

Eshua Almalech's Graduation Ball In The French College



This is a photo from my graduation ball in the French College in Plovdiv in March 1943. I am the third from right to left on the second row (in a grey coat); the man with glasses and small beard in the middle is our class instructor Pere Gotie, the second from left to right on the first row is Kamen Vichev, a teacher and in charge of the sports activities in the college. He was killed during the communist regime and beautified by the Roman Catholic Church in Plovdiv in 2002 by Pope John Paul II during his visit to Bulgaria. On the upmost row from left to right are the three Jewish friends of mine - the first is Paco, the second Jacques Anavi and the third - Berto Aronov. The three moved to Israel and to this day I keep in touch with Jacques and Berto. I returned to the college intending to go back to Stara Zagora the next day. Then my class teacher Pere Gotie Damper, who was a French Catholic priest, called me to his room. He told me that the college director Pere Ozon and he would not allow the Jewish students in the college to be sent to death. He offered me to stay in the college and said that I should not worry about food, accommodation and clothes. But there was one condition: I had to adopt the Catholic faith. He said that they had spoken with our parents and that they would issue us a document that this had happened when I enrolled in the school in 1937 so that the authorities would not be suspicious. I do not know what would have happened if I had accepted their proposal or if I would have accepted it at all. But the same day shortly before leaving for Stara Zagora the message came that the deportation of the Jews was postponed and they could go back to their homes. The Jews in Bulgaria were defended by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, large groups of Bulgarian intellectuals, Macedonian organizations, including deputies from the ruling party in Parliament. After that the government adopted another strategy. All Jews from Sofia, who were around 30 000, were to be interned from the capital to other parts of the country. Around 100 families came to Stara Zagora; most of them were put up in local Jewish families, the others - in a school. The Mevorah family came to live with us together with another young family, whose name I have forgotten. We lived together for a month, when a new governmental order came that all Jews from Stara Zagora had to be interned to other towns. It was also valid for all

bigger cities in the country, but there was one more reason to apply it in Stara Zagora - here were the headquarters of the Nazi General List, Commander-in-Chief of the German army for the Balkans.