strange and yet so dear and near. My brethren.

"They were witnesses of the diverse processes of development that swept these regions, of revolutions, of wars. They were recipients of the influences of various cultures that penetrated the area – whether of Byzantium and Hellenism in the days of yore, or the Turkish and the Albanian, whether the Serbian or the Bulgarian. Each of them leaving behind a residue and having inscribed its impression on them. Nevertheless they preserved their unique qualities as Jews and fashioned a special Jewish type that exists nowhere else the wide world over.

"This is a world unto itself. Creation within creation. Its contradictions overflow its limits. Conservative and possessing pure Jewish values that were not assimilated and were not distorted.

"I reached Bitol on Friday afternoon. I walked across an old wooden bridge into the eastern part of the town, to the old market quarter. And suddenly, just as if by miracle, as a chapter out of ancient legend, I encounter an aged man emerging from the narrow alleyway and in a chanting voice calls on the shopkeepers to close their

stores. "Sabbath Eve, Jews. Sabbath Eve." Thereafter one hears the crash of closing shutters and the clatter of turning keys. The iron gates are closed to a metallic sound. After one or two moments, silence prevails. The Sabbath has progressed through the Jews' Quarter.

"The Jewish Quarter of Bitol. What a sorrowful landscape. I pay notice to the fact that many stores are out of use. Their display windows are empty, the signs erased, the places abandoned. A scene of utter neglect. My companion (Leon Kamhi-U.O.) told me that rents are very dear, and often reach 30-50 dinar a month. Many Jewish merchants cannot afford them. This is the appearance of the commercial centre of the city which in the past served as the capital of the Turkish district, the residency of consuls of 12 countries, the junction of ramified trade routes. Then (in the 19th Century, and the early part of the 20th —U.O.) the population of Bitol numbered 80,000 persons. Whereas today (1936) it is less than 30,000. There were nearly 8,000 Jews in the town, today there remain only 3,300. The big emigration began as far back as 1910. It went to North Africa, mainly to New York. Today there live in North America over 3,000 former Bitol residents. In South America and especially in Chile, there reside half that number; in Greece from 1,100 to 1,500. A few hundred have moved to Egypt and France, while 800 have dispersed throughout the cities of Yugoslavia. At least 1,000 Jews from Bitol live in Eretz-Israel.

"Most of Bitol's Jews live outside their place of origin. It is said that Jews who came from Bitol and now live in New York still suffer from poverty and want in contrast to their brethen from other places. They keep to themselves and do not come in contact with other Jews in New York. They have formed congregations and opened synagogues of their own, and continue to conduct their way of life just as if they were still in Bitol. It would appear

that the transition to productive trades is harder for them than crossing the ocean. In Eretz-Israel too – to exclude the pioneers – the former residents of Bitol kept to their old trades: small tailors, cobblers – not even real shoemakers.

"In contrast to the above, in Chile – apparently due to their knowledge of Spanish – the process of assimilation was much quicker. There are even intellectuals who originate from Bitol. Some of the emigrants managed to make money and occasionally visit their old hometown and send money for charitable purposes.

"The Ghetto, the old Jewish Quarter spreads between the old market place to the Jewish cemetery outside the city bounds. It is called "Cortizus" – in the language of the local Jews. Small houses that are neglected and near to collapsing. One of the old men of the place told of how the Jewish neighbourhoods came into being in the various parts of the city. Contrary to other places, it was not the authorities that forced the Jews to act in this manner. The Jews from their own initiative and resources built separate districts in order to live therein by themselves and thereby preserve intact their Jewish way of life. However today the bonds linking the Jews to the Ghetto are those of poverty and want.

"The further we go the more sorry is the state of the houses. The homes are very dark inside, not a ray of sunshine penetrates to the interior. Each room serves an entire family. There is neither light nor cleanliness. I stand aghast. The scene is not alien to me, I have seen it before, elsewhere! These houses lack all privacy, with unlighted interiors and mounting filth. I know of these Jews who live away from the fresh air and lacking minimal means of a livelihood. I remember; Michael Gould, Lunders, Shalom Asch. I read rather realistic descriptions in their works. That same "smell of poverty", referred to

by Michael Gould when he described the East Side. I recall the shocking descriptions of Jews in Carpatho-Russia in Lunders' work. However the Jewish Ghetto of Southern Serbia has still to find its writer. Journalists and authors who have passed through this region have registered many details but it is surprising how they failed to notice the unique qualities of this Ghetto. It is so interesting from a social and folklorist aspect – in their most human element.

"The women stand outside the houses. They wear a head band decorated with the Toquados – a piece of jewelery made up of coins. They launder, cook and clean. All their lives take place outside the house and in the alleyway. On steaming summer nights they bring out the family mattresses into the open. There they sleep under the stars. On nights like this the alleyways become one huge bedroom. Discretion, privacy, shame and cleanliness – are all relative concepts.

"Many houses sport a Magen David sign (Star of David) and the year of construction in Hebrew lettering. Even political propaganda has penetrated the Jewish Quarter: one can still read the remains of faded posters geared to the Jewish voter. They are written in Rashi Hebrew lettering but in the Ladino vernacular: "All of you vote for.....". The Hebrew letter and Ladino jargon predominate as a medium of communications among the Jews. In these are printed placards and posters, advertisement and commercial publicity. The old books full of moral preaching were printed in this manner, and they still survive in many homes in Bitol. These are the works of the Jewish sages of Bitol, like Haim Raphael Esquiya, Haham Shlomo Kamhi and others.

"The invitations to my lecture were printed in this way. They read "Unna Importante Conferencia" (An Important Meeting). The gathering took place on the Sabbath at the Great Synagogue: "Kahal Kadosh Aragon". The building

is a fine combination of the Spanish and Eastern influences: many carpets, ancient candelabra, the heavy decoration of the Holy Ark, antique chairs and even a "kuba" recalling the interiors of mosques. The synagogue was overflowing with people. Even the old men who do not understand the language (Serbo-Croation=U.A.) came to listen.....and hear of Zion. They all paid close attention. The women's gallery was also packed with women wearing the "Toquados" head bands, for the women of Bitol are very interested in the Land of Israel.

"The Jewish woman of southern Serbia is a special matter. Some 40-45 years ago under the Ottoman Empire they were as veiled as their Moslem sisters. This feminine modesty is not alien to the spirit of Israel. Today too the woman bears the main burden of life in the Ghetto as mother and housewife. The father is the authority at home and his patriarchal status holds good even for the bad times when money is very scarce. The woman always stands aside, in the shadow. Traditional education is only for boys. It can be put to the credit of the Zionist Movement that even in this sphere it has brought about a certain change. The Jewish woman, although illiterate and uneducated, has begun to have her children educated. She is also beginning to send her daughters to acquire an education. She is herself Orthodox in religion, and this is a mixture of upholding the traditional patterns and cleaving to superstitions. The women of Bitol believe until this very day in spirits and ghosts, in the evil eye and in the inscription that can cure ailments. . . . .

"On the morrow we continued with our tour of the Jewish Quarter. Once again the same scene of neglect, of ruined houses, of broken walls. This is what remains still from the shelling of the last war (World War 1 – U.O.) when the Jewish Quarter was badly hit. Nobody has bothered to repair the damage. The ruins still remain like

Dr. R. Buchwald (Zagreb):

Kroz jevrejske mahale Južne Srbije

Pitanje Jevreja u Južnoj Srbiji, još uvijek vrlo akutno, počelo se pretresati u posljednje vrijeme u želji da se rješenje toga pitanja makne sa mrtve točke. S tim u vezi je u utorak, 10 novembra, održao dr. Buchwald u Židovskom narodnom društvu u Zagrebu, vrlo uspjelo predavanje sa projekcijama o svojim opažanjima i utiscima sa puta po Južnoj Srbiji. Predavanje je pobudilo veliki interes i zato ga donosimo u izvodu.

U vrevi jezika i haosu stilova, između šarenih nošnja južnosrbijanskih seljaka, između živahnih Turaka u fesovima i Turkinja u feredžama, između Arnauta sa svojim bijelim pojasima i kapama, usred zaglušne levantske vike, gledao sam ih kako koracaju, kao sjenke, sa dugim bradama i očima, punim nekog praiskonskog znanja: Jevreji. U svojim kaftanima i sa fesovima, dostojanstvene pojave; mnogi u dronjcima raznih armija koje su prolazile ovim krajevima: turske, bugarske, srpske, njemačke. Jevreji, meni tako strani i tako bliski. Moja braća.

Nad njima su prohujali kataklizmi, ratovi i prevrati. Bili su izloženi utjecaju različnih kultura — bizantijske, grčke, bugarske, turske, arnautske, srpske — od svake su poprimili ponešta, a ipak sačuvali svoju jevrejsku osobitost, i tako stvorili osobiti tip Jevreja kako ga nema nigdje na svijetu.

Svijet za sebe. Kosmos u kosmosu. Pun protivnosti, pun konzervatizma i neiskvarenih jevrejskih vrednota.



ške, željezne kapije i starinske rešetke, sa svojim velikim ključevima. Pomalo — sve se smiruje. Šabat je prošao kroz jevrejsku čaršiju.

Tužnu sliku pruža ta jevrejska čaršija. Upada mi u oči da mnogi dućani — možda svaki drugi — uopće nisu iznajmljeni: izlozi prazni, firme skinute, lokali napušteni — slika pustoši i mrtvila! Moj pratilac mi priča da mjesečne kirije iznose 30 do 50 dinara — niti toliko



G. Leon Kamhi u razgovoru s jevrejskim hamalinom

ne mogu da plate! Tako izgleda trgovačka četvrt grada koja je negda bila centar velike trgovine, glavni grad turskog vilajeta, sjedište 12 konzulata! Tada je Bitolj imao 80.000 stanovnika, a danas nema više nego 30.000. A Jevreja je bilo oko 8000, a danas ih imade svega 3.300. Još 1910 započela je emigracija u Sjevernu Ameriku, najviše u New York. Danas imade u Sjevernoj Americi možda

A photostat copy of an article written by Dr. Buchwald in "Zhidov" on 13.11.36.

an open sore. On our way we met an aged man. "Buenos Dias" he said. It is Zhido the porter. A Jewish porter, and whatsmore an unemployed one at that. What will the 120 Jewish porters of this city do since it lost its economic prowess? Zhido the aged has a dignified mien. A fine Sephardic personality, aristocratic despite his rags. His eyes are deepset and very handsome I wondered to myself: what depths are concealed by this poor man whose glance has been toughened by poverty and hard labour, and who cannot even put one word to another in order to express himself? ! Once again I thought of this poor old man at a later occasion when I heard Dr. Licht (Chairman of the Yugoslav Zionist Federation of that period – U.O.) appeal to the Jews of Bitol: 'Tell that same Jew; that he is a descendant of Maimonedes and Yehuda Halevi. . . .".

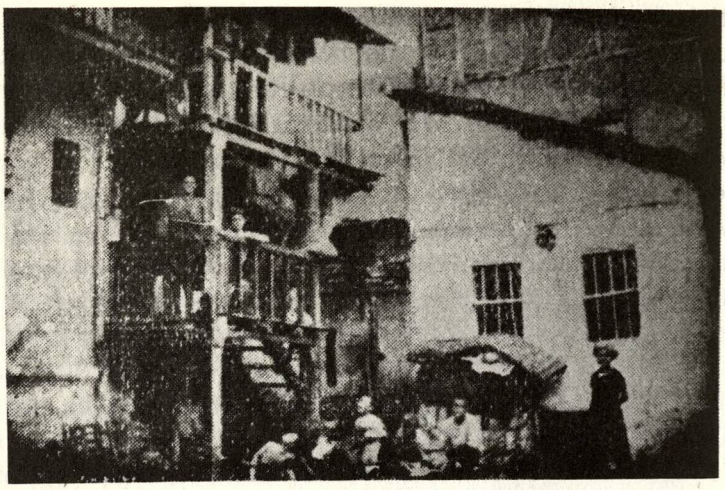
"We continue. The children of the Jewish Quarter accompany us. They are uneducated children, lacking in control and supervision. There are quite a few hundred street children like them in Bitol. At the outskirts of the Quarter one comes across the communal outhouses set up by communal funds for the very poor Jews, named "Chipitlik". Everything I have seen until now are utterly luxurious compared to these wooden huts. There are about a dozen of them, packed together, encircling a dirty courtyard. They are nothing but dark caves wherein live, packed into a few square metres, families of six and ten persons. The children are pale and unhealthy. Some are good-looking and intelligent of expression. A 17 year old girl approaches us, carrying a baby in her arms. This is the little sister, the youngest (and ninth) member of a family. She speaks of their destitution. The father is pleased on the day he can earn 5-6 dinar. He is a man in despair, and expects nothing from anywhere. He is passive and adapts himself to an apathetic, oriental mood.

"The sight that greeted my eyes caused my words to

stick in my throat. My companion (Leon Kamhi) – as if reading my thoughts – said: "Why do they not house these families elsewhere? Why do they not instruct them in productive trades? Our community is very poor. The wealthy are few. We have had many surveys, many commissions have been here, many reports have been written. Zvi Rothmuller (today Dr. Zvi Rotham – U.O.) unveiled at the time the problem of the Jews of Bitol in his reportage, but the concrete results are nil. One of my friends in a moment of despair wished to set fire to the 'Chipitlik'. With difficulty I managed to restrain him. I think now that I was mistaken. Perhaps that was the most desirable solution. Thereby would have been aroused our Jewish public opinion and confront them with a fait accomplit."

"Leon Kamhi spoke excitedly, sincerely. He was particularly upset for the children and the youth. "We help them as much as we can. After all we cannot expect that the charitable fund of Bitol will be bigger than elsewhere, moreover the wealthy stratum is very small. The children feel they are getting charity. They eat poor food at the 'Mensa' and get old uniforms instead of clothing. Sometimes we have to separate the children from their parents, even by force. The child sees around him only poverty, destitution, narrowing horizons and ignorance. When he has grown up under these circumstances he has no choice but to follow in his father's footsteps: to be a porter, a street peddler, and in the best circumstance – to be an assistant to a shopkeeper. . . ."

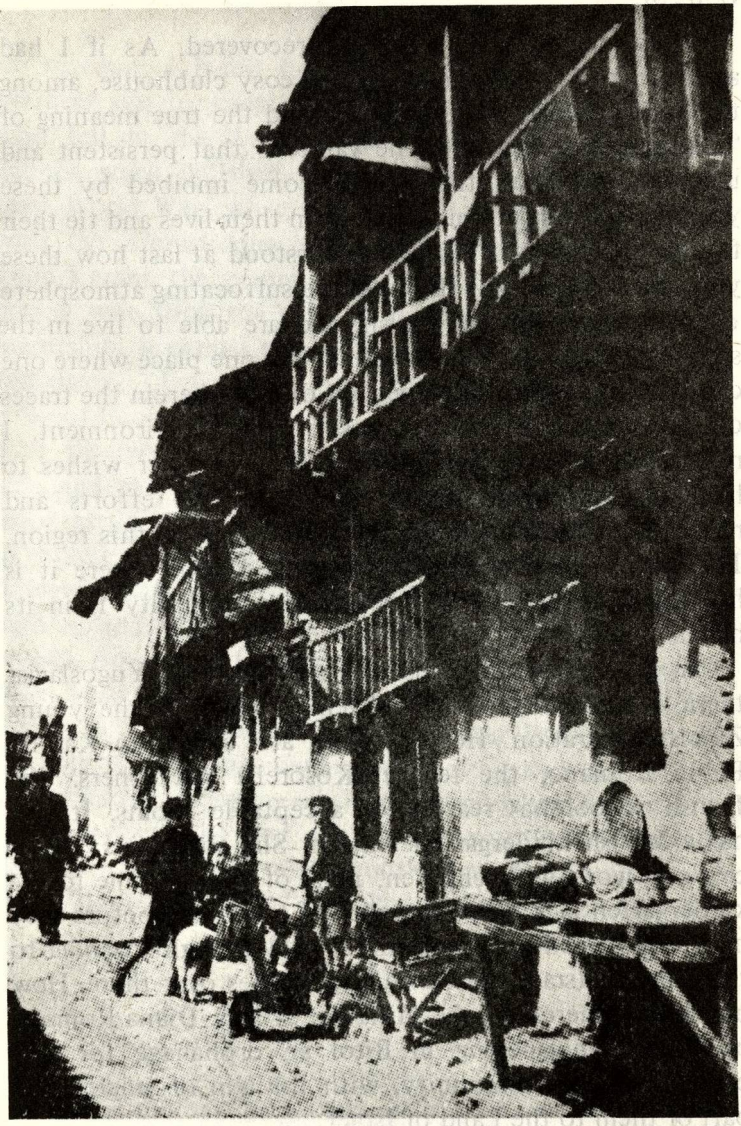
"In the course of our tour we meet a group of youngsters organized in a Zionist youth movement. It is called "Hazak Ve'amatz" (Be Strong and of Good Courage). They take us to their clubrooms. Here at least the rooms are illuminated with slogans and pictures. When we enter they receive us with a fine song "The Song of the



The Jewish quarter of Bitol. 1936.

The head of the "Malbish Irumim" (Clothing Aid) Society with poor children in Bitol. 1930.





A house in the Ghetto during the 1930

Valley".

"Here, for the first time, I recovered. As if I had awoken from a nightmare. In this cosy clubhouse, among these youngsters, I suddenly grasped the true meaning of 'halutziut' (pioneering). The value of that persistent and undying aspiration that had become imbibed by these youths – to bring about a change in their lives and tie their fate to the Land of Israel. I understood at last how these youngsters were being stifled in the suffocating atmosphere of their town and they wish, and are able to live in the spirit of Israel. The youth club is the one place where one can breathe freely. One does not discern therein the traces of pressures and crowdedness of their environment. I resolved with a firm conviction that whoever wishes to help south Serbian Jewry must aim his efforts and resources at the advancement of the youth of this region. That same vital, serious youth that knows where it is heading. The future of the Jewish community is in its hands.

"In Bitol, more than elsewhere in southern Yugoslavia, there is already felt the enlivening spirit of the young Zionist generation. Here at work are our Leon Kamhi, Rabbi Romano, the teacher Kosorella and others. The Jewish school has reasonably acceptable rooms. It also has a Jewish kindergarten teacher. She complains: "How can one work with children, most of whom come to the kindergarten lacking even a slice of bread and before they have even tasted a drop of milk! ". My thoughts wander to the Land of Israel, to the children's lives over there. How important, therefore, the initiative of Mrs. Diana Romano of Zagreb in opening in Bitol an orphanage for 140 orphans of the community, with the aim of transferring part of them to the Land of Israel. . .

"A restless and optimistic spirit has been introduced by Zionism into the Jewish street. There are also revelations

of heroism: I heard here of an old man who sent his younger son to Eretz Israel so as to replace his older son who fell in the Arab disturbances. The beginnings of Zionist work in Bitol were in 1918, at the end of the First World War, when a group of young Jews caught up with the Zionist idea began to influence their brethren. Leon Kamhi, the young, yet eternally adult man, was the person who took the helm of the Movement, assumed its leadership, breathed into it the spirit of enthusiasm, faith and vision. I find it unimaginable to think of Bitol without Leon Kamhi.

"I thought well of all these things that my eyes had seen and my senses absorbed during the days I spent in Bitol, as the railway carried me far away from this region so replete with harsh colours, contrasts and contradictions. A region that is full of poverty and destitution side by side with optimism and hope. Despairing old age besides vital youth. Apathy and indifference together with daring and faith. And so as the variegated landscape of southern Serbia retreats into the distance, I hear in my inner ear the monotonous song performed by the pale, wan children of the 'heder' (religious school) in Bitol. It was a faint tune emerging from the past, that was interrupted by the vital and highspirited calls of the youths from the Zionist youth club; "Hazak Ve'ematz" (Be Strong and of Good Courage).

6. New Songs

The background to the emergence of the Zionist Movement and the organization of the youth of Bitol can only be appreciated against the backdrop of degenerating poverty and destitution. On the other hand it is difficult to grasp to its full extent the problems affecting the organization of a free and rebellious youth movement of this kind without a correct and proper perspective of the nature of the patriarchal rule in the Jewish community.

The emergence of the Zionist Movement in Bitol did not carry a purely ideological character. It became the banner of all who wished for social progress and raised the flag of change. This first of all called for emancipation, progress and rejection of paralysing poverty. The question of the revival of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel was a function of these aspirations.

There is still extant, a document which offers us an insight into the measure of poverty and the stratification of the Jewish population of Bitol according to professions and social levels in the years between the world wars. The document was compiled by Rabbi Avraham Romano, a Zionist and Sephardic Haham, himself a resident of Bitol at the time. It came in the form of a sociological article published in 1932 in the "Iebreska Glas" (No. 6) together with the analyses and conclusions of the author, which at the time evoked a considerable furore. The findings of

Rabbi Romano – the main points of which we have mentioned in previous chapters – demonstrate well the socio-economic background of the Zionist Movement of Bitol, above all, as a movement of protest:

Rabbi Romano makes clear in his essay that Bitol, in contrast to Skopje, the capital of the Republic, did not benefit at all from industrial progress. There was not even one modern factory in the town and the workshops gave employment only to their few owners plus one worker apiece.

In the whole Jewish community of Bitol there were not even five really wealthy men for a population of 3,600 persons. The livelihood of most of them was very precarious. Of the three professionals in Bitol, not even one of them had been born there.

"There are a considerable number of merchants, who in fact are nothing but poor traders in haberdashery, "Romano wrote. "There is quite a number of artisans but they are not real specialists in their trade. The cobbler does not fashion new shoes but repairs old ones. The tailor does not sew new suits, but repairs and mends with needle and cotton the torn garment. Shopkeepers who have lost out, have begun to lease tiny garden patches and grow vegetables and fruit there." (Thus emerged the farming nucleus in Bitol, from among whose numbers there arose the Zionists who settled in Kfar Syrkin, and prospered in Israel. At a much earlier date there were pioneers who settled Beit-Sha'arim – that was in the 1920's. They had a very hard time of it until water was found. Thereafter the village prospered and they were even joined by sons of Nahalal – U.O.).

Bitol had 823 families in 1932 categorised into the following groups: 88 – in a good situation; 139 – middling; 267 – poor; 331 – destitute.

Rabbi Avraham Romano then classifies the breadwinners

in Bitol according to their trades and occupations, giving a most illuminating picture:

47 merchants
69 small shopkeepers
14 milkmen
56 old-clothes men
62 cobblers
61 vendors of fruit and vegetables in the market
19 tailor-repairmen
10 leather vendors
40 small flour vendors
22 assistants to grocerers
24 meat salesmen
23 clerks in private firms
101 porters
127 lacking any occupation

None of them were born in Bitol) 1 dental technician
1 physician
1 lawyer

The existence of a large number of Jewish porters in Bitol was an unusual phenomenon, quite unknown elsewhere in Yugoslavia. The publication of this data caused a real sensation at the time in Zagreb, then the cultural and Zionist centre of the country. It was unheard of that a non-Jew would buy goods from another non-Jew and that a Jew would carry them on his back, instead of making a living as a go-between. These porters were in fact small merchants and shopkeepers who one day found themselves faced with destitution and empty shelves. They locked up their stores and stood in line in the market-place to find work as porters. Their number rose to become one-eighth of the Jewish breadwinners in the town.

Rabbi Romano adds:

"A father of a family who fails to provide the minimum livelihood removes his small son from school and sends him into the streets to sell fruit, vegetables, sunflower seeds or toilet paper. Very few were inducted as apprentices to artisans on the assumption that they could earn something at the conclusion of three-four months of training, however, those trades that provided some sort of living during the Turkish rule, no longer can sustain their artisans.

Sometimes the father will hand over his son to a house of commerce where he works as a messenger and thereby condemns his son to serve all his life in an unskilled occupation. The father would hand his daughter into domestic service with the womenfolk of the Gentiles – and thus the Jews of Bitol – adult and young – become the drawers of water and hewers of wood. Many are the street traders whose maximum income reaches 120 dinar a week. (200 dinar were worth £1 sterling. The wage of a worker in Eretz Israel in those times was £2 a week, and even that was considered very bad – U.O.).

The young marry at 18-20 and are obliged to live with their parents. Rent is about 70-90 dinar a week, and almost equals an entire week's pay.

Housing consists of dank and shaky structures, that indeed are a danger to their inhabitants. The crowdedness and density resembles the chicken run. Housewives toil all day to introduce order and cleanliness in their tiny homes, but to no avail. Too many feet scramble through the home.

"The menu of the family is meagre and cheap. In winter they eat mainly beans. In summer – lettuce, egg-plants, green peppers and water melon. Only once a week, on the Sabbath, is the menu enriched by a modest portion of meat."

Out of this factual analysis, Rabbi Romano draws his conclusions concerning the nature and personality of the community. It was this, that brought down on him the wrath of Zagreb.

"The Jew is cowardly and broken-spirited, and often lazy in the oriental sense", wrote the Sephardic Haham residing in Bitol. "He is suspicious and lacks any faith in the authorities. He is more of a skinflint than prudent. He neglects his appearance. He lacks all ambition and does not strive to improve his position. A fatalist, he is not ready to fashion his fate with his own hands. He suffers silently until the boiling point and then explodes. He is enslaved by superstition. His minimal schooling he acquired mainly in the religious school (cheder) and regards the world through the prism of religion.

"The Jew considers that others and not himself are responsible for his sorry lot, and least of all does he assume the burden of guilt. He complains about the community, the authorities of the State, the Zionist leaders and the charitable and welfare institutions. Only he himself is cleared in his eyes.

"The environment here is destructive. The demographic variegation is national and all the spoken tongues are uninspiring and primitive. The child and the youth have no example to follow. They have no one to envy and no one to contest. They lack any criterion for considering their world. All they see around them is material and spiritual poverty, and lacking any other point of reference, conclude that that is the way of the world, everywhere, even beyond their narrow range of vision. Therefore they do not strive and do not aspire to achieve any target. They consider it superfluous and inconceivable to arise above and beyond their environment.

"The result: out of 120 Jewish children studying at

the high school, only 4 – 5 reach the top grade. In the current school year 42 children failed to pass the admittance examination to the first grade of high school – more than 2/3rds of the applicants. The main reason – lack of any knowledge of the official language – Serbian. But additional factors contributing to this reality are bad living conditions and malnutrition. The community brought its poor to live within the "melder" and there the way has been blocked to them to universal education and broadening of their horizons. Soon we will see these children joining the ranks of peddlers in the street or charity cases".

This shocking description did not pass without a reaction. No one challenged the facts, but they did take up the self-flagellation and denunciation.

"Does anyone require an interpretation of these matters? " asked Dr. Zvi Rothmuller in his reply to Rabbi Romano's essay. "Here we have been provided with a description of Bitol Jewry from the viewpoint of a member of the capitalist society, for those qualities that Romano enumerated in his community should and could be regarded in their favour: the Jew is modest and retiring; he does not involve himself in others' affairs; he observes the commandments of the Sages; he does not behove himself to the authorities; he is prudent, suffices with little and rejoices in what he has; he does not strut around, does not show off and does not pretend to a greatness which is not his; he puts his trust in the Almighty and bears his fate as patiently as possible; the Jew is full of of admiration and unshakeable faith in his ancestral religion, is educated to fear the Almighty and preserve tradition and regards life by means of belief, purity of mind and humility".

This analysis, taken from the viewpoint of the school of philosophy of the sage Hillel, naturally did not challenge the facts of life at Bitol. For it was they which caused

the great wave of emigration to the four points of the earth, and cultivated such an easy ground for the flourishing of the Zionist Movement and of youth groups desirous of effecting a drastic change in their patterns of living.

Until that period the Jews of Bitol had not yet found their way to northern Yugoslavia – although in the opinion of the national Jewish leadership it would have been possible to solve the problem of Bitol Jewry by mingling them with the more prosperous communities of the northern cities. The facts demonstrated that the process of transfer was so difficult that when it began to move, it was drastic enough to lead to emigration overseas. The emigrants wished to go so far away so as to be able to open an entirely new page in their lives. Their families having preceded them, they were ready to aid them in their new life.

Leon Kamhi sought to persuade the authorities to grant them a farmstead in Macedonia where he could settle some of Bitol's Jews, but he was unsuccessful in his efforts. The authorities claimed that there was no need for such a farmstead when sufficient agricultural schools existed in Bitol and its surroundings. The fact that these schools were closed to Jews, not because of national discrimination, but simply because they were earmarked for the sons of farmers only.

The Zionist Movement in Bitol was somewhat unusual. Not only because it encompassed a relatively higher number of youngsters for the Macedonian region, but because it did not ally to the "Sephardic trend" in Yugoslav Zionism, rather accepting the doctine of "Ashkenazic" Zagreb.

In Yugoslavia the Jews were two-thirds Ashkenazi and one-third Sephardi. The former made up the dynamic element in the Zionist Movement, headed by Dr. Alexander Licht, the adored leader of Kamhi, who was for

Yugoslav Zionists what Martin Buber and Kurt Blumenfeld were for German Zionism.

The Sephardim who resided in Belgrade regarded the concept of "nacionalita" as identical with "Statehood" and not with "nationhood". Thus they were more passive in respect of fulfillment of Zionism and settling in Zion, and tended to identify with their gentile environment and assimilate therein.

When the Sephardi Movement came into being that claimed that Sephardi Jews were being discriminated against in Eretz-Israel, many Yugoslav Jews joined its ranks with enthusiasm. Sephardi youth groups sprang up after they broke away from the Union of Yugoslav Zionist Youth, and set up societies named "Esperanza".

The supporters of "Esperanza" rejected the criticism that they tended to assimilate in the name of emancipation, and cried against the Ashkenazi: "We imbibed the Love of Zion with our mothers' milk". The Ashkenazi retort was: "We ourselves underwent assimilation a generation ago. This process is already behind us and our Zionism is that of post-assimilation. You, our Sephardi brethren, are now at the beginning of this process. You are becoming enstranged from Judaism, whereas we are returning to it."

The enthusiasts of "Esperanza" embraced Sephardi romanticism and nostalgia, leaning on the old days of brilliance. This principle serves well for the literary salon and for theatrical performances, but not further. To come to Bitol and tell its poverty-stricken Jews of the beauties of Spain and the glories of the past – that certainly did not solve their problems.

In the struggle for influence in Bitol the Ashkenazi school emerged victorious, despite the fact that they were opposed by strong Sephardi circles in the city. Leon Kamhi dictated the spirit of practical fulfillment in the

Zionist Movement. He wished not for high-sounding words, nor for nostalgic yearnings for lost days of glory, nor for an attempt at imitating the ways of the gentiles and assimilate among them, nor for highflown phrases about the emancipation of humanity as a whole. No, he urged a radical solution – the organization of pioneering youth movements, the training of their members for agricultural life and finally the move to the Land of Israel.

One must also consider the awakening of consciousness among the youth in Bitol against the background of the patriarchal regime that prevailed in the community until the 1930's. It was a rule of the adult over the young, and of the aged over the adult, with blind obedience to the person in authority.

The wind of egalitarianism and emancipation that blew through Europe and even through the cities of northern Yugoslavia for a matter of a generation or two, had not yet reached far-off and isolated Bitol. The father's domination of the family was absolute. The mother was always kept in the background, and the children were obedient, submissive and full of respectful fear. They would kiss the hands of all adults in formal meetings and the adults would act likewise with the aged.

Just as the father and the aged comprise the supreme authority in the family unit, so the rabbi and the wealthy man enjoy an unchallengeable power within the communal framework. Even the aged would kiss the rabbi's hands and they would bow before the man of property. He who holds promissory notes of members of his community can control even their religious conscience.

This situation persisted since the time when the rich took care of the poor and loaned them money out of solidarity and not in order to extract interest. Meanwhile the capitalist concept prevailed and the loan became an act of business between the two sides. Nevertheless the

spirit of feudalism still prevailed in Bitol wherein the creditor was the patron. Likewise the status of women did not change despite their having to leave the home to earn money for the family budget. Her status remained inferior and she was submissive to her husband even though often the father of the family might be unemployed and lacking all means of providing the family with a livelihood.

The Zionist Movement among Bitol's Jewish youth was therefore also a movement of protest against the patriarchal concept.

The youngsters grew up in a different political reality to that under which their parents had grown. It required the acquisition of a new language – the official Serbian and of a general education. The "meldar" and other religious schools were now entirely inadequate for their needs. Likewise French studies that were fashionable among the sons of the wealthy Jews who learned them from the schools fo the French monastic orders, did not enable the youngsters cope with the new realities.

The younger generation that grew up in Bitol in the initial period following the First World War found itself completely out of touch with reality. Its life was alien to the political environment – lacking any common linguistic and educational basis, and at the same time becoming increasingly cut off from the great Sephardi centre of Salonika. Following the Balkan Wars and World War 1, the Greek border cut off Bitol from Salonika and thereby was interrupted the flow of spiritual riches from Salonika to the Bitol community.

Slowly the youth began to seek out contacts with the more progressive Yugoslav Jewry in the northern cities. They still spoke and read Ladino and most of their organized activities were allied with that of the Communal Council – i.e. aid to the needy. Just as the aged occupied themselves with the synagogues, sick funds and mutual aid

as well as charitable agencies and Hevra Kadisha, so the youth set up similar societies – "Matanot Le'Evyonim" or "Malbish Arumim" that would provide school equipment, clothing and footwear for needy children.

Thus one could find many pupils in schools wearing the uniforms of these societies indicating that they belonged to the youth organization for mutual aid, and on their lapels a metal badge with the Hebrew initials M.I. (Malbish Irumim).

Slowly but surely things began to change by the first part of the 1930s. The first sports club "Esperanza" was opened, in time changing its name to "Noda" and finally to "Maccabi". The mutual aid societies of the youth united and became the Zionist club named "Tehiya (Renaissance) – which was founded by Leon Kamhi. The ties with Salonika in the south weakened and the spiritual centre began to emerge in the north – in far-off Zagreb – which was the scene of lively Zionist activity.

The process of emancipation in Bitol was already apparent in the 1930s. Many youngsters were already studying at Yugoslav State schools, they spoke Serbian and were also different from their parents and older brothers in their clothing and manners. The signs of underground rebellion began to appear among non-Jewish Yugoslav youth. It must be kept in mind that the country was then in the hands of the monarchistic dictatorship (until 1935) of King Alexander, and with his assassination in Marseilles, the Regent came to power. One people ruled the other nationalities of Yugoslavia, and all the nationalist and Socialist trends were outlawed. Though the opposition activities were forced underground, even so there were those who openly gave vent to their views.

The new generation in Btiol joined this movement. It took the form of joining the underground Communist

Party or in organizing Zionist-Socialist youth movements. Hashomer Hatzair was the most active and strongest of all, among the Union of Zionist Youth of Yugoslavia and it left its imprint on Bitol too.

The underground Zionist activity focused on the "Hatehiya" (Renaissance) club that was founded by Leon Kamhi. This was the place where the Zionist funds operated, the distribution of the shekel was made, and the cultural-ideological discussion meetings took place, where they debated the problems of the new world, literature and morality, and even set up an orchestra and a youth choir.

The Zionist club was almost entirely identical with the Hashomer Hatzair branch. It became the centre of cultural life for Bitol youth and therefrom emanated its influence on unorganized Jewish youth throughout the township and on the relations between the youth and their parents. The heartsearchings and concern for finding a way out of the problems of poverty and degeneration facing the community took on a more radical approach in this atmosphere. This background of Zionist yearning and the revival of national life in the ancient homeland provided a backdrop against which emerged the rebellion against the family and patriarchal rule of the community. The young felt themselves much braver, and wiser and with broader horizons than thier parents. Obedience and blind submissiveness were replaced by independence of thought and an upright stature. This was accompanied by abandoning the observance of the traditional mitzvot (religious commandments), and what the parents considered "wantonness" because it involved common activities of boys and girls within one social framework.

The collision was inevitable, it found expression within the family unit as well as the wider communal framework. It even happened that a number of parents of members

of the "Hatehiya" club complained to the Yugoslav police of the underground activities of the organization. Complaints of these kind were conveyed to the heads of community. It was even necessary to dismiss youth movement leaders for a time until the row settled. The youngsters encountered difficulties at the State high school which also received complaints of their extra-curricular activities. The school was as such loyal to the regime and it was forbidden for the pupils to belong to any organization other than "Sukol" (the officially sponsored athletic association) and the official Scouts Organization. This sort of complaint to the school management could bring expulsion down on the youngsters and deepened the sharp rift between the parents and communal leaders on the one hand, and the youth movement leaders and the youngsters, on the other. For some time the youths would stand on guard around the "Hatehiya" club house to warn those inside of any likely approaching danger.

However as the years progressed, the community became accustomed to the youth organization within the framework of the Zionist club, and soon it even cooperated with the club. The youth were geared to such activities as summer camps, inter-city meetings across Yugoslavia, and agricultural training for pioneering in Eretz Israel. None of these could have worked out if not for the concrete aid of the community and the allocation of considerable funds from the communal coffers. With the gradual acceptance by the communal leadership so came the parental acquiescence.

To this contributed to a great extent the persuasion of Leon Kamhi who was an energetic and talented defender of the organized youth groups before the Communal Council and the parents. The "Hatehiya" club began to organize even parents of its members for common gatherings and parties on the Festivals. The aged heard the young

speaking Hebrew, they saw the bronzed faces illuminated with the splendour of youth as they came home from summer camps, they hearkened to the songs of the choir and the music of the orchestra, to the rendition of "Hatikva" and to the hopes filling their children's hearts – and theirs too expanded with pride.

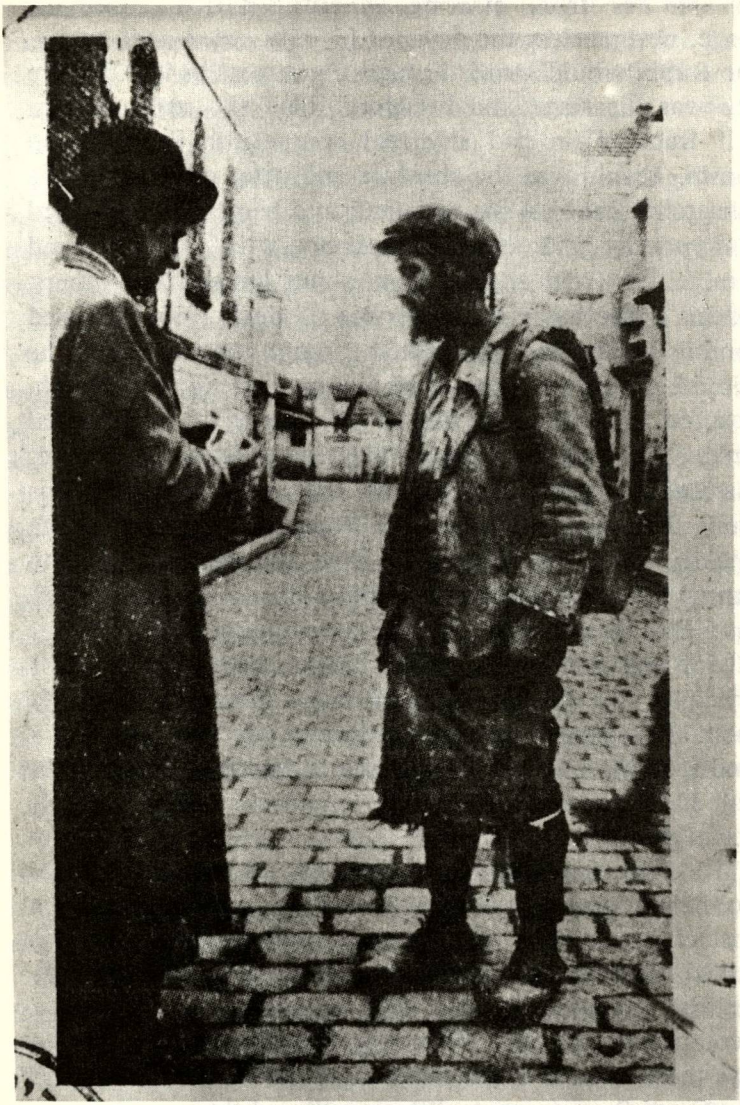
For this tremendous change – slow, gradual but far-reaching that later brought parents to follow their sons to live in the Land of Israel, the community had to thank one man and one man alone – Leon Kamhi.

7. Leon Kamhi

Dr. Zvi Rothmuller (today Dr. Rothem) visited Bitol in the early 1930s, in his capacity as one of the leaders of the Zagreb Zionists, and as Secretary-General of the Jewish National Fund in Yugoslavia. He came to "the holy township" – as he would term the place – in order to give a lecture to the local youth, to meet the local Zionist leadership and communal heads. He also sought to study the material needs o fthe community, their requirements for a quota of immigration certification to Eretz-Israel and help in their organizational work. From this visit there remained imprinted on his memory – as he told me many years later – the recollection of two outstanding and contrasting personalities. Their very appearance demonstrated the nature of the revolution that had overtaken this Jewish community.

One was Rabbi J'ain, who served one of the synagogues, and accompanied Rothmuller during an afternoon walk through the city's byways. The Rabbi walked in a princely fashion, with a bodyguard marching ahead of him brandishing a heavy staff in his hand. All the Jews would approach from both sides of the street to kiss his hands with a sense of profound respect.

In his youth, Rabbi J'ain had been an actor and poetical playwright. He had retained some of the characteristics of the actor even after he assumed the robe of the Rabbinate.



Leon Kamhi in conversation with a Jewish porter in a Bitol street. (This photograph appeared in "Zhidov" on 13.11.36, as an illustration to an article of Dr. Buchwald).

He was far from evoking an authoritative patriarchal image, nevertheless the Jews of his city acted as if he did. The Rabbi would stroll through the streets as if the entire city was his stage and his glory filled the surroundings.

If Rabbi J'ain had any real competitor, it was Leon Kamhi. Kamhi was the absolute and utter contrast to the patriarchal Rabbi. A man of prose and truth, who abhorred all hypocrisy and artificial manners, who was strict and humble, far from any illusions about himself and others, and his entire being in the service of ideas. Nobody kissed Kamhi's hands when he walked through the streets, but he enjoyed no less a measure of respect and honour. Kamhi acquired his authority out of the force of his unusual personality, and from the absolute confidence he evoked. Despite the patriarchal regime that still prevailed, this young man managed to acquire respect and authority. The capacity of Leon Kamhi to have the old men of the community respect and defer to him, just as the young did, was a clear demonstration of his outstanding position.

Leon was a man of medium height, with a solidly-built physique. He would wear a broad-brimmed hat and constantly clench cigarettes between his lips. He was a good-looking man, as one can see in the few photographs that have survived. But these pictures missed out his special glance.

"He had deep eyes", recalls Dr. Rotem: "and his goodheartedness and fidelity peered from them. He had a most charming look about him, which conquered hearts, evoked empathy and readiness to do as he wished. His rule over the community was in fact unchecked. His influence encompassed not only the young but also the old. At the time there were in Bitol two congregations focused on the two Great Synagogues – "Portugal" and "Aragon". Leon would visit both of them. But not as a worshipper, rather as a preacher. He was not observant and did not grow a

beard. He converted the synagogue into a platform for his preaching. Even this was accepted uncomplainingly by the old men. He exuded a patriarchal charisma that no one could resist. Thus the old men did not regard him as a rebel – although in fact he was just that."

Leon Kamhi's talent for speaking and preaching. was perhaps his greatest one. He would convert people to his ideas by his words, his enthusiasm and by his manner of expression. He succeeded in keeping his audience's attention on every subject he talked about – and there were few he did avoid mentioning. His education was much broader than that he could have acquired at the schools he attended in Bitol. He was the clear case of the self-educated man, who had bought books and taught himself many languages. In his preaching he would mention current affairs – in the community, the Jewish world, international politics, but first of all he would speak of Eretz-Israel. Everything would lead to Eretz-Israel and everything would be inspired thereby. The destitution of the poor in Bitol , the decline in the international situation, the rise of anti-Semitism, even the problems of the daughters of Bitol who had no bridegrooms in the offing. All these ailments could find their cure in one place – in Eretz-Israel.

Leon Kamhi also learned Hebrew and was able to converse in it quite freely, and even to read and write in it. He would always include Hebrew phrases in his articles and translated some of Bialik's poetry.

Each of his speeches would commence in Hebrew, and thereby he introduced a sense of Israel. People would listen to him with bated breath.

During the week that Zvi Rothmuller visited Bitol, his interpreter was Leon, for the speech he delivered to the community at the Aragon synagogue. Rothmuller, himself, spoke Serbian, whereas most of his audience only under-

stood Ladino. "Leon translated my words simultaneously and did it in a most exciting manner. I saw how attentive the audience was and how their eyes glittered, and I realised that Leon was conveying my words in a much better form than the original. It was then that I realised his talent and the flame of the man's faith."

Twenty-eight years after the death of Leon Kamhi, these recollections about him may well sound as part of an eulogy. When a man dies, one only spells out on his grave his particular qualities and knowingly avoid his failings.

Quite a different approach must be demanded of the one who seeks to portray a true picture of a public personality. It is difficult to write of, and even more difficult to read of, a man who is portrayed lacking any weaknesses and opponents – although he wished to bring about a real revolution in the patterns of life of his generation. People do not walk the face of the earth enwrapped in the magnificent packaging of noble virtues. Generally speaking there is a mutual relationship between strength and weakness, and these two characteristics manage to coexist as the diverse and harmonious elements of a man's personality.

With that, it is a fact that all the testaments that I succeeded in collecting from people who knew Leon Kamhi in person – were phrased in one style. The same applies to written testaments that are scattered in all kinds of places. All of them refer to a man whose life was devoted to others, who never sought any benefits for himself, but only rejoiced in helping others.

Leon Kamhi emerges as a public figure who did not seek power, neither honour nor money. A person who is entirely good and all owe him thanks. If there were those who disagreed with his views, they would nevertheless regard him with open admiration and never became personal rivals. If anyone did hold a grudge against him it

is that he is no longer among the living.

All those who spoke to me of Leon Kamhi would exceed themselves in enumerating his qualities as a modest and honest man, who was utterly devoted to his community, who had a natural aura of leadership from his childhood, who was loyal to his comrades and kept faith with his way of life and had a personality overflowing with affection and love for anyone born in the image of the Creator. His great-heartedness was joined to broad horizons and a capacity for getting to the roots of things. All told, he was the most educated man in the Bitol community, and knew how to make a speech and preach on most subjects that concerned the public in that stormy period betwixt the world wars.

In the Daily "Omer" that was published in Israel in 1958 I found an essay devoted to the Holocaust of the Bitol community. It mentioned "the adored leader of Monastir Jewry, Leon Kamhi, who considered it his bounden duty all those years to stand guard for Zionism and who remained at his post until the very day of the Holocaust."

In the book entitled "Personalities" brought out a few years back by the Jewish National Fund (Second Volume, P. 243) there is a short essay about Leon Kamhi, which uses his name for a title.

"In the Yugoslavia of the pre-World War 2 days, the Jewish community of Bitol was the most peculiar congregation of all the groups making up Yugoslav society. Most of its congregants were artisans or poor workers who lived in the Ghetto – the only one in the entire country – and were singular in their orthodoxy. Here, within this environment, was born and grew up Leon Kamhi. By nature, a sensitive soul and of noble character, he devoted his thoughts and mind from his early youth to the special conditions of his brethren, and began to be concerned for them from early manhood. Firstly he sought

to solve the problem through charity and care for orphans and the aged, and later came to the conclusion that the only way was to emigrate to Eretz-Israel. Thus out of a Zionist consciousness combined with essential deeds, he rose to become the leader of his township and the entire region and everyone from small to aged, heeded him out of love and respect. During all the time between the two world wars, he would devote himself to Zionism in all its aspects. His manner of work was very informal, by influencing each individual, with each good deed being joined to another. It was only natural that in such a popular effort he would devote his energies to redeeming the Land. And indeed for many years he was Chairman of the Jewish National Fund Commission for the entire region, prior to the formation of the National Executive for Yugoslavia as a whole. He visited Eretz-Israel on two occasions and returned strengthened and encouraged in his Zionist faith and even firmer still in his demand that the youth should train themselves for settling in Eretz-Israel as quickly as possible, He considered it his duty to remain for a longer period in the Diaspora, as the leader of his community, and to leave for Eretz-Israel when the time was ripe together with the rest of his brethren and disciples. His dream never materialized: he died sanctifying the Name, a victim of his love for his community."

Most of the people who told me about Leon Kamhi and even those who knew him well, assumed that he had served as Chairman of the Communal Council since the early 1930s. He is mentioned as filling that position in the various reports. The facts of the matter are that Leon headed the Council for only a short time for half year in 1930, and also near the end of his days when the Germans invaded Bitol and the post of Council Chairman was a task replete with danger. In that interim period of about twenty years, Leon Kamhi had served as Council Secre-

tary or Vice-Chairman, and yet he was accepted by all and sundry as the leader of the community.

Leon, himself, wished to avoid serving in the formal position of Council Chairman. It was much more convenient for him to assume a more modest post that enabled him to maintain his position as mediator between the conservative generation of parents, clinging to tradition and fearful of the new, unruly spirits sweeping through the age – and the younger generation, that had began to organize in Zionist youth movements and was readying them for the departure to agricultural training centres and then to Eretz-Israel.

Nissim Arazi, today a member of Kibbutz Sha'ar-Ha'amakim, and in those days a youth movement leader back in Bitol, worked side by side with Leon for a prolonged period, although he was his junior by 15 years. He recalled how they were all disappointed in Leon when they learned of his engagement to a Salonika girl just before his 40th birthday. "It was rather strange in our eyes. It was almost a betrayal, for Leon to marry a woman! We regarded it as abandoning the front-line. A most non-pioneering act. What, after all, could Leon have to do with such a petit bourgeois institution as marriage? "

Bitol was a "nature preserve" of warm, traditional Judaism, that was rooted in the deep past. Progress and emancipation that had already embraced the northern cities of Yugoslavia had not yet reached backward and isolated Macedonia. Thus the Zionist pioneering awakening among the youth was accompanied with harsh growing apins, due to the gap between the older and the younger generations that was nigh unbridgeable.

Leon Kamhi provided the bridge. For the youngsters he was the enlivening force, and among the parents he was their defender and the moderator. He always strove to convince the parents that their sons were not heretics and

abandoning all tradition, but were youngsters who sought to build something new. He sought to convince the parents that the youngsters were courageous, that they were enthused with a healthy spirit and their intentions were of the best. They only wished to break through the vicious circle of destitution and degeneration that enfolded the Bitol community. His mediation worked, slowly but surely. Its importance lay not only in his success in resolving quarrels and arguments but because the Communal Council had the means to make possible the operations of the youth – or prevent them. The Council had the money and the final word. It was the Council that leased the hall that housed the clubrooms, and it could also cut off its budgetary allocations, which it did from time to time.

Leon Kamhi was the most fervent Zionist among his younger disciples. In the full cognizance of the antagonism aroused by Zionist work and organizational activities, he learned how to moderate his appearance to the outside world, just as he would arouse enthusiasm from within.

That was what made Leon so unique and special for his community. For he was outside the age groups and lacking any clear affiliation. Although he kept aloof from the factions and the fringes, he would unify them. Accepted by all, he managed to represent the various shades of society to each other, and would not only act but activate others. Somehow he managed all this, while lacking any official position that might create for him an image and conformity likely to limit his condict and his actions.

Thus he acted, until the end of the 1920s. But later on – as we will see in subsequent chapters – he challenged, in a most outspoken manner, the conservative communal leadership, and even took over the Council rule for a short time. This he did on realising that the Council hampered the work of the Zionist Movement, and therefore perpetu-

ating the degeneracy and the backwardness prevailing among the community. Since the early 1930's, Leon was the recognised leader of the progressive camp in Bitol and in Yugoslavia as a whole.

Leon was born in Bitol in 1898 to his father, Moshe, and to his mother, Steria (Esther). He was the child in the middle of the five scions: Ernesta and Nissim were his seniors, and Wida and Matilda, his juniors. Matilda is the only one left alive. She came here in 1934 as a member of Hashomer Hatzair and lives today with her husband and children in Kibbutz Shaar Ha'amakim.

Leon's grandfather reached Monastir from Turkey at the beginning of the 19th century. His son, Moshe, Leon's father, was born in Monastir and died there in 1938, a year before the outbreak of World War Two.

Leon imbibed his love for Eretz-Israel in his father's home. Moshe Kamhi would speak of emigrating to the Land as an obvious deed. All of them were educated towards that aim and the home was enveloped in an atmosphere of temporariness – until the journey.

It was assumed that Leon and Matilda would be in the vanguard, and be the first to go to Eretz-Israel, the rest of the family joining them later on. In fact it was only Matilda who fulfilled the family's ambition. True, Leon visited the Land on two occasions, and studied the prospects of settling there, but did so in his capacity as the leader of the Bitol Zionist Movement. He could not allow himself to leave his congregants and he gave expression to this inner conflict in the conversations he conducted with his disciples. He was fully cognizant that in the absence of a Zionist leadership in Bitol the opportunity of hundreds of Jews to emigrate would be lost.

This feeling of his gained encouragement from Dr. Licht, the Yugoslav Zionist leader, who would say firmly: the leaders of the Movement will be in the rearguard. His outlook contained a conceptual approach that saw in the

life of Exile a foundering ship, and its officers and captain were not permitted to abandon it until the last of the passengers and crew had gone. Dr. Licht stood firmly by this opinion, despite a sharp quarrel caused thereby, in an argument with his colleagues in the Zionist leadership in Zagreb. When they persisted and left to settle in Eretz-Israel in the 1930's (including Dr. Rotem and Yakir Eventov) he parted from them in anger and hardly bade them farewell. Dr. Licht paid for this belief with his life and perished together with the other Jews of Yugoslavia in the Holocaust. Thus was the fate of Leon Kamhi, who throughout his life considered himself a disciple of Dr. Licht.

Moshe Kamhi, his father, was a relatively educated man who completed his secondary school studies at the Turkish Gymnazium in Bitol. He was strongly attached to Jewish tradition but was not over-observant of the mitzvot. His wife, Esther, was the one who insisted on strict religious observance and watched closely that there was no ignoring of any religious precept. The Kamhi family resided close to the synagogue and they could hear the sound of prayers very clearly.

Matilda recalls: "Mother would listen to the prayers and know which chapter the worshippers were studying and which chapter was next in turn. She would urge Father to go to the synagogue with growing impatience: look where they have gone in the service and look where you are! ".

Moshe Kamhi was a man of means. He was engaged in the sale of cosmetics and in his business travels across the Albanian frontier he was under threat of robbery, which took place more than once. Kamhi did not fear these hazards and it would appear that he had an adventurous nature. Whenever he would return home, he would relate to the members of his household all the details of his experiences, and his roars of laughter would accompany

his tales. He was something like the character created by the writer, Schneour in "Pandrei the Hero". Moshe Kamhi was a man who loved life – he was a tough man, and was known for his affection for horses. He, himself, had a white horse and he would joke: until the Messiah comes on his mule, we will ride on horses.

Matilda has kept until this very day a souvenir from her father, which he gave her on the eve of her departure for Eretz-Israel: the "Korbatz" (whip) which he used to brandish when out horse-riding.

Moshe Kamhi had an affinity for farming and working the land. His properties included some vineyards, which he would cultivate himself. During the hot summer months, the entire Kamhi family would journey to the vineyards and picnic under the shady grapevines.

Moshe Kamhi had two brothers who never managed to succeed in life by their own efforts. He would help them constantly. He finally paid for their passages to North and South America, where they did well. Kamhi would say to his sons and daughters with a smile: "If life should be too hard for you in Eretz-Israel, and you will not wish to return to Bitol, always keep in mind that you have a family in America, which owes you a lot".

Leon inherited his physical toughness, his gaiety and his bravery from his father. From his mother, he inherited her modesty, her tolerant attitude towards people and her extreme sense of justice. These qualities were revealed already in his childhood when he took the leadership of his schoolmates and encouraged them to hit back at the non-Jewish children who baited them.

Yitzhak (Isaac) Levi, today a farmer in Kfar Syrkin, still retains clear memories of their common childhood. Isaac was of Leon's age-group, and his mother was hired as a wet-nurse by the Kamhi family and nursed the two babies, Yitzhak and Leon. A close friendship developed

between the two, and Isaac still recalls how Leon showed great courage as a schoolchild at school and in the town's alleyways. Clashes with non-Jewish children was a usual sight in Bitol. They would mostly end in the flight of the Jewish children, until Leon would appear at the head of his group and call on the other youths to attack the non-Jewish children baiting them. He was the first to strike out and inspired his comrades to brave acts. The first fight ended in the full victory of the Jewish children, and although there were many clashes when the Jewish children did not do so well, in all of them Leon stood at the head of the defenders and was revealed as a leader of true worth.

His bravery and extreme sense of justice caused him no little trouble in high school. Being unable to suffer injustices meted out by teachers to their pupils, he would frequently cause the teachers and the high school principal to turn against him. Leon intervened against the system of punishment adopted at the school, and his father was warned in no uncertain terms that if his son would continue to take upon himself the role of legal advisor, without being asked to do so, he would be compelled to leave school.

Later in life, Leon was confronted with non-Jewish youths in their academic debates on the logic of Judaism versus the logic of Christianity. In this form of argumentation he revealed an even greater talent than in fisticuffs. His oral talent – both as a public speaker and as an excellent conversationalist – became in the course of time quite famous. Thereby he became the leader of the Zionist Movement in Bitol. It was difficult to oppose his logic, and his clarity of thought was joined to a real passion and a charming manner of speech.

Yitzhak Levi relates how Leon would rivet the attention of groups of youngsters of his age and tell them the tales

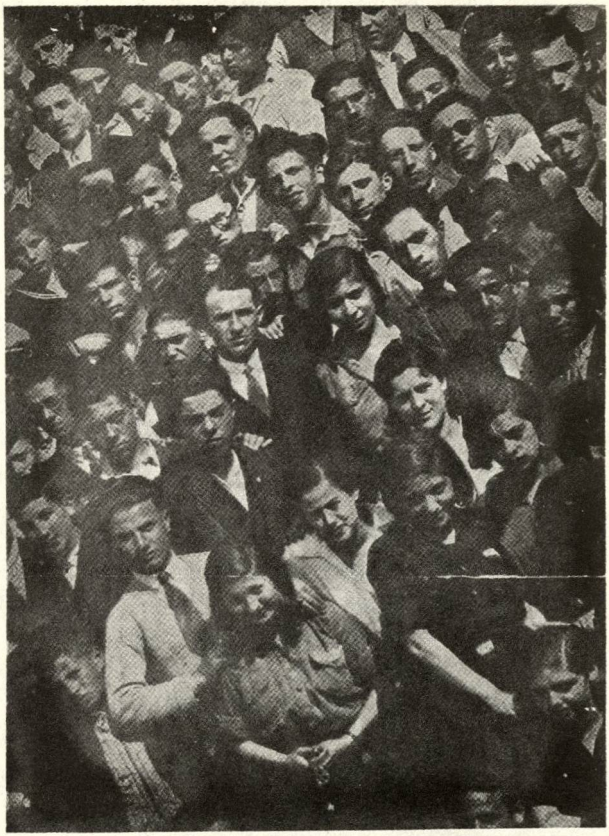
of the Land of Israel. The vision of Herzl captured him from the very first moment, and Leon would constantly return to this subject. On Sabbath mornings they would stroll out together to the slopes of the mountain just outside the town, named Dumka-Alexandruvo-Bredo, and there he would sit on a rock, with his comrades spread out around him. He would create a magical atmosphere with his stories of the far-off Promised Land. His stories were so descriptive and tangible, just as if he, himself, had just returned from the Land and still retained its feeling.

Leon was gay, full of humour and also knew how to sing. His comrades not only respected him, they loved him. He was the first and foremost in all the spheres in which the youths engaged themselves, and he had no competitor for the crown of leadership.

His broad knowledge and profound grasp of various subjects were acquired mainly outside his school framework. His father, who loved him best among his children, hired him a rabbi as a private tutor who taught him Hebrew and provided him with a deeper understanding and a greater knowledge of Judaism. In effect he learned Hebrew from the prayer book, and he would often translate the meaning of the prayers for his comrades, at a time when they only knew how to mull over the written phrases without understanding their meaning.

Leon would read hungrily anything that came to hand. He maintained a close link with Salonika, the centre of Jewish culture in Macedonia, and received books from there regularly. Later on, when he acquired a knowledge of French, at the Alliance Israelite school, he established contact with bookshops in Paris and enveloped himself in French culture. His father's home was frequently the meeting place of the Jewish intellectuals and Leon would mix in their company from an early age, and listen and absorb. The Hebrew he acquired from the prayer book, he

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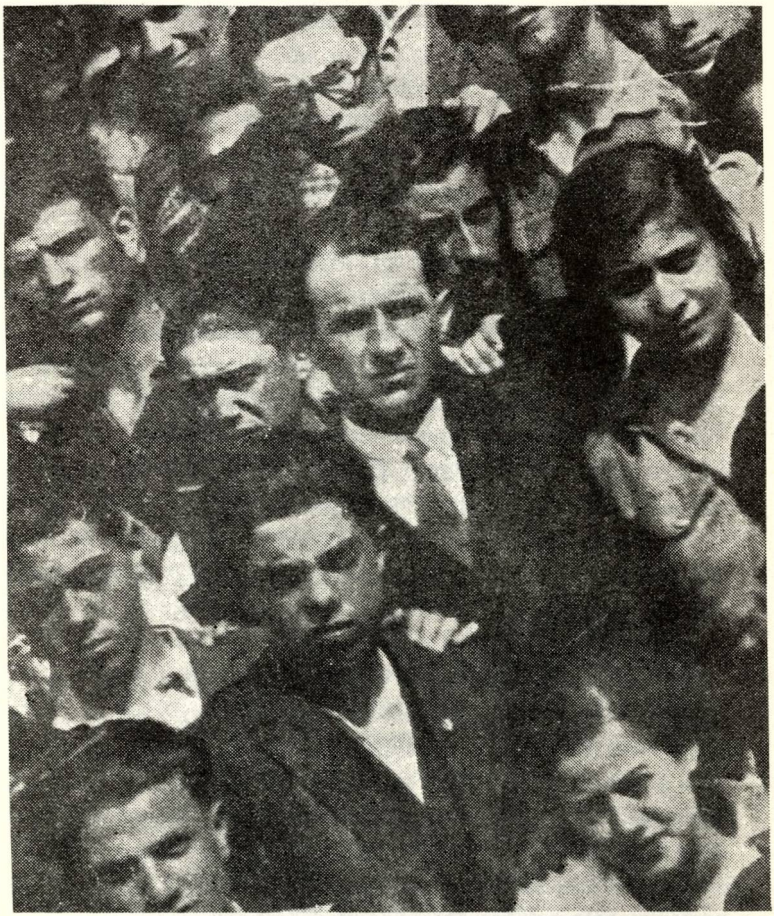


11 МАРТ

1943 - 1958

БИТОЛА

The frontispiece of the memorial publication brought out by the City of Bitol in 1958 devoted to the liquidation of the Jewish community of Bitol. The photograph shows members of the "Hatehiya" club in the company of Leon Kamhi.



Leon Kamhi (centre) with his pupils.

managed to update later on by means of reading newspaper papers and books from Eretz-Israel. He was assisted in his studies by emissaries of the Hashomer Hatzair youth movement, whom he brought over from the Land.

Leon intended studying law in Paris, but World War I ruined his plans. Although his formal education did not go beyond that of high school – all and sundry deferred to him with the title of Dr. Later on, when he took over all matters pertaining to emigration to Eretz-Israel and the handling of immigration certificates, another title was added: that of Consul Dr. Leon Kamhi. He would protest to no avail – the titles clung to him whether he liked them or not.

There was a measure of justification for the title of "Consul". Leon was the person who was delegated by the Communal Council to handle all contacts with the State authorities. He was a constant caller at the chambers of commerce, at the regional police headquarters, and in the various Government departments where he would iron out his congregants' problems. During the period when he took himself to fight the "luftmenschkeit" (the unskilled occupations) of his fellow Jews, and have their sons learn a trade or farming, he was acknowledged as the authorised representative of the Jewish community of Bitol by the State authorities.

With the outbreak of World War One, Leon together with his brothers and sisters moved to Florina, a small town near the Greek border. Bitol was badly hit by shelling at a very early stage of the war, and there are those who consider that the town took the first bombs that were dropped in the Macedonian campaign. Moshe Kamhi entreated his children to move to Florina, although he, himself, refused to do so, and remained in Bitol with his wife and their little daughter, Matilda. A short time later his shop was hit by a bomb. It got stuck in the upper floor

of the shop and did not explode.

A few weeks after they moved to Florina, Leon went to Salonika. He was searching for a cultural and social centre, and together with him went his childhood friend, Yitzhak Levi. His brothers and sisters stayed in Florina at an aunt's home.

"We reached Salonika at the age of 16 or 17," Yitzhak Levi relates: "We were quite alone in the big city, abandoned to our souls, but not for long. Leon speedily made close contact with the local Zionist youth groups, and it did not take long for him to become their leader. This was the start of his Zionist path. He organized meetings, made speeches, learned Hebrew, and preached of the need to go and settle in Eretz-Israel. In 1918, when we returned to Bitol, Leon had already completed his 'apprenticeship' in leadership."

All his thoughts and deeds were focused on Zionist work. He spoke of it on every opportunity – the youth must be organized and sent to the Land. His comrades of that time relate that it was as if he was in the grip of "a dybbuk", that sees neither to the left nor to the right in its onwards rush to its given target.

As his first act, he organized a Zionist youth group named "Bnei Zion". This group was later affiliated to the Yugoslav Union of Zionist Youth under its new name – "Hatehiya". He saw to it that the meetings of the youngsters in the clubroom were replete with content, in social activity, in organizing study circles, in ideological discussions, and with lectures that he would deliver regularly once a week. The musical and drama-circles paid their own way as a result of public performances they held from time to time. Leon took an active part in directing the performances and even in acting – (Matilda recalls how her brother got her to play in Moliere's "Le Malade Imaginaire") and the takings were handed over to the

Jewish National Fund.

Leon believed that pride of place must be given to teaching Hebrew to the youngsters. He tried to do something in this direction but quickly realised that the youths needed a special instructor from the Land of Israel.

He had a hard time with the Communal Council until he persuaded its members to finance this expenditure. Their objections mounted particularly when Leon's choice turned out to be a woman: Miss Lea Ben-David. 'Why a woman? We have enough male Hebrew-speaking teachers of local stock', his adversaries complained. Leon stood firm. He had chosen Lea Ben-David because she was an enthusiastic Zionist and had it in her power to bring with her a feeling of Eretz-Israel. His stubborness paid off and his hopes proved correct. Lea Ben-David remained in Bitol for a number of years, and her Zionist activity is still remembered by members of her generation who live in Israel today. (She resides in Ramat Gan, and maintains contact with her pupils, the youngest of whom have already passed their 60th birthday).

When Lea left Bitol in 1925, Leon saw to it that her place would not remain vacant. Once again he had a tough fight with the Communal Council, and went so far as to write urgent letters to Zagreb when he would incessantly nag the Zionist leadership on the matter, until they sent a new emissary to Bitol.

The new man was from the Hashomer Hatzair movement and his name was Ben Baruch. He started off with great drive, but in a matter of months was forced to depart, His conduct did not satisfy the monarchist regime and his leftist activities drew upon him the authorities' suspicions. One day he was caught by the police carrying a subversive publication on his person, and he was ordered to leave the the country immediately. His successors were a kindergarten teacher named Naomi, and a teacher named Gur-

Aryeh. The chain of emissaries was kept intact after they had gone too.

Leon concentrated on training the youth in manual skills. He would always say: "You will need them in Eretz-Israel".

Pepo Nahmias of Kfar Syrkin recalls: "He would frequently talk to us of the socio-economic pyramid, as it should exist in a modern society. The basis was men of the soil, and the peak – merchants, officials, and other white-collar workers. The Jews lives in the Diaspora, he would explain, had an inverted pyramid, and whoever wished to create a healthy society on his own soil but train himself for tilling the land and to learn a trade."

During the summer holidays, Leon would take the youth to holiday camps. This plan encountered many difficulties mainly because of the strong opposition of the parents to send their children to mixed camps with both boys and girls. Moreover the Communal Council objected to provide the finances. The concept of 'summer camp' was entirely alien to the conservative spirit of the Council. The entire matter was beyond their range of conceptualization and bordered on licentiousness. Leon resolved to attack this hostile front through its weakest link, Rabbi Romano. The Rabbi also served as religious tutor at the high school, and his patronage of the summer camp could be considered by the Communal Council as an official activity under the auspicies of the school. Leon called on the Rabbi and persuaded him to join the youth at the summer camp in person. The camp was set up, by the shores of the Lake of Ochrid, in cooperation with the youth movements from Skopje. After prolonged persuasion the Rabbi consented and finally spent three weeks at the camp.

On his return, he published a series of enthusiastic articles in "Zhidov" – the official publication of Yugoslav

Zionists, wherein he highly praised the youth and the atmosphere at the camp. "These youngsters, whose success we do not perceive as a rule at high school, find new strength and resources that we had not imagined existed. They are sensible, diligent, enterprising, replete with faith in their future and full of the fire of youth. We can be justifiably proud of this new youth that has arisen in our midst."

This excited report comprised the breakthrough in the relationship of the Communal Council and the parent generation to the Zionist youth movement membership. However it took many more years of efforts by Leon Kamhi in building bridges across the chasm of incomprehension that lay between the conservative approach of the community and the revolutionary unrest focused on the "Hatehiya" club.

Nissim Arazi of Kibbutz Sha'ar Ha Emakim recalls well Leon's special method of work and approach. Nissim worked alongside Leon as a youth leader in the "Hatehiya" club, and was secretary of the local branch of the "Hashomer Hatzair" movement.

Leon was elected to the position of Secretary of the Communal Council, and this post enabled him to mediate between the camps, without creating any formal identification with either side. For many years he refused to stand in the elections to the Council itself, in order to avoid dependency on the community elders and not to lose the valued position of the intermediary.

Whenever it was necessary to pass some tough decision or demand money from the Communal Council, Leon would arrange matters in a most elegant fashion. "Come Nissimko" – he would say "Lets do it officially. You attend the Council session on Sunday and we will manage somehow."

Nissim registered his surprise: What me? At the



Members of the "Hatehiya" club with their Hebrew teacher, Leah Ben-David during a Hebrew lesson in 1930.

The "Malbish Irumim" (Clothing Aid) Society in the company of Rabbi J'ain (below, centre) in 1928.



Communal Council! What will I do there? "

"Just come" – Leon would reply.

"So I came, and I was immediately subject to a rain of criticism and complaint: You and your gang! You shout and make noise until the late hours! The neighbours are complaining, the police is keeping an eye on you, We will stop our financial backing! And I would just stutter: 'True, we made a bit of noise.....two hundred boys and girls in one place, its always a source of noise'..... And then Leon would come to my aid: 'You see, the youngster admits it himself. But would it be better for this youth to roam around the streets in idleness? Is it not better that they meet on Sabbat eve and sing Hebrew songs? 'And then he would raise the matter of the budgetary allocation for the summer camp, and then let me explain its importance. I would start to talk, a youngster of 20 facing bearded septuagenarians, and strive to convince them of my cause's significant and how important the summer camp was for the youth's mental health and physical well being. Leon would continue: 'Its inacceptable that because of the poverty of these boys and girls, that we should deny them their future. And so, Nissim, how much do you require for this matter from the Communal Council funds? I mentioned a sum, double the amount I required (as Leon had advised me beforehand) and before the old men had managed to open their mouths in protest, Leon got in first and proposed, as a compromise, that we get half the amount. The elders somehow acceded to this request, with a heavy heart, and that was just the sum we needed."

Once in an earlier period in Hashomer Hatzair activity in Bitol, a youth leader had conducted an atheistic discussion with a younger group, and rumours of it had reached some parents. A great furore arose. The Jewish parents were absolutely furious. How dare he introduce an

anti-religious activity into the club that was supported financially by the community! Such a thing was unheard of! The atmosphere became so inflamed that the Communal Council was obliged to shut down the club that was under its ownership, and Leon was once more summoned to the rescue.

In consultation with Nissim, the branch secretary, it was decided to get rid of the youth leader who had sinned. With this sacrifice the communal anger subsided and the closure order was averted. The club was reopened after a short interval, and within a fortnight to three weeks the same youth leader was reinstated. However there was a condition imposed, with Leon demanding that he moderate his lectures and adjust them to the reality of the environment.

Leon slowly but surely conquered the Communal Council. His appointment as secretary, by virtue of his being a Zionist personality, was in fact a public admission by the community of its acceptance of the Zionist movement, and that it had given its blessings to Zionist work. Later on he was appointed Vice-Chairman of the Communal Council, and finally – Chairman of the Council itself. This progress took place simultaneously with the expansion of Zionist influence in the community.

Leon enjoyed a special attitude of respect in a somewhat unique manner. People did not regard him as superior to them, but rather as first among equals. This was not how they honoured the Communal Rabbi or the elders of the community. They were placed on high, above the common run, while Leon stood in line with the rest – only he stood head and shoulders above them.

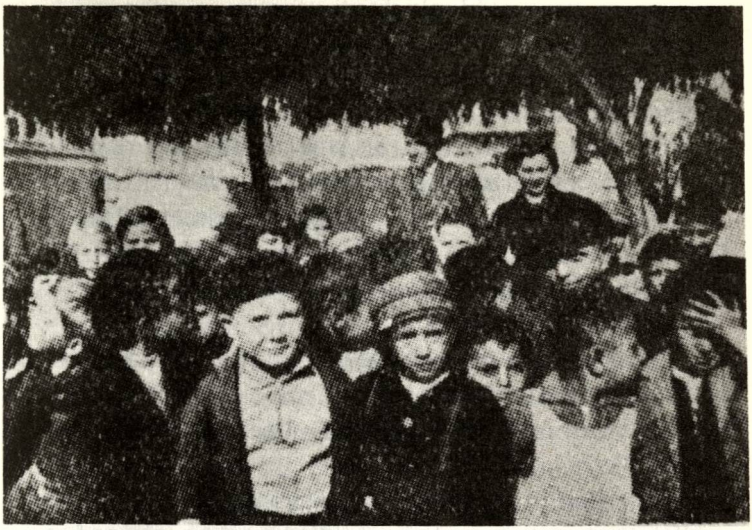
Nissim Arazi relates of his fatherly manner with the youth: One night, after a youth movement discussion, a few of our numbers went to stroll through the alleyways of the town. We walked singing through the dark streets of



Members of the "Hatehiya" club at the entrance to the club premises in 1928.

Members of Hashomer Hatzair in Bitol during an outing to Lake Ochrid in 1930.





Kindergarten children with their Hebrew teacher, Leah Ben-David. 1930.

Characteristic family photograph on the eve of emigration to Eretz-Israel in 1932.



the town, and suddenly from afar we saw the well-known figure of Leon. He was leaning against the wall of one of the houses, one hand clasping his stomach in Napoleonic style, and the eternal cigarette between his lips.

We were embarassed, it was hardly the right sort of time for such an encounter. The school's instructions forbade pupils to stroll through the streets after 7 p.m., and Leon insisted on our fulfilling as many of them as possible. Thus he wished to obviate the hazards of the informer and slanderer.

"What are the boys doing? " – Leon asked with a smile.

We stuttered a few words.

He continued "Above all, have the girls returned home? "

"Yes, along time ago! " – we cried.

"In that case, everything is all right," he rejoined, patted us on the back and departed.

As in his public work, so in his private activities Leon found a way of serving his one and only aim – Zionism. He became an agent of various firms dealing in haberdahsery, inside Yugoslavia and abroad. This work enabled him to be self-sufficient in time and livelihood. He rented a small office, containing two tiny rooms, connected to the street by a steep wooden staircase hanging on the outside of the building. People would climb up and down these stairs as if they led to the public social welfare bureau. One of his office rooms was devoted by Leon to receiving the public, and it comprised the entire range of the Bitol Jewish community which came to press requests and demands pertaining to all aspects of the community's life. This ranged from applications to emigrate to Eretz-Israel, to mobilizing the funds to marry a poor bride. This room was, primarily, the emigration bureau of Bitol, and it even contained a small library.

Leon's door was open to all. His secretary and his

typewriter served public and Zionist affairs, much more than his business matters. Letters to Zagreb, to Eretz-Israel and elsewhere; requests to the Ministries of the Interior and the Police; pamphlets, posters and advertisements – these made up the most part of the employment of the tiny office that existed under the camouflage of an agency for haberdashery.

In fact, Leon's business affairs were in a bad way, and suffered from neglect throughout the years. However in the 1930s they reached a serious crisis. With the rise of Hitler to power in 1933, Leon declared a boycott on his business ties with Germany, and called on other businessmen in the town to follow suit. In fact, he thereby cut the ground from under his own feet, because most of his income came from his representation of a large German firm. However even that did not manage to empty the petty cash box of his, with which he would help the needy, pay for passports for emigrants to Eretz-Israel, and for the postage stamps of the letters of the many applicants who would come to him for guidance.

Josef Kamhi, Leon's cousin, who belonged to one of the three wealthiest Jewish families in Bitol, and managed to escape from the Skopje detention camp, told me that Leon was on the verge of destitution in the last years of his public activity. He – Josef Kamhi – would give him money discreetly so as to enable him keep the Movement going. Leon would take the money without any false humility and transfer it to the petty cash box. He knew how to take with pride, just as he knew how to give with humility. For him the purpose was more important than false prestige and artificial manners.

Moshe Yishai, today a resident of Rishon Letzion and a soldier in the Regular Army, was still a child in these days. Leon's office was sited opposite his father's store, and little Moshe used to climb the wooden staircase and stand

wide-eyed, looking at the man with the broad-brimmed hat. Leon would give him sweets and use him for minor services. He would give him a few coins and say: "Boy, go and buy me some stamps. I must send this passport to the British Consul in Belgrade. If you do this, then you will be doing a great and good deed – a mitzvah -- for thanks to you this passport will be stamped and thus both of us – you and me – will have sent one more Jew to Eretz-Israel."

For Leon there was no unseemly or inferior manner for persuading Jews to go and live in Eretz-Israel. He did not suffice with the sermons preached in synagogues and the "Hatehiya" club. Nor did he consider his activity complete in just organizing summer camps and agricultural training centres, as well as his speeches to members of the community of various festive occasions. He would act in an individual manner, and go from person to person. Of an evening he would go out into the Jewish Quarter and go from one family to the next, and seek to convince these poor people that their problems would be solved in one place, and one place alone - Eretz-Israel. He would tell the poor cobbler: "You have three daughters! How will you marry them? Where will you take their dowry from? So let's send them to Eretz-Israel. There, there is no need for money to marry one's daughters." As for the owner of the small plot of land who managed to scrape a modest livelihood from his sorry plot of land, he would show that once in Eretz-Israel he would be able to till bigger portions of soil and live honourably therefrom.

Leon would fulfill his promises. He would take care of the people he sent to settle in Eretz-Israel. The emigration of the young girls was one of the biggest projects that Leon ever initiated. There are those who believe that some 200 girls left Bitol for Eretz-Israel within this framework. What helped him was the fact of a surplus of Jewish girls in Bitol because of the emigration of the young Jewish

men to the larger cities and to other countries. In some years no weddings took place, and this caused great concern to many parents. Leon contacted the colony of former Bitol residents living in Eretz-Israel, and saw to it that they would care for the girls coming from Bitol. They went by tourist visa, which did not require an immigration certificate, and their visas were valid for three months. During this short period of time most of the girls got married, for there was a marked surplus of young men in Eretz-Israel of those days. Thus they stayed on legally. This was a real humanitarian effort and incidentally served to give impetus to emigration, for the daughters were generally followed by the rest of their families.

Leon Kamhi's reputation spread far beyond the narrow bounds of little Bitol. Already back in the 1920's he had come to be recognised as one of the leaders of Yugoslav Jewry, and during the 1930's was frequently re-elected to the post of Vice-Chairman of the Zionist Federation of Yugoslavia. Zagreb cultivated him and advanced him. He was considered an irreplaceable asset. No one believed that tiny, poor Bitol in backward, isolated Macedonia would give birth to such a broadly-based and livley Zionist Movelment.

Leon belonged to the school of "self-fulfillment" in the Yugoslav Zionist Movement. It was his belief that Zionism as a Movement that obliges its adherents to fultil the aims of Zionism by settling in Eretz-Israel and establishing agricultural villages there. Accordingly, he joined the list of "Labour Eretz-Israel" led by Dr. Yoel Rosenberg from Zagreb, and swiftly rose to take second place in this list in the elections to the world Zionist Congresses. The fact that a man from Bitol had reached second place in country-wide elections (there were three lists in these Zionist elections), in addition to being Vice-Chairman of the national Zionist Federation, was regarded as a tremendous achieve-

ment. This was demonstrated by the fact, that the list managed during two elections to get two delegates through. Leon was elected in both instances to represent Yugoslav Zionists at the Congresses that took place in Switzerland. For some unknown reason, Leon did not attend these Congresses and his place was filled by the third man on the list of "Labour Eretz-Israel". There are no extanct sources clarifying the reason for Leon's absence from the world Zionist Congresses. On the other hand, Leon never missed any national conventions and meetings that were held in the various towns of Yugoslavia. He appeared among the most outstanding, and the youngest of the delegates from the branches.

It can be said that Leon Kamhi did not make life easy for his colleagues in the central Zionist leadership in Zagreb. His demands for certificates for the members of his community, could have been considered a nuisance, if the request had not come from Leon.

The number of certificates issued by the British Mandatory Government was absolutely minimal in relationship to the demand from Jews for the right to emigrate to Eretz-Israel from the various parts of the world. The World Zionist Executive allocated quotas, in accordance with a certain key, to each territorial centre, and the latter would distribute them among the branches in their countries.

Yugoslavia was not very high up on the list of quotas, and Zagreb was inclined to distribute the certificates among the northern branches that were nearest to the organizational centre. Bitol was far-off from all viewpoints. It belonged to a backward area and its Jewish community was patriarchal and conservative that was not, in theory, expected to take much part in Zionist pioneering awakening.

Leon Kamhi sought to challenge this approach by set-

ting up a broadly-based Movement, and by his talent for representing this Movement with fire and purposefulness to the Zionist centre in Zagreb. In the final analysis, Bitol won the number of certificates that was relatively so much higher than its percentage of Jews in relationship to the rest of Yugoslav Jewry. It is likely that Zagreb accepted Leon's claim that the Bitol community was in a terrible social and economic situation, which required solution by means of emigrating to Eretz-Israel. Or even possibly they found the charm of his enthusiasm simply irresistible.

Leon would use these rare certificates with maximum effect. He did not abhor any trick to make each and every certificate carry the maximum number of immigrants. He would organise fictitious marriages; link 15 year old girls to men of 30 as their daughters; he would add two-three more children to an emigrating family, and so forth.

With that he would insist on severe selectivity in choosing the candidates for the certificates, which after all, was the sole legal method of immigration to Eretz-Israel. He would allocate the certificates only to those whom he found fit, and they included first of all, those who were honest and diligent. This approach of his caused some nuisance to Leon, and often some troubles. Matilda still remembers one drunkard who demanded a certificate, and threatened that he would murder Leon in a dark alleyway at night if he did not get it. Leon did not budge, and the man stayed behind in Bitol.

However, as it is known, the certificates were only one means - and the most limited of them at that - for sending Jews to Eretz-Israel. Another possibility was presented to each owner of capital possessing one thousand Palestine Pounds (a considerable sum of money for those days). They could easily enter the Land, and this opening was exploited by a few. But the most acceptable way was to exploit the tourist visa. What was required was the presen-

tation of a bank draft of 25 pounds, as proof of visible means of support for some time. This bank draft would travel back and forth between Bitol and Eretz-Israel and each time enabled another family to move to the Promised Land.

Moshe Yishai told me that his family came to this country by means of such a bank draft, in three stages.

Tourist visas were given for three monthly periods, but few who received them ever returned to Bitol. The girls would marry in Eretz-Israel and the others would mingle with the rest of the Jewish community, like all the other illegal immigrants from other lands. According to eye-witnesses, the largest number of immigrants from Bitol managed to enter Eretz-Israel, with Leon in charge of the project from the beginning right to the end.

As the years elapsed and the footsteps of the Nazi jack-boots came nearer and nearer, Leon's anxiety over the future of the Bitol community grew. He now envisaged that the coming years would contain a much more horrifying fate than just social and economic decay. No one could exactly visualize the Holocaust, and it is not to be expected that Leon's intuition was any sharper than the rest. However, Leon saw with clarity the indications of anti-Semitism that first began taking root in Bitol already in the mid-thirties. There were Macedonians who quite early on raised their voices against the Jews. The old-time tolerance was a thing of the past, and here and there the poisonous words were uttered: You Jews, need Hitler!

Leon's alertness to the impending disaster was witnessed by Nico Pardo of Kfar Syrkin. He was one of the six persons who managed to escape from the Skopje detention camp in March 1943, only one day before the actual transportations moved off to Treblinka.

"I remember it as if it was yesterday. It was in 1936. Leon was giving us his weekly lecture at the 'Hatehiya'

club, and spoke of the Nazi danger. This once he did not tell us of the wonders of Eretz-Israel, but of the actual dangers threatening all of us in the future. His words angered the majority of the public. People did not like to hear such things, and refused to allow him to continue. His voice rose above their shouts, and he said: I warn you once more. 'You are endangering your future. You must all leave this town as one person. I do not wish to reach the day when I will be able to prove how right I was. I would hope that on that day, all of us will be in Eretz-Israel."

"So why dont you go there? ! " - someone in the hall shouted.

"I leave the last" - Leon replied: "I will leave here with the last family."

Pepo Nahmias added: "I heard from Leon on a number of occasions this explanation. I knew he had a number of tempting offers of work in Eretz-Israel at the Jewish National Fund and the Jewish Agency offices. He turned them down because of his deep fear for the fate of immigration from Bitol, in the absence of any guidance. He said quite clearly: "This ship is sinking – the captain must leave the last."

Matilda, his younger and beloved sister, immigrated to Eretz-Israel in 1934. The last time she met Leon was her final visit to Bitol in 1938 after their father's death. (During her absence, Alexander Zeid, the watchman, was murdered in the neighbouring settlement to her kibbutz Shaar Heamakim).

"Those were very depressing days in Bitol", Matilda relates: "Leon was most unhappy. The future seemed very bad and there were still about eight hundred Jewish families left in Bitol. He did promise me: "I will join you soon in Eretz-Israel".

But in 1938 he was still in Bitol.

"We tried to draw up plans for leadership in an emer-

gency". Nissim Arazi recalls. "We thought of organizing an underground movement, of escape routes in the event of a catastrophe, but they were never used. I myself was then chief youth instructor of Hashomer Hatzair in Bitol. In April I received a notification from the central leadership to leave immediately for Zagreb, and to embark from there, via the Adriatic Sea, for Eretz-Israel. I had no means for doing that. I went to see Leon and told him of my decision to emigrate right away. I told him I lacked money, but if I should reach Zagreb I would manage to arrange matters somehow. Leon gave my decision his blessing. "Although I will miss you" he said, "I do not doubt that you have to go". Right on the spot he opened the petty cash box and gave me 500 dinar. "I will follow you" he said.

"I spoke to him harshly. I did not like the constant postponement date. It was my belief that one had to carry out this decision forthwith, and I told him of my opinion. I said I could not accept his notion that he was irreplaceable. The needs of the community would have, of themselves, raised up a new leader. It was likely that on his departure a vacuum would prevail – but not for long. Someone among the younger element would take the helm and fill his place."

"Leon was not hurt. He was about 40 years old and I was a youngster in my early twenties. He gazed at me at length with his deep and kind eyes, and said: "Maybe you are right, Nissimo."

"I never saw him again."

Leon was, in those days, already the husband of a young woman and father of a two months' old baby girl. All of a sudden he found himself the head of his own family, after having stayed single and living at his mother's home until his 40th birthday.

The mystery of Leon's prolonged bachelorhood troubl-

ed his family and relatives for some time, and remained unanswered until this day. No one knew why he never married, after being without a doubt the most sought after man in his town. There were those who surmised that his devotion to his public works prevented him from fulfilling the duties entailed in establishing a family. For it was argued, had he not neglected his livelihood for the the good of the public?

Matilda, his younger sister, does not accept this prognosis. In her opinion, Leon bore in his heart for many years the memory of a burning and unrequited love for a lovely maiden of the town. He was her friend for a short period in his adolescence. She was a girl of his age who lived in the lower storey of the building where the Kamhi family made its home. She was a most attractive girl and sang very well. Matilda still recalls the nights when her voice could be heard from the lower storey, as Leon sat by the window, listening and smoking heavily.

Shortly before he was called up to the Yugoslav Army, he walked out with this girld and she loved him deeply. When he left for a ten months' period of army service, Leon asked a friend to report to him on her conduct during his absence. There is no telling what this friend reported to him, but when Leon came back, he was utterly depressed and with sunken cheeks from the tough army training, he did not resume his courtship of that girl. Of an evening he would return home early, and the neighbour's pretty daughter would follow him closely with her eyes.

For a year or two she tried to reach him through a yearning silence, but Leon would ignore her love and impose on himself absolute abstinence. Later on she married a Jewish boy from Skopje and emigrated with him to America.

Some years later she returned to visit Bitol for her

sister's wedding. She was then aged 30, a most elegant and lovely lady who knew how to sing well. At the wedding party she sang the same songs she used to sing during her adolescence under his window. Leon sat all this time, gazing at her and did not even approach her. He did not even exchange one word with her. She was, apparently, the cause of his not marrying until his fortieth year, that is what Matilda believes.

In 1938 "Zhidov" carried the announcement of Leon's engagement to a girl from Salonika, a native of Bitol named Frieda Baruch. They wed a short time afterwards, and a year later their daughter was born. She was named Batya.

Four years later they were all despatched to the crematorium of Treblinka.

Leon, Frieda, Batya – and with them his mother, Esther, and the other members of the Kamhi family; Ernesta and her husband, Eshael, and their five children: Nissim, his wife, Diana and their four children; Vida and her husband, Eroyisti and their three children. Twenty-two souls all told.

Matilda alone remains, the sole survivor of the Kamhi family.

8 From the Source Itself

We have in our possession the possibility of understanding, if only by little, the outlook and personality of Leon Kamhi from the source itself. I refer thereby, to a number of articles and speeches written or delivered by him, that were published in the Zionist weekly "Zhidov". This magazine was published for 15 years in the period between the two world wars. In its columns one may ascertain clear traces of Leon Kamhi's Zionist work. A smaller portion is to be found in written material, and the major part is made up of reports about him.

In this chapter we bring Leon Kamhi's articles, and the first of them reproduced, with only a few omissions, was printed on 8.5.31 in the "Free Forum" column of "Zhidov".

"The Shekel and its Price"

by Leon Kamhi

"The campaign for purchasing the Zionist shekel is on the downgrade – if not with us, then at least throughout the wide world. In 1930 the number of shekalim acquired through the lands of Exile dropped to 150,000 – a number that certainly does not reflect the number of conscious Jews in the world. Taking into account this grave fact we have to consider the problem of the shekel first of all

from an overall viewpoint, and later on only from a local vantage point.

It will be of benefit if we indicate a number of facts and phenomena characterizing the campaign for buying the Zionist shekel: A. A few years ago the number of shekalim bought throughout the world was a matter of a few hundred thousands; B. In Yugoslavia the number of shekalim bought is more or less a stable figure, reaching an annual average of 6,500; C. The stability which the distribution of shekalim has reached, does not in any way indicate the boundaries of Zionist Movement activities. Evidence of this can be found in the Jewish community of Bitol, which is linked to the reconstruction of Eretz-Israel. That community bought 600-800 shekalim in the years 1924-27, while during 1928-31 the average figure dropped to 400-500.

At the same time, it is an unchallengeable fact that the the Zionist ideal has continued to penetrate into all corners of our lives during recent years. From this viewpoint one could assume that the campaign for purchasing the shekel throughout the world could have produced mere fruits. What is, therefore, the reason for this constant drawback?

Before proceeding to answer this question, we have to keep in mind the principles which are based the Zionist shekel distribution:

The shekel is the contribution each Jew over 18 pays to the World Zionist Organization, on condition of acceptance of the Basle Programme. The price of the shekel is determined in each country by the Zionist General Council. Each person can only acquire one shekel and its price is to be within reach of everyone, whether rich or poor.

From this there emerges that the shekel is a kind of fixed annual tax and not a voluntary contribution. Accordingly it is only right that the price of the shekel

should be determined so as to be within the reach of every Jew. After all the Zionist Movement is the Movement of the masses, and not just of certain classes.

Is then the price of the shekel within the reach of the needy? Those who make up the majority of the supporters of the Zionist Movement? Undoubtedly not!

The purpose of this article is to prove that the price of the shekel is too high and that it is not in keeping with the financial means of our Jewish masses. Thus, the reason for the drop in the number of shekalim acquired is tied to the fact that of late the lot of Jews has worsened in Poland, Rumania, in the Balkans and so forth. All these people cannot, however, much as they would like to, buy the shekel at its present price level.

I do not wish to be misunderstood. I do not doubt that a Jew must make many sacrifices for the mighty Renaissance of his people. But are we properly aware of the material situation of the mass of the supporters of the Zionist Movement? Have we learned to appreciate that the destitution of most of the Jews loyal to the Zionist ideals, has reached a high degree? We, who bear the fate of the Movement, who operate among communities – most of whose members belong to the proletarian – know that today we cannot launch the activities of the Jewish National Fund and of Keren Hayesod, because the masses of the people can only give very little to the National Funds.

Naturally we have to persist in conducting wide-ranging fund-raising campaigns for the upbuilding of our Homeland. I do not doubt that it only depends on us to reconstruct our National Home. However, it is no less clear that we cannot appeal to the masses of the people, and seek from them large sums for the Jewish National Fund or Keren Hayesod.

On the other hand, we are all fully aware, that we must appeal to the masses in the matter of purchasing the

shekel, otherwise the true significance of the shekel will be lost. But how will we be able to apply to every Jew and urge him to buy a shekel, when we knew a priori that two out of every three Jews cannot afford it. The price asked for is equal to two days' wages, even when the day's work is not sure. We should not, therefore, be surprised if the reply given to the fund-raisers on many occasions will be: I will purchase the shekel in the coming year...

It is likely that some of my readers may claim that I am exaggerating in my description of the position of many supporters of the Zionist cause, and that is ample proof that in various places our brethren are better-off. We are happy at that reality, but we cannot allow it to blind us to the facts. No one can deny the existence of the process of material deterioration of the Jewish masses, that is being speeded-up in these countries – Poland, Rumania, and the Balkans – where the Zionist foundation is strongest. In these lands one could sell a million shekalim, if the policy was changed. If these places do not manage to raise even one-tenth of this sum, then we should consider the source of the reason. Even if I am mistaken as far as the price of the shekel being the sole cause, it is surely one of the main factors in the drop in the scope of its distribution. In many places there is only one bread-winner in a large family, who can be taken into account for the purchase of the shekel. This single bread-winner must be enabled to acquire a shekel for each adult member of his family. Could one really expect such a family, with all the best will in the world, to commit itself to such a financial commitment in the light of today's economic situation?

Turning from the wide world to our territory:

With us in Yugoslavia the situation has become even worse than before, because alongside the campaign for buying the shekel we are conducting fund-raising for our own Zionist organization. The Zionist General Council

has to take note of this matter as well, on the eve of the assembly of the Zionist Congress.

What, then, should be the price of the shekel?

If we consider this issue from the viewpoint of Yugoslav Zionism, then the price should be 10 dinar, i.e. half the price of the shekel. Thirty per cent of this sum should be left to finance the operations of the Zionist Federation of Yugoslavia. The Zionist General Council will get the amount of 7 dinar. By setting the price at half cost, we would therefore enjoy in our shekel campaign drive the advantage of having a wider popular appeal. Its purchase would come as a sign to every Jew that he comprises real power only when his efforts are joined to those of other Jews. In order to expand the entire unit we have to go out and sell two halves. Thus purchase of one half would encourage the Jew to join another Jew, however anonymous, and both of them in conjunction would demonstrate the unity of the Jewish people.....

If the price of the shekel is set at 10 Yugoslav dinar, or at a similar value in other lands, then one can expect that the shekel distribution campaign drive will get additional impetus. The revenue of the General Council will not be smaller, because other number of shekel holders will be larger, and thereby will be enhanced the force of the Organization. I do believe that experience in this direction will not bring us disappointments.

When we set the price of the shekel at 10 dinar, the number of purchasers in Yugoslavia alone could reach 10,000 (at the time there were 70,000 Jews in Yugoslavia –U.O.), and the coffers of the Zionist Federation of Yugoslavia would be enriched by the sum of 30,000 dinar – which would provide a serious financial basis for financing Zionist activities in this country.

Besides the shekel distribution campaign, that should be launched about Passover time each year, we should

make preparations for a special drive – to be held at Succot time – for collecting donations for the financing of the activities of the Zionist Federation of Yugoslavia. Our targat would be 10 dinar per capita. One can assume that this fund-raising effort, at least during the first years, would not enjoy the same scope as the shekel distribution campaign. However, it would not be exaggerated to expect that half of the shekel purchasers, namely 5,000 persons, would donate to this effort as well. Naturally, we have to permit our key men to engage in fund-raising in their localities, to contact institutions and wealthy personages with the aim of raising more than the set quota of ten dinar per capita.

I do not know whether the needy in Sarajevo and Belgrade buy the Zionist shekel. But I do know for sure that in south Serbia, the number of purchasers of the shekel could be doubled, if we only dropped the price. I assume that the position is similar in the other cities, not to speak of the Jewish centres outside Yugoslavia. The facts speak for themselves. I know how many shekalim are bought by the 65,000 Jews of Salonika. The number is so small that it is preferable not to mention it. This is despite the fact that in this city, there operate many Zionist organizations, and hundreds of youngsters and adults live for the Zionist Movement. What is, therefore, the reason for the results of the shekel distribution being so miserably low?

In order that the reader should not misunderstand me, I would like to stress that when I advocate lowering the price of the shekel, I see before me the tremendous political significance of this effort. I appreciate that the scope of purchasing the shekel is a reflection of the internal state of affairs of the Zionist Movement, and a measure of its strength. If we appeal to the masses, we have to take into account their condition.

Another question altogether is that of the great con-

structive funds. We have to intensify our efforts in raising considerable sums of money for the Jewish National Fund and Keren Hayesod. It is clear to us all that the reconstruction of Eretz-Israel imposes sacrifices on all Jews, that express themselves in a self-imposed tax assumed by each individual, in keeping with – and beyond – his capacities. When one deals with the great deeds of purchasing land and the upbuilding of the Land, in which the Jewish National Fund and Keren Hayesod are engaged, then no conscious Jew can avoid shouldering the burden and taking up his share in the process of his people's renaissance.

Of course, the importance of the constructive funds is quite different to that of the shekel. Only by concentrating on this basic difference, can one justify the above mentioned proposal. A shekel is not a Fund. The purchase of a shekel is an expression of identification of each Jew with the Basle Programme – irrespective of class origin. Despite the process of assimilation we are witness to, it is a fact that cannot be challenged, that the largest and most important part of the nation has not turned its back on the National Ideal. If – God forbid – the picture should change, then we will have to close our ranks. We are duty-bound to know who we are, and what is our strength. The outcome of the distribution of the shekel reflects the situation of the Front. The results of this drive are the criteria for our power."

Bitol. The month of Iyar, 1931.

On the Eve of Rosh Hashana (11.9.31), four months after the publication of the article "The Shekel and its Price", a further article by Leon Kamhi was printed in "Zhidov" entitled "Diaspora and Eretz-Israel".

The article was written in the wake of a furore that

arose among Yugoslav Jewry following the demand of the Zionists from the Communal Councils to allocate 10% of their budgets in 1932 for the Jewish National Fund and Keren Hayesod. This was to be the contribution of Yugoslav Jewry to the revival of the Jewish National Home. The Zionist demand caused considerable annoyance among the conservative wing. They claimed that the money was needed to finance the activities of the communities themselves.

In Bitol the debate was particularly sharp following the take-over of the Council in 1930. That year the Zionist Movement resolved to compete in the communal elections and take over the Communal Council. Their success was so great that almost all of their candidates were elected to the Council, and their predecessors were obliged to step down. This was the first and only time that representatives of the Zionist Movement, headed by Kamhi, had taken control of communal affairs out of the hands of the community's elders. Moreover, this period did not last long. In the light of the sense of injury, and the bitter feelings that prevailed following the Zionists' success, the new Executive resigned en masse after a few months had elapsed so as to hand over the community's affairs to its conservative predecessor.

No sources exist to explain this move of the Zionist Executive in Bitol, but on the basis of one's knowledge of Leon Kamhi's approach to things, it may be assumed that he wished to avoid any deepening of tension that would have defeated the Zionists' purpose in Bitol. It seems almost certain that his aim of attaining harmony in the community dictated his decision to put aside the formal leadership, and cleave to the role of spiritual leadership.

Traces of this struggle, and a faithful reflection of the conflicting viewpoints of the two camps in Bitol, are to be found in this polemic article of Kamhi.

Diaspora and Eretz-Israel

by Leon Kamhi

"The Orthodox Jewish Community of Bitol has hitherto supported the reconstruction of the Jewish National Home in Eretz-Israel, both by moral and material means. In fact, the Communal Council Executive of late has taken the lead in activities aimed at supporting the Renaissance of our people in our ancient Homeland.

Each member of the Executive was personally mobilized in this cause, and it had looked as if there existed an identity between activities for Eretz-Israel and the local Jewish leadership. That was natural, especially of late, for last year the Communal Executive in Bitol was composed of the heads of the local Zionist organization. That is to the exclusion of one member who did not belong to the organization, but took an active personal role in all the important fund-raising efforts for Eretz-Israel. Today there is not even one member of the local Zionist organization on the Council Executive. Although some of its members are sympathetic to the Zionist cause. The other part of the Executive operates out of conservative tendencies that are not acceptable to the local Zionists.

Thus the Jewish community of Bitol has been divided into two different camps. The camp of progressive Zionists seeking to break away from the old line. Its essence was for the community to engage only in aid to the poor and not to bother itself with the national problems of the people. This line is represented by the conservative camp that opposes any radical reforms. To its mind, Jewish solidarity and common Jewish work are nothing but acts of charity. In this sphere we have to overcome them.

Following the resignation of the previous Executive, the current body is made up in the main of protagonists of these outdated views. Nevertheless, we need not fear

that the Zionist work in Bitol will lose its impetus. For it is conducted by men who are devoted to the idea, and because the overwhelming majority of the Jewish public in Bitol is profoundly committed to the Zionist philosophy. They can only find their salvation in the Renaissance of our people in our ancient Homeland

In the previous elections to the Communal Council Executive, the local Zionist organization did not submit its own list of candidates. Moreover, it remained neutral in the election campaign. The reason for this was the belief of the local Zionist leadership that it was tactically preferable, for the moment, to leave the Executive in the hands of the same men who would strive again, if for the last time, to work on the basis of the old model. We are convinced that life itself will finally prove that the Community cannot be directed in the way its old-fashioned philanthropic institutions are run.

The measure of support for this approach by Bitol Jewry can be taken from the fact that when, one-and-a-half years ago, the local Zionist organization submitted its own list of candidates to the Communal Executive, they were all elected. Then we took over the Executive and introduced major reforms. But this was badly received by the conservatives. On the basis of their criticism, the previous Executive submitted its resignation and handed over its functions to its predecessor.

The attitude of the non-Zionist institutions in Bitol towards the activities of the local Zionist organization, and its nucleus – the "Hatehiya" club, is somewhat undefined. Some of its leaders openly contribute to the funds of "Hatehiya", and personally cooperate with the Zionists. But there always exists a measure of competition between the various funds – those of the Diaspora, and those earmarked for Eretz-Israel. Of course, it is worth while to note that the Eretz-Israel funds have much greater success among the mass of Bitol Jews, than the ones geared to

the Exile. This is because the overwhelming majority of Bitol Jewry has intrinsically tied its future to Eretz-Israel. This is also due to the fact that the best and most talented persons in the Community belong to the Zionist organization.

Jewish organizations in the Diaspora can only survive if they are focused on Zion. The Jewish club in Bitol no longer exists, despite the large funds it received from the Community. This is yet another proof that a Jewish organization that lacks any Zionist content is doomed. The survival of any sort of association, even of the Community itself, hinges on its members – and particularly its leaders – being imbued with a profound national consciousness and a sense of responsibility. Lacking these, it has no future. It is Zionism that confers upon Jews this sense and this feeling. In the absence of any ideological programme and platform of ideas, the existence of any Jewish organizational framework will be just a passing phenomenon.

That is the situation in Bitol. That is how one can evaluate the reserved approach of the Bitol Communal Executive towards the proposal to allocate 10 per cent of its budget towards the funds for the reconstruction of the Jewish National Home. They excuse themselves on the grounds that the monies are needed for large-scale renovation work on the Synagogue, and for fencing off the cemetery.

There can no longer be any doubt that Zionism is the only Movement capable of encouraging and fulfilling the process of resuscitation of the Community. I consider that this is possible, and even essential, for the existence of full, amiable, close and daily cooperation between the Zionists and the non-Zionists within the communal framework. This is the case whether pertaining to activities relating to the Diaspora or Eretz-Israel. Here is the key to life. In its absence we are faced by doom.

Accordingly, the Jewish Community in Bitol must allocate a tenth of its annual budget for Eretz-Israel. That is the desire of seven-eighths of the Jews in town. The leaders and the great communities have to move forward in this matter. Make this great move consciously, with courage, and lacking in fear. We will follow in your footsteps. That is our desire. That is what we are capable of doing. That is what we are bound to do."

Bitol, Erev Rosh Hashana, 1931.

This article of Leon Kamhi evoked considerable comment. A polemic debate ensued in the pages of the Zionist publication brought out in Zagreb. One of the conservative leaders of the Bitol community, Yaacub R. Israel, printed in "Zhidov" "A Reply" to Kamhi's article on 9.10.31.

Interalia he wrote: "Leon Kamhi has always been accustomed to divide the Jews of Bitol, and their institutions, into two camps: the Zionists and the non-Zionists. This attitude hampers Zionist work much more than it helps. That is because there always exists a gap between the wish and the capacity. . ."

Leon Kamhi did not keep quiet A week later (16.10.31) he published in "Zhidov" – "A Reply to A Reply".:

"If I, and my activities, were hamful to Zionist work in Bitol, I do not believe that the organized Zionists of the town and the central Zionist institutions outside, would repeatedly re-elect me to my posts. (Leon Kamhi was at the time the holder of the following offices: Vice-Chairman fo the Zionist Federation of Yugoslavia, Secretary of the Bitol Zionist Organization, the representative of the Jewish National Fund in Bitol, and Trustee of Keren Hayesod in the town – U.O.). In this period of inflation, there can be no 'cheap' Jews. Our concept has to be a

decisive one, and we do not have to stand confused, as if side-stepping the issue. Either we concentrate our efforts on the Renaissance of Israel and work for it, or we abandon it. Why should we pause half way? ! Against this background, we have to raise our voices against the propaganda being waged by these conservatives in Bitol along the lines of "if the Zionists should once more take control of the Communal Executive then the poor will perish from hunger." They charge that the Zionists will transfer all the monies overnight to Eretz-Israel. We also have to reject their charge as if the monies donated to the Jewish National Fund and Keren Hayesod are wasted by unemployed youths who made a business out of Zionism.... By such atrocity propaganda, they cannot succeed in arguing against the justified demand to allocate ten per cent of the communal funds for the Renaissance of Eretz-Israel."

Leon Kamhi pursued this comradely polemicism whenever the occasion arose. In early October, 1931, there arrived in Bitol, Carlo Friedman, representative of Keren Hayesod. He came for a four day visit. The purpose of his visit was to launch new fund-raising activities for the fund and discuss matters with the Jewish farming families who had submitted their applications to immigrate and settle in Eretz-Israel. On October 13, a large youth rally was held in honour of the guest at the "Maccabi" hall. In his opening remarks, Leon Kamhi said (according to the report in "Zhidov" – 20.10.31):

"Our Movement expects of the younger generation much more than from the older one. The youth has to prove that it is worthy of the spiritual Renaissance and Rebuilding of the Homeland. To our regret, the older generation has not proven its willingness to rise to this challenge. The young people of Bitol has shown an example of self-sacrifice in their mobilization for fund-

raising to the Jewish National Fund. In the course of the present campaign in only a matter of days there have been collected some 16,000 dinars, and in the next few days we will collect another 30,000 dinars. Indeed, the younger generation has not turned its back on us. The Movement exists for them. The future belongs to them.

The Situation of the Youth in Bitol

A lecture given by Leon Kamhi.

At 3 p.m. on the afternoon of Friday, April 29th, 1932, two buses drew up outside the Maccabi premises in Bitol. To the sound of song and joy there erupted therefrom some 40 boys and girls, accompanied by a similar number of adults. These were guests from the Jewish community of Skopje who had come to take part in a regional youth rally that was held this once in Bitol, at the initiative and through the organization of Leon Kamhi.

The rally was held on the morrow, on Sabbath morning, in the Maccabi hall. It was packed with adults and youngsters. The "Zhidov" weekly gave a lengthy report of the event, particularly the introductory lecture of Leon Kamhi. It was devoted to the situation of the Jewish youth of south Serbia, and referred from the start to the report of Dr. Zvi Rothmuller on this subject – that was published at the same time in a special pamphlet.

This is the content of Leon Kamhi's lecture:

"...The problem of the Jewish youth in our region is an acute and a burning issue. It is even more serious and tragic than Dr. Rothmuller considers in his precise and interesting analysis.

The Zionist Executive must sharpen its analytical instruments in coming to tackle this subject. The focus of the problem is in Bitol. Here is found the largest concentration of youth, from all strata, who live without a

present and without a future. Here Judaism is in a process of deterioration, and is threatened with the danger of real loss. A large number of young artisans and apprentices who possess the most superficial knowledge of Judaism, are faced with spiritual disaster and with the danger of a complete break with the sources of tradition. High school pupils who were obliged, for this or that reason, to drop out of class, cannot find employment. The poorer youths can find no more honourable occupation than idle rambling through the streets of Bitol, midst a sorry attempt to sell cheap writing paper or packages of dried fruit. These are youngsters possessing a healthy outlook on life, who see no possibility ahead of them to create any sources of livelihood for themselves. The one way ahead of them is their settlement in Eretz-Israel. Even without a permanent occupation, they will at least find a place where they can live modestly but honourably.

No small measure of responsibility for the situation of the youth can be put at the door of the traditional leadership of the Jewish community in Bitol. This leadership refuses to see the changes taking place in this period in this country and the world at large, and declines to accord the youth a properly systematic and healthy Jewish education. Today there is no longer any possibility of upholding the prestige of tradition among the youth, when Judaism is presented to it as a complex of outdated principles – and not always clear ones – that lack any link with the life and reality of our age. The traditional system of days of yore is a sterile one that can no longer produce fruit. We have to learn from other communities in other lands. Jewish circles that enjoy authority amongst us have done nothing at all in order to submit to the State authorities that in our days the concept of Jewish education does not mean receiving two or three hours of religious instruction a week in the schools. It must be

made clear to everyone that in our age the acquisition of the Hebrew language is the first objective in the education of the new generation, and that it comprises a medium of material and spiritual communication between World Jewry and Eretz-Israel. There are places where the leadership in Jewry understands this essential need of Jewish life. The Hebraization is conducted by means of young teachers from Eretz-Israel. These teachers bring to their pupils -comrades from the Diaspora, the new and healthier ways of life of the new and awakening Judaism. The function of these teachers is to guide these Diaspora youngsters and to prepare them for Jewish life in Eretz-Israel based on new social foundations.

None of these exist amongst us.

Most of the institutions of the Community in Bitol, and their functionaries, continue to engage as in past years in charitable works along the old lines. Education is conducted according to an utterly outdated system with minimal results. All this is happening at a time when in the outside world, so much effort is being expended on establishing pioneer training centres, on providing vocational training to youth, in setting up circles for general education, in establishing cooperatives, and so forth.

Insofar as any positive things come into being in our midst, they must be attributed to a few men of individual incentive. In all these there is no coordination, worthy of the name, and thus there is no guarantee of normal development. The authoritative factors in the Jewish communities in our region do not keep up with the unrest that is sweeping the Jewish mass. They do not understand it, do not sense it, and do not care about it. Accordingly the fine revelations of various initiatives that come about among people who are young in age and spirit, are compelled to compete with that same strangling atmosphere of pessimism, apathy, indifference, incomprehension, egoism

and pettiness.

One may add to the afore-mentioned, the miserable and depressing outlook prevailing among so many prominent persons, who regrettably occupy the leadership of the communal institutions. They do so side-by-side with others, who are much more enlightened and ready to make an effort and self-sacrifice.

But let us confess openly, that even among the youth we find that egoism, snobbism and ignorance have made their inroad in matters pertaining to the national cause. Of course, in this case, it appears in a much more civilized form, so to speak. These are facts we have to see with clarity, courage and disgust. If we will not bring about a revolution in all our patterns of living and the Jewish community will not be established along new lines, then nothing will be left for us to do other than ponder the galloping process of assimilation bordering on catastrophic dimensions, and watch how part of our people disappears from Judaism...

The youth has the duty to ready the change. Our situation is clear. Once and for all we ask that everyone should understand that the Jewish people cannot survive if it should be led as if it was still the Napoleonic period. Truly, we cannot convey all of the Diaspora to Eretz-Israel and liquidate it immediately. But let us not adopt half measures, which is the system of the old generation.

The youth rejects it and strives for basic solutions in its desire to fashion a wholesome and healthy Jewish generation.

What, then is the proper way?

To take our fate in our hands. To prepare the youth in the spirit of Hashomer Hatzair. To confer on it already in the Diaspora entirely new horizons. Let us stop complaining about the others. From such complaints nothing positive will arise. The youth is sufficiently mature to achieve

by itself, by its own efforts, its aims and to remove the obstacles in its path. The activities of the older generation, apart from a few exceptional persons, are not our liking.

We must, therefore, conduct our affairs in keeping with our views. We must take over as many functions as possible in the ruling bodies of the communities. We will have, on the first opportunity available, to show our readiness for a real contest. Those who now stand at the helm of the communities will have to understand the new situation. After all, in the final analysis the world is inherited by the young. Thus it is only natural to conduct local affairs in keeping with the view of the younger generation. If the heads of the community do not take this into account, then they will have to learn that this generation intends to bring about a profound change in our communal institutions and to cause changes in their leadership..."

These sharp words of Leon Kamhi teach us that he had assumed an extreme position in his approach to solving the problem of youth. Henceforth, he no longer stands as the mediator and intermediary between the generation, but stands up openly and bravely at the head of the group of the youth. He calls out his challenge in clear and strident tones against the heads of the Community representing the old Establishment. Taking into account the patriarchal atmosphere of Jewish society that still prevailed in Bitol, we must regard his talk of the right of youngsters to fashion their own fate with their own hands, as daring and rebellious.

In view of this position, it is hard to grasp why Leon Kamhi allowed the reins of control of the communal institutions to go some two years before he made this lecture. However, we have no proof of whether he ever managed to reconquer the communal institutions.

However, it is clear that this address of Leon's at the regional youth rally was not just for his listeners alone.

A report that was printed some months later in "Zhidov", shows us that Leon and his comrades in Bitol had drawn up a detailed and constructive plan for tackling the social and economic problems of the local Jewish community. The plan was submitted to the special committee that reached the city and was composed of representatives of the Union of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia, WIZO, and delegates of a number of organizations of Sephardic Jews from Sarajevo and Belgrade. This distinguished delegation, that included among others, P.Popes, Vice-Chairman of the Union of Communities, and L. Abromowitz, Secretary of the Union, reached the town towards the end of May 1932. In the course of a few days it toured the Jewish Quarter, called at Jewish schools, the relief kitchen, and the vegetable plots cultivated by Jewish farmers.

Leon Kamhi delivered an address to the Committee on the situation in Bitol, details of which were later published in "Zhidov" above his signature on 29.6.32.

In his report it was said:

"The Bitol Community is in a grave process of decay. The economic situation of the majority of the 800 Jewish families in town, is quite intolerable. Day by day the number increases of families lacking all means of livelihood, and the communal institutions and the Jewish organizations in Bitol are helpless in facing this dilemma. The immediate cause for this situation is, of course, the economic crisis besetting the world. But even when this crisis should pass, the future of Bitol will not be a rosy one. Its population is emigrating and moving to other centres, that are more economically viable. At this very moment nine families are registered for emigration. The number of the jobless is on the increase, and even the simplest kind of employment is unavailable. All these factors cause justified anxiety to the responsible elements in the Community. How can Bitol be helped? This question has served the

basis of constant deliberations. The proposal of the youth of Bitol is to try and tackle the problem by means of the combined aid of a number of organizations and factors. The community's youth has worked out a detailed plan based on the assumption that with its execution, there will remain in Bitol only a quarter of the 4,000 Jews now living in the town today. Henceforth a number of points in this emergency programme:

a. A farming settlement must be established near Haifa with the utmost despatch for the twenty families of the Jewish vegetable growers in Bitol, with the aid of the central Jewish institutions in Yugoslavia and elsewhere;

b. In Yugoslavia itself, there must be set up a pioneering farming centre where agricultural training will be provided to young people so as to ready them for settlement in Eretz-Israel. A small group of high school pupils in Bitol is already at work with a local Jewish farmer. About 130 of the local Jewish youngsters are willing to acquire productive trades, a quarter of whom are suitable to become pioneers.

c. The settlement of Beit-Shearim in Eretz-Israel must be developed so as to be able to absorb a group of candidates from Bitol that will undergo vocational training in Yugoslavia;

d. Vocational training – apart from pioneering farming– must be provided for the youngsters from the poorer families. These youngsters will have to find training facilities in other parts of Yugoslavia. In addition to learning a trade, they have to be provided with suitable conditions for studying the Hebrew language, as well as general education in evening courses;

e. Following the closure of the Jewish kindergarten in Bitol by the authorities because of its unsafe condition, we urge that a new kindergarten be opened.

It is only fit that we ask the authorities to permit Jewish communal supervision of the one primary school in town which has only Jewish pupils. Moreover that same school building is communal property. A special fund should be formed to grant stipends to needy children and enable them to continue their education.

The discussion that ensued following Leon Kamhi's report ended with the conclusion that because of the lack of financial menas, the Committee would as a first stage concern itself with the settlement of the 20 Jewish farmers of Bitol in Eretz-Israel. (They joined the group that founded Kibbutz Shaar Heamakim. The remaining recommendations were never carried out – U.O.)

ON THE ZIONIST ORGANIZATIONS OF SOUTH SERBIA

A lecture by Leon Kamhi

Exactly five years after this discussion of the situation of the youth and the Community of Bitol, the "Zhidov" magazine published an address made by Leon Kamhi on the condition of the Jews and the Zionist Organizations in South Serbia. It appeared in early June 1937. Kamhi delivered the lecture to a meeting of the National Council of the Zionist Federation of Yugoslavia. Once again we encounter his cry of bitter pain at the desperate lot of his fellow congregants, side by side with an undying optimism as to how best to repair the situation.

His speech was reported on June 18, 1937:

"The situation in south Serbia is far from satisfactory. The problem lies not only in the question of the number of Zionist keymen. Even within the framework of the existing manpower, we could organize our work much

better. We, the leadership, must provide the main contribution towards an improvement in the situation. It is such a pity that the generation of Sephardic intellectuals, from whom we expected so much, should have in fact turned its back on the Zionist Movement. Thus we have a situation wherein we lack sufficient numbers of men who are educated, talented and of independent means. These men could have advanced our Movement's work in south Serbia and could have conducted systematic and persistent efforts in the cause of our National Renaissance.

Despite these difficulties, the possibility exists of improving much our Zionist work in south Serbia. In order to persist in systematic work we have to provide ourselves with a regional secretariat in Bitol, and put at its head a young man, who can be mobile and travel throughout the year to various areas. Thus we will be able to double our Movement's attainments in our region.

Since the end of February, I have had the opportunity of spending time in Salonika and smaller communities in Greece. I could also discern that there too the situation is desperate. The organizational framework there is so disrupted, that it only took the departure of the Zionist veterans (for Eretz-Israel:U.O.) to disband the entire Movement. The Zionist Movement in those parts is now conducted by a small group of men, who enjoy goodwill but limited capacities, and they are incapable of moving the masses of Jews. We of the Sephardic communities lack men for carrying out current work that has to produce results immediately. We also lack men for long-term activities. We have to educate and bring closer our Jewish masses to the Zionist Movement by conferring on them the basic fundamentals, right from the start. We have to arouse the great mass of Sephardim from its torpor starting with Eretz-Israel itself, via Asia Minor, Greece and Salonika, right into south Serbia. We have to do this by means of Zionist emissaries, or by any other method.

I still recall, that 12 years ago, when we started our first activity on behalf of Keren Hayesod in south Serbia, I was told to expect the impending arrival of an emissary of Goldmann. We convened a meeting and most of those present wished to inform the emissary that he should refrain from coming until we had managed to set up a properly strong Zionist organization, still in its beginnings. Most of them believed that it would take another five-six years until it would be possible to begin operating for Keren Hayesod in south Serbia. At the time I refused to accept this viewpoint and I telephoned the emissary that "The Jewish Community awaits you"; The result was that in a matter of a few days we collected in south Serbia some 100,000 dinar(!) for Keren Hayesod. The moral success of the drive was tremendous. It indicated that even among the mass of the Sephardim, even lacking any systematic activity, the possibility exists of producing fantastic results at moments of enthusiasm. Further evidence of this was provided by the mass rallies held in Salonika during the war (World War One–U.O.) and immediately thereafter. Such enthusiasm for the Zionist cause, and such a readiness to learn Hebrew, especially among the youth, had not been seen in the Balkans beforehand. But, the leaders left for Eretz-Israel and the enthusiasm petered out. As I have said before: We are poor in leaders. . . ."

These are last extanct relics of the speeches and articles of Leon Kamhi. Two years later, the Second World War broke out. Two years after that Yugoslavia fell before the invading German Army.

The anguish felt by Leon Kamhi for the Zionist Movement found its full expression in his anxiety for its fate in the absence of a leadership that abandons the local Zionist organization in order to immigrate to Eretz-Israel. If there were those who criticized Leon Kamhi for not having by himself fulfilled his own teachings and

followed his pupils to the Jewish Homeland, it is due to their not having descended to the depth of his attachment to his community, and have not appreciated the measure of his personal responsibility for rescuing as many as possible before it would be too late.

9 The Diary of Leon Kamhi

Leon Kamhi never kept a diary of his own. If he did, then it never survived him. But his public activities, and a number of the more personal facets of his life were recorded in various places over the course of a decade. They can be found among the fading pages of yellowed newspapers, in the reports of the Yugoslav Zionist Federation, and diverse other documents.

The main part of the material appearing below was extracted from the Yugoslav Zionist magazine "Zhidov", wherein Leon Kamhi's articles and speeches saw the light. Out of the compilation of news and reports, of reviews and surveys, of critiques and polemics, one gains an insight into ten years of intensive and devoted public work for the sake of the Zionist cause.

With the aid of my colleague, Raoul Teitelbaum, who was born in Yugoslavia, I perused thousands of pages of the magazine's issues that were published throughout this period of time. I extracted any reference or detail pertaining to Leon Kamhi and his town, or I simply quote his own words. I do believe that there is much value in these living testimonies – however disjointed – which may be compared to a documentary film, where the camera work

was done live. These echoes from the past combine into a fabric that infuses life into this far-off epoch.

1931

"Leon Kamhi, Secretary of the Zionist organization in Bitol, has been coopted onto the inner National Executive of the Jewish National Fund in Yugoslavia. The elections to the Executive were held at the National Council session of the J.N.F. in Novisad. This is another triumph for young Leon Kamhi who already serves in responsible positions in the central bodies of the Zionist Movement of Yugoslavia".

January 30 ("Zhidov")

"Bitol is an extremely large reservoir of candidates for immigration to Eretz-Israel. There is a relatively high number of applications to the Jewish Agency for entry visas. The applicants are usually young people replete with the nationalist spirit but lacking all prospects of making a livelihood in Bitol itself. The other candidates belong to the middle class.

Statistical data on the number of Jews in Bitol teach us that there are about 4,000 Jews in that town today. This compares with the figure of 7,500 in 1912, according to the census conducted by the Alliance Israelite at the time. Thereafter there took place a steep rise in emigration from the town due to the depressed economy of the town. The emigration trend is also strong today, but more than ever before the Jews of Bitol wish to settle in Eretz-Israel.

All these problems were raised at the double celebration held on January 17, 1931 at the Aragon Synagogue on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the "Ozer Dalim" (Poor Aid) Society, and the inauguration of the

refurbished synagogue. The situation of the Bitol committee was discussed on that occasion by the Secretaries of the Zionist Organization in Bitol, Leon Kamhi and Rabbi Romano."

February 13 ("Zhidov")

"Leon Kamhi writes to us from Bitol:– On February 3rd we accompanied the family of Akiva Asquio – eight persons – on their way to Eretz-Israel. This family comes from the middle class, and possesses capital of £1,000, and wishes to start its life anew in our Homeland. Despite the rain and the early hour, many Jews turned out to see off the Asquio family at the railway station. Their close friends even travelled with them right up to the Greek border – the train's destination is Salonika. As ever, the departure of a Jew for Eretz-Israel is a most joyful occasion for the Jews of Bitol.

The emigration trend in Bitol to Eretz-Israel is on the upgrade. The trouble is that we cannot get enough certificates. Bon Voyage to the Asquio family! "

February 20 ("Zhidov")

"The entire cultural elite of Bitol attended a large ball that was organized by WIZO. The ball was also attended by all the foreign Consuls assigned to Bitol – the French, the Italian and the Rumanian. The arrival of the representatives of the civil and military authorities signified the official opening of the ball. The Jewish Club was full of well-dressed people. On the walls, which were decorated in good taste, there hung alongside the portraits of the Royal Family, those of Herzl and of Weizmann, as well as magnificent photographs of the landscape of Eretz-Israel. Such a successful ball has not been held in Bitol for the past five years – according to the report communicated to us by Leon Kamhi.

On February 8, the eve of Tu B'Shvat, the masses of Jews turned out for a meeting organized by the Jewish National Fund at the "Hatehiya" hall. Leon Kamhi told the audience of the large-scale afforestation projects underway in Eretz-Israel. A great impression was made by the readings and performance of the literary circle of "Hatehiya", while the orchestra played well."

March 13 ("Zhidov")

"Leon Kamhi, Chairman of the "Hatehiya" Cultural Association of Bitol, writes to us: "Apart from the youth, our Jews refrain from attending parties and gatherings, because most of the programme is given over to dancing. The preparation of alternative programmes for such an occasion is a difficult problem involving considerable expenses. We do not have youngsters endowed with artistic talents who can prepare an attractive programme. In other places one may find, with relative ease, a youngster who plays the piano, who is capable of singing a Jewish song, or capable of reciting. With us, most of the effort in arranging a party or a gathering, is devoted to printing the invitations, selling entrance tickets and so forth. At present we are engaged in negotiations about concentrating all the Jewish societies in Bitol under one roof. It is our intention to unite the activities of "Hatehiya" and of "Maccabi". I do not know whether the negotiations will succeed. But it is clear that if all of us will join forces it will make it much easier to prepare artistic programmes, that must lead to the cultural advancement of the Jewish Community and its youth. . ."

(This merger was brought about successfully after a few years elapsed – U.O.)

March 20 ("Zhidov")

"Last Sabbath Eve the Zionist Organization in Bitol held

a meeting. The Secretary, Leon Kamhi, lectured on the more convenient situation that had emerged for the Zionist Movement in the wake of the letter of MacDonald to Prof. Weizmann. He surveyed the developments in the Zionist Movement and in Eretz-Israel since the last Zionist Congress, and the Arab Disturbances of 1929. L. Kamhi indicated the positive aspect of MacDonald's letter insofar as it did not prohibit Jews from buying land in Eretz-Israel. Once again the opportunity has arisen for the Jewish people to prove its political maturity, by an intensified effort of acquiring large tracts of land in Eretz-Israel, L. Kamhi said. He spoke of the magnificent work done by M. Ussishkin in land acquisition, although he is not entirely in agreement with other Zionist leaders in their attitude to the British Mandatory authorities. The positions we have won in Eretz-Israel, – Kamhi said – will undoubtedly influence the more positive aspect of political developments. Accordingly, we are duty bound to conclude that the way to salvation is in our hands.

On Saturday night, Leon Kamhi spoke once more, this time before a large public gathering in the "Hatehiya" hall at a meeting held to commemorate Trumpeldor and the heroes of Tel Hai.

L. Kamhi dwelt on the social philosophy of Trumpeldor concerning settlement in Eretz-Israel. Interalia, he said: "It is likely that it was our mistake and that of the Zionist Movement in 1920 at the London Conference, that we adopted the minimalist programme of Ruppin, which was not implemented either. The Jewish people throughout the world did not give as much as it could towards the mighty deed of our Renaissance in Eretz-Israel. It is still not too late to intensify the rate of settlement there. But for this end we have to be prepared for even greater sacrifices, and to free ourselves from petty provincialism, and break with Galut thinking. The key to our salvation is in our hands.

The land is there – let us go and acquire it! Our Home will not be built for us by any other people, not even the most friendliest! If we are worthy of a free Homeland, let us go and build it! Jews will be able to rebuild their National Home when they stop regarding this great cause as if it was just a humanitarian matter. We have to realize that the upbuilding of the Land is the content of our living for our generation."

April 10 ("Zhidov")

L. Kamhi writes to us in a light-hearted fashion in a piece entitled: "Only in Bitol".

"On the past Sabbath, just after the Shaharit prayer, the Great Synagogue began to fill up. Young and old, and many women came to hear the sermon of Rabbi Romano on: The League of Nations and Calendar Reform. A most important issue. If the reform of the calendar will be adopted, in the light of current discussions at the League, then one of the fundamentals of Judaism will be hurt – the Sabbath. Rabbi Romano managed to explain why and wherefore the Gentiles seek this reform and the destructive results for the Jews, as well as its general uselessness. In the end he issued a call to those present to sign a petition that would be submitted to the League of Nations against this proposal.

When the congregation emerged from the Synagogue, a lively discussion ensued. Each group cleaving to its viewpoint. The Orthodox say: "No League of Nations – even the strongest ever can contest the will of the Almighty. It was He who created the world so that the Sabbath could be sanctified . . ."

The youngsters, most of whom do not observe the Sabbath, propound the contrary view:"No petitions will help". The wags say: "Even if the League of Nations provides the fullest opportunity to all the Jews in the world

to keep the Sabbath, those types will act to the contrary..."

The women have the biggest complaints: "What does that old League of Nations care about our Sabbath..." adding in Ladino: "Ah, Camino Caro, non pefueda caminar, nos transgressiona (in Hebrew) escapajo del mondo..." (because of our transgressions, the world is coming to an end...)". But they all signed the petition. Most of the signatories are Sabbath observers, and most of them are Jewish women. The poor things do not know how to read and write, so what can they do? The old men provide counsel – one of them will sign for all.

Thus, we continue to observe the Sabbath just as we have done for many generations, while the League of Nations can carry on with its speechifying... "

July 17

During the summer months, the students at the Rabbinical Seminar of Sarajevo visited Bitol. They were the guests of the Jewish Community, met its leadership and talked to its Jews. At the end of their visit, one of the guests, Yaacob Masterro wrote down his impressions, and had them published in "Zhidov".

"Bitol heads the list as far as the vitality of Jewish life is concerned. In particular I would like to single out the ramified activities of the "Hatehiya" Zionist youth club, under the leadership of Leon Kamhi. The club has a fine house at its disposal. There is also a Maccabi club in town with more than 100 members. There is a kind of unclear conflict between the two clubs. Leaders of the clubs are striving to unite their work for the Zionist cause...

It has been years since I felt such a profound spiritual excitement on the Sabbath, as I encountered in Bitol. The shops are closed. The beadle summons the congregation. All Jewish homes have lighted candles. Everything reminds one of the past. It is wonderful how the Jews of Bitol are

thirsty for every word on Judaism, for a sermon or a lecture. All it needs is a small notice in the synagogue for the hall to be packed. The memorial meeting for Herzl, which was not all that successful – according to the organizers, there came double the number of people that attend the most successful gatherings in Sarajevo. (It must be kept in mind that Sarajevo at the time had more than three times the number of Jews of Bitol–U.O.). Of all the communities I am acquainted with, one can only talk of Bitol as the place where they really learn Hebrew. Already a few years back there were a number of Hebrew teachers from Eretz-Israel, and the results of their work are still felt today. Many youngsters speak Hebrew. The Community has to thank Leon Kamhi for this good work.

When we reached the Jewish Ghetto in Bitol, the Jews received us there with the words: "Send us to Eretz-Israel. Here we have nothing to live for. Of the 711 families, some 400 require aid and welfare support."

August 7 ("Zhidov")

"Leon Kamhi writes to us: Former residents of Bitol in Jerusalem have approached the Jewish Community for a contribution towards their new synagogue in the Ruhama Quarter. The synagogue will bear the name "Yigael Yaacov", in memory of the Haham Yaacov Israel of Bitol, who towards the end of his life settled in Jerusalem. The site for the new synagogue has already been bought."

November 20 ("Zhidov")

On November 2nd, the 14th Anniversary Celebrations of the Balfour Declaration was held in the Bitol Synagogue. J.N.F. representative Leon Kamhi gave a comprehensive lecture to the sizeable audience on the meaning of the Balfour Declaration. "Join us in our J.N.F. work" he said when concluding his address. The walls of the synagogue

shook to the rousing rendition of Hatikva."

1932

January 15 ("Zhidov")

On January 3rd, Dr. Zvi Rothmuller came on a visit to Bitol and on the morrow he delivered a lecture in the Synagogue on the subject: "Israel and the Land of Israel". A large audience came to hear him. The sizeable gathering also heard haver Kamhi delivering a short address.

On January 5th, a youth rally was held at the Maccabi hall. Rothmuller lectured on "The World Crisis and the Jews". That same day, a separate meeting was held for the women of Bitol. As a major part of the Jewish women of Bitol do not understand Serbo-Creatian, they were provided with a translation and an explanation in Ladino by Leon Kamhi. The meeting aroused great interest among the Jewish women who were unused to events of this kind.

Smaller gatherings were held with the participation of Rothmuller. "At these meetings" – writes Leon Kamhi in "Zhidov" (the issue of 22.1.32) – "there was given expression to the great disappointment of the participants at the failure of the experiment at settling Jewish farmers from Bitol on the soil in Eretz-Israel..." (It concerned an attempt to settle Beit She'arim,which failed at first because of a water shortage – U.O.)

January 22

A summary of a report that appeared in "Zhidov" un the headline: "Days of Festivity in South Serbia". "The Railway Station of Skopje, the regional capital.

January 7, evening. Lots of noise. 110 Jewish guests reach the town. Most of them from Bitol. Hundreds of youngsters and adults form the Skopje Jewish community come to welcome them. Hands are clasped. Serbian words blend with the sonorous tone of Ladino.

The guests from Bitol have brought with them a band of wind instruments. Eveningtide. The first street lights go on as the youths from Bitol march through the town in their pride, led by their wind instrument band playing lively tunes. They proceed until the Jewish youth club. The inhabitants of Skopje are surprised and highly curious. They come out in their hundreds to see the most unusual sight: Jews marching with an orchestra . . .

On the morrow, the regional conference begins of the representatives of Jewish youth organizations in south Serbia. Leon Kamhi is elected chairman. In his opening speech, he registered his satisfaction at the large number of youngsters that came to the meeting. He hoped that the gathering would serve as an important milestone in the development of Zionism in south Serbia. He devoted a goodly part of his words to the deplorable situation of the Jewish communities and their younger generation in this region. He calls for the adoption of more uptodate work methods among the youth, and in particular, the defining of the aim: aliya to Eretz-Israel!

Among the resolutions adopted by the conference of Jewish youth delegates was one inviting teachers from Eretz-Israel to teach the youth Hebrew, and an appeal to all the Zionist organizations in Yugoslavia to help the Jewish youth of south Serbia, victims of a deteriorating economic situation. With the adoption of the resolutions, the chairman, Leon Kamhi closed the meeting. The walls of the clubhouse shook at the impact of the mass singing of "Hatikva" and "Tchezakna" . . .

March 25 ("Zhidov")

"Yesterday there took place in Bitol, a memorial assembly in honour of the 12th anniversary of the death of Josef Trumpelder and his comrades in defence of Tel Hai. Many persons gathered at 3 p.m. in the Maccabi hall to see the artistic programme. Afterwards Leon Kamhi delivered a lecture on the significance of Trumpelder's life-work and on the tremendous moral influence of the defence of Tel Hai. After his speech, a children's choir sang songs and the event was concluded in a most impressive manner."

Ditto

"The Jewish community of Bitol has given a positive response to the demand of its youth to hire a Hebrew teacher. Hebrew lessons are given under the auspices of the "Hatehiya" Society. Rabbi Avraham Romano is the teacher and he is aided by Leon Kamhi. They hold a conversation session every Sabbath."

May 22

A summary of a report in "Zhidov"

Two hundred youngsters from Bitol and Skopje, plus some dozens of adults, departed on an outing to the Monastery of Christopher in one of the scenic mountain landscape near Bitol. The air resounded to Hebrew songs. The youngsters danced a stormy hora in true halutz fashion...Games were played. In the afternoon a lecture was given by Leon Kamhi on the subject: "The Hebrew Language and its influences on Jewish life in the future." The youngsters danced around the bonfire. Soon they are joined by their elders, who dance a little more slowly. They had joined in the outing in order to see how the youth dance in "The Holy Tongue" and are very moved

by what they saw. "If not for the 'Hatehiya' Society", one elderly man said to his companion, "Our children would not know one word of Hebrew in order to be able to pray the Kaddish at our gravesides."

"True", the old man nodded his head, "Its possible that without Zionism we would not have been able in ten years' time to get a minyan together."

The youths exchange impressions: "Four youngsters have begun to work in our vegetable garden. By their own initiative, because there is no organized training programme. Others intend following suit."

Kamhi's lecture did not take place. Rain began to come down, and they all fled back home.

On the morrow, the Skopje guests set out for their homes. The parting is very touching. "See you at camp! " The buses move off. The travellers and those who remain sing songs in Hebrew.

Leon Kamhi writes in "Zhidov" (20.5.32) in the wake of the youth outing: "This was outstanding proof of the great change wrought among the youth, which was previously unwilling to join "Hatehiya", on the basis that the club only organizes dances. We must coordinate this spontaneous movement of future halutzim. It is my feeling that a new period is beginning. New people are being born and new life is flourishing on the soil of our age-old Homeland of Eretz-Israel ... "

May 27

The Central Organ of the Yugoslav Zionists "Zhidov" published an editorial devoted to the situation in Bitol:

"In Bitol there has been a sense of satisfaction and relief at learning of the decision to allocate a certain percentage of Keren Hayesod income in Yugoslavia to the settlement of the vegetable growers of Bitol in Eretz-Israel. Because of their farming know-how, they can be settled at a

relatively low cost. However the idea was not carried out, although the JNF did set aside a tract of land for them near Haifa. The place appeared to be especially suitable because of its proximity to the new port likely to bring to an intensive development of Jewish settlement in this town, and thus to an increased demand for vegetables and other farm products. Now it is essential to obtain the financial means with the utmost speed to enable the group of twenty families from Bitol to settle there . . ."

August 5

Excerpts of a report of the Union of Jewish Youth Organizations in Yugoslavia – "Zhidov":

"The situation in Bitol and south Serbia is deplorable. About 110 candidates have registered in Bitol for the training centre. Not all of them are young. A number of these wishing to train have by their own initiative gone to work with Macedonian peasants in order to ready themselves for life in Eretz-Israel. It is essential that we find with the utmost urgency the way for these youngsters to emigrate. Likewise the arrival in Bitol of an emissary from Eretz-Israel is a most urgent matter."

August 26

Excerpts from "Zhidov" editorial:

"The exodus of Jews from Bitol to Eretz-Israel is a permanent phenomenon. By means of the Yugoslav Zionist Federation there have set-out 85 Bitol Jews, who obtained tourist visas from the British consulate. In addition immigration certificates were received by four of the local small merchants. In recent months ten Jews have left every fortnight for Eretz-Israel. On August 18, a group of 40 departed. Entire families have begun to leave for our

Homeland. They prefer to live in poverty in Eretz-Israel, rather than in Europe. Out of the 118 youngsters registered for training, some ten of them have departed without undergoing training.

From a Zionist viewpoint, the situation is not so good. We understand the exodus from Bitol, but we are concerned that people go to Eretz-Israel unprepared and lacking all means. True, their future in Bitol is a depressing one, but the difference being that disappointment with Eretz-Israel could remove from them their last hope.

People from Bitol cannot be transferred to farm work without any prior training and lacking all means. What would improve their lot if they were all to settle in Jerusalem, where there are as few prospects for obtaining gainful employment as in Bitol itself?

However, in the final analysis, perhaps this is the best of alternatives. The time left for the people of Bitol is short. They too deserve a place under the sun."

End of September

During September 25-26, 1932, a session of the Executive of the Zionist Federation of Yugoslavia was held in Sarajevo. In the report submitted to that meeting (Extanct in the Zionist Archives in Jerusalem – U.O.) there emerged the strong influence that the economic crisis afflicting Europe – and Yugoslavia – had on the wish to emigrate to Eretz-Israel. Most affected were the poor Jews of Bitol. They believe that they will be able to engage in their occupations in Eretz-Israel, and that at anyrate their state of affairs would not be worse than at present.

The report goes on to state: "A number of families in Bitol are in a hurry to liquidate their few possessions, even before receiving their immigrants' certificates. This causes serious problems in allocating the few entrance permits to

Eretz-Israel awarded to the Jews of Yugoslavia. We were forced to give three certificates to one family that had liquidated its property at the expense of the certificate quota earmarked for bachelors. We feared at the catastrophic consequences in the event of part of the family returning from Eretz-Israel."

It turned out that in 1931, only a few certificates were allocated to Yugoslavia, whereas the demand for entry permits grew more than ever before. The report noted that the situation in relation to certificates allocated to Yugoslavia was even worse in 1932 than in the previous year. The preference awarded in allocation to the Jews of Bitol was explained as not only due to their tough economic situation, "but also because this town was among the few places in Yugoslavia where the youth learned Hebrew – thanks to the consistent and energetic activities of the Secretary of the Bitol Zionist Society, Leon Kamhi."

1933

February 19 ("Zhidov")

"The Bitol Zionist Society initiated a meeting with local women with the purpose of opening a branch of WIZO. After Leon Kamhi's lecture and a discussion among the participants, it was unanimously resolved to set up a WIZO branch in town and temporary executive bodies were elected."

April

The Jewish world in turmoil. Hitler entrenched himself in power in Germany, and his drive against the Jews commences. On April 4th, the organ of German Jewry comes out with a front-page banner headline: "Wear the

Yellow Patch with Pride! ". Protest rallies are also being held among Yugoslav Jewry. The Jewish youth organize a boycott on German films and against German products. In that very stormy period, during the days of Passover 1933, there convened in Belgrade, the 5th Congress of the Union of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia. The organ of Yugoslav Zionists: "Zhidov" wrote:

"The Congress signifies the start of a new epoch. It is characterized by a new wave of national revival borne on the crest of Zionist enthusiasm. The young generation see for the first time their victory in confronting the generation of parents, whom for many years were not ready to grasp the meaning of the Zionist Renaissance."

At the conclusion of the Congress, which took place on April 2-3, a special resolution was also adopted protesting the persecution of Jews in Germany. It said: "Yugoslav Jewry regard the acts of oppression against German Jewry as a very grave injury. Together with all Jews throughout the world, our resolution is firm to oppose this situation and to take all necessary measures to protect the honour and pride of the Jewish People wherever it may be, and to strive for the salvation of German Jewry ..."

The dozens of delegates who reached Belgrade from all parts of Yugoslavia for the Congress included Leon Kamhi. He took an active part in its deliberations and even addressed the gathering during the general debate. Amidst a heavy feeling of anxiety and also of a profound sense of the justice of his cause, Leon Kamhi commenced his speech. He opened his remarks, demonstratively, in Hebrew:

"We Jews are now undergoing our Renaissance. Just as the man when, after years of prison cannot find his path to freedom. We are confused, and we have to make haste to end this state of affairs. The gap between the young and the adults is not just a local phenomenon, but a

universal one, and is even taking place in Eretz-Israel. It is not true that our youth hate religion and the Rabbinate. But their path to Judaism seeks new channels."

Once more Kamhi returns to a cherished subject:

"Much has been said about Bitol, but little has been done. If there is the intention to do something, then make haste. Even the best medicine in the world will not help a dead man, and Bitol is already in a state of dying. The expansion of agricultural training for the youth is important everywhere, but in Bitol it is most essential for the young people ..."

"Leon Kamhi's speech evoked enthusiastic and general agreement", wrote the reporter who described the 5th Congress (in "Zhidov" on 7.4.1933).

As an expression of the ascendant Zionist spirit in the leadership of the Union of Jewish Communities, that was an all-Jewish organization of a general and religious nature, there was elected a new Executive. It included a number of prominent Zionists. Leon Kamhi was one of the 24 members of the new Executive. The measure of support he enjoyed among the delegates to the Congress may be learned from the fact that he was voted onto the supreme body of the Union of Jewish Communities by 167 votes out of 188 delegates who took part in the elections.

April 12 ("Zhidov")

"Leon Kamhi is deeply devoted to the youngsters who introduce to their Zionist work their youthful vitality. He strives to convey his sympathetic approach to the parents as well. On his return from Belgrade he convened a meeting of those parents whose children belong to Hashomer Hatzair, and delivered a most enthusiastic speech to them."

"On the second day of Passover, Kamhi spoke to a massed meeting in Bitol on Pinsker's credo and his "Auto-Emancipation". This was a first-class opportunity for him

to appeal to members of his community to join with him in his Zionist work. Kamhi concluded his lecture by reporting on the 5th Congress of the Union of Jewish Communities in Belgrade. In his words could be discerned considerable satisfaction at the success of the Zionist wing in the Union."

April 28 ("Zhidov")

"Leon Kamhi visited the regional capital – Skopje, where there was held a festive assembly on the occasion of the formation of the local Zionist Society. He delivered his greetings to the rally on behalf of the Yugoslav Zionist Movement, and in his capacity as Vice-Chairman of the Zionist Federation. Kamhi opened his remarks by saying:

"It is a great honour for me to bring the greetings of the Zionist Federation of Yugoslavia to this meeting. I consider it my duty to begin in Hebrew, the language that symbolizes the unity of our people and its Renaissance." Mr. Kamhi devoted a goodly part of his address to the need for the Hebraization of the younger generation."We have to teach our youth the Hebrew language so that they can be absorbed among the Jewish workers in Eretz-Israel," the distinguished speaker declared."

June

A protest campaign was launched throughout Yugoslavia against the persecution of German Jewry by the Nazis. The Jews of Bitol also raised their voices against Hitler's act of horror. The new leadership of the Jewish Community of Bitol initiated a special public committee to aid German Jewry, with Leon Kamhi as a member.

In mid-June a large protest rally was held in Bitol. On the same occasion, members of the youth organizations began to ask the local Jews to donate money for German Jewry. A large crowd came to the rally. One speaker

after the other took the rostrum to denounce the Nazis – Rabbi Romano, Moshe Bracha, Dr. Moshe Jerassy, and lastly – Leon Kamhi, who said, interalia:-

"Until we find the solution to the Jewish Problem, the world will not find a solution to its dilemmas. We must aid our brethren in Germany by giving our hands to the strengthening of Eretz-Israel. Charity is not required here, but constructive aid."

On that day some 13,000 dinar were collected in Bitol for the German Jewry Aid Fund – according to the report in "Zhidov".

July (excerpts from "Zhidov")

The election campaign to the 18th Zionist Congress was particularly harsh in Yugoslavia, more than in other lands. Three lists contested the elections in every community: Labour Eretz-Israel, General Zionists and the Revisionists. The great problems that had arisen at the beginning of that year were suddenly forgotten. The Jewish press in Yugoslav was full of articles, advertisements and electioneering. Everyone was involved in the Zionist Congress elections, and the competition between the three lists was replete with attacks and counter-attacks. Even former Yugoslav Jews residing in Eretz-Israel published a special communique calling on Yugoslav Zionists to vote for the Labour list. That list headed by Dr. Yoel Rosenberger of Zagreb, followed by: Leon Kamhi, H. Steiner, S. Sherer, D. Damio, Dr. A. Weiss, Dr. M. Schweiger and Dr. Z. Rothmuller. The Labour list appealed to the electorate to vote for "pioneering Zionism, realistic policies, national funds and labour settlement."

The elections to the Zionist Congress took place between July 16 and July 23. Leon Kamhi's triumph and that of his list in Bitol was impressive. Out of 375 voters,

297 ballots were cast for the Labour Eretz-Israel list, 70 went to the General Zionists, and eight to the Revisionists. (That year the Zionists of Bitol acquired 542 shekalim out of 7,410 shekalim taken up in the whole of Yugoslavia – U.O.).

The Zionists of Yugoslavia were awarded four seats at the 18th Zionist Congress. When the elections were completed, it turned out that both the Labour Eretz-Israel and the General Zionist lists had won two seats apiece. These election results were considered a most unusual achievement for the Labour Eretz-Israel list, made up on the main of younger leftists. Leon Kamhi was therefore chosen as a delegate to the 18th Zionist Congress, that was held in Prague towards the end of August and in the first part of September. However, when the final list of delegates attending the Congress appeared, the name of Leon Kamhi was missing. For unclear reasons he never reached Prague. Instead of Leon Kamhi, the third man on the Labour Eretz-Israel list, Steiner, went to Prague together with No. 1 – Dr. Rosenberger.

1934

February 20 ("Zhidov")

The National Executive of the Union of Jewish Communities assembled in Belgrade. Leon Kamhi could not attend. Instead he sent in a special appeal wherein he explained that the emissary from Eretz-Israel, I. Ashkenazi, who had been working in Bitol until then, was now returning home and it was urgent to bring over a replacement. Kamhi also asked the National Executive to despatch with speed its representatives to the smaller communities in south Serbia in order to ascertain the situation there. The National Executive accepted his demands. It was resolved that a new emissary would be asked to come from Eretz-

Israel, and it was concluded that they would draw up a detailed programme for the visit of the leaders of Union to south Serbia.

March 9 ("Zhidov")

The polemical debate with Zeev Jabotinsky and his Revisionists also heated up among organized Yugoslav Jewry. In this dispute there is given a prominent place to the scandal that arose in the 18th Zionist Congress when Jabotinsky and his fellow-delegates appeared in the hall wearing uniform. At the same time the reverberation of the assassination of Arlosoroff reached Yugoslavia. Added to these was the appeal of the Revisionists to the Jews of Yugoslavia to join in the petition that Jabotinsky had initiated on a world wide scale.

The split in the World Zionist Organization was also felt in Yugoslavia. Within the framework of the fight against the Revisionists and their petition, 23 of the most prominent Zionist leaders in Yugoslavia issued an announcement wherein they registered their support for the official leadership of the World Zionist Movement and the Jewish Agency, and they sharply rejected the Revisionists' activities.

The announcement read:

"The undersigned are fully cognizant of their responsibility for the unity of the Jewish People, and for the need of conducting cohesive policies on behalf of the People towards the Mandatory regime in Eretz-Israel. Out of the aspiration to establish a Jewish National Home, and the need for internal discipline, we denounce the petition movement and call on the Jews of Yugoslavia not to sign it, and thereby demonstrate their agreement with the responsible and united policies that give expression to the aspirations of the Jewish People."

"Zhidov" related that the signatories belonged to the

elite of the Zionist Movement of Yugoslavia, including Leon Kamhi, Vice-Chairman of the Zionist Federation.

July 20 ("Zhidov")

Following Hitler's rise to power and the emergence of signs of anti-Semitism in Yugoslavia itself, there arose a group of assimilationists among Yugoslav Jews. They claimed that Jewish and Zionist activity would only lend to sharp resistance among the non-Jews and thereby emphasize the disloyalty of the Jews to the Yugoslav regime. Organized Jewry launched a campaign against this group. (In the second half of the 1930s there also arose the even graver phenomenon of Jews who began to change their religion, converting to Christianity and even to Islam. "Zhidov" reacted to this trend by publishing the list of names of the converted – U.O.).

Leon Kamhi also takes part in this ideological dispute with assimilationists. We find his reaction in the framework of his address to a special memorial rally for Herzl (20.7.34) organized by the Zionist youth organization. In talking of Herzl's ideas, Kamhi focused his words on the war of the Visionary of Jewish Statehood against the assimilationist rabbis of Germany.

July 28 ("Zhidov")

"The Jewish People in all its Diaspora accompanies Chaim Nahman Bialik on his last journey. Heavy sorrow has descended upon all Jews at the death of the national poet. In Bitol, all the youth groups, women's organizations and cultural clubs held a joint memorial rally. Leon Kamhi eulogised Bialik, and following his lecture the poems of the great Hebrew poet were declaimed, the youth choir sand the Labour Zionist Hymn, composed by Bialik "Tchezakna".

1935

May 12

Amidst an atmosphere of growing anxiety, the National Council of the Zionist Federation of Yugoslavia assembled in the first part of May. The Zionist leaders came from all parts of the country to Novisad. The Yugoslav press, just like the media throughout the world, printed flow of news reports on Nazi Germany. The oppression of the Jews had already been given official validity in the infamous Nurenberg racial laws. The Council devoted its deliberations to the emergence of anti-Semitism in Yugoslavia itself, and the growth of local Nazi-Fascists groups in the wake of events in Germany.

Leon Kamhi also took part in the Council session. Against the background of those heavy clouds that were beginning to overshadow Europe and its Jewish communities, Kamhi reiterated his call: "Bring us more certificates to enable more Jews go to Eretz-Israel! ". He also criticized the National Executive of the Federation of Yugoslav Zionist for not giving more attention to the settlement of Beit-She'arim which served as an absorption centre for pioneering immigrants from Yugoslavia. (The settlement was undergoing a serious crisis at the time, and in the end part of the Yugoslav group left and joined Kibbutz Sha'ar-He'amakim – U.O.).

"The main issue today is emigration", Kamhi declaimed: "Thus the Council has to adopt a special resolution registering our displeasure at the rate of distribution of entry permits to Eretz-Israel. The fact of the matter is that last year the Yugoslav Jewish community only received 155 certificates, while Greece get over 1,600 permits."

"Zhidov" reported: "The National Council of the Zionist Movement once more elected Kamhi as one of its three Vice-Chairmen."

May 31

The 800th anniversary of the birth of Rambam was celebrated in all the Jewish communities of Yugoslavia. In particularly, there was much festivity among the Sephardic congregations, and naturally this included Bitol. A festive assembly was held in Bitol and addresses were delivered on the life-work of Ben-Maimon by the Communal Rabbi, Rabbi Avraham Romano and Leon Kamhi."

July 1 ("Zhidov")

"Rally round the Zionist Organization and acquire the identity card of every conscious Jew – the Zionist shekel", with this appeal, Leon Kamhi concluded his speech to the mass meeting convened in Bitol within the framework of the shekel purchasing campaign in advance of the 19th Zionist Congress, Leon Kamhi analysed the situation in the Zionist Movement in the world as well as in Yugoslavia. He argued sharply with the Revisionists."

July 20 ("Zhidov")

"A memorial rally to Herzl and Bialik was held in the Central Synagogue of Bitol. The life-work of these two great Jewish historical figures was described by Leon Kamhi."

July ("Zhidov")

As the convening of the 19th Zionist Congress in August-September in Lucerno approached, the chief Zionist groups in Yugoslavia agreed among themselves on the division of delegates. Thereby was avoided the election

campaign that proceded the previous Congress. This time too, Leon Kamhi was chosen on behlaf of Labour Eretz-Israel, and his name came in the fourth place among the ten delegates and deputies sent by Yugoslav Zionist. The General Zionists took three delegates and the Labour list – 2. Once again, just as on the occasion of the 18th Congress, Leon Kamhi's name does not appear among the delegates who actually attended the Congress.

Nov. 23

A news report in "Zhidov": – "The scholar, Meir Y. Kassurala took as his wife, Rivka. The ceremony was conducted by Rabbi Avraham Romano in the presence of many friends. Rabbi Romano and Leon Kamhi delivered their greetings after the ceremony."

December 21 ("Zhidov")

A crisis swept Hashomer Hatzair, the cherished object of Leon Kamhi's care. The leaders of the branch left the town in order to undergo agricultural training to prepare themselves for emigration. At the same time the conservative parents' opposition grew, because of their dissatisfaction with the rebellious ideas of their children.

Leon Kamhi and other Zionist leaders assembled the parents together in a meeting which was a considerable success. Many parents came to hear about the ideological foundations of Hashomer Hatzair, and at the end, youth movement members declaimed suitable passages and sang Hebrew songs. The dramatic circle also gave a performance of a short shetch on the life of the pioneers.

"Hanukka was celebrated in Bitol with a sense of spiritual uplift", L. Kamhi reported in the same issue. "This was aided by a most successful Hanukka party, wherein there appeared the tenor, Peppe together with a

choir that performed Hanukka songs while lighting the candles. The singer gave the audience much pleasure by his rendition of Sephardic Romances."

1936

March 30 ("Zhidov")

The 6th Conference of the Union of Jewish Communities took place in Belgrade, and Leon Kamhi was once more elected to its Executive.

The Conference focused on the increasing emergence of anit-Semitism in the wake of the Nazi rule in Germany. One resolution adopted at the Conference noted that the appearance of anit-Semitism in Yugoslavia, which was not deeply rooted among the mass of the people, had caused considerable dissatisfaction and anxiety among the Jewish public. The Jews of Yugoslavia demand of the responsible authorities in the land to ensure the maintenance of equal rights for the Jews, and to put an end to these anti-Semitic phenomena.

April 12-13 ("Zhidov")

"The Conference of representatives and keymen of the Jewish National Fund in south Serbia was held in Skopje. The meeting was a most successful one in its deliberations. A report was submitted on the scope of donations that was quite satisfactory. A resolution was adopted calling for an added effort to increase the share of south Serbian Jewry in buying natioi al land. The meeting was opened and chaired by Leon Kamhi."

May 5 ("Zhidov")

Eretz-Israel was in the throes of the Arab Disturbances.

The Jews of Yugoslavia react to the bloody attacks of the Arabs. All the Zionist organizations in Bitol hold a joint memorial rally for the victims of the Disturbances. Practically each family in Bitol has relatives in Eretz-Israel, and thus the Jews are concerned. Leon Kamhi addressed the memorial rally on the background to the Disturbances.

May 23 ("Zhidov")

Another memorial meeting was held in Bitol. This time to mourn the death of the Zionist leader, Nahum Sokolow. A eulogy was delivered by Leon Kamhi.

June 31 ("Zhidov")

The school year ended. Some 625 Jewish children attend primary school, and another 58 pupils attend high school. Of the 114 Jewish children who completed in 1935/6 the primary school (four classes), only 20 registered to continue their studies at high school. This data was reported at a special meeting called to discuss the state of education and Jewish youth in the town. Leon Kamhi explained to the meeting that education for Jewish youth in Bitol must be given top priority.

"We are responsible for our youth's future, those who remain and those who will go to Eretz-Israel", Leon Kamhi said.

December 27

At the end of 1936, Leon Kamhi was once again elected to the Jewish Communal Council of Bitol. He was elected as a member and Secretary of the Council. ("Zhidov").

The year of 1936 in the life of Bitol was mentioned in the report of the Zionist Federation of Yugoslaiva, relating to an unusual event in town:

"Bitol saw its first film from Eretz-Israel. Those

hard-working Jews who heard so much of flourishing settlements in Emek Jezreel and the Jordan Valley, were able to see with their own eyes the reality that had been for them a far-off legend. It was the first documentary produced by the Keren Hayesod named "The Land of Labour and the Future". It proved itself as an uptodate, living and effective medium for Zionist information work. It also made a great impression on the many non-Jews who came to see the wonder from the Holy Land."

The film was screened in the one and only cinema in Bitol, and it was completely packed. Due to the shortage of seating for all who wished to see the film, it was necessary to show it again and again during the coming week. Many came to see it for a second and a third time. The entire Jewish community of Bitol – women, children, old, young, sat transfixed and excited at the sight of the beautiful and verdant Land, whose state of prosperity whispered to them of their own prospects.

The report of the Zionist Federation of Yugoslavia noted that Bitol was the poorest and most desperate of all the communities in the country. In 1936 a special fund drive was conducted throughout Yugoslavia for the Jewish children of Bitol, and donations were collected for the establishment fo "The Jewish Children's Home".

The report said: "The conditions of want and poverty in which the Jews of south Serbia (Macedonia) exist, and particularly in the town of Bitol, have obliged us to devote special efforts to find suitable ways of providing constructive aid to this aprt of the Jewish community. A special effort has been made to collect data on the basis of which can be determined the manner whereby we can ensure a decent livelihood to those Jews and particularly to the younger generation. . . ."

(Following this report, the General-Secretary of the Zionist Federation of Yugoslavia, Dr. Rudolf Buchwald

went to Bitol. His impressions were quoted in the previous chapter. – U.O.).

1937

March 5 ("Zhidov")

"Leon Kamhi from Bitol, Vice-Chairman of the Zionist Federation of Yugoslavia was engaged on February 21, 1937, in Salonika to Miss Frieda Baruch. Heartfelt greeting greetings to our friend."

That, in fact, was the only mention of Leon Kamhi during that entire year in the Zionist publication. "Zhidov" devoted most of its columns in 1937, to the problems of Wrold Jewry and Yugoslav Jewry, which were deteriorating from day to day. Bitol, for some reason, was emitted.

But we learn of Leon Kamhi's activities from the report of the Zionist Federation of Yugoslavia which came out annually.

Leon Kamhi was, as ever, completely involved in speeding up emigration from Bitol, in ramified activities for the national funds, and in all Zionist work throughout Yugoslavia. He was now filling numerous local and national positions: Vice-Chairman of the Zionist Federation of Yugoslavia; member of the Executive of the Union of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia; Trustee of the Jewish National Fund in south Serbia, and one of its keymen throughout the country; Secretary of both the Bitol Zionist Society, and of the Bitol Jewish Communal Council.

These positions take up all of his time. His personal affairs were completely neglected, particularly after the boycott he initiated on German goods, which he had

served as an agent. While he is looking after his community's affairs, his own livelihood suffers even as he is about to marry and set up a family.

Although Leon Kamhi reached a level of public office that obliged him to be concerned for all Zionist and national fundraising affairs in Yugoslavia, he still defended the interests of Bitol.

The year of 1937 passed amid a constant struggle to increase the aliya quota and the enlargement of the allocation in certificates to Bitol.

We learn from the Zionist Federation's reports that the construction of the Tel Aviv Port opened a door to the immigration of the Jews of Bitol who had been engaged in porterage for years. No one community in Yugoslavia could compete with Bitol in this matter. It is an irony of fate that this occupation, considered the most demeaning among Jews, tore an opening through the obstacles to the emigration of dozens of the social welfare cases of Bitol. The Federation report noted, in this connection: "It has been promised that a special emissary of the Jewish Agency will this summer (1937) visit Bitol, and on the spot decide on the candidates for aliya as port workers."

1938

This year, too, Leon Kamhi's activities were mentioned in only one news item by "Zhidov". It appeared on November 18, under the headline: Reorganization of the Zionist Society in Bitol."

It read:

"For a number of years now there has been felt a need to reinvigorate the local Zionist Society in Bitol. All the Zionist work has been carried out by a small group of four-five persons, led by Leon Kamhi. Under the initiative

of Hashomer Hatzair and the Kadima group, a special meeting was called (on 13.11.38) wherein it was resolved to expand the framework of the local Zionist Society. A temporary committee was formed, with the participation of representatives of all the local Zionist groups. Alongside the veteran members of the leadership was included a group of youngsters. It was also decided to hire a hall for Zionist work in Bitol.

It is characteristic that even during these harsh times, when on could expect an impasse in Jewish communal work, there has been an awakening of Jewish activity in Bitol.

1939

March

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Hashomer Hatzair, Leon Kamhi wrote a message of warm greetings to the National leadership of the Movement in Yugoslavia, interspersed with numerous Hebrew phrases. The greetings were published in the journal of the Hashomer Hatzair Movement in Yugoslavia:

"Comrades!

How goodly are thy tents . . . (Hebrew)

Shomerim!

You, who have joined Hashomer Hatzair in complete sincerity and with the pureness of your hearts, not as an entertainment, but under the impulse of idealism. You, whose aim is self-liberation and rising above petty things, with fidelity to a courageous way of life – you have provided our pioneering youth with a model. Youth of your kind is what we wish to see. Youth of the kind that your Movement strives to mould.

Twenty-five years of systematic and productive work

have not been in vain. Your boys, with the other pioneering youth, are the elite to which we will leave our life's labours, the aliya of the builders of our Homeland.

It is my hope that on the eve of the new period in your work, you will be able, without aid, to extend your influence and absorb in your ranks new members. The time will yet come when sceptical parents will fully concede that they were mistaken when they held prejudices against all of us. Your unwavering loyalty to the Homeland, to the spiritual values of Judaism, will in the final analysis pull down the wall within which they are trying to isolate you in some places. The camp that you have established is the best proof that Zionism is not just a stream of emigrants, but a Movement of political revival, of a People returning to its Homeland. What can be more important, more decent and more sensible in this period, at a time when humanity is wandering in the darkness pushing away many to despair.

Accordingly, we regard your Movement, as the others, that base their work on the premise that Zionism is first of all a Movement that is bringing about fundamental change in Jewry, as a focus of Zionist ideology. We, the veterans, are duty-bound to prepare the way before you, and remove the obstacles therefrom, and bless your loyalty to the ideals of pioneering.

Be Strong and of Good Courage! Do not let thy Spirit fall! Be the stars that bring the glowing dawn nearer to us. When the mass of our people will reach our National Home, then they will bless your pioneering work and feel in their hearts: How goodly are they tents . . ."

(Organ of Hashomer Hatzair)

April

A month thereafter, the fourth Conference of Hashomer Hatzair in Yugoslavia is held in Belgrade. Leon Kamhi

is asked to address the gathering, both as one of its warmest supporters and as a top member of the Zionist leadership in Yugoslavia. Leon could not appear in person, so instead he sent written greetings:

"I wish you the best of success in your Conference. Buttress the foundations for the continuation for your important work. I would like to see many youngsters joining Hashomer Hatzair, so that we will be able to successfully compete with the other camp in Israel. That same camp, that to my regret, demonstrates that not all of the People properly understands the historic importance of the period of National Renaissance, which we are now living through in these tragic times.

Buttress your sacred work for the JNF. Let each shomer show true joy as he adds another brick onto the foundations on which we are erecting our Home for the coming generations.

Train the youth for Eretz-Israel, and fortify the bonds of the Land for times of sorrow and times of peace.

The idea of redemption is not the same idea for which one dies heroically in war. The idea of redemption for our People leads to that way of life that encompasses National Renaissance – that is both spiritual and social.

I felt obliged to add these few words to my greetings because of late there has been an increase in the activity of the parasitic element in our People, which attacks the positive and essential work of your comrades ..."

(Organ of Hashomer Hatzair)

April – December

On April 23-24, the seventh Conference of the Union of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia was held in Belgrade. This was the last great gathering of Jewish communities of this country before the Nazi wave engulfed them. The heavy shadow of war hung over the discussions and found

expression in the resolutions adopted at the Conference. The participants spoke of the hard conditions suffered by European Jewry, and of the attempts of the Yugoslav Government to limit Jewish rights in that country. This was due to the rapprochement of Yugoslavia to the Berlin-Rome Axis (they had already introduced normus clausus for admitting Jewish students to universities, and so forth). Waves of Jewish refugees from Germany and Austria began to pour into Yugoslavia, and the Jewish communities assumed a new role – caring for the refugees from Nazi oppression. Hundreds of refugees from Poland and Germany passed through Yugoslavia aboard small ships down the Danube. Their path wended from Germany, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Rumania, right to the Black Sea, near Turkey. The Union of Jewish Communities provided them with food and clothing on their journey through Yugoslavia and at its frontiers.

The Conference, in its resolutions, expressed more than ever for its identification with the National Renaissance in Eretz-Israel. This was noteworthy because the Union was not a Zionist body but a general Jewish organization. The resolution read: "We are fully conscious of the great admiration that Jewry has for the community in Eretz-Israel, the strongest fortress of the Jewish present and future."

Leon Kamhi was re-elected again to the Executive of the Union of Jewish Communities.

Two months later, on July 5, 1939, Leon Kamhi was elected, for the third time, as a delegate to the 21st Zionist Congress held on August 16 in Geneva, just on the eve of the outbreak of World War 2. (There is no evidence showing whether Leon Kamhi did attend that Congress, or whether he stayed away, as on the two previous occasions – U.O.).

In December 1939, the National Council of the Zionist

Federation of Yugoslavia was held in Bonja-Luca in Bosnia. Leon Kamhi once more was elected Vice-Chairman of the Federation. He served in this post for ten years without a break. He was also elected to the National Board of Trustees of the JNF in Yugoslavia.

That was the last Zionist meeting to be held in Yugoslavia before the Holocaust.

1940

January ("Zhidov")

A most interesting document on the social makeup of Bitol Jewry prior to the Holocaust still exists. The Communal Rabbi, Rabbi Avraham Romano, related in an article he wrote in "Zhidov" (9.2.40) the following details:-

On March 11, 1931 there were 757 Jewish families in Bitol, making a population of 3,751 persons. Until 1940 there emigrated from Bitol to Eretz-Israel some 429 persons. The flow of emigration to Eretz-Israel dropped by half in the second half of the 1930s, due to the bloody Disturbances there. Instead the movement turned towards the main cities of Yugoslavia – Belgrade, Zagreb or Skopje.

In early 1940 there were 736 Jewish families in Bitol with a population of 3,246 persons. That year 394 families applied for welfare aid to the Community, meaning that over half the Jewish families in Bitol were social cases. The sorry lot of the Jewish population in this town can also be learned from the data on the occupational division of the Jews as registered by Rabbi Romano. In the first part of 1940 there were in Bitol: 80 shop assistants; 70 porters; 63 unskilled men; 57 cobblers; 54 vegetable vendors; 43 old clothes men; 43 merchants; 42 daily workers; 34 peddlars; 29 bakers and flour merchants; 29 beggars; 26

assistant tailors; 24 small grocers; 22 butchers; 21 domestic servants; 17 tinsmiths; 16 poultry dealers; 14 fruit growers; 14 tanners; 11 cafe owners; 10 carters; 9 money changers; 9 clerks; 8 vegetable growers; 8 milkmen; 8 rabbis; 8 sanitation workers; 7 students; 6 glaziers; 6 commercial agents; 6 barbers; 5 metal workers; 4 owners of small restaurants; 4 coke-men; 4 exporters; 3 physicians (not local); 3 tailors; 3 inn owners; 2 carpenters; 2 fire-fighters; 1 decorator; 1 lawyer (not local); 1 dentist (not local); 1 engineer(not local.

Thus, there was hardly a trade or skill that the Jews of Bitol did not engage in, starting with the traditional Jewish occupations in trade and ending with "gentile" skills like porterage and coke-making.

In the same article, the Rabbi notes with concern that if in the past the sorry lot of the Jews of Bitol aroused interest and attention on the part of the central Jewish institutions, at the moment they were pushed aside by general Jewish problems.

November (Organ of Hashomer Hatzair)

The organ of Hashomer Hatzair in Bitol printed a short item: "The building of our clubrooms in Bitol has been confiscated for military purposes. This has caused considerable hardships for our work with the youngest groups. Efforts are being made to get the place back. On the other hand, work is continuing intensively among the older groups ..."

1941

February ("Zhidov")

A few days before Yugoslavia itself was swept up in the bloodbath of war that rages throughout the rest of Europe, the Zionist weekly publishes a report on what was taking

place in Bitol. This is the last written news on the Zionist activities of this town led by Leon Kamhi. We learn that despite the increasingly strong smell of approaching gunpowder, Leon Kamhi persisted in his Zionist work, and even increased it:

"On January 25, a festive rally was held in Bitol to signify the first anniversary of the "Blue White" group. Speeches were delivered. The youth sang 'Tchezakna". An emissary from Eretz-Israel, Hizki Bachar, spoke of the Movement's work. In conclusion, Leon Kamhi spoke and appealed to the youth to cleave bravely to its work."

Indeed, only two months were to pass before the Nazi beasts conquered Bitol, and the Jews of that town will soon require generous portions of two qualities: fortitude and bravery.

10 The Holocaust

On April 6, 1941 Nazi Germany invaded Yugoslavia without any declaration of war.

This move was preceded by shirts and turns in internal Yugoslav politics. The Royal Yugoslav Government which had at the beginning of the year conducted negotiations with Germany and Italy, and signed a treaty joining the Berlin-Rome Axis, collapsed at the end of March as a result of internal unrest.

Mass demonstrations were held in the main cities of Yugoslavia to demand the cancellation of the disgraceful treaty. The patriotic feelings of the nationalist masses waxed strong, and were fed by the fact of the traditional ties of Yugoslavia with France and Czechoslovakia, which had already been trampled underfoot by the Nazi jackboot. The central slogan in these stormy protest demonstrations, carried aloft on enormous banners and chanted by the crowds, was: "Better War Than Submission! ". These demonstrations finally brought down the Government and in its stead there took power a military-nationalist Cabinet that cancelled Yugoslav adherence to the Axis, and declared its support for the Allies.

This development upset Hitler's timetable, for he was planning his Drang Nach Osten-Drive to the East. So he postponed his invasion of the Soviet Union for a few months. Instead he gave the order early in April to invade

Yugoslavia and liquidate this nuisance and obstacle in his path.

On April 6, in the early hours of the morning, Belgrade was cruelly bombed by hundreds of German heavy bombers. At the same time, the armoured columns of the Wehrmacht poured into Yugoslavia from across the Austrian and north Hungarian borders to the north, from Bulgaria to the east and from Greece to the south. Under the tremendous blows of the Wehrmacht and its allies, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was defeated within less than one week. Already on April 7th, an armoured column of the German Army entered the regional capital of Macedonia, into Skopje, and on April 9th Bitol fell to the Adolf Hitler SS units of the 72nd Division of the Wehrmacht and the 12th Armoured Corps. The battle with Yugoslav troops was short, but at any rate 30 Germans paid with their lives for the occupation of Bitol.

In the course of the next three days, the Germans looted the shops of the Jews in these cities. Their loot – cloth, textiles and haberdashery – the soldiers of Hitler sent to their wives and mistresses in Germany. The scope of the looting was so comprehensive that in a matter of days, nothing remained of the Jewish shops of Bitol, Skopje and other Macedonian cities. In addition to these, there were acts of oppression, humiliation and individual killings.

With the German occupation, there began wild anti-Jewish propaganda. The anti-Jewish campaign in Macedonia was put in the hands of a special Nazi expert, one of Eichmann's specialists, SS Hauftshtumführer Theodore Denker, who was at the time the German General Consul in Skopje.

On April 22, the entire Macedonian area plus some parts of Serbia were incorporated into the Kingdom of Bulgaria, the loyal ally of Nazi Germany. That was the prize awarded by Berlin to Sofia, and it was inscribed in a

special treaty right after the occupation. When the Bulgarian occupation forces entered the area in place of the German troops, a certain hope arose among the Jews that their lot would improve. However, these hopes were quickly dashed. The Bulgarian Government continued to study the Jewish Question, and did not let up until the final liquidation of the Jews of Macedonia, two and a half years thereafter.

As soon as the Bulgarians settled down in Bitol, they immediately adopted anti-Jewish steps. They saw to it that on each Jewish shop and workshop was hung a sign – "Jew shop", and by the end of 1941 special commissions completed their work of registering all Jewish property in the town.

In October 1941, a special ordinance was issued by the Bulgarian Occupation authorities completing the work of the German looters in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. According to this ordinance the Jews of Skopje and Bitol were forbidden from engaging in trade and industry, and ordered to liquidate their business interests by the end of the year. After a few months, in early 1942, a new ordinance was issued ordering all the Jews of Macedonia, including those of Bitol, to hand over to the Bulgarian Government one-fifth of all their property, as a special tax. Committees set up by the authorities vetted the Jews' property declarations, and in many cases confiscated all the property of Jews under the premise that their declaration was incorrect. Jewish children were forbidden to attend general schools, and the youngsters prohibited from taking part in any sport contest or activity of any kind.

During 1942, the Commisseriat for Jewish Affairs in Bitol issued a string of orders aimed at making the Jews' lot an impossible one: all Jews were forbidden to hold ready cash, and the money was forcibly deposited in the Bulgarian State Bank; they could only take out of the

Bank for personal usage the small amount of 6,000 levs and only on receipt of a special permit from the authorities. Jews were prohibited from working and trading in food. A Jew could no longer work as a milkman, a baker or a butcher. In every case he was not allowed to work in more than one trade. All the Jews were obliged to wear the yellow patch. They were not allowed to open new shops, to keep cars, telephones or radios. A Jew could not share an apartment house with a Bulgarian, and those wealthy Jews who lived in the well-to-do areas of Bitol on the west bank of the River Dragur were obliged to move back to their brethren in the ghetto. Even the promenade along the west bank of the river was forbidden. A Jew could neither enter a cafe nor a restaurant, and they could not live in the same houses as a Bulgarian. Even Jewish babies could not receive the names their parents wished to give them, but only in keeping with a special list prepared by the occupation authorities. They made sure that no Jew would carry a name resembling a Bulgarian one, and those who did so already, were forced to change them.

The special commission investigating the crimes of the occupying forces, which operated for an entire year immediately after the Liberation, found that the German and the Bulgarian invaders robbed the property and monies of the 739 Jewish families in the town, and these assets were valued at 538 million Yugoslav dinars. Apart from that, they ransacked the 5 synagogues in Bitol, the property being valued at 32.5 million dinars.

On August 26, 1942 the Bulgarian Fascists decided to establish a special Commissariat for Jewish Affairs who would handle all Jewish matters as part of the Ministry of the Interior. A week after that, on September 3rd, the Government in Sofia appointed Alexander Belev as Supreme Commissar for Jewish Affairs. This man, and his ramified administration, was in close contact with the German

Embassy in Sofia and with the Gestapo. A representative of this Commissariat reached Bitol, as all the other towns in Macedonia. Most of his work entailed supervising the Jews, and to initiate every few months acts of oppression and humiliation. The cost of maintaining this widespread bureaucracy was paid by the Jews themselves. This took place after all the bank accounts of Jews were blocked, and the properties of Jewish communities and public organization were confiscated.

On 22.9.42, a special representative of the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs was appointed in Skopje by the name of Ivan Zacharov. This wicked man speedily became the source of terror and fear for the Jews of that city.

According to Ordinance No. 4567, all the Jews of Bitol, together with the rest of the Jews throughout the Kingdom of Bulgaria, were obliged as of August 1942 to wear the yellow patch. In keeping with the German Race Laws, the Ordinance ruled that all Jews, without any exception must wear the patch, from the age of 10 onwards, and it must be affixed not only on the external clothes but on underwear and indoor dress. Jews were forbidden from visiting public places, and to move through the cities' central streets. All the homes and property of Jews were marked by special signs: "Jew home" – and at the entrances were affixed lists of all the Jewish residents.

The legal basis for all this was introduced earlier on. The Bulgarian Government and the Royal court were inclined to Fascism even before the outbreak of World War 2, and as a result thereof the suitable political conditions were created for anti-Jewish legislation. At first the purpose of the laws were to liquidate the Jews, both economically and politically. The Final Solution was reserved for the Jews in the areas annexed by Bulgaria, while the Jews of Bulgaria proper were saved.

Even before January 24, 1941 – i.e. before the invasion

of Yugoslavia, the Bulgarian National Assembly enacted the "Law for the Preservation of the Nation", that was a copy of the Nuremberg Race Laws. The Jews were proclaimed Enemies of the State, and the law was aimed at protecting the Bulgarian Nation from the Jews . . .

These laws forbade Jews from working in public administration, banks and book-keeping. Jews were expelled from and kept out of institutions of higher education and culture, schools, theatres, cinemas, newspapers and so forth. They were not allowed to own or be partners in cultural institutions, publishing firms, hotels, the production and trade of films and records, and of weapons. Later on ownership of farm land was prohibited to Jews.

On the basis of the various clauses of this law, the Jews of Bitol, Skopje and other parts of Macedonia were obliged to submit precise declarations of all their assets, from real estate and houses to an exact list of cash savings, furniture and household effects. Within a very short period, the Jews were forced to sell their homes and businesses at a nominal value. After October 1941, when the Jews of Bitol and Skopje were prohibited from engaging in trade and industry, a new order was issued on February 12, 1942 by the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs demanding the final closure of Jewish workshops, and the artisans had to go into liquidation within a fortnight, and hand over to non-Jews. The small payment they got from this enforced sale they had to deposit in a special blocked account in the State Bank. Those workshops that did not sell out were confiscated. The poor tailors, cobblers and other artisans of Bitol were obliged to bid farewell to the inadequate equipment that had provided a living for their families for generations.

"The Law for the Preservation of the Nation" imposed on the Jews, in addition to economic restrictions, very severe political limitations. Things were worse for Mace-

donian Jews, who were not regarded as Bulgarian citizens even after the annexation. Accordingly, the Jews of Macedonia were forced to hold special identity cards and pay a special sum of money for not serving in the Bulgarian Army (!). Likewise Macedonian Jewry was forced to pay 20 lev for every yellow patch sold them by the authorities..

The Jews protested and even dared send a peitition to the Bulgarian Government, which said: " ...for we, who were born here, and have lived in this land for centuries, whose forefathers have been buried here for many generations, are we to be made aliens under the law? . . . " (A copy of the protest is preserved in the archives of the Skopje Jewish community.).

The petition bore no fruit. Everywhere was felt the trained hand of Eichmann's men. The noose began to tighten around the Jews of Macedonia in systematic fashion. On January 15, 1943, Ivan Zacharov, the Commisar for Jewish Affairs in Skopje, issued another order restricting the movement of the Jews in the towns. All the central streets of the towns were declared out of bounds to Jews. They could only walk through alleyways. Likewise access to public gardens was restricted to weekdays until 4 p.m.

At the same time, the destruction of European Jewry was underway. Unclear information began to reach the Jews of Macedonia. They were rumours that no one wished to believe. Hope still remained, despite all the suffering and humiliation.

The great tragedy of Macedonian Jewry began in March 1943, and ended within a short time with the complete liquidation of all the Jews of Bitol, Skopje and the other small towns in this region, After the Germans and the Bulgarians agreed on the deportation of the Jews of Macedonia to Treblinka, the Bulgarian Government adopted a special resolution on March 2, 1943, whereby:

"The lands belonging to the Jews who will be expelled outside the borders of Bulgaria will be confiscated by the State; the assets of the deported Jews will be sold in a public sale by the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs. Insofar as the Jewish organizations will end their duties with the emigration of the Jews, all the properties of the local Jewish communities and of their religious and cultural institutions will be handed over to the municipalities."

Negotiations between Germany and Bulgaria over the deportation of the Jews from Bulgaria began during 1941. In 1942, these talks were speeded up. That same year the special administration of the Commissariat of Jewish Affairs was set up to expedite the Final Solution in that country. The Germans put pressure on to speed up the Final Solution, and that it should include all Jews inside Bulgaria. Sofia hesitated going that far and told Berlin of its reservations. Finally, they agreed to a compromise. In the negotiations on this question conducted between the German Ambassador and the Bulgarian Minister of the Interior, it was agreed in principle that Bulgaria would hand over to Germany in the first phase, some 20,000 Jews from the regions annexed to Bulgaria – Macedonia and Thrace. Once the agreement was reached in principle, the matter was handed over for execution early in 1943. Involved in this operation were an SS man who served as an attache to the German mission in Skopje, Theodore Denker, and the head of the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs in Sofia, Alexander Belev. The negotiations ended speedily and on February 2, 1943, the two men made an oral agreement on the following points:

1. The German Reich was ready to accept the Jews from Bulgaria.
2. The numbers of Jews to be deported would be determined a priori.
3. The deportation would commence early in March.

4. The Jews would be handed over to the German military authorities at agreed points.
5. Once the Jews were handed over to the German military authorities, the Bulgarians would cease to take an interest in their fate.
6. At first the Jews will be concentrated in temporary camps adjoining railway stations.
7. The Jews will be allowed to take with them only food and clothing to last for 10-15 days.
8. The round-up of Jews will be carried out at once and suddenly so as to prevent escapes.

On the morrow of this agreement, on February 3, 1943, Belev sent telegrammes to all representatives of the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs throughout the area to draw up the lists of Jews living in their localities, with special care that the Jewish families would be registered with their exact addresses. The lists must be conveyed to Belev within a week's time, until February 9. Special arrangements were made to ensure cooperation with the Bulgarian Army and Police in performing this mission.

In the first half of February, there were intensive consultations between the Germans and the Bulgarians over the number of Jews to be deported. The Bulgarian leadership resolved that this fate would, for the time being, be reserved for Macedonian Jewry alone, and that Jews with Bulgarian citizenship, from Bulgaria proper would not be handed over to Germany. On February 22, the consultations ended and an agreement was drawn up in writing. On behalf of Bulgaria, the signatory was the Commissioner for Jewish Affairs, Alexander Belev, and on behalf of the Reich, the signatory was Denker.

Hereunder the said agreement:

"Once the Royal Bulgarian Government will have endorsed this agreement, there will commence the transfer of 20,000 Jews, irrespective of age and sex. The German

Reich is ready to receive these Jews in its Eastern districts. On no account will the Bulgarian Government be entitled to demand the return of the deported Jews."

It was clear for all to see in this document's phrasing what kind of fate awaited the Jews of Bitol, Skopje and other parts of Macedonia. Even in this document, like in the others dealing with Jews, there was care to observe the explicit instruction of the Nazi leadership never to specify the words: "destruction", "liquidation", "gas chambers", and so forth. They only used the euphemism – "the Jews will be received in the Reich's Eastern districts," and once there they would vanish, and the Bulgarians would no longer be able to enquire after their fate.

Once the agreement was reached between Belev and Denker, even before the formal approval of the Bulgarian Government, the administration began to operate. On the Bulgarian side, those responsible for the deportation were appointed. The man in charge for Bitol was Kirol Stoimanov, and for Skopje there were two officials – Zachariev and Draganov. Zachari Volkov was made coordinator for deportation procedure in all of Macedonia.

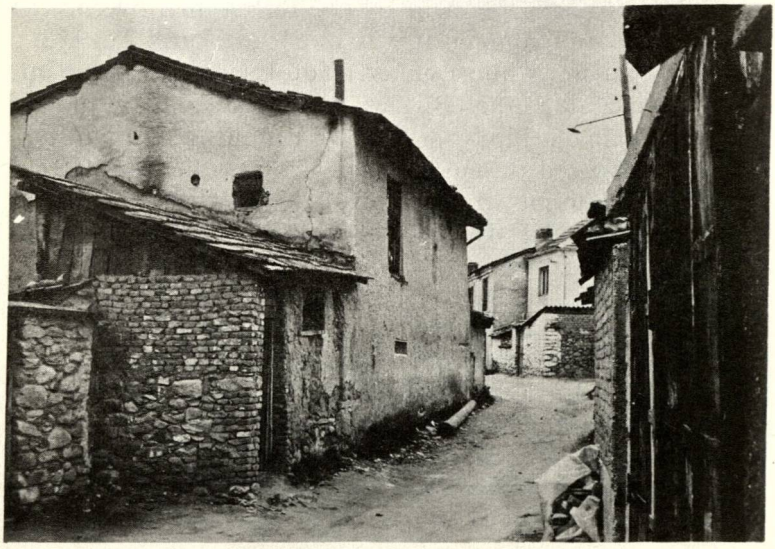
The formal endorsement by the Bulgarian Government was not slow in coming. It was given on March 2, 1943, a month after Belev and Denker made their oral agreement. That same day the Bulgarian Government withdrew Bulgarian citizenship from all Jews sentenced to expulsion, if they possessed it, and confiscated all of their properties. Thus was determined the fate of 20,000 Jews within the boundaries of Bulgaria, and among them that of the eight thousand Jews of Macedonia.

On the previous day, March 10, the telephone rang in the office of Kirol Stoimanov. Skopje was on the line. "You have to ready the journey by railway for the morning" – he heard over the phone. That was the agreed password for launching the operation.

It commenced simultaneously at all collection points in Macedonia. Everything was organized and planned down to the last detail. The sign was given at 2 a.m. The



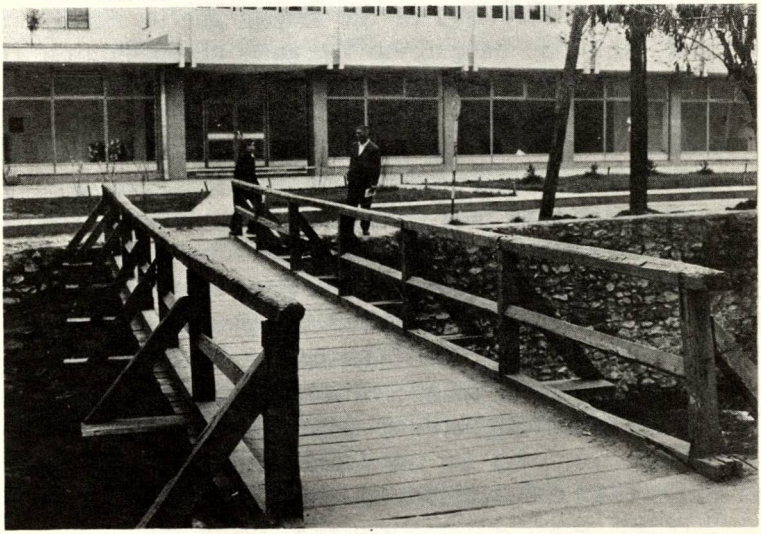
Remnants of the Jewish Street. 1971.





A poor Macedonian family living in the old Jewish quarter.

The wooden bridge across the River Dragur, which was renamed "The Bridge of the Jews", after the expulsion. The Jews of Bitol crossed this bridge on their way to their deaths on 11.3.43.



Bulgarian Army surrounded the town and its approaches were blocked. Dozens of unit commanders were already on the alert at the police station where Kirol Stoimanov and George Zhambobzov were giving out the orders.

The narrow Jewish Quarter of Bitol wherein had lived all the Jews in town for the past two years was divided into twenty sub-sections. Over each sub-section there was appointed one unit comprising five policemen and five soldiers commanded by an officer. The unit commander had a list of all the Jewish families with their exact addresses, and he was also given a local man as a guide.

Stoimanov explained to the unit commanders: "Persuade the Jews that they are being moved temporarily to other parts of Bulgaria, and after the war they will return home. Tell them to take their money and jewellry with them. That it will help them. . ."

Between 4 a.m. and 6 a.m., the units spread out among the shaky houses of the Jewish Quarter. Dawn had yet to rise and the cold was bitter. Snowflakes were falling from the black skies and the rooftops became white. The snow was stamped under the jackboots of the policemen and soldiers and soon turned into a morass of mud throughout the narrow alleyways of the Jewish ghetto. Soon was heard the loud banging on the gates of the houses. The policemen broke into the homes and woke up the astounded occupants. The unit commander read out the names of members of the family from the list he held, and ordered them to be ready for departure in a few moment and to take with them food and clothing, and valuables for future eventualities.

Other policemen, at the same time, engaged in a search of the homes and ransacked the place. Small children burst into screams. The older children were shocked into silence, gazing at their terrified parents. The unit commander, following orders, said soothingly: "Its not so terrible, you will be transfered temporarily to another place. Later they will let you return..." Such words are not

convincing, but there was little time to think or protest. The policemen were pushing them to hurry and leave the houses. The unit commander locked the door and sealed it with red wax and a special stamp. It was all over.

By 7 a.m. the collection of the Jews of Bitol has been completed. They are transported in a long convoy trampling through the snow towards the railway station. They crossed the River Dragur over a wooden bridge – ever since called the Bridge of the Jews.

No one remained in the town. A special truck carried the eight sick Jews who had been in hospital. Even they were not forgotten. At the railway station, the policemen made a very careful search of the Jews' clothings and took from them any object of value. Once this work was completed, the Jews were loaded onto freight wagons.

"They put us into wagons for conveying animals. Fifty to 60 persons in one wagon, together with their belongings. There was no room. Many stood. There was no drinking water. The children cried ... One of the women started her labour pains, and a doctor was not available. At 12 midnight we reached Skopje. It was nightime. Darkness. They opened up the wagons and forced us into two large buildings. We were pushed into the buildings, we trampled on one another in the darkness, dragging our belongings and our children, the aged and sick – with the Bulgarian soldiers hitting out right and left. When dawn broke, we learned that we were inside the warehouses of the Government tobacco factories in Skopje, and that on that day all the Jews of Macedonia were concentrated there...."

That was the description of the scene by one of the few survivors of the same period, which is preserved in the Yugoslav Army Institute, as part of the material compiled by the Macedonian Commission Investigating the Nazi War Crimes.

The terrible conditions prevailing in the transit camp in

Skopje have been recorded by a number of survivors. The physician from Bitol, Dr. Illana Ayah recalled:

"Seven thousand detainees from Bitol, Skopje and other parts of Macedonia were packed into four warehouses two thousand persons per warehouse. We were locked inside, after having been locked inside the railway wagons on the previous day. There were no conveniences there. No lavatories. People were obliged to relieve themselves in the corners of the warehouses until soon the stink became intolerable. When some dared to urinate through a window, one of the guard commanders shot at them with his revolver. Only on March 13, did they open the door for the first time and allow us to go to the toilet....They let out all the locked up persons together and gave us only half hour to relieve ourselves. Then they locked us up again. Thus only half of the people managed to relieve themselves and drink water. They only permitted people to go to the lavatory once a day, group by group. The time was so short until many people, the weak, the ailing, or the invalid, never managed to descend the stairs. We were hungry. Only on the fifth day did the camp authorities organize the ktichen. Food was distributed at 11 a.m., and the last detachment only received their meal at 5 p.m. because the facilities did not suffice.

"Food was allocated once daily. The portion: 250 grammes of bread, and mostly watery beans and rice. Sometimes we would get pickled meat, but it was so bad it was impossible to swallow it, despite one's hunger.

"Out of sadistic pleasure, they would force us to undress, claiming they were seeking hidden foreign currency. There were cases when they even grabbed babies' napkins. If they did find something of value they would beat up the person concerned into insensibility. The cruellest one of all was one of the police commanders nicknamed the Tartar. Every day he would stroll through

the camp brandishing a huge whip, he would hit out in all directions, irrespective of whether it was a child, a woman, an invalid or an old man who happened to cross his path..."

Another written testimony of that dreadful period was that of Dr. Yitzhak Levi, another physician from Bitol. He also related of the abuse that was the lot of the Jews who were concentrated in the Governemtn tobacco warehouses in Skopje – of the rape of young Jewish girls by Bulgarian and German policemen.

The Jews in the transit camp were completely isolated from the surrounding area. However, the inhabitants of Skopje revealed considerable sympathy for the suffering Jews and even endangered their lives in attempting to alleviate their lot. "They would climb on top of the nearby wagons and chuck down to us loaves of bread and other food ... " a refugee from that same camp, wrote years later in the Macedonian press.

There still exists fairly accurate statistical data of the numbers of those imprisoned in that transit camp in Skopje. The record was kept with marked precision by the camp commander, Draganov. On the first day, i. e. March 11, there were concentrated in the tobacco warehouses some 7.215 Jews. They included 3,351 Jews from Bitol. There is even an exact breakdown of the age groups: 592 children aged upto 10, 441 old people over 60, 8 pregnant women and 188 sick persons. Two persons died in the camp, and two babies were born. In the ensuing days the number of those imprisoned grew as more transports of Jews arrived. Ten days later, on the eve of the first deportation, there were 7,314 persons in the camp.

Prior to the deportation to Treblinka some 250 individuals were rescued from death. They were doctors, pharmacists, as well as Jews holding Spanish, Albanian, and Italian passports. They were excluded from the transports.

S.S. units appeared in the camp holding uptodate lists,

and called out the names of the persons to be released. They and another six survivors (See "Surviving Flame" chapter) were witnesses of those dreadful days, and their memories have been chronicled.

The first transport was mainly of Skopje Jews and it left on the noon of March 22. Some 2338 persons were packed into 40 cattle wagons. Every adult was permitted to take 40 kilogrammes of personal effects and half of that for the children. They were provided with one miserable food ration which was supposed to suffice them for the entire journey.

The second transport left on March 25, containing the last remnants of Skopje Jewry, the first group from Bitol and all the Jews of Stip. They numbered 2402 all told. The first transport left under Bulgarian guard, but later the Germans came into the picture.

As Albert Zarfati related: "20 Germans appeared in the yard of the tobacco warehouse, headed by an SS officer. It was clear what awaited us. Until that very moment we believed that we would be sent to the central areas of Bulgaria, as promised us. But, when we saw the Germans, we grasped that our die had been cast, and that the German railway would take us to Poland. A dreadful cry burst forth. The train moved out. Out of the narrow windows of the wagons could be seen fluttering hands. We, who stayed behind in the building, burst into bitter tears. . . . "

The third and last transport left Skopje on March 29. It comprised mainly Jews from Bitol, 2404 in number.

We know of the fate of the 7,144 Jews who left Skopje in the three trainloans because of German precision and their horrifying orderliness. There still exist three reports of the guard commanders who accompanied them. Each of the reports is signed by a Lt. Kerl, Commander of a detachment in the German Military Police.

The first transport left as per schedule at 12.45, with a Bulgarian detachment guarding it until the Lafuvo station. There was waiting a German army unit of 35 soldiers commanded by a police sergeant named Roth.

At 15.00 on March 23, the transport was handed over. From Lafuvo in Serbia, the responsibility was German. The report of Lt. Kerl summed it up: "Events: between Lafuvo and Zamon, a Jewess died. En route from Piotrkov to Malkinia another three Jews died. The corpses were handed over to the camp commander at the final destination. The causes of death – old age ...

The condition of the transport:

Received from the Bulgarians	–	2,338
Amortization en route	–	4
Total delivered at Treblinka	–	2,334

Signed by: Lt. Kerl,
Battalion Commander

The same Kerl reported again on April 7, 1943 to his superiors concerning the second transport, which included the Jews from Bitol. Everything is written down in typical German conciseness:

"Work Report

RE: Accompanying Transports of Jews

On March 25 at 0600 we began to load 2402 Jews from the tobacco warehouses onto the wagons. By 1300 the loading was completed, at 1400 the train set out. Because of the sabotage of the line (i.e. by Tito's partisans – U.O.) the transport was diverted through Albania. The final destination was specified as Treblinka. That was reached on March 31, 1943 at 1730. On that day by 1830, 20 wagons were delivered at the camp and unloaded.

Events: En route between Zamon and Ruma a woman of 94 died of a heart ailment. Her corpse was handed over to the authorities at the Ruma station. During the journey

another old man of 75 died at Zagreb, and a child of 2 died at Lundenburg. The Jewish physician, who accompanied the transport, gave the cause of death – heart ailment.

The condition of the transport:

Received from the Bulgarians	–	2,402
Amortization en route	–	3
		2,399

Signed by: Lt. Kerl
Battalion Commander

Hereunder the third report dated April 12, 1943 – concerning the last transport from Skopje composed mainly of Bitol Jews.

"Work Report

RE: Accompanying Transports of Jews

In keeping with telephoned instructions from SS Hauftsturmfuhrer Denker, the train left on 27.3.43 at 1200 en route for Skopje. The first detachment of 30 men was commanded by Military Police Sergeant Buchner. It arrived there at 2300. On 29.3.43 at 0500 approximately, there commenced the loading on of 2404 Jews from the tobacco warehouses onto the wagons. The operation was completed by 1200, and the train set out at 1230. The train travelled via Albania. The final destination – Treblinka (the camp), was reached on 5.4.43 at 700, via Czenstochowa, Piotrkov and Warsaw. On that same day, between 0900 and 1100, the cargo was unloaded.

Events: En route 5 Jews died. On the night of March 30 – an old woman of 76; on the night of March 31 – an old man of 85; on April 3 – an old woman of 94 and a child aged six months; on April 4 – an old woman of 99.

The condition of the transport:

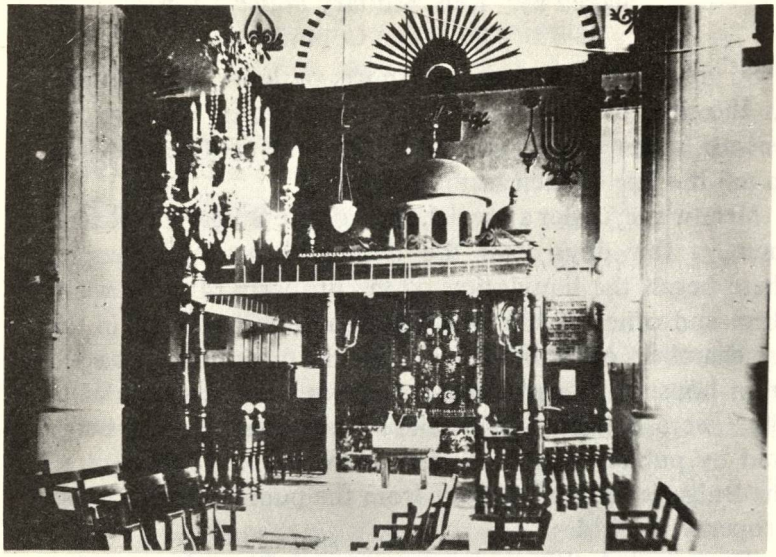
Received	–	2,404
Amortization	–	5
Total Delivered at Treblink.	–	2,399

Signed by: Kerl, Military Police Lt. and
Battalion Commander"

So departed the three transports of Jews from Skopje. At the time of the journey of the last group, the first one was no longer among the living. Not one of them survived to tell the tale of their last journey.

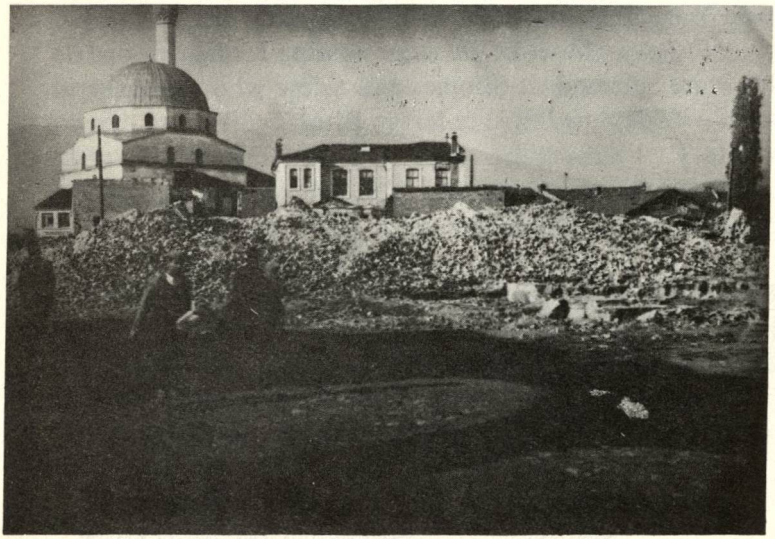
Meanwhile, under a special order of the Bulgarian Government, a few days after the train set out from Skopje, there began the liquidation of the property of the Jews of Bitol and other towns, who had found their deaths in the gas chambers of far-off Poland. Special commissions passed from house to house and wrote down what was left. Valuables were collected in special storehouses, the rest being sold by public auction. A sum of 19,564,486 levs entered the Bulgarian State Treasury from the public sale of Jewish property in Bitol.

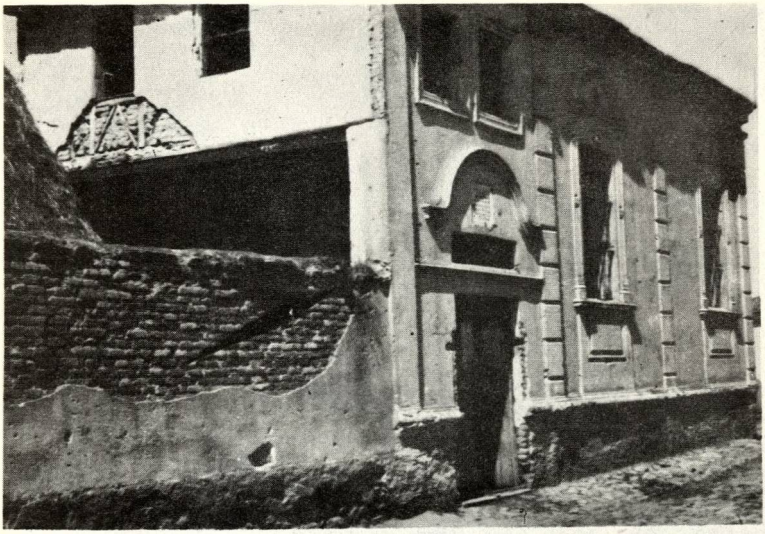
Thus ended the glorious annals of Bitol Jewry after centuries of vital communal life. We read in the Chronicles of the Union of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia: "Out of 3146 Jews living in Bitol on the eve of the Second World War, there returned to the city after the War ended only 57 Jews. (Most of them possessing foreign passports who were released at Skopje, and a few who managed to escape.) Today no Jews are left in Bitol."



The "Kahal Gadol Aragon" synagogue, before its destruction.

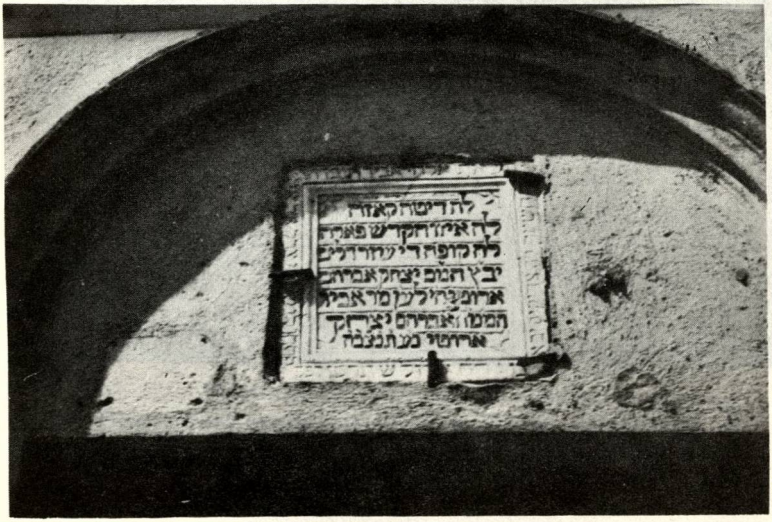
The ruins of the "Kahal Gadol Aragon" synagogue taken against the backdrop of the mosque that stands intact. 1941.





The "Ozer Dalim" synagogue after the bombing of Bitol during World War One.

The marble plaque of the "Ozer Dalim" synagogue, now on exhibition at the **Belgrade Jewish Museum.**





A Macedonian youth next to the monument the Bitol Municipality erected in memory of the 3,013 Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

11 The Heroes

Out of all the Jewish communities in Yugoslavia, the Bitol community was the only one where its youngsters were collectively integrated into the anti-Nazi underground. Groups of Jewish boys left for the forests in an organized fashion and joined up with the Partisan units operating in Macedonia. A substantial part of these youngsters – members of Hashomer Hatzair and Blue-White, fell in the war against the Nazis. Some of them were awarded the highest decorations for acts of heroism, including the decoration of "National Hero" of Yugoslavia. That was, therefore, the special contribution of the Jewish community in the war against Nazism. But this was not repeated elsewhere.

Some 300 young Jews, members of the Zionist pioneering youth movements and of the Yugoslav Communist Youth Alliance, joined actively in the war against the Nazis, or showed active sympathy for the anti-Nazi underground operating in the city. Despite all the efforts of the occupation forces they did not succeed for a very long time to introduce their agents into the underground cells in order to discover their leaders. This shows excellent organizational talents and a complete measure of solidarity among the members of the underground in Bitol. In all other parts of Macedonia, the Bulgarian occupying forces succeeded in

arresting the leaders of the Resistance, and thereby disrupting their activities.

Already in the first days of the Resistance, in the autumn of 1941, some 37 Jews from Bitol, who included key members of the Resistance, went underground. They were in hiding from the Bulgarians for many months. Later on eighteen of this number left for the mountains and joined the first Partisan units. Only five out of that group were still alive by the war's end. Even the members of the Jewish Resistance who stayed on in Bitol performed key roles in organizing the Resistance movement which was influenced by the Communist Party in the town.

The official publication of the Union of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia which was issued to signify the 15th anniversary of the destruction of the Bitol Jewish Community, noted that 60 per cent of the 500 members of Hashomer Hatzair and Blue-White were active supporters of the Yugoslav Partisans and formed Resistance groups. These groups were also engaged in collecting contributions, food and clothing, and conveying them to Partisan units hiding in the mountains and the immediate neighbourhood. More than one hundred Jewish families in Bitol took upon themselves the duty of making a regular monthly contribution to the Partisan units.

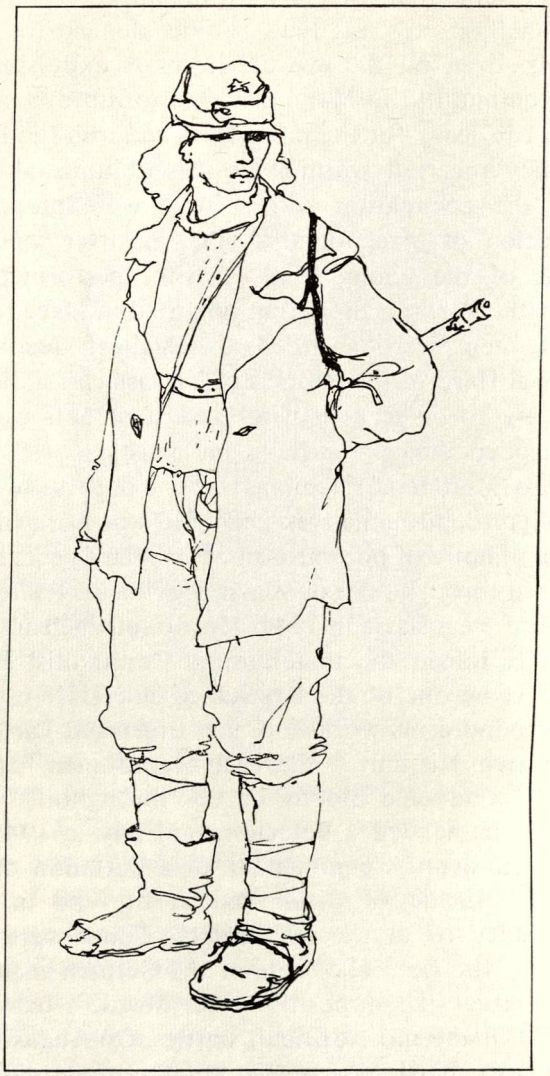
This operation was highly complicated, considering the conditions of the town. So many people were involved, and it was feared that something would be leaked to the outside and reach the occupation forces. However, as long as the Jewish Resistance operated, not one informer was to be found. During more than a year and half, the Bulgarian police only managed to track down one underground unit. Some of its members were arrested. But despite the terrible tortures that they were subjected to, they did not reveal their comrades' identities.

Early in 1943, there were ten underground groups opera-

ting among Bitol Jews, within which framework most of the youth movement members were organized. From time to time, small groups of Jews would depart to join the Partisans. Even on the eve of the mass expulsion of the entire community, in March 1943, a group of young Jews managed to leave for the mountains and join the Partisans, after they received warning notices of unusual activities among the occupation forces, who were preparing the annihilation of Macedonian Jewry in utter secrecy.

Some of the young Jews of Bitol performed central roles in the Partisan units that operated in Macedonia, and two of them were awarded the highest decoration of "National Hero of the Peoples of Yugoslavia". Their gravestones are to be seen in Bitol and their acts of heroism have inspired Yugoslav authors and artists.

Mordo (Mordechai) Nahmias was one of these two heroes. His underground name was Lazo. He was born in 1922 in Bitol to a family of poor artisans. For many years his family wandered throughout Yugoslavia seeking a livelihood. With the fall of Yugoslavia in 1941, Mordo returned to his birthplace. He joined the underground Communist Party and soon became one of the Resistance chiefs. He operated an underground arms workshop, and organized Partisan units in the area. His unit – the 11th Macedonian Partisan Brigade – conducted bloody battles throughout 1943, and Mordo commanded a detachment. Early in 1944, he was appointed deputy commander of a battalion of the 7th Partisan Brigade of Bitol, and at the end of the year spearheaded its attack on the city. Those were the final phases of the war. The units of the German and Bulgarian Armies gave stiff opposition, and Mordo's battalion was involved in the most difficult battles. On August 25, 1944 the decisive battle was waged for the mountain range on the border between Yugoslavia and Greece, wherein the Germans had entrenched themselves in fortified bunkers.



A black and white drawing of Esther Ovadia, the Jewish Partisan heroine, by a Macedonian artist after the war.

The Partisans stormed the fortifications with Mordo at their head. The battle was resolved with a Partisan victory leading to the liberation of Bitol, but the soldiers of the battalion paid for their triumph with the death of their beloved Jewish commander.

Another National Hero of the Peoples of Yugoslavia was in fact a Heroine. She was a Jewish girl from Bitol named Esther Ovadia whose underground nickname was Mara. She was born in 1921 and grew up in the Bitol ghetto, being orphaned of her father at an early age. In her youth she joined Hashomer Hatzair, as one of the pupils of Leon Kamhi. In 1938 she moved to Belgrade in order to find employment. But with the German invasion, she returned to Bitol and joined the ranks of the Communist youth.

Esther was the only girl among the central figures of the local Resistance movement. Despite her weak health, she worked incessantly. She headed the organization of material aid to the Partisan units and was in charge of safeguarding the Resistance fighters in Bitol. In March 1943, a few days before the expulsion of Bitol Jewry to Skopje, she went into hiding where she remained for over a month in a state of high fever, waiting to hear from the Partisans. Contact was finally established and Esther managed to reach the famous Partisan unit named after Gutza Deltchev. She took part with the unit in most of the battles conducted in Macedonia, as detachment political commissar. Despite her non-combatant status, Esther insisted on taking part in the battles in the front fank of the unit.

With the formation of the 7th Macedonian Partisan Brigade, she was appointed Division Political Commissar and in 1944 she fell in battle, near the Greek frontier, while attacking a German unit at the head of her men.

The role played by Leon Kamhi in organizing the Jewish Resistance and in its operation, is not entirely clear. However we do know he was definitely involved. Mr. Peppo

Nahmias of Kfar Syrkin, who escaped from Bitol in 1942 and was himself active in the Resistance, relates that Leon offered an extra room in his office to the underground. That was the same room that served his Zionist work all those years.

Mr. Nahmias also recalls how the Jewish youngsters were busily engaged in collecting money and clothing – and even stealing from their homes – and handing them over to a contact man who would convey them to the Partisans. Some of the material and money were concealed for short periods in Leon Kamhi's office. The room at the top of the stairway was open and anyone wishing to enter, could come and go. Leon saw nothing, knew nothing.

In December 1942. following the escape of the Resistance keymen from the town, the Bulgarians arrested a number of their relatives whose names were known to them, as well as 11 dignitaries of the Jewish community. The detainees were taken to Bulgaria, and held as hostages until the Resistance men would turn themselves in. Leon Kamhi was among those arrested. He was held in a Bulgarian village for three and a half months until the day of the expulsion of the Bitol Jews to Skopje. That same day, March 11, he was transferred by train from Sofia to Skopje, and put into the tobacco warehouses together with all the other Jews. Here he met his wife, his daughter and the other members of his family. With them he departed for the Treblinka death camp.



Esther Ovadia in the company of a Jewish partisan.

12 The Surviving Flame

Six persons alone managed to escape out of the detention camp in Skopje, and three of them live today in Israel. They are Nico Pardo, Allegra (Eroisti) Pardo and Josef Kamhi. The stories told by the three, and especially that of Josef Kamhi who was with Leon Kamhi in detention in Bulgaria, illuminated those terrible days from various angles.

Nico Pardo, today a member of Kfar Syrkin, was a young man in his early 20s on the day the Jews of Bitol were expelled. He was a brave youth, a good athlete, and of resolute spirit. He resolved to escape the fate that the Bulgarians had cast for him, and he endeavoured to get away on three occasions during the ten days in the camp.

At first he tried to escape from the train taking them to Skopje.

"The train started moving by evening. Until that very moment, during all the hours of that very long day, the Bulgarians searched our belongings. The snow came down heavily. The journey began with nightfall and we moved slowly. We did not know to where we were heading. Every so often the train would stop, wait a long time, and then move on again. We were very crowded, 70-80 persons to a wagon. The windows were very narrow, and despite the cold outside, the stench in the wagons was insufferable. At 2 a.m. the train stopped at a station. I recognized the place despite the darkness. It was the border junction between

Greece and Yugoslavia. I winnowed my body through one of the apertures and jumped, no one saw me at first, but when trying to leave the station building, a Bulgarian policeman saw me. He beat me up and put me back on the train before it moved off.

We reached Skopje at 8 p.m. The entire train – it had 50 wagons – entered the large open place outside the "Monopol" tobacco factory and the gate closed after it.

"Monopol" was an enormous factory with five huge buildings around a large yard. All the detainees – the Jews of Bitol, Skopje and Stip – were packed into the four buildings and the fifth was set aside for examinations, searches and transit uses.

We were in a terrible mood. The youngsters tried to sing every so often, but the adults and the elderly people were deep in depression. We did not know what awaited us, but the dreadful treatment we received from the Bulgarians showed the value of the promises given us that we would only be taken to a Bulgarian work camp. Here and there youngsters whispered of the possibility of an uprising and a mass escape, but they never materialized. There was no prospect of it succeeding. The yard was surrounded by a wooden fence and behind that a barbed wire fence. At each of the four corners there was a sentry with a machine gun and other armed guards would patrol the yard. Also the belief that the worst possible fate did not await us prevented such suicidal acts from taking place.

After the War, I met the Russian Jewish author, Ilya Ehrenburg in Bitol. It was already 1945. We had returned to Bitol; a few of the escapees and dozens of those who had been released because they held foreign passports. We sought to find traces of our families and our community. We did not succeed in finding out anything until Ehrenburg reached town. He was wandering among the remnants of the European Jewish communities and compiling

facts about the survivors. He came from Germany and Poland and was equipped with considerable information. From him we heard of the fate of our community that had perished in Treblinka. No one survived – Ehrenburg told us. There was, in fact, a spontaneous attempt at an uprising but it was crushed brutally.

After the second transport left, containing Jews from Skopje and Bitol, it was clear to me that we were due to be sent either to Poland or Germany. This time we saw that not the Bulgarians, but German officers were in charge. I was to have been sent in the third and last transport. I resolved to escape, even if I paid with my life in the attempt.

Each day an army ambulance would enter the camp that took away the very ill. I managed to reach it, opened the door and entered it. No one sat inside with the patients. I intended jumping out during the journey, but it travelled too fast. When we reached the hospital in Skopje, I left the ambulance and tried to move away.

Two policemen carrying a stretcher ordered me to help them. I did as they ordered and against my will entered the hospital. The yellow patch on my clothing aroused the attention of the doctor.

"What are you doing here? "

I told him my throat hurt.

"Open your mouth! "

I opened it...

He did not even bother to look inside. He hit me full on the mouth and called the policeman to take the 'Jewish pig' back to the camp. The policeman hit me with his rifle and dragged me by the legs down the steps. My head was banged on the stairs, and I was almost unconscious. I was returned to the camp in a state of collapse. But I knew that there was little time left.

On the morrow we were told that the transport would leave that night. It was to be the last one. I would have no

further opportunities. At noon I went out into the yard, and joined the group of Jews guarded by a Bulgarian policeman that was going to do some work. The policeman did not pay attention to my presence, just as he did not see me dodging behind a small hut next to the wooden fence. It was made of planks. I jumped over it, and then managed to get over the barbed wire, I crossed the railway line and found myself near Skopje. After a number of days of trial and tribulation I reached the Albanian frontier. . . "

Nico was followed by his sister-in-law, Allegra Pardo. Her husband, Aharon Pardo, had settled in Eretz-Israel in 1941, a day before the invasion. Allegra was due to follow him, but the Germans entered Yugoslavia before she could join him.

Allegra fled the camp a short time after Nico.

Her parents were sent to Treblinka already in the second transport. She noticed a large hole in the wooden fence, made by the Bulgarians when they removed some planks to make a fire. The cautiousness of the guard lessened, because it was the final day of the camp. She watched closely the movements of the sentry, along the fence, and when he turned his back, she fled through the opening.

A few hours later she met Nico in the homes of some relatives in Skopje. They were Jews who held a Spanish passport and had been released from the transit camp. They concealed the two overnight, and then they left on foot for the Albanian frontier, a distance of 40 kilometres. The Albanians locked them up in jail for three months, and finally released them and they waited for the war to end.

Josef Kamhi escaped from "Monopol" two days before Nico and Allegra, and three hours only before the Germans began loading the Jews onto the train for the second transport to Treblinka. He escaped after midnight under the

cover of darkness, the snow and the cold. He remained in his freezing hiding place until the morning, a few metres away from the railway line and witnessed with his own eyes, how Jews were forced onto the death train. He was still unaware that the transport also included the members of his family, and with them, Leon Kamhi.

Josef Kamhi, today a Tel Aviv businessman, was a relative of Leon. His grandfather was a brother of Leon's grandfather. Leon's brother, Nissim, married Josef's sister, Diana. The families maintained close contact, and were neighbours for many years.

Josef was the youngest in his family, although at the time of the Holocaust he was in his early forties. His family was considered one of the three richest Jewish families in Bitol. It held the monopoly on the concession for exporting cement, asphalt, cattle and wheat from Yugoslavia to Albania, and also served as the agent for foreign machinery companies. Their volume of trade was said to be in millions, and they had connections with wide circles in government and banking throughout Europe. The father, Shlomo Kamhi, died in 1931 and left his capital and the management of the business to his three sons. The two eldest brothers managed the business, while Josef, the young bachelor, was in charge of external relations and would travel constantly throughout Europe. His connections stood him in good stead during the hard days awaiting him, after his escape.

Josef Kamhi was one of the 11 Jewish dignitaries from Bitol, who were exiled to Bulgaria and detained there as hostages for the Jewish resistance leaders in Bitol. He was the only person to survive to tell the tale of that harsh winter, he endured together with Leon Kamhi in Bulgaria.

Josef recalls that the hostages were taken from their homes at 4 a.m. of December 1st, and taken to a small town, a few hours travel from the Yugoslav border. They

were dispersed among various mountain villages in order to prevent any contact between them. However the villages were near each other, about two hours' walking space. They were very primitive villages consisting of mud huts, their inhabitants belonging to the poorest section of the Albanian nation. Leon was held in the village nearest to that of Josef, and they would exchange daily visits. Sometimes they would pass the night together and Josef would get up early in order to be on time for his daily appearance at the village police station.

They were not required to do anything else. They did not work and guards were not posted over them. Their sole duty was to report every morning at the police station and write their names in the register.

Leon was in a good mood, insofar as it was possible under the circumstances. Contact with home was out of the question, and in fact they were men without any control over their future. Despite this, Leon maintained his optimism that drew from hidden resources and inspired his comrades.

Leon's capacity to make friends held good for him in that place too. The villagers grew to like him and the Kadi became his friend. Leon spoke fluent Turkish (besides Serbian, Ladino, French and Hebrew) which he had acquired during his studies at the Turkish high school in Bitol. He grew friendly with the Kadi and utilised the period of his exile to learn about the fundamentals of Islam.

Josef Kamhi relates that once he went to visit Leon and found him in the mosque, that he had removed his shoes and had kneeled on the prayer carpet with the other worshippers.

Leon smiled at him and explained: if you want them to honour you and your beliefs, then you have to show respect for their faith.

"But you do not believe in any Deity" – Josef told him.

"Just because of that I can allow myself to enter a mosque and act like the others" – Leon replied.

On March 11, 1943, the day of the mass deportation of Macedonian Jewry, the 11 Jewish dignitaries from Bitol were ordered to return home. They joined the train travelling from Sofia to Skopje as ordianry tourists. No guard was put over them. They had not the slightest of inkling of what awaited them. They surmised that – simply, their period of detention had expired.

But once they arrived at their destination they realised that something had happened. It was during the early evening hours, the time when the train with the deportees from Bitol was due to reach Skopje. The railway station was full of policemen and soldiers.

A Macedonian, an acquaintance of Josef Kamhi passed near him and whispered to him: "Get away, as quickly as you can! ". Josef told Leon of this. They covered their yellow patches with their handkerchieves and tried to escape through the crowd packing the station.

All in vain. A young Macedonian woman saw what was happening. She called to a Bulgarian policemen and pointing at the two men, cried: "Look at those dirty Jews, they are trying to escape! ".

They were arrested and taken to jail. In prison they met the other nine who had come back from Bulgaria. They passed the night amid great anxiety. They did not yet know that at that very moment the 7350 Jews of Skopje, Bitol and Stip were being packed into the warehouses of the "Monopol" tobacco factory. With the dawn, they too were taken there. Their hands in chains, they were marched in a row through the streets of the town, with five policemen in front and five, behind them. They treated them as if they were a gang of murderers.

Josef Kamhi still bears with him a searing, painful

memory: "The Macedonians – the same people who had known me and showed me respect for years, shouted contemptuously at us: 'Its good that they treat them like that! Just what the Jews need! ".

In the tobacco factory warehouse, they met their families. Josef met his mother and brothers, and Leon – his wife, Frieda and his little daughter, Batya, then only three years old. It was a tragic ending to an absence of three and half months.

Henceforth they shared the fate of the rest of the community. They swung between hope and despair. Leon spent all the time with his wife and child. He looked bad. For once his optimism had vanished. Too quickly and too horribly had his dreadful vision been realised. He knew that evil was upon them.

Outside the camp, a few steps away, passed the railway line. Trainloads of Jews passed along there day after day on their way to the north. They were the Jews of Salonika and from other parts of Greece. All told about 80,000 Jews passed that way en route for the death camp.

Josef readied himself to escape. His older brothers insisted on it. He was the youngest and had excellent connections with the Government. His family believed that he would manage to escape, and once outside could also manage to extricate them.

"I escaped on the night of March 23rd, at 1 a.m. I did not know at the time that the second transport was planned for the same day at 4 a.m., and that all members of my family were fated to be aboard that train. If I had known that, I would not have escaped.

"At first I tried to go out into the yard through the main doorway, but changed my plans immediately. Two police guards were on patrol only a few steps from the door. I descended to the basement. Its windows reached ground level. Outside there was a heavy snowfall. I

watched the guards. Finally the cold froze their alertness. They sat dozing and their hands hugged their knees. I crawled snakewise, across the yardway and my tracks were covered by the snow that was coming down heavily, while the crunching sound made by my movements was swallowed by the roar of the wind. I reached the wooden fence and got out through the aperture.

"I found myself on the railway line. The train was waiting. It had 40 cattle wagons. A patrol approached. I hid between the wagons and prayed. They approached and stood exactly opposite my place of hiding. They lit their cigarettes. I could have put out my hand and touched them. They chatted for about 15 minutes and I held my breath all the time. Finally they parted and each one turned in a different direction.

"I came out and moved to the other side of the train. The snow crunched underfoot. They noticed the noise and shouted: "Stop! ".

"I crouched in the ditch below the railway tracks. Two guards looked for me without much enthusiasm and gave up rapidly. I continued rolling myself across the snowy space and reached the barbed wire fence. My coat caught in the spikes the moment I tried to get through. I could not make a move either forwards or backwards. With great difficulty I managed to extricate myself from the coat, and got through.

"Ahead of me lay a broad field. It was about 2 a.m. Nearby stood an unused oil factory. I decided to hide out there until the morning. Unluckily for me the place was guarded by a pack of dogs who started to bark and run in my direction. The guards began to shout once more: "Who's there? ! ". I fell down lengthwise onto the ground and pretended to be dead. The dogs approached me,

sniffed me all over and went away.

"A long time passed until I allowed myself to move. I did so with great care, step by step. By 4 a.m. I had moved 250 metres from the railway line, and managed to find a hiding place in a small shed that served as a store for farming tools. At that same time, the Bulgarians and the Germans began leading the Jews onto the wagons.

"I sat there frozen to the bone until the light of day, and my ears caught the terrible cry coming from the railway. The women shouted, the children cried, and the police guards hit them. All that night I heard these terrible cries. About 7 a.m. the train moved off. By then it was dawn, and I could see the wagons moving away in the distance.

"I tore the yellow patch off my clothes and walked into town. I turned immediately to the home of the Italian Consul in Skopje – Larosa. He was a very good friend of mine and well- known to all members of my family.

"I rang at the doorbell. He was in his garden, playing with his dog. His eyes grew round on seeing me. "Is that really you? Did anyone see you? ' He immediately opened the gate and let me in to his home.

"He immediately offered me his home as a hiding place. He brought me breakfast, and made me take a hot bath. As for me, I had only one request, that he should immediately go to the authorities and secure my family's release.

"He promised to do so and left the house. At noontime he returned in a bad mood! 'All members of your family were sent on the train this morning . . . "

Fate has its own way of settling people's lives. The Kamhi family, including Leon, his wife and child, could have stayed alive only if their departure had been held up until the third transport, when in effect, most of Bitol's Jews were sent to Treblinka. If not by the importuning of the Italian Consul, then their release would have been

effected by other means.

In Salonika, there lived at the time, Josef's uncle, Raphael Kamhi. He was a very wealthy man and highly respected, even by non-Jews.

The Bulgarian General Zilkoff, who was appointed by the Germans as Military Governor of Salonika, was a good friend of Raphael Kamhi and would call at his home every evening. When the Jews of Salonika were detained early in March 1943, the General entered the concentration camp and took out Raphael Kamhi and his sister. He drove them all the way to Sofia in his own car. It was he who told Raphael of the fate awaiting the detained Jews, as well as the Jews of Bitol. He asked his friend, the General, to seek the release of his family, and Zilkoff promised him to do his best.

His good works lasted a day too long. On March 26, an SS officer stood in the yard of the "Monopol" tobacco factory and read out the list of the names of Jews due to be released from the camp. He mentioned the names of all members of the Kamhi family: "Moise Kamhi and his family, Josef Kamhi, Leon Kamhi, and his family.....". No one responded to his appeal. It was only one hour after the death train moved off towards Treblinka, with its second transport. It was the day when Josef Kamhi was already in hiding in the home of the Italian Consul, Larosa.

These terrible details became known to Josef only years later, when he met Nico and Allegra Pardo in Bitol. The two had not yet escaped from the detention camp (they did so on that same day), and witnessed the events.

Raphael Kamhi himself remained in Sofia until the end of the war, and settled in Israel at the end of the 1940s. He was already a very old man, but managed to live many more years, and passed away at the age of 105 in 1971.

The story of Josef Kamhi's life in the next two years is a very exciting one. Although it does not belong to our

chronicle, technically speaking, it is difficult to ommit mention of it.

Josef did not stay more than one day in the home of the Italian Consul. He appreciated that he would only involve Larosa in trouble and did not wish to cause him harm. The Consul advised him to wait for a few more days and then join one of the Italian units making its way to Albania, dressed in army uniform. (Albania was then under Italian military rule).

Josef refused: "I have a better idea."

"Which one? ", the Consul asked.

"I can reach Albania with the help of some friends. All you need to do is to let me have one of your loyal officials to accompany me until I reach my friends in Skopje. He can follow me, and if I am arrested, he will let you know," Josef said.

The Consul loaned him his personal secretary, and Josef left making for the home of an Albanian friend. A Bulgarian policemen stopped him. "Do you have a light? ", he asked. Josef lit his cigarette. His hands shook. Praising his luck, he let him have the entire box of matches and moved on, with the Consul's secretary close behind him.

His Albanian friend, Mehmet Zadik, had at one time worked in the Yugoslav Consulate in Tirana, the Albanian capital. With the outbreak of the war he had returned to his home in Skopje. He needed ten thousand dinar, which he received as a present from the Kamhi family. Now the time had arrived for repayment. He was the man on whom Josef relied to lead him to the Albanian frontier.

They left on foot along the long mountainous path. It took them two nights of walking. Zadik knew the hidden ways and even had friends who helped them en route.

On the second morning, they crossed the border. Josef was exhausted and ill, and Zadik carried him on his shoulders during many hours of walking. He brought him

to his father's home and then Josef lost consciousness. He stayed in a coma for ten days.

When he recovered his senses, he asked to be put in contact with the Governor of the National Bank of Albania, Atur Machlis. The man (he is still alive) had close contacts with the Kamhi family, as most of their trade was done with Albania. Josef appeared in one of the bank branches in the small town where he was staying, and from there the branch manager contacted the Governor in Tirana. He told him of Josef Kamhi's presence.

Atur Machlis ordered his clerk to dress Josef in bank uniform and bring him over immediately. Shortly afterwards, Josef left in a smart limousine for Tirana, which he reached a few hours later.

For the next year and a quarter, Josef lived in the home of the Governor of the National Bank of Albania, and enjoyed a most hospitable treatment. Atur Machlis even arranged for him a good position that did not require of him any work, but brought in a fat salary.

In mid-1944, Italy submitted to the Allies and the Italians began fleeing from Albania. Their place was soon taken by the Germans, and once more Josef's life was in danger.

The Governor of the Bank could no longer protect him. He, himself was cast into prison, because he refused to hand over to the Germans the State Treasury. Before being sent to prison he handed over his friend to the Albanian Prime MInister, Mustafa Mutzari.

The Premier was a fine-looking and brave man of 45, who owned a huge estate and considerable wealth. He gave Josef Kamhi refuge in his home on his estate and would visit him daily to see after his welfare. It was an Albanian custom, that the protector must look after his protege's welfare even before his own.

Josef endured those terrible days in the company of the

Albanian Prime Minister, when a special chapter was inscribed in the history of Albania. Their friendship waxed strong and the Prime Minister considered Josef his confidant, and involved him in State secrets.

At the end of 1944, Josef Kamhi served as a translator and liason officer between the Albanian and the two British commandos who had been parachuted into an outlying mountainous region of the country. A detachment of horseback led by Mutzari rode out to meet the British commandos in the dark of night, and Josef Kamhi accompanied them. The two Britishers, who were hiding in an abandoned mosque, were officers holding the rank of Colonel and Major. They brought with them the demand of the Allies that Albania should actively join in the war against Germany, now in retreat along the southern front. The Albanian Premier gave his agreement. Josef served as the translator in the conversation that was conducted in French.

The Prime Minister told the Britishers: I will fight with you against the Germans and against Communism. (Albania remained under a monarchy until the end of the war.)

"If thats the case", the Colonel said, "We intend blowing up the huge bridge down below. We have brought dynamite with us."

"Agreed", said Mustafa Mutzari.

It was the bridge across which passed the railway line connecting Greece with Tirana, via Yugoslavia. The bridge was blown up that night just when a train load of German soldiers and ammunition was crossing it.

Thus Josef Kamhi became a partner in the first military action that brought Albania into the war against the Germans.

The victory of the Albanian Communist Partisans over the Germans heralded the end of the monarchy, and of the Prime Minister, a loyal Royalist.

As soon as the Communist forces occupied Tirana, they hung out notices putting a prize on the head of Mustafa Mutzari. He hid out on his estate and with him the brave and loyal army of his bodyguards. He entrenched himself in the forest that surrounded his estate and awaited the crucial battle.

Josef was no longer allowed to remain in his house. Mutzari sent him to Tirana because he could no longer guarantee his safety.

A week later he sent his brother to Tirana and asked Josef to come and see him. He told him that the English had sent him a message to make his way to the seashore and to escape by means of a submarine, they would send for him. But the submarine did not arrive as planned. It was clear to him that he had little time left and he wished to bid farewell to Josef.

Josef urged him to escape via Greece. "Now, it is my turn to help you. In Salonika I have a house and you can live there." he siad. Mutzari refused. "I will remain and fight," he said, adding: "You go back to Bitol."

Josef returned to Bitol a few days before the partisans broke into the Prime Minister's estate. The battle was a cruel one, and it is inscribed in the annals of Albania. Mustafa Mutzari fought like a lion and fell together with his loyal men. None remained alive.

Josef Kamhi met Nico and Allegra in Bitol, as well as a few other survivors of the Jewish community. They still did not know what had befallen their families. Until Ilya Ehrenburg reached them and told them: "Don't wait anymore, they were all destroyed in Treblinka! "

13 After 28 Years

In April 1971, I travelled to Yugoslavia to see for myself the scene of the events which are related in this book.

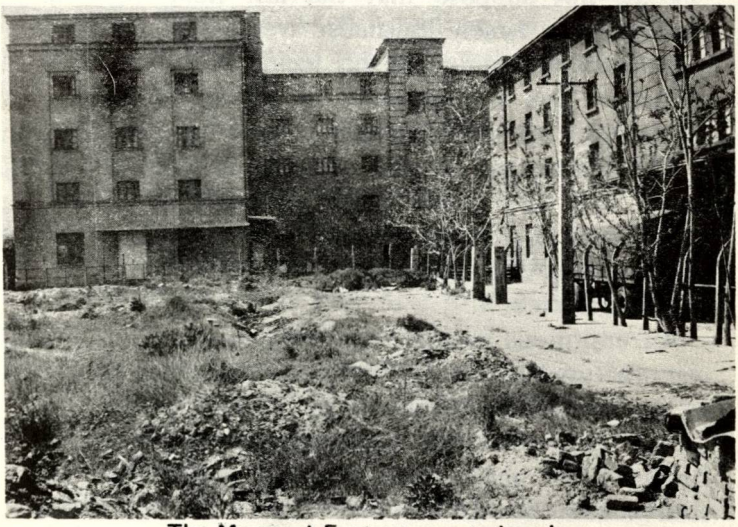
I reached Skopje, on my way to Bitol, in a train that came from Sofia. It was the same way that Leon and Josef Kamhi had travelled to the detention camp in "Monopol."

When I reached Skopje, I immediately went to see the factory, wherein thousands of Jews of Skopje, Bitol and Stip had been detained. I wished to photograph the place. But shortly afterwards I found myself illegally under arrest. It was as if history wished me to taste an nth of what those others Jews had endured.

I easily found that factory according to the description given me by Josef Kamhi. I almost did not need to ask my way. It was a tall and vast building that stood on the southern approach of the town, and could be seen easily from afar. At its entrance sat a gatekeeper busily engaged in examining the documents of a truck driver. I chose to evade him and avoid problems and questions. Perhaps I was pushed into such behaviour by my associations with the place. I followed the truck, my camera hanging on a strap over my shoulder, and I found myself in the factory yard.

It is very infrequent that it happens that the picture one has painted in one's mind is so identical with the reality.

That same huge concrete space between tall stone walls; those same broad warehouses wherein were imprisoned the Jews of Macedonia. Even the fence of wooden planks had remained. They were decaying and rotting, and the gaps were wide between them, creating a two metre high stockade, encompassing the entire building. Very close by – the railway line. Everything, just as it had been described to me. I was very excited. I removed the camera from my shoulder and was about to take shots, when a cleaning worker approached me, brandishing his broom, and enquired what I was doing, I could not explain anything to him in English. I did not understand why he was so upset and making such a fuss. Within a moment I found myself surrounded by workers, indicating to me that I should wait.



The Monopol Factory – exterior view.

I only realised the transgression I was accused of some hours later. The factory was on the classified list. Entry was forbidden, and that photography was a breach of the law was written on a large sign outside the entrance to the grounds.

Soon after, there arrived three other men, their clothing indicating their high status and they invited me to accompany them to the offices. None of them spoke a word of English.

I was brought into a spacious room and my jailors with me. They requested my passport and studied it with interest interest.

"Israeli? "

"Yes."

"Journalist? " (That's what was in my passport)

"Yes."

I do not suppose that the last item improved my position. An Israeli journalist trespassing on forbidden ground with a camera in his hands – a most important matter. I was still unaware of the transgression I was accused of, but the atmosphere grew increasingly heavy.

The men sat and did not utter a word. They said nothing to me and only gazed at me smilingly, as if they were being hosts to a welcome guest. I, too, was rather amused somehow .... And so, history repeats itself...

"A cigarette? "

An enormous packet containing hundreds of cigarettes manufactured by the factory was offered me, plus a warm recommendation, explained by sign language, as to its quality. With the same politeness, they offered me their lighter. Soon there appeared a tray with coffee, beer and sandwiches.

"Eat, eat," they urged in sign language and with a pleasant smile.

Soon a third man made his appearance and occupied

the seat at the top of the table. He also examined my passport and repeated the same questions. Yes, I said, I am an Israeli and a journalist.

It turned out that he too was a journalist. A local newsman from Skopje. He tried his English, but gave up immediately.

We sat and waited. I do not know for whom and for what. I try to behave as if I was in truth in the company of pleasant hosts. I ate, I smoked, and tried to clarify my position.

My hosts exchange a few words. They consulted. It appeared that they made their decision. The journalist phoned someone. The conversation was very short, and I caught one word: "Politzia".

Very nice, I am detained in "Monopol", in the same building where they held Leon Kamhi and the other thousands of Macedonian Jews, and the local police is being invited to take me to jail.

I asked if there was any problem. Problem, after all, is an international word.

"No", said the journalist, "No problem".

He smiled most politely. His smile assured me that everything was in perfect order. Because I am liked by everyone. They are ever so happy to play host to a journalist from Israel.

"English is a problem" – he said.

"No one speaks English? " I asked them in English.

"Ima, ima" (there is, there is) – they respond in Yugoslav: "he will come".

They try, in truth, to trace someone who speaks English. There is someone in the factory who does, but they do not manage to find him. In the meantime we drink beer and smile at each other.

These Yugoslavs have lots of time. Their police too, it would seem. The expected call of the Yugoslav policemen

does not flatter me. I remember that Israel does not have any diplomatic representative in this country. I could simply disappear and no one would know. This is a Communist country.

"Deutsch? " the journalist asks.

I shake my head in the negative, and make my suggestion: "Francais? " He smiles: "Petit-petit".

Me too.

I write down on a piece of paper the date 11.3.43, and mention a few words connected with it: "Jews. 7,000. Germans. Transports. Treblinka."

If he is a journalist, he might know something.

He regards me with great interest, something lights up in his eyes.

"Here, in this factory", I said, "In Monopol. They stayed a fortnight.. Later in transports to Treblinka. I am writing a book, in Israel."

He understood. He opened up like the legendary rock in the wall reacting to the magic word. He turned to his friends and told them something with great excitement. "Very interesting, 3,500 Jews from Skopje", he said.

"And another 3,000 from Bitol," I added.

"Right, right", he notes.

"On March 11th," I say, "28 years ago".

"For your paper? Reportage? "

"Not for the paper, for a book."

"Ah! "

A smile lights up his face. He extends his hand: "A colleague ..."

Now the policeman appears. Two of them in fact. They enter the room and their glance falls on me straight away. This lot is not smiling. They are very serious indeed. They examine my passport and exchange a few words with my hosts.

A discussion ensues. The journalist acts as my defence

counsel. The others are less enthusiastic in my defence. I do not know what they decide, but suddenly the policemen go away and I am invited to follow my hosts on a tour of the factory yard.

They have something to show me. The big yard, the warehouses that I already discovered, and this too: a large marble slab in the wall of the building on which are inscribed a few lines. The actual story!

It tells of how the Jews of Skopje were detained here by the Germans and sent to the death camp. (No mention of the Jews of Bitol). That is the memorial plaque which the Skopje Municipality installed after the war. "Monument" the journalist observed proudly.

"Can I take a photograph? "

A short consultation, and permission is given: "Is possible".

Then I am allowed to photograph the wooden fence, the railway station, the warehouses, the railway line beyond the barbed wire fence along which were despatched the three transports to Treblinka straight from this place. A freight train stands on the railway line. Beyond the barbed wire. The same train.... I photograph that, too. The people watching me examine closely the angle of my shots. I am not allowed to raise the lens and photograph the entire building.

I find the small structure behind which hid Nico Pardo before escaping through the gap in the fence. I tell my hosts how the youngster evaded the Bulgarian guards when they took a group of prisoners to work, and how he managed to escape across the railway line.

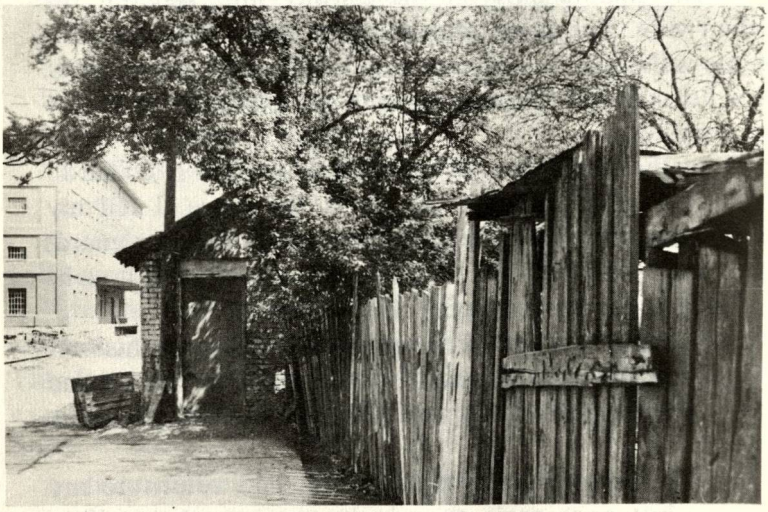
They are all excited on hearing this piece of history. "The Bulgarians are Fascists", they say. I do not remind them that Bulgaria today is a Communist state, just like Yugoslavia.

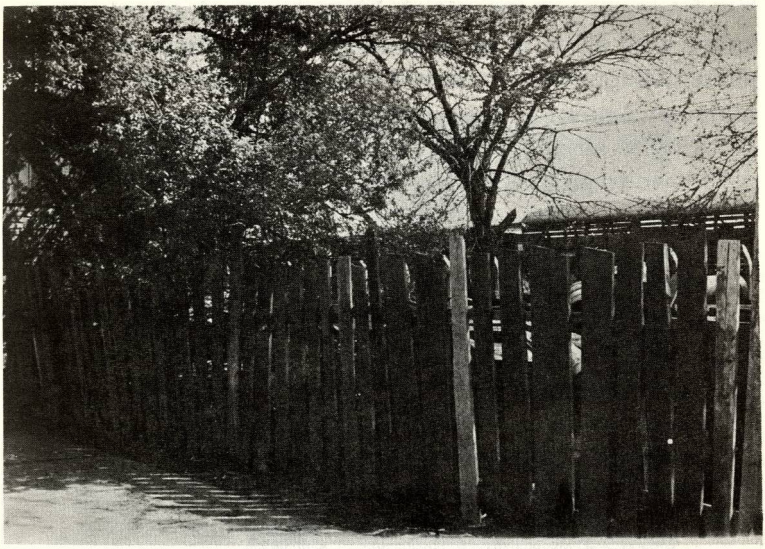
Now I wish to make my farewell and return to my hotel – but once again they invite me into their office.



The memorial plaque in the factory wall commemorating the Jews who were held there before being sent to the death camps. The Skopje Municipality installed the plaque.

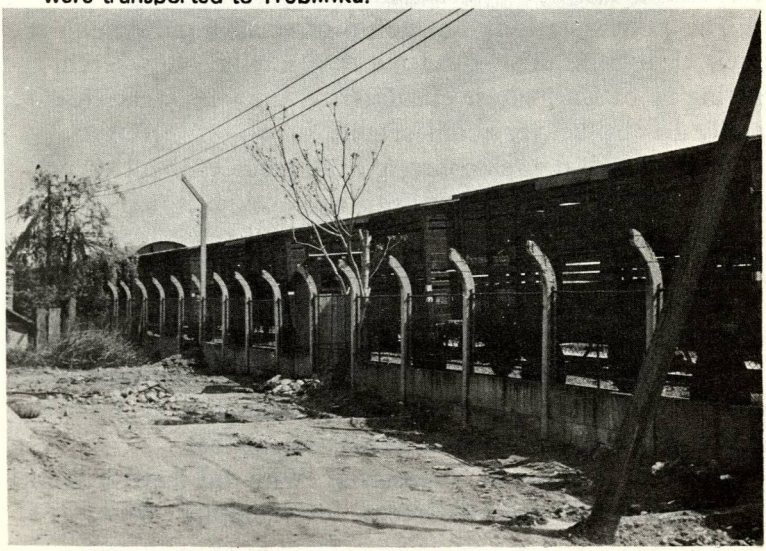
The hut behind which Nico Pardo hid; and the wooden fence through which he escaped from the detention camp. All remains as it was 28 years ago.





The wooden fence around the Monopol factory.

A freight train beyond the barbed wire fence around the factory. In such a train and along this railway line the Jews were transported to Treblinka.



No, I am not yet free to go. I was to spend a further two hours with them in an increasingly uncomfortable atmosphere. All four of them stayed with me. Once more we await someone. I point at my watch. "It's late".

"Alright, alright", the journalist says.

"I have to go to Bitol".

"When? "

"This evening."

"Alright, alright".

The telephone rings. The conversation is about me. When it is over, the journalist informs me: "They have come to take you in a car."

"Where to? "

"To the bus to Bitol."

"But what about my luggage at the hotel? "

"Good, they take you to hotel, then to bus."

It sounded too good to be true.

Someone entered and said that the car was waiting. We bid farewell with warmth. I go outside. The car is a police car, and its driver, a policeman.

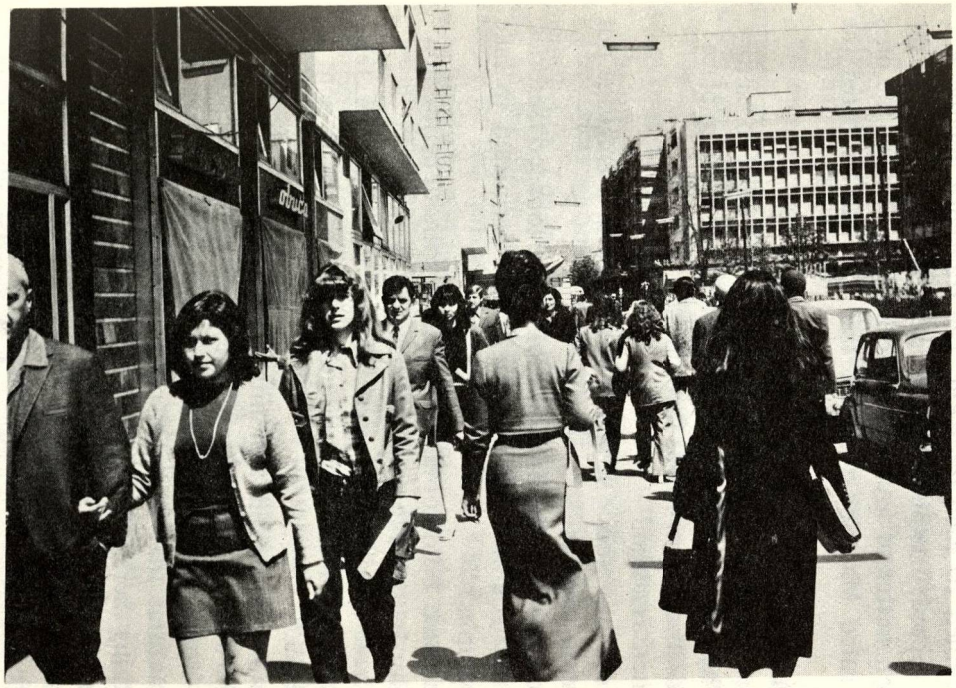
The police station is made up of small huts, shining in their cleanliness. They lead me to a small room wherein is sitting an officer, whose epaulettes gleam with stars. Now I really do not feel very comfortable.

Once again my passport is examined. With utter precision. He stops at my transit visa through Bulgaria. The officer does not smile at all. My route does not recommend itself to him. Undoubtedly I am suspect.

A quarter of an hour passes in gloomy silence. The officer is busy with his paper work. It is getting late.

The door opened and into the room comes a beautiful girl. The translator. Without any preliminaries the interrogation commences. A real interrogation at that.

What am I doing in Yugoslavia? Why did I arrive there via Bulgaria, and not via Greece, for example? Why was I



A busy street in Skopje. 1971.

interested in the tobacco factory? Which newspaper do I represent? What mission did my newspaper assign me? Who else in Israel knows of my journey to Yugoslavia?

I replied to each question. The translator conducted a short record. I explain that Bulgaria is connected with the subject matter of my book. The Bulgarians were the ones who ruled Macedonia during the war and deported the Jews.

"I know", interrupts the interrogator.

The conversation finally focused on the tobacco factory.

"Why did you wish to photograph in a forbidden place? "

"I did not know it was forbidden."

"There is a sign."

"I did not notice it and it is written in a language not known to tourists."

"Tourists have nothing to look for in tobacco factories. Why did you not ask whether it was permitted to take photographs? "

"I did ask. I did not take one picture without permission."

"Why does this factory interest you so much? "

"I have already told you.... It was there that the Jews of Skopje and Bitol were detained before being sent to Treblinka."

"And why should that interest you? "

"The Jews are my people. They were also your countrymen. You, yourselves, put up a memorial plaque. It is only natural that in Israel people should wish to know everything there is to know of the subject."

"Are there many Jews from Yugoslavia in Israel? "

"A few thousand."

"From Skopje and Bitol as well? "

"As well."

"I thought you in Israel wished to forget that period."

"Why? "

"You are very friendly today with the Germans, aren't you? "

A smile lit up his eyes.

"The Germans were your enemies too," I noted.

"And so? "

"And so, tens of thousands of Yugoslavs have emigrated to Germany."

"They did not emigrate. They are working there."

"And they fill their factories with cheap labour, and thereby strengthen the German economy."

"What do you wish to say thereby."

"I want to say that we have no need to bring politics into our conversation. The Governments of Israel and Yugoslavia can pursue a political line in their relations with the German Government, while our peoples are entitled to keep in their hearts what is not given to forget."

The officer smiled and said suddenly: "Bravo! "

The interrogation continued. It lasted three hours – until 7 p.m. The questions focused for some time more on the angles of my photographs of the factory (for some reason he did not ask to see the film). Then we moved onto literature and press in Israel: What was the measure of freedom of creativity and criticism? How many newspapers were published in Israel? The link between the journalist and the newspaper, and between the newspaper and the authorities; Who issues the press card? Who signs it? Who is entitled to it? The link between the journalists and the writers' associations? The measure of Government aid to artistic and cultural institutions? The state of employment in Israel, the social welfare institutions and the social welfare cases, and so forth. It was not, in fact, an interrogation as such – but a conversation, although it was quite clear that I was in a position where I had to respond.

Suddenly the officer asked me: "And now, what do you intend to do now? "

"I will leave for Bitol."

"For what purpose? "

"To obtain some material for my book."

"And what do you intend seeing there? "

"The city as a whole, the Jewish Quarter, the Jewish cemetery, the monument that was erected in memory of the destroyed Jewish community, and the archives devoted to its memory."

"And when do you intend leaving? "

"First thing in the morning."

"No, you will go right now." He wrote down an address on a piece of paper and gave it to me. "That is the name of an hotel in Bitol. You will stay there when you arrive. You will reach there at midnight. Bon voyage."

I assumed that he wanted to check a number of details in my testimony, and that he would have me watched. If he did have such an arrangement, I never noticed it. Moreover, the hotelier in Bitol did not seem to be expecting me.

The police van took me to my hotel in Skopje, and from there with all my suitcases directly to the bus station. The policeman bought the ticket (with my money, naturally) gave it to me and accompanied me to the entrance of the bus.

To spell it out – I was expelled from Skopje.

Three and a half hours later I reached Bitol. Alongside the highway, between the mountains, there snaked the railway line – along which there travelled 28 years ago a Bulgarian freight train, pulling wagons packed with 3267 Jews condemned to death.

Bitol at midnight was deep in slumber.

Epilogue

On the 29th of the month of Adar – the Day of Commemoration for those Soldiers of the Israel Defence Forces whose place of burial is unknown – the People of Israel also hold communion with the memory of the victims of the Holocaust.

On that day, year after year, hired buses depart from the central part of Israel carrying dozens of families of former residents of Bitol, and they ascend to Jerusalem to pay tribute to the memories of their dear ones.

On the way to the Capital, in the Holocaust Memorial Forest – are planted 3013 trees in the memory of the 3013 victims of the Bitol community. Here the buses come to a stop, and their passengers alight and stand in silence for some moments, in the shadow of the trees that cover the mountainside.

In Jerusalem itself, the former residents of Bitol assemble in the Yagel Yaacov synagogue – the only house of worship built in this country by immigrants from Monastir at the beginning of this century.

This act of commemorating the victims of Bitol was initiated by Moshe Yishai, a resident of Rishon LeZion, who reached Israel from Bitol in his childhood. Moshe Yishai was also the one who initiated the planting of a thousand trees in memory of Leon Kamhi in the Herzl

Forest at Beit Shemesh. The trees were planted in 1965 in the presence of hundreds of friends of Leon Kamhi, and during that same year a small municipal garden was named after him in the Kiryat Moshe Quarter of Jerusalem, in the presence of the Mayor, Teddy Kollek.

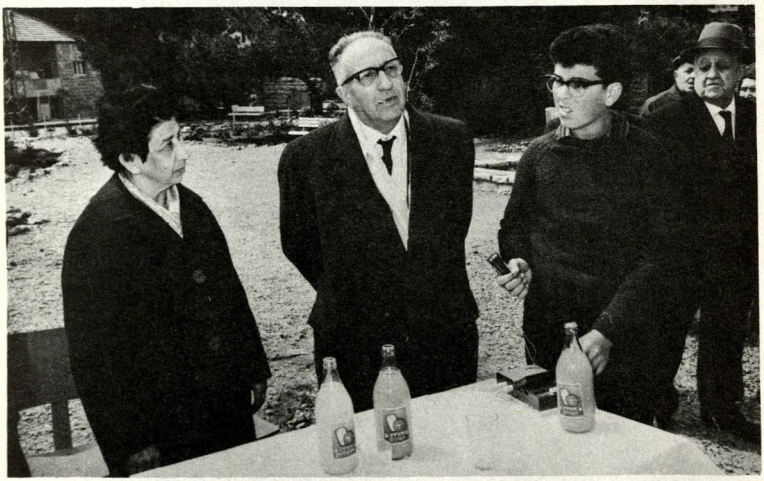
Today little children play among the sandboxes of the garden, they laugh as they swing between the trees, and they quarrel in piping voices on the slip of grass. In the corner, on a modest plaque, there is written the inscription: "Leon Kamhi, Chairman of the Zionist Organization of Monastir (Bitol), who perished in the Holocaust."





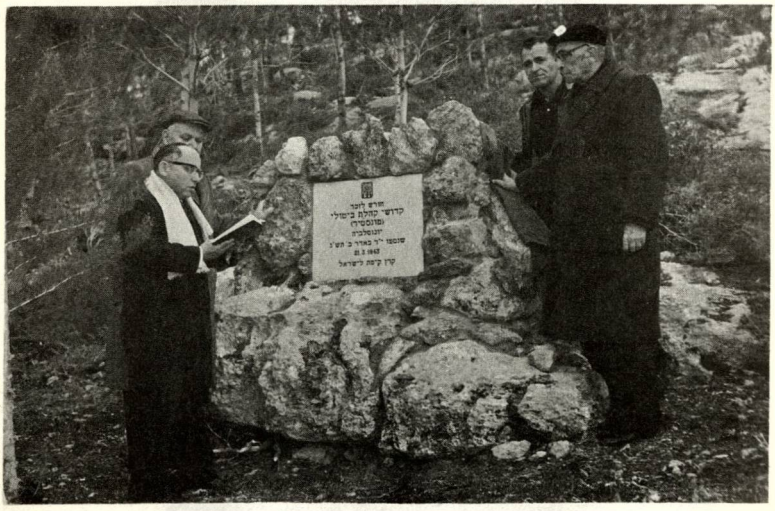
The Mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek, at the inaugural ceremony of the Municipal Garden bearing the name of Leon Kamhi (Photo above). To his left: Mrs. Mathilda Berman and Mr. Moshe Yishai.

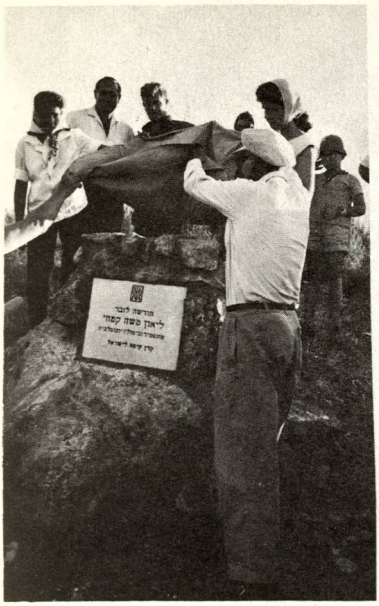
Dr. Tuval, one of Leon Kamhi's friends and a prominent Zionist in Zagreb during the 1930s, and Mrs. Mathilda Berman, at the inaugural ceremony of the Municipal Garden named after Leon Kamhi.





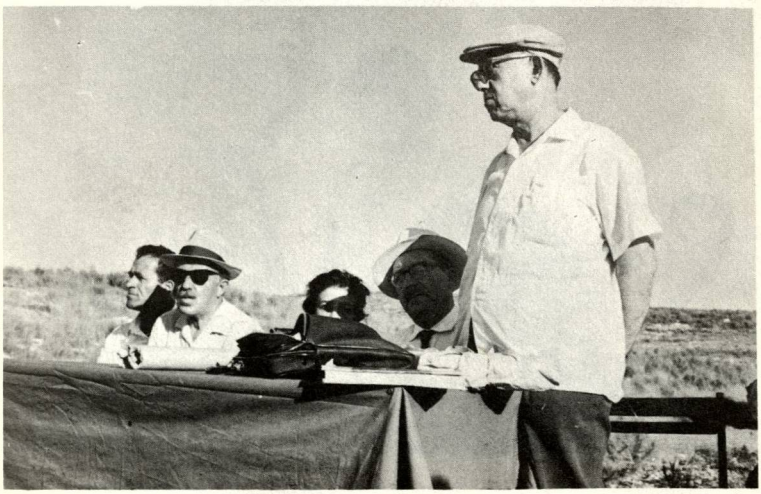
Former Bitol residents, who settled in Israel, making their pilgrimage to the Holocaust Memorial Forest, where through the Jewish National Fund, they planted 3,013 trees as a living memorial to the 3,013 members of their community who perished in the Holocaust.

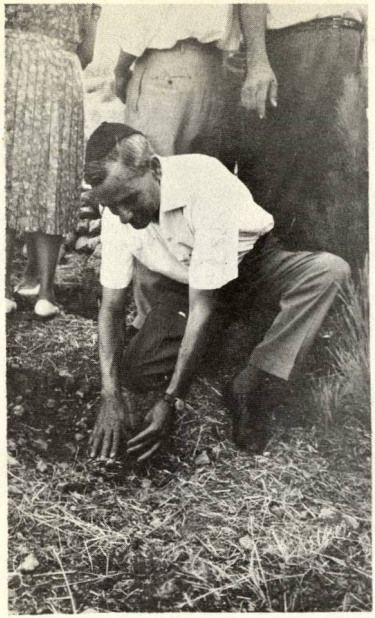




The ceremony of unveiling the plaque at the wood planted in memory of Leon Kamhi in Ben-Shemen Forest, wherein are nurtured 1,000 trees as a living memorial to his name.

Dr. Zvi Rothem speaking at the unveiling ceremony.





Josef Kamhi, Leon's relative, planting a sapling in the forest.

A member of the Directorate of the Jewish National Fund presents Mrs. Matilda Berman, sister of Leon Kamhi, with the tree planting certificate.

