

On a hot and muggy afternoon in the village of Novi Pazar in rural northeastern Bulgaria, a ten year boy nicknamed Seeco was playing soccer with a dozen other boys of the same age on a crude countryside field. Novi Pazar was a small impoverished farming enclave left over from the Ottoman occupation mostly inhabited by Turks and Roma (Gypsy). After working up a good sweat playing with the other boys, Seeco had taken his shirt off and was heading to his new temporary home with the rest of the shirtless children. As the group came upon a bridge crossing over the Kamenitsa River, Seeco faced a dilemma that bared more risk than he really knew. It was end of the summer of 1943 and little Seeco was a Jew in the fascist-controlled nation of Bulgaria.

The most direct route home crossed a bridge that was forbidden for usage by Jews. There was another bridge that allowed Jewish passage but it was much further away. Being a naïve and carefree child, Seeco reasoned that since he was not wearing a shirt and had no visible yellow Jewish star that he was required to wear in public at all times, the bridge guards would not know he was Jewish. Most of the boys had already made it across the bridge and didn't need to contemplate the repercussions before proceeding. Children of all religions and political affiliations would frequently play together in the multicultural Bulgarian society. However, the onslaught of war and fascism had robbed these children of their innocence. Seeco took a chance and crossed the "Non-Jewish" bridge with the remainder of his soccer comrades. Half way across the overpass, another boy betrayed his trust and ran to a bridge guard to tell him that shirtless Seeco was a Jewish boy.

He was busted! What would become of him? He had heard rumors and horror stories about Jews being put to death for similar infractions in nearby Romania, Germany and other Axis countries. But he was only a little boy; no authority could be so cruel?

The ten year old juvenile was immediately arrested and detained in a KEV administered local jail. Komisarstvo za Evreiskite Vuprosi (KEV), or the Commissariat for Jewish Questions was a recently established department within the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The KEV would legally have the power to enact rules regarding Jews without the approval of the Subranie (Bulgarian Parliament) or King Boris III. As the frightened ten year old boy, waited in the interrogation room, KEV officers and their Nazi SS supervisors would decide his fate. It would not be difficult for these hardened adults to break a young boy for he was already scared to death, but the officers seemed to rejoice in their cruelty to a Jew. Following an Anti-Semitic rant, KEV officers administered a beating and a forceful interrogation to the scared child which included slaps across his face and threats of deportation to his family.

The hysterically sobbing boy was thrown into a detention cell and spent the next few hours pondering his fate. He asked himself how life had come to this point. Only a couple of years earlier he was the privileged son of well-to-do hardware store owner in the center of the Bulgarian capital, Sofia. He attended the prestigious American College for his advanced elementary school studies. His family had servants and a modern apartment in a good neighborhood. His family would take frequent vacations to the Black Sea coastal resort of Varna. Now an impoverished Seeco was confined in the rural wasteland not far from Varna, but under completely different circumstances.

The outbreak of WWII would drastically transform the life of every Jew in Europe and Seeco was no different. In fact the Jews of Bulgaria were actually better off than most of the Jews in Eastern Europe. Recounting this story through 21<sup>st</sup> Century eyes, it's hard to think of my family as lucky. Seeco was my father, Mordecai Varsano. My grandparents, Isaac and Rachel named their first born child, Mordecai, after his paternal

grandfather. It was a grandiose name for a little baby, so his parent's nicknamed him Morris. Morris was also a rather mature name, so it was adapted to Moriseeco. Finally, for the sake of simplicity his name was shortened to Seeco, which stuck with him the rest of his life.

A cute name and cherubic good looks masked the oppression of the last few years. He would spend his precious formative years under a brutal regime that deprived him of an authentic childhood. In the year 1939, Mordecai Varsano turned seven years old and Adolph Hitler began his campaign of hate and subjugation across Europe. Following Germany's annexation of Czechoslovakia, King Boris began to realize that an alliance with the Third Reich was the only way to avoid forced occupation even though he was more philosophically attuned to the Western powers. King Boris and Adolph Hitler began to secretly negotiate the terms of their pact. Bulgaria wanted the land lost in the Treaty of Neuilly, including Dobrudja from Romania and Thrace from Greece. The Germans agreed to let the Bulgarians acquire these "new territories" in exchange for mining rights within rural Bulgaria and other forms of non-official cooperation.

Throughout the early years of the war, Bulgaria positioned itself with the anti-Western forces which also turned out to be extremely anti-Semitic. Following the formation of the Nazi-Soviet Alliance, the Bulgarian-Soviet Commercial Treaty was signed and the pro-Western Prime Minister was deposed in favor of the fascist Bogdan Filov.

Filov's regime was pro-German and Anti-Semitic from the outset which set the tone for Bulgaria's participation in WWII. The Jews and other minority groups of Bulgaria would suffer greatly under Filov's government. During Filov's reign of terror, my father would have his dreams shattered and his innocence robbed. The Varsano

family had been contently settled in Bulgaria for about 400 years. They were patriotic and law abiding citizens that directly contributed to the well being of the community by gainfully employing Jews and non Jews alike. After so many years of good standing, the faltering of the political structure throughout Europe would turn my family and their Jewish neighbors into unwilling enemies of their own nations.

In July of 1940, Bulgaria adopted the “Law for the Defense of the Nation,” or ZZN (Bulgarian acronym), which was a Slavic version of the Nuremberg Laws. Filov instituted a Nazi-type youth league that would fundamentally divide the children of Bulgaria into the majority Christians against the other minority groups. Stars of David marked all Jewish homes, businesses, and people. When the rule requiring the wearing of yellow stars was first established, there was a shortage of government issued stars. Some Jews decided to make their own custom stars to wear, complete with a picture of the King and Queen of Bulgaria. Even though the stars were meant to alienate and ridicule the Jews, many of them still felt patriotic towards the country that treated them as enemies because they had lived in the multiethnic and relatively harmonious country for many generations. With centuries of tolerance behind them, Boris and the Bulgarian government felt that the Jews were expendable and were prepared to use them as a negotiating tool for international diplomacy.

He began renaming the streets of Sofia to identify the country’s new heroes. Adolph Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Victor Emanuel III all became new street names in my father’s hometown. Practically overnight, the familiar avenues of his carefree childhood vanished. The Bulgarians closely identified themselves with their fascist neighbors and were consequently compensated with long sought after territorial gains.

With the help of German advances in Yugoslavia, Bulgaria annexed Macedonia which it added to its war chest of “recently liberated territories.” The Macedonian region, along with their 8,000 Jewish residents, would be governed by Bulgaria rather than locally controlled. Lured by the promise of additional territorial gain, Boris allowed the Germans safe passage and support on their way to fighting the Greeks. As a reward for their complicity, Bulgaria would receive the region of Thrace which had about 6,000 Jewish residents. The Jews of the new territories would soon be conceded as a sacrifice for the war effort while the Jews of Bulgaria would suffer a slower and less drastic demise.

By September of 1941, the government closed the American College in Sofia, which had previously been allowing more than the mandated five percent maximum enrollment for Jewish students. Consequently, Seeco and his younger sister Seli (She was nicknamed Seli, but her full name at the time was Sarah Varsano) were forced to attend the remedial Bulgarian public schools where they were much more academically advanced than their classmates.

Previously, the ZZN required Jewish men of working age to serve in labor groups supervised by the Ministry of War, which was considered a somewhat patriotic duty because it contributed to the war effort. Under the new rules, Jewish men, including my grandfather, were put into forced labor crews under the Ministry of Public Works which was viewed as an obvious punishment that was not related to helping national aspirations. The slave laborers were also forced to shave their heads and many were treated in a degrading manner. On July 19, 1942 all Jewish men ages twenty to forty-five were to report for labor service on roads and railway beds in strategic parts of Bulgaria. My grandfather was sentenced to work on a remote section of railroad near the Bof station.

He was relatively lucky because he was not physically abused; he just had to work long grueling days for no pay.

My father was traumatized due to the breakup of his nuclear family by the government authorities whose anti-Semitic net continued to close in on every Jew. Even though my grandfather was in a forced labor camp, he could still visit his family occasionally. His appearance shocked my father because his freshly shaven head gave him an unusually depersonalized look—similar to the concentration camp victims. While my grandfather spent hours of hard labor building railroads, my family heard rumors of other camps in Romania, Germany, and Poland where Jews were being exterminated. The labor camps in Bulgaria were viewed as a lesser evil, but there was a constant fear that they would be transformed into extermination or deportation camps.

In fact, Jews under Bulgarian jurisdiction were being deported to death camps in Poland. Warrant Number 127 of the August 26, 1942 Decree (Same law that established the KEV) stated that German authorities had the right to deport 20,000 Jews “inhabiting the recently liberated territories,” but made no mention of Bulgaria proper. This qualified choice of words might have unknowingly saved my father’s life.

The entire deportation operation required the conspiring of several countries of the Axis powers, but Bulgaria was the main player. The departure centers were under the authority of the Bulgarian State Railway and the KEV. From the regional camps, many Jews were transferred to Sofia which was the transportation hub of the nation and where many of the Jewish residents had already been relocated to a rural portion of the country. From the Bulgarian capital city, they would be moved to the border town of Lom. In Lom, some railway cars would wait for days with the overcrowded Jewish passengers

screaming for help. From the port of Lom, the remaining Jews boarded ships up the Danube River on route to Vienna, Austria.

Once in the Reich, it was a fatalistic journey to Katowicz, Poland and eventually to Treblinka. The journey was supervised by German police but the security was done by Bulgarian officials. Meanwhile, my grandfather was busy laying rail road tracks and filled rail road beds with heavy gravel just a few miles east of where the deportations of Jews to Treblinka were routed.

According to Bulgarian and German transportation figures the total deportations per country were as follows: 4,075 Thrace, 158 Pirot, and 7,160 Macedonia, for a total of 11,393. The liquidated funds from Jewish properties far exceeded the deportation costs, making it a profitable venture for the Bulgarian government. All but twelve of the deported Jews perished in the gas chambers of Treblinka. The shame of these Bulgarian atrocities was an overlooked chapter of history that even my father never mentioned to me.

My father and aunt were merely children that were probably oblivious to the technicalities of the laws. The adults in the family, however, were aware and actively lobbied the Jewish political and economic groups to pressure the authorities while trying to ride the fine line of not being a partisan. They were just a regular law abiding family that wanted to work hard and have a peaceful life, not political radicals or violent protestors. The extent of their political involvement was isolated to issues of self preservation and they had no designs on ascension to power.

While my grandfather Isaac was on his work detail, the rest of the family received evacuation orders to leave Sofia and go to a place called Razgrad. "Fortunately," Seeco developed Peritonitis, an infection of the abdominal lining, and the health authorities

restricted him to a quarantine area in their home. Seli became infected with Mumps so the Bulgarian Red Cross put a warning on the front door that “Danger – Infectious Disease: No one allowed in, No one allowed out!” That ominous warning granted my family a temporary reprieve from being banished from their hometown. It was yet another ironic moment of the times that a contagious illness was viewed as a positive development.

On May 21, 1943 all the remaining Jews in Sofia received orders to leave the city within three days. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church and political opposition leaders staged public protests. Belev , the rabidly anti-Semitic head of the KEV and Prime Minister Filov defiantly insisted that the Jews would be deported. My grandparents secretly feared it was the first step to being deported and, in fact, if Belev and Dannecker’s (German envoy to Bulgaria) original proposal was implemented, they would have eventually been deported as the latter half of a two phase process. In the Danube River port towns, empty steamships began to ominously cluster around the docks.

Panic, chaos, and rioting filled the cities of Bulgaria. My grandmother Rachel spent that violent day visiting a friend and was still not home when the sun set. The entire family feared the worse, but a few hours later she returned and explained that she waited until the streets became quiet enough to proceed.

The rumors of mass deportations had reached the forced labor camps, and somehow my grandfather was able to go back to Sofia with the help of some of his Bulgarian friends to tend to his family. He made arrangements to transfer his wife and children to a small town near the Romanian border named Novi Pazar.

Most Jews were sent to the interior provinces where they lived in crowded houses with other Jewish families or peasants. Men of working age, including my grandfather, lived separate from their families with their assigned work detachment. My urban father

along with his mother and sister were unwillingly relocated to the countryside to live under primitive conditions amongst Turkish peasants and Gypsies. A daily routine in the fields was a drastic shock but at least there was food and they were still in Bulgaria. Jewish schoolchildren were not allowed to attend the local public schools, so every student received their instructions in only one humble room. They made the best of a bad situation with every bench in the classroom representing a different grade, Seeco was on the fourth and Seli was on the first bench. Meanwhile in Sofia, Jewish property went up for auction, and an assortment of Bulgarians moved into Jewish homes.

All objects of attributed value including musical instruments which were previously registered with KEV were now liquidated. My father's beloved accordion and other furnishings of the Varsano family apartment were never to be seen again. My grandfather's convertible Fiat automobile and motorcycle with side car which gave him a great sense of personal pride were unceremoniously repossessed from him and sold for the benefit of corrupt government officials.

As my father sat in a dank KEV prison cell and contemplated his circumstance, the outlook was as grim as it could be. He would either die in Bulgaria or be deported to certain death and he may have accelerated the deportation process for his entire family by his careless actions. His family's wealth and prestige had been stripped by the fascist authorities and now a single KEV officer held their fate in his hands. The Varsano family's saving grace turned out to be my grandfather's business savvy and experience dealing with unethical Bulgarians. Isaac managed to scrape together enough funds to bribe the notoriously corrupt KEV official and earn the release of his son. I'm not sure of how or where he obtained the money under his destitute conditions, but he did what was necessary to save his only son.

Although there were dark days ahead, the arrest of Seeco was the lowest point in my family's WWII experience. By late 1943, Axis losses were mounting and the Bulgarian authorities became more concerned with domestic harmony rather than appeasing the Third Reich's thirst for conquest. The "Jewish Question" was not a priority in Bulgaria, so the status-quo reigned for several critical months of the war. If a few of the decisive battles had gone a different way, I might not be writing this today. However, the Allies were gaining ground and American planes were relentlessly bombing Bulgarian targets and other strategic Axis positions. My father and many others actually cheered the American bombers as they flew overhead.

In November of 1944, the Varsano family finally returned to their home in Sofia. Unfortunately, their previous residence on Dragoman Boulevard was in the hands of wartime squatters, so they were again forced to find a new residence and moved to Morava Street near the Jewish Quarter. The Bulgarian-German alliance had crumbled and the Soviets were positioning their troops to assemble the Iron Curtain across Eastern Europe. My family would survive the war but they were left impoverished and under a new communist oppressor. As the atrocities of the Holocaust were revealed to the world and the dysfunctional communist system took hold in their homeland, the Varsano family did not take much joy at the end of the war. They were merely survivors left to pick up the pieces of an unfathomable mess.