

More important moments related to the construction and activity of the first Jewish community centers /chitalishta/ in Bulgaria (1919-1944)

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***Abstract:** The building of cultural and educational organizations and community centers by the Jewish community is a long process. Based on the activities traditional for the Jewish community, new ones are formed, which lay the foundations of the community work among the Jews as well. In the period up to 1944, several main centers stood out in which Jewish community centers were built - Shumen, Ruse, Varna, Dupnitsa. In the capital Sofia, three community centers are being built successively, which support the development of Jewish culture and traditions. The preserved documents reveal individual moments surrounding the construction of the community centers. The available memories of public figures and intellectuals provide additional information regarding the first steps of the community work in the circles of the Jewish community and its confirmation in the period 1919-1944.*

***Key words:** community centers, Jewish People's Community Center, Jewish community, Beit Aam.*

Introduction:

The construction of the community center network in the first half of the 20th century went through various stages. The processes started at the end of the 19th century continue. They are mainly related to its formation and subsequent structuring. For this first stage, it can be concluded that, in addition to the growing number, there is a lack of unity and organization in the actions between the individual community centers. Their occurrence occurs spontaneously and without any prior preparation. There is no center to coordinate these processes. At the same time, they are multi-layered. There are also various organizations like the community centers, some of which are those of the various ethnic and religious communities. They unite around themselves mainly their representatives. Given the same goals in terms of culture and education, however, the need for joint action becomes imperative. All this causes the community center activists in the country to come out with a call for unification, which aims to form a single organization that includes community centers from different settlements. However, similar formations are not excluded from its scope. In the preparatory, founding and subsequently adopted documents of the Union of People's Community Centers, formed in 1911, it is noted that this institution is characteristic of the Bulgarian people and

represents a voluntary association of people of different religions, ethnicities, or social affiliations. And this is a mark that has been characteristic of it since its creation. That is why it is recommended to build community centers as a kind of cultural centers among the individual communities in the country. They should also work together with their already established cultural organizations. It is stated that this is evidence of growth in cultural and educational terms. And the same should be encouraged and further developed. A conviction is expressed that various established organizations with a cultural and educational orientation, which develop activities like the community centers, should also be attracted. Thus, it will be possible to achieve the unification expected by all. These processes are characteristic of the first years of the 20th century. In this way, the foundations of a specific type of community center were laid - those including representatives of the various ethnic communities in Bulgaria, as part of the Bulgarian nation.¹

Exposure:

Although it is not officially the practice to indicate community centers as belonging to a certain ethnic community, their creation in a local place, as well as the main membership that formed it, give it a unique appearance. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century - a period of active creation of new community centers throughout the country, based on existing cultural societies, representatives of one of the largest separate communities at that time - the Jewish one - also created them. And although they do not define and call them by the name community centers, in essence they represent exactly this type of association. Chronologically, one of the first that we can point to as such was established in Shumen. There is information that in 1894 a community center was established here under the name "Agodat Iladim" ("Compound"). Local people perceive it as "Beit-Aam" (people's home). Following the example of the other cultural organizations and community centers in the city, several groups are opened to it, the majority of which are focused on music. In the following years, a special building was built, in which there are separate rooms for cultural events (a stage with

¹ The idea of uniting the existing community centers and cultural and educational organizations was initiated by the activists of the "Zora" community center in Sliven in 1910. It should be remembered that the community centers should unite all citizens regardless of who they are. Joint events with related organizations of other ethnic communities are indicated as good practice. At the same time, several organizations of the local Jewish community were actively functioning in the city, among them the branch of the "Maccabi" gymnastic society, established at the end of the 19th century, stood out. The same expands its activity in the field of culture and actively begins to cooperate with local community centers. In this way, there is an exchange of culture and views on development in the direction of meeting the cultural and educational needs of the people. - C. Minutes No. 1 of September 27, 1910, of the community center workers in Sliven - C: Twenty-five years in native education and culture (1911-1936). Jubilee collection. Sofia: 1937, pp. 58-59.

dressings rooms attached to it), as well as for meetings, conversations and various public events. Musical instruments are purchased, as well as various decor for organizing performances. In organizational terms, the experience of other community centers existing in the city is used - a leadership is created that makes common decisions. This indicates that there is an exchange of information with them. Something more. Some joint appearances are also made. During the parties, activities are also developed, within the framework of which charitable initiatives are carried out. Funds are being collected to support not only children of Jewish origin, but also many Bulgarians who need financial help to study.² Although with a large degree of conditionality and despite the lack of other accurate information that would show how and in what way this cultural and educational association of the Shumen Jewish community was built and functioned, it can be assumed that the foundations of the first for the country Jewish community center. The same is perceived by the population as such. However, in what way it worked in the following years and to what extent it was not just likened to a community center, it is difficult to say. The duplication of activities between it and the other Jewish associations leads to a lack of complete identity. At the same time, still in the minds of the Jewish population, cultural events were mainly aimed at the members of the community itself, which predisposed them to take place in organizations traditional to it. Based on all this, it can be assumed that the association "Agodat Iladim" is perceived as a community center mainly by the Bulgarian population in the city. Its founders accepted this to make it recognized by a wider range of people. For the Jews themselves, it is both a community center and the traditional "people's home" (Beit-Aam). There is no preserved data that in the following years the existence of a community center in the city under this name continued. Most of the holidays that continued to be held, including the publicized charity gatherings, were held in places traditional to the Jewish population. In addition, as in the previous years, different, thematic in nature, separate cultural associations continue to emerge, which include representatives of various genres in art - music, dance, etc. Gradually, some of them died out, and others flowed into local community centers, continuing their activities there. This process is characteristic both for the end of the 19th century and for the first years of the 20th century.³

The given example is not an isolated phenomenon. Similar things are observed in other places in the country. The idea and its application aimed at forming cultural and educational associations, which later turn into community centers, is visible in various settlements with a

² **Haralanova, Beta.** The Jewish community in Shumen. – In: *Suffering and Salvation. The memory of the Jewish communities in Rousse, Shumen, and Varna.* Ruse, 2015, pp. 46-47.

³ CSA, f. 264 K, i. 5, a.u. 895, p.1-18.

Jewish population present in them. In the city of Ruse, the most developed in those years in Northern Bulgaria, representatives of the local families Arditi, Ishovich, Kamhi, Pinto, Ventura, Canetti, etc. are actively involved in the establishment of various organizations. The base for all of them is the branch of the "Maccabi" gymnastic society opened here in 1902.⁴ Its founders call for "everyone who likes sports and needs cultural enrichment" to join it. Two years later - in 1904, the Ruse music society "David" was also founded.⁵ In addition to the independent organization of sports and musical performances, the two organizations actively cooperate with the community centers operating at that time on the territory of the city – "Zora" and "Angel Kanchev". Their example was followed by the members of the Jewish community in Varna.⁶ As in other places, a cultural center was also built here. It unites the Jewish societies and organizations in the city that have been formed since the beginning of the 20th century. And they are not few. The "Ashomer Atsair" society, a local branch of the "Maccabi" gymnastics society, as well as "Bene Israel" stand out. The first public appearances take place in a specially rented building, which becomes the center of traditional parties, balls and gatherings organized for the community. Periodically, all Jewish holidays are solemnly celebrated there. To expand the activity, joint performances are also carried out with some Varna schools and community centers.⁷

From the beginning of the 20th century, cultural centers of the Jewish Bulgarians, similar to the existing community centers⁸, were also established in the capital Sofia. As in other places, so here, mainly young people actively participate in the Sofia branch of the "Maccabi" gymnastics society. The organization promoting the study of Hebrew – "Histradut" - also has an influence. Gradually, numerous small organizations were formed, most of which defined themselves as "self-educational educational societies". Popular in the period 1915-

⁴ From the end of the 19th century, representatives of the Jewish community in Bulgaria created a mass organization, whose members are mainly young people, called "Maccabi". It defines itself as a sports organization. Since 1901, it has been officially stated that it is a "gymnastic society". Sections are being created in different settlements, the first ones being in Vidin, Ruse, Shumen, Chirpan, Haskovo, Kazanlak, Dupnitsa. It was the most important youth organization of its time in the Zionist movement in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian "Maccabi" announces itself as part of the worldwide Jewish organization of the same name, which aims to work for the cultural, educational and sports growth of Jewish youth. - SA-Russe, f. 232 K, 32 a.u. 1-32 (Zionist Gymnastics Society "Maccabi" - Rouse)

⁵ **Nenov, Nikolai.** The Jewish community in Russe. – In: *Suffering and Salvation. The memory of the Jewish communities in Russe, Shumen, and Varna.* Russe, 2015, pp. 56-57.

⁶ It is important to note that during the first years of the 20th century, one of the largest compact groups of the Jewish community in Bulgaria was formed in Varna. By 1910, it had 1,687 people. This is mainly due to the economic opportunities that the city is starting to offer.

⁷ **Shtereva, Tatyana.** Highlights of the history and life of the Jewish community in Varna. – In: *Suffering and Salvation. The memory of the Jewish communities in Russe, Shumen and Varna.* Russe, 2015, pp. 36-37

⁸ The first community center in Sofia was founded in 1867 and was named "Colour". In 1880, the "Slavyanska beseda" community center was founded, which emerged as the main and most significant community center for the capital, and subsequently for a long time a unifying center for community centers throughout the country.

1920: “Knowledge”, “Diligence”, “Progress”, “Development”. It is noteworthy that the names chosen by their founders are not of Jewish origin but are typical of the community center network that is already taking shape. This can be explained by expanding the range of presence in the membership table, which mainly represents schoolchildren, as well as students and young people who worked in various institutions. Workers also actively participated. In practice, these organizations were not of a closed nature. Bulgarians were also members of them. In this way, contact was made between representatives of different communities. All this makes the active actors of the Jewish cultural and educational associations look for opportunities that unite, not differentiate. Initially, mainly lecture halls were opened, with the aim of holding discussions and gatherings on issues related to literature, social and economic life in the country. They are also visited by members of various community centers in the capital, who also organized similar events. It is a form of civic events that were extremely popular during those years. Based on joint actions, community centers gain recognition in the circles of the Jewish community, which perceives them as close to it. This is where the future close contacts come from.

As a consequence of what has been stated up to this point, the question is logical: Why is a connection being sought between the already established considerable number of Jewish sports, gymnastics and cultural-educational associations and the community centers, and what does it mean? In addition, why does the community itself accept the community center form as better and replace the traditional “people's homes” with it? At the end of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century, there was practically no specific legislation regarding the construction and development of the already numerous cultural, educational and sports associations in the country. All of them are subject to the general legislation currently in force and primarily to that relating to the field of education. However, this is only when certain actions aimed at supporting the processes in secondary schools in the country are carried out. To a lesser extent, it applies to higher education. Some of the periodically issued district instructions and regulations of the Ministry of Public Education are applied, albeit partially. At the same time, in the larger settlements, along with the community centers, independent museums, libraries, and scientific societies arose or became separate. Some of them are separated from community centers to which they have been exposed until now. In 1901, the Bulgarian Historical Society was established, which unites efforts aimed at preserving antiquities, as well as the cultural identity not only of Bulgarians, but also of individual ethnic communities. However, in the public sector, there are no uniform rules that regulate the way of creating different cultural or educational organizations arising as a result of the citizens'

initiative.⁹ This shows that the already existing more than 1000 community centers, as well as the numerous cultural and educational organizations of the various ethnic communities, including and the Jewish one, were formed mainly according to the vision of their founders and drawing on the experience of already established similar associations. But the increase in their number, as well as the already started organization of joint appearances, including the exchange of members, inevitably leads to the need to seek rapprochement between them. This gives rise to the need for cooperation not only in the implementation of cultural initiatives, but also in terms of structuring, management and supporting the overall development of these associations. One more fact can be mentioned here. Regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation, the representatives of the emerging Bulgarian intelligentsia participate jointly in all public events in populated areas. Guided by the principle of universality and the non-allowance of division between individual Bulgarian citizens, community centers unite all those willing and interested in creating opportunities to provide cultural and educational services to citizens. Given this and the fact that their number is constantly growing, it is a natural process for the community centers to become the unifying center for all the associations that had actions like the community centers. And finally, the desire for unity, for the formation of a unified beginning and organization in the work of the community centers is noticeable from the first years of their development. Subsequently, it is further developed as a vision, accompanied by concrete actions in this direction. It is aimed at this - that the community centers become a natural center of all cultural and educational associations, thus contributing to the affirmation of the Bulgarian nation.¹⁰

Regardless of the lack of clearly defined administrative requirements, during the first twenty years of the 20th century, the mentioned cultural and educational organizations of the Jewish community in various cities of the country, and especially in Sofia, continued their development and activity. It is carried out in accordance with the accepted rules within the community itself. It supported the tradition of organizing various events, parties, balls, etc., as well as promoting acts of charity. Although in each settlement the Jewish community has its own relative independence, there are also attempts to cooperate between them. During these years, many of the established societies defined themselves as “Zionist organizations”. There are not a few who prefer to engage only in cultural and educational activities and avoid politicizing

⁹ More on the matter See **Velev, Ventzislav**. Stages, processes, and influences on the formation of policies for the management of the cultural and historical heritage of Bulgaria. Sofia, 2021 // <https://www.unibit.bg/opismeneh-digital/ISBN-978-619-185-525-4>

¹⁰ Twenty-five years in native education and culture (1911-1936). Jubilee collection. Sofia, 1937, pp. 58-59.

their performances. A new stage in the relationship took place after 1914. With its decision, the Central Consistory of the Jews in Bulgaria imposed the principle that the individual Jewish communities and the internal societies built by them should carry out activities mainly of a secular nature. During practice on September 5, 1920, the assembly approved a special program. It is aimed at the “spiritual development of Judaism”. And it itself should have its own religious and cultural independence. But establishing contacts, as well as allowing monitoring of his activities by state authorities, is not excluded. However, it is necessary to consider the principles of autonomy, as well as those already adopted for traditional activities and events. An important document is the adopted "Statute for the Organization and Management of the Jewish Communities and the Consistory in Bulgaria". It states that the Jewish community is established in a settlement where at the relevant time there are at least 30 Jewish families living. Any Jew with a permanent residence in the area of the municipality can be a member.¹¹ In the absence of special legislation that applies to associations¹², although there is no explicit evidence, it can be assumed that all the principles adopted by the Jewish organizations largely duplicate those established in the community centers. This is shown by the similarity with accepted basic settings recorded in the founding documents of the Union of People's Community Centers. The texts related to the required number of organizations in one settlement, settlement, traditional activities, autonomy, as well as the possibility of state support, and in some cases also of monitoring, are identical. Therefore, it can be assumed that the organizations not the various communities in the country, including and the Jewish one, which are established at the national level, to a large extent copy the already imposed and adopted basic settings reflected in the community center regulations. They have proven their applicability in the construction and formation of the community center network throughout the country. Their large number, the ongoing process of the emergence of new community centers, as well as their adoption at the local and state level is an additional motive for using the established norms for organization and management. In this way, structurally, all these organizations lay the foundation and develop civil associations in Bulgaria.

There is information about the formation of a Jewish community center in Sofia, which is based on previous associations, from the end of the second decade of the 20th century. In fact, the main organizational and cultural life of the Jewish community in the country is

¹¹ CSA, f. 264 K, i. 5, a.u. 1627, l. 1-94.

¹² The country's first special law on legal entities was adopted in 1933 - In: State Gazette, no. 13 of April 20, 1933. In 1938, an Ordinance-law on state supervision of companies and associations was also adopted - In: State Gazette, no. 77 of April 8, 1938

concentrated in the capital. ¹³As up to this point, the Jewish organizations continue to be divided into two main categories: 1. supporters of the international Zionist movement that has also formed in Bulgaria; 2. those who announce that they do not want to be bound by political ideas but set themselves purely cultural and educational tasks. With great popularity and influence during these years, the company “Atslaha” stands out. It has a significant membership. The Zionists had a marked influence on him. As in almost every settlement with a compact Jewish community, there is also a branch of the Maccabi Sports Association in Sofia. It remains the closest in terms of ideas and activities to the many new cultural-educational and sports-gymnastic societies created at the beginning of the century in the capital. All of them operate mainly on the territory of the refugee district of Sofia “Yuchbunar”, where the Jewish population lives compactly.¹⁴ The most active associations are: “Knowledge” - with chairman Mancho Rakhamimov, “Labour” - with chairman Meshulam Beni, “Progress” - with chairman Jacques Nathan, “Development” - with chairman Albert Kyoso and “E. Chlenov” - with chairman Isak Moshev. The students of Jewish origin, who mainly attended Sofia's First and Third Boys' Gymnasium, were united in the “Shakespeare” societies, whose chairman was once again Mancho Rahamimov. Those from the upper classes and students founded the society “Dimcho Debelyanov”, in which, along with Jews, many Bulgarians are members. Separate groups of young people also unite in the “Pouka” and “Chernihovski” societies.¹⁵ Active contacts are maintained between them. Although maintaining their relative independence, all the mentioned companies accept the idea of uniting. They point to this as an opportunity to support their activities. It is a common practice for the members of the companies to visit each other during various joint initiatives. Speakers are exchanged on various issues. Meetings, discussions, parties are organized. The issue of unification in a form acceptable to all was discussed as early as the beginning of 1918. The occasion was the anniversary of the capital's student Jewish library “Knowledge”. The discussion takes place in the building of the small synagogue, located on Nishka Street. Representatives of various companies are invited to attend, including and the Zionist ones. Attendance is great. Among the participants can be mentioned the names of people with positions and influence in Jewish circles, such as: Sami

¹³ According to official data, as of 1934, there were about 48,000 Jews living in Bulgaria, the majority of whom settled in Sofia and settlements close to the capital.

¹⁴ In Sofia, Jewish Bulgarians mostly live in a separate neighbourhood, which is part of the former “Yuchbunar” neighborhood. Their homes are in the square formed mainly between the Nishka (today Todor Aleksandrov Blvd), Positano and Tri Ushi streets. There they formed their own inner neighbourhood known by the nickname “Yuchbunar” (“Three wells”).

¹⁵ **Avramov, Simanto.** The “Emil Shekerjiyski” Jewish community center is 70 years old. – In: *From general rise to “Emil Shekerdzhiski”*. Sofia, 2020, pp. 49-50.

Benyaminov, Albert Eshkenazi, Sami Solomonov, Bitush Isakov, etc. From the very beginning, Mancho Rahamimov and Isak Moshev raised the question of uniting the companies into one. For the most acceptable type, they indicate that it should be an association, of the type of community centers. This was to be a new and common Jewish community center, which, as they stated, “will be common and unified”. In addition, community centers are already a familiar institution, which in many places Jews recognize as close to them. There are also examples from the country of Jewish societies that worked as community centers. The principle that is established and can be developed under this form of association is aimed at working for the cultural and educational growth of the Jewish community, which is a starting point for further development. It is pointed out that for the already existing organizations there needs to be a new type of unifying center, which not only guides and coordinates them, but also creates the feeling of unity in actions. The influence that various movements of a political nature have on Jewish organizations sometimes also leads to disputes between them, which has a negative impact. It is emphasized that Zionist views, no matter how accepted by certain people, create problems for the Jewish community currently. Also, Jewish issues are often discussed in the pages of the press. The writing of various articles is often influenced by the affiliation of their authors to various currents among Jews. But this is not always understood by people, which also leaves a negative feeling. Therefore, it is necessary to create a new type of organization that is known to all and through which Jewish interests can be defended.¹⁶ Misunderstandings between individual organizations, as well as interpersonal disputes, lead to the postponement of a decision on a general association.

In the middle of 1919, the question of building a single Jewish community center was again put on the agenda. Discussions resume. Some of them appear on the pages of various printed publications.¹⁷ The issue continues to be debated in various formats. Informal talks are being held with other community centers in Sofia, including representatives of the Supreme Community Center Council. The aim is to establish the foundations of the community center's work among the Jewish community, which is stated to be sympathetic to the community center's mission and goals. As a result of an agreement reached between them, the chairmen of the larger cultural and educational associations decided to become the founders of the first

¹⁶ **Rakamimov, Mancho.** Creation and activity of the Jewish Community Center “Obsht Podem” (1919-1924). – In: *From general rise to “Emil Shekerdzhiski”*. Sofia, 2020, pp. 92-93.

¹⁷ During these years, “Pro causa Judaica”, which is a publication of the Jewish anti-Zionist club “Union”, was particularly popular. The Zionist newspaper “Ashofar” is also widely distributed. Various issues of Jewish organizations are discussed on their pages, and opposing opinions are often expressed. Various collections of poetry and music are also published, which are distributed and gain popularity.

Jewish community center in Sofia.¹⁸ To a large extent, it copied its organizational structure from another Bulgarian community center already existing in the “Yuchbunar” area – “Hristo Botev”, which was founded in 1917. Regarding the reasons for the establishment, it is stated that the need for a community center was expressed by representatives of various Jewish organizations - both the young and the old. The main goal to be achieved is “through cultural and educational activities to bring together and unite the Jewish and Bulgarian youth in the name of common cultural interests”. The leadership of the community center, called “Obsht Podem”, includes: Mancho Rahamimov, Meshulam Beni, Mois Betzalel, Nissim Alfandari, Adolf Bohorov and Albert Michael. Jako Behar was elected chairman.¹⁹ The first appearances of the community center are related to the organization of literary meetings, parties, as well as a series of concerts. Joint initiatives are also implemented with the community center “Hristo Botev”. The meetings that are organized with various scientists and public figures of Jewish origin arouse interest. Lectures are organized to which different groups of the population are invited to attend. Dr. Nissim Mevorach, Moise Cohen, Jacques Nathan and others stand out among the speakers. Teachers are also often present to guide their students. This gives rise to the need to open a library with an adjacent reading room. A loan service began to work actively, with books being given for reading both on site and for home use. Special rooms are rented for this purpose. It is announced that the headquarters of the community center will be at the address: Sofia, 58 Klementina Street (today Al. Stamboliyski Blvd.).²⁰ Community Center “Obsht Podem” is actively starting to work towards its establishment as a unifying center. This is also a result of the undertaken mission, which is already spelled out in its founding documents. Namely, that it is important to popularize the community center idea among the Jewish community not only in Sofia, but also in other populated areas of the country. Especially where there are established Jewish cultural and educational societies. Active conversations

¹⁸ These were the first post-war years when the idea of a general upsurge in terms of organizing people in different types of organizations was promoted by the Bulgarian government. It is accepted that this specific type of organization of the people is a possible form of overcoming some of the restrictions imposed on the country introduced by virtue of the Neue Peace Treaty. The formation of public opinion, as well as the maintenance of organized actions by united groups of people, is realized through various existing cultural, educational and sports societies. In fact, this can also be accepted as a form of a kind of protest of the Bulgarian people against the discriminatory provisions laid down in the peace treaty, which create obstacles for leading an active socio-political and organized life. Therefore, the discovery of new forms of public events becomes an actively implemented state policy. Attention is also directed to the functioning traditional organizations of individual ethnic and religious communities in Bulgaria. Perceiving them in the form of “nationwide” forces them to go beyond their hitherto practiced community format into one of a nationally acceptable character. Everything said is also evident in the name chosen for the community center – “General Uplif”.

¹⁹ **Rakamimov, Mancho.** Cited works, pp. 93-98.

²⁰ **Cohen, Joseph.** Cradle of patriotism and progress. – In: *From general rise to “Emil Shekerdzhiski”*. Sofia, 2020, p. 39.

began with them, and the question was even raised that when establishing new ones, they should be in the form of community centers. In this way, to lay the foundations for a community work among the Jews common to the country. And “Obsht Podem” should be a “national Jewish community center”. To popularize this idea as well, on July 15, 1924, the publishing of a printed organ began - the magazine “Free Thought”. The same has been announced as an edition of the new community center. The intention is that it will be published twice a month - on the 1st and 15th. Jacques Nathan became its editor-in-chief. Buko Piti and Mancho Rahamimov are also editors. Already in its first issue, it is written that the publication aims to "fight for the economic and spiritual well-being of the Jewish youth ". It is planned to publish articles in the magazine against the war, against the chauvinism of the reactionaries in the Jewish movement - nationalists and Zionists. There should also be more socio-political articles, poems, chronicles, and announcements. For various reasons, mainly of an organizational nature, only 4 issues were published (July 15 - September 4, 1924).²¹ It was replaced by the printed sheet “Free People”, published in only 1 issue (September 1-15, 1924).²²

The community form of organization and actions is a unifying formula for the future development of Jewish cultural and educational associations. The opening of new community centers is also encouraged. When establishing them, it is stated that they will adopt the principle established by the Union of People's Community Centers, namely that community centers in Bulgaria are popular and are aimed at working with everyone, including the individual ethnic communities that are part of the Bulgarian people.²³ This causes the existing Jewish cultural and educational societies to seek cooperation not only among themselves, but also with other community centers. Thus, in 1921, a second Jewish community center was established in Sofia – “Heinrich Heine”. Robert Angie was elected as its chairman. In its founding documents, it is stated that this community center is based on currently existing associations and the experience of the first community center “Obsht Podem” will be used. The desire to group various traditional Jewish manifestations is indicated as new. The existing music and dance formations need to be united. The understanding is that only in this way - in a unified structure, their activity will be stimulated, and, in this way, it will not only develop, but also gain sustainability and, finally, wider popularity. The governing body of the new community center includes Yeshua Aji, Nissim Meshulam, Herzel Zonal. Fico Levi, who is also a part of it, begins to work in the open library, which is in his house on the corner of Sofia's Klementina and Odrin Streets.

²¹ NLKM, magazine Svobodna misal, 1924, 1-4 nos. – B2620.

²² NLKM , memo sheets Free People, 1924, 1 pc. – B1431.

²³ CSA, f. 1168 K, i. 1, a.u. 1.

The book fund is based on the donated personal collection of one of the founders of the community center - Nisim Behar. Many young people are attracted, and work is being done to "conceptualize and organize cultural and educational work among the Jewish population".²⁴ The new community center began to be actively present in the life of not only the Jewish community. Similar to "General Uplift", it makes contacts with various community centers in Sofia and the country. However, some contradictions soon arose among part of his leadership. Two groups are formed. This is not something unexpected, because it was a characteristic phenomenon for the Jewish movement in the country at that time. One group espouses Zionist views, which are becoming increasingly popular among the young population, and the other declares itself to be "neutral action". Initially, representatives of the second group, headed by Yeshua, had a predominant presence Aji, Naisim Meshulam and Bouko Eshkenazi. However, the influence of the "Atslaha" society, which was formed as a Zionist organization, grew rapidly. Its representatives begin to have an advantage in making decisions about the activities of the community center. In addition, the company has solid financial resources, as well as influence among most cultural organizations. Failure to achieve unity and the new contradictions created are the basis of the relatively short functioning of the community center "Heinrich Heine".²⁵ Thus, in 1924, at the first two Jewish community centers in Sofia, processes showing the decline of their activity were noticed. Internal disputes, the lack of finding common solutions, as well as the non-rhythmic financing of individual activities lead to this. Their membership is rapidly decreasing.

The changes in the socio-political life of the country, which occurred after 1923, catalysed the desire to develop the community center activity among the Jewish community in the capital. To activate and overcome the contradictions, the question of unification between the already existing two Jewish community centers in the capital is being raised. Under the pressure of some of the members of "Atslaha", the state authorities perceive that in the two community centers – "Obscht podem" and "Heinrich Heine" propagates views related not so much to Jewish education and culture, but to a social-democratic and working-class character. Steps are being taken to close "General Rise". The first is the suspension of his printing authority. But the community center idea did not die. To preserve some of the activities and especially the formed library, some of the more active members of the two community centers

²⁴ An interesting fact is that the library at the community center "H. Heine" does not have its own permanent place. When a new librarian is appointed, the books are moved to his house. In this way, the library activities, and the giving of books for home reading were also organized.

²⁵ **Behar, Nasim.** How we created the "Heinrich Heine" community center. – In: *From general rise to "Emil Shekerdzhyski"*. Sofia, 2020, p. 103.

began to discuss the idea of their unification and the creation of a new one. However, the traditional two wings are again showing themselves. Seeing an opportunity to achieve the Zionist ideas, some of the members of “Atslaha” speak for a new community center. There is also support from representatives of two more strong Zionist organizations with their presence in Sofia – “Theodor Hertsel” and “Yom Ashekel”. The latter insist that the character of the new community center has a distinctly Zionist character. The other wing among community center activists - the so-called "neutralists", speak out for the preservation of cultural and educational activities and forbidding politicization and the visible conduct of Zionist actions. At the head of this group is Buko Eshkenazi. The contradictions are again strongly expressed. The only consensus is that unification in the name of the Jewish community is necessary. But both groups need a legitimate form of work among wider circles of people, including those of non-Jewish origin. Therefore, it is assumed that the new association in the form of a community center will have. The same will have the character of an educational society. In the second half of 1924, a constituent assembly was held, during which it was announced that an agreement had been reached. A new community center for the Sofia Jewish community is being formed, succeeding the two that have already ceased their activities. The community center is named after the famous Jewish poet Chaim Nachman Bialik. Isak Moshev was elected chairman.²⁶ Yeshua became active community members Kemalov, David Asa, Armand Baruch, Laura Cohen, Rebecca Cohen, Aron Cohen, Tsonko Cohen, Nissim Meshulam, Estrea Yeshua and others.²⁷ The activity is also aimed at working among the students at the Yuchbunar Jewish School. The traditional “mifhadim” parades, as well as the holding of various holidays,²⁸ are popularized among the students. A new one is being created based on the existing community libraries. A public reading room is organized for it. The performances of the Jewish People's Choir, as well as of the revealed theatrical amateur composition, are becoming more and more established and becoming traditional. Fairy tales and parties, literary evenings are weekly. The holding of lectures is welcomed with interest, in which various representatives of the Jewish community, as well as other scientists, public figures, educational and community activists are invited to give lectures. All these events are carried out to emphasize the acceptance by the already formed Jewish community centers of the main mission, goals, and tasks of the other community

²⁶ Until 1934, consecutive chairmen of community center “Haim N. Bialik” are: Isak Moshev, Armand Baruch, Leon Isakov, Tsoncho Cohen, Leon Rubenov, Matei Yulzari.

²⁷ **Moshev, Isaac.** The progressive activity of the Jewish community center “Haim N. Bialik” - Sofia. – In: *From common rise to “Emil Shekerdzhiski”*. Sofia, 2020, pp. 105-106.

²⁸ **Koem, Nasim** . A walk through some of the Jewish sites in Sofia in the 1930s. - in “Jewish News”, 2006, issue 19 (October 13), issue 20 (October 27) . // http://www.thebulgarianjews.org.il/_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/EVREYSKIKORENI.pdf

centers in the country. Their desire to develop activities identical to all other cultural and educational organizations in the country is indicated. For this purpose, the guidelines developed as early as 1921 by the Ministry of Public Education, written in the form of the “Regulations for the Activities of People's Community Centers”, are applied. It is perceived that national community centers are city-wide educational institutions that are established by the population regardless of their faith, gender, social or sexual affiliation. It is necessary to promote knowledge through the formation of libraries in which reading can be developed, the organization of fairy tales, talks and meetings with famous persons. In addition, it is necessary to organize musical evenings, theatre performances, matinees, literary evenings. It is also important to hold sports events, organize group tourist hikes, folk games and any other type of activity that people accept and wish to practice. All ethnic groups should be worked with. Attracting people from other ethnicities and forming their community centers is set as an important task, with the aim of unifying the national spirit and showing unity. The very arrangement of these community centers, as well as of the separate cultural organizations that continue to be established in places, is carried out in the same way as it is done in all Bulgarian community centers. The instructions of the Supreme Community Council are recommended to be applied. The activity should be synchronized with the other regulations of the state authorities.²⁹

Despite the apparently achieved unity, which found its expression in the establishment in 1924 of the community center “Haim N. Bialik”, the internal contradictions between the individual groups continue to exist. Disputes between community members - Zionists and neutralists - are becoming more frequent. During the first two years, the Zionists had the upper hand in decision-making. A letter from October 1926 has been preserved in the archives of the Sofia Synagogue, in which it is stated that from the very beginning the Zionists viewed the new association mainly as the cultural and educational ones traditional for the Jews. They avoided calling it a community center because they thought it might change its spirit. In the minutes of the separate meetings of the annual meeting, which took place on June 13, 1926, it is recorded that until that month only an educational society was functioning, bearing the name “Haim Nachman Bialik” (“Haim N. Bialik”). Further on, however, it is read that by decision of its members from that moment (June 13, 1926) it was accepted that it should now be called “chitalishte” and bear the same name. Again, it is noted in the minutes that the division between individual members is primarily related to their way of working, as well as to the goals to be

²⁹ Cohen, Joseph. Cited works.

achieved. The Zionist members believed that certain political actions should mainly be carried out. Of course - in harmony with their views. However, supporters of neutral actions spoke out against them, stating that the new community center is one that arose based on the previous two community centers, and it is necessary to preserve their character. And he is culturally enlightened.³⁰ And after the meeting, the disputes continue. It wasn't until the end of 1926 that the number of anti-Zionist figures in the leadership of the community center increased. They gain an upper hand in decision-making. They point out that political activity is not inherent either to the cultural organizations of the individual communities or to the community centers. Therefore, it is necessary for those who have accepted to define themselves as such to work in this direction. Activity activation begins. Based on all that has been stated, it can be assumed that, in fact, for the initial year of the creation of community center "Haim N. Bialik" can be referred to 1926, not 1924. This two-year period was associated with clearing up internal disputes and establishing new forms of work. This is also confirmed by the adoption and registration of the charter of the community center by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Public Health (MIAPH).³¹

Since the end of 1926, community center "Haim N. Bialik" develops an active activity that places it alongside the other active cultural and educational organizations and community centers in the country. Membership is growing rapidly. Many new members are signing up. The majority of them are from the working class. In 1927, a new board of trustees was elected, in which representatives of the social democratic and communist circles predominated. Increased activity in various enterprises is noted, which is expressed by participation in organized rallies and trade union events. Close contacts with other Jewish organizations, mainly of young people from Sofia, continue. Joint appearances and registered presence in the community center have representatives of the "Lord Balfour" educational society, as well as the "Ness Zion" youth society. Community center members, including Robert Cohen, Leon Rubenov, Yakov Danon, Matti Nardea, initiated the opening of a new educational society, which they called "Klaredad" ("Light"), which gradually became part of the community center.

³²In fact, this appears as a result not so much of the desire to create new organizations, but of internal strengthening and organizational stability of the community center itself. The expressed opinion is accepted that the attraction of new partner associations will not only strengthen its activity, but also serve as a rebuff to the ongoing aspirations of the Zionist groups

³⁰ **Moshev, Isaac.** Cited works, pp. 106-107.

³¹ CSA, f. 177 K, i. 4, a.u. 26.

³² SA-Sofia, f. 1295K, i. 1, a.u. 20.; **Moshev, Isaac.** Cited works, pp. 108-109.

to control the leadership of the community center and to push politics in their interest. As a continuation of this vision, the participation of community activists as correspondents in newspapers and magazines published at that time. The community center itself does not have its own publication and therefore supports the publication of others or is included in already existing ones. Some of the articles published on the pages of the anti-Zionist journal "Pro causa Judaica" are being reprinted, where it is emphasized that there must be "people's power" as well as "emancipation" among all Bulgarian Jewish families. It is also pointed out that "the Jewish question will be resolved through the legal and factual equality of the Jews in the countries where they live", for which it is necessary to work on the path of culture and enlightenment. It is important to note that it is accepted to work not only in the way of cultural and educational activities, but also by sharing political causes and seeking political support.³³ By the end of 1926, only 5 issues of the Jewish cultural and public newspaper "Review" were published. He sets himself the task of "writing down and giving true information about all significant events that disturb the human spirit" and that "excite the Jewish community in the country".³⁴ The newspaper is distributed through the library at the community center and thus becomes available to a wide range of people. In the following years, information about the community center's activities was published on the pages of the "Podem" newspaper published by Eshu Azhi, and also in the "Jewish Review" magazine - with editor Mancho Rahamimov, as well as in the "Jewish Thought" magazine - with editor Isaac Naimovich. As part of its internal organizational activity, the community center publishes hand-made wall newspapers, in which, in addition to announcements, poems are printed, representing the first attempts of some young poets.³⁵ And although this largely creates conditions for organizational strengthening, it also causes new internal contradictions with the Zionist-minded members.

All the activities that community center "Haim N. Bialik" is developing the traditional ones that existed in the previous two community centers up to that point. Only the traditional community center "Hristo Botev", as well as the nearby "Kiril and Methodius" and "Aura". Active appearances soon raise the question of a building and, in general, of the material base. In the period 1924-1926, premises that were part of the Jewish People's Home "Beit-Aam" were used. The same are provided through the mediation of "Atslaha" company. After the changes of 1926, the community center began to use several rooms provided to it in a shop located on the corner of Positano and Antim I Streets. Premises on Klementina Street are also

³³ NLKM, in. Pro causa Judaica, 1919-1923 - B1698.

³⁴ NLKM, in Review, 1926, no. 1-5 (October 2-December 13, 1926) – B102.

³⁵ **Moshev, Isaac.** Cited works, p. 111.

available for rent. It is here that the main part of the community library is being built and continuously replenished. During this period, Matti Mitrani, Nissim Meshulam, Jacques Moschel, Leon Anawi, Betty Danon, Jacques Jonah worked in it. A reading room is also organized, where the opportunity to use different types of literature is provided. Literary evenings, meetings with writers and poets, journalists, public figures are often held. A literary circle was formed. Actively present in it: Haim Benadov, Armand Baruch, Natan Grimberg, Israel Meyer and others. Traditional fairy tales are attended by a variety of people, with a special emphasis on attracting young people. They are included in recitals, as well as in the organized amateur theatre. The performances of young theatre actors, among whom Moise can be mentioned, are of great interest Benies, Estreya Behar, Stella Yakov, Yosif (Yosko) Rozanov, Nisim Meshulam, Roza Herskovich and others. All of them work under the leadership of Sami Fintsi, Boyan Danovski and G. Bankov. Musical parties and balls, which are important for the Jewish community, are also gaining new popularity. Sports and abstinence sections are also being created. Hebrew courses are also organized. Some of the activities, including public appearances, are organized for a fee. The funds received are used to cover the needs of the community center and, above all, to pay the rent of the used premises. Towards the end of the 20s of the 20th centuries, the community center itself gained popularity, public prestige and was accepted as the center of Jewish culture in the capital.³⁶ Although several activities were carried out, the functioning of the community center was stopped in 1934. This was necessitated by the situation occurring in the country. Restrictions imposed after Kimon Georgiev's government came to power (May 19, 1934) were introduced. The activities of all political parties and movements, as well as many cultural and educational associations and organizations, are prohibited. This also reflects on the activity of community center "Haim N. Bialik". Throughout 1935, the activity was gradually reduced. On December 21, 1935, Order No. 2146/ IV .13 of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Public Health was issued, signed by Chief Secretary Ivan Kozhuharov. The text is relatively concise - a lack of activity is found, which is why the community center "Haim N. Bialik" to be closed. As expected, the order caused a negative reaction from the community center activists. In the rebuttal submitted on behalf of the chairman Matej Yulzari and his deputy Solomon Alajem, it is stated that the community center performs only cultural and educational tasks, and political actions are not allowed. It is emphasized that this is a voluntary organization of the people, which is an

³⁶ Memories of Jewish public figures - In: Yearbook of the public cultural and educational organization of Jews in NRB. Year XXI, S., 1986.

“association with an ideal purpose” and is not in conflict with the legislation in force in the country. The many cultural activities that are received positively by the public are also indicated. A quick reversal of the closure order is being urged. The matter was again examined, but with decision No. 479 of November 16, 1936, of the Supreme Administrative Court, the closure was confirmed. It is ordered that the termination of community center “Haim N. Bialik”.³⁷ This practically marks the end of the first stage of the development of the community center work among the Jewish community.

Apart from the mentioned cases in which the first three Jewish community centers – “Obsht Podem”, “Hainrih Heine” and “Haim N. Bialik”, maintain close contacts with other community centers in Sofia and the country, as well as with the Supreme Council of Community Centers, there is really no other evidence that would give us confidence to claim that they are built in a manner similar to the common community center norms, characteristic of this period. Of course, its structure and organizational activities, as well as the individual activities revealed, resemble those of the other community centers. But they are also characteristic of Jewish cultural and educational organizations in general. Like the rest of the community centers, the Jewish community centers work in close cooperation with various schools. Here, too, the teaching staff is among the most active community members. Meanwhile, in 1927, the first specialized Law on People's Community Centers was adopted. It emphasizes the accepted view that community centers are a cultural and educational organization for all Bulgarians, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation. In this way, the created community centers of the individual communities (although the law does not specify them as such), such as the Jewish ones, are declared as national community centers by virtue of the legislation. The condition is that they adopt the generally accepted written principles that they should observe in their activities. In the minutes of the congresses of the Union of People's Community Centers, held in the period 1920-1936 (4-16 congresses), as well as in the lists of union community centers in those years, the names of the three mentioned Jewish community centers are not found. They are not found in the list of all community centers in the country issued in 1936 by the Supreme Community Center Council.³⁸ This also raises the question to what extent community center “Haim. N. Bialik”, as the longest existing of the three, it is accepted by the public precisely as a community center. As already stated, the actors

³⁷ CSA, f. 370 K, i.1, a.u. 319 K.

³⁸ CSA, f. 1324 K, i. 1, a.u. 145. Here it is necessary to clarify that not all community centers in the country are members of the Union of National Community Centers, which explains the absence of existing community centers in the protocol lists of the Supreme Community Center Council.

themselves and its active members often prefer to define it as a cultural and educational association. This is mainly what the representatives of the Zionist wing insist on. In this way, they consider that the autonomy and uniqueness of the organization as one with a Jewish focus is preserved. From the preserved documents, it can be concluded that the use of the term “community” is mainly in the official correspondence with the state authorities. Among themselves, however, Jewish organizations prefer to call it an "association." Although sporadic, the traditional definition of “people's home” is also used. The latter is closest in meaning and essence to the community center. This was mainly preserved for the period 1924-1926. When the so-called “neutralists”, a replacement of “association” with “chitalishte” was made. In addition, contacts with neighbouring community centers also give reason to primarily use this definition, thereby emphasizing the unity and commonality of ideas. The Law on People's Community Centers, adopted in 1927, serves as a legal basis. Based on it, a new statute is developed and adopted. From that moment on, one can officially talk about the existence of a Jewish community center, which is registered in accordance with the current legislation. It is written in the statute that it is registered under the name “Chitalishte “Haim N. Bialik”.³⁹ The same is confirmed in some of the statements made during discussions between the management of the community center in the following years, reflected in the preserved protocol book of the board of directors.⁴⁰ In the official order of the Ministry of Internal Affairs - No. 2146/ IV .13, it is also recorded that the activity of the “Jewish People's Community Center “Haim N. Bialik” in Sofia”.⁴¹ An interesting fact is that in 1935-1936, when the said order actually closed the activities of the community center “Haim N. Bialik”, a similar restrictive measure was not applied to the other Bulgarian community centers. This shows that for the state authorities, the activity of the community center is not only seen as cultural and educational, but also as having a political nature. By the way, this is also evident in some of the reasons for its closure. It states that various party functionaries spoke on behalf of the Jewish community center, organized anti-government meetings and speeches in this spirit, and that “the community center itself serves as a cover for meetings in which anti-state ideas are preached”.⁴²

The desire to continue the started community activities remains. The issue was discussed during meetings of the Central Council of the Consistory held at the beginning of 1936. The termination of the community center functions was accepted as an attack on the

³⁹ CSA, f. 177 K, i. 4, a.u. 26.

⁴⁰ CSA, f. 1568 K, i. 1, a.u. 417, pp.1-54. - Minute book of the Board of Trustees of the Jewish Community Center "Haim N. Bialik" for the period 1931-1934.

⁴¹ CSA, f. 370 K, i. 1, a.u. 319 K.

⁴² CSA, f. 370 K, i. 1, a.u. 319 K.

Jewish community itself. Opinions are also expressed that there is a danger of the formation of new anti-Semitic movements in the country, which should not be allowed. That is why, already in the spring of 1936, in a series of articles published on the pages of "Jewish Thought" magazine, calls were made for the restoration of the activities of the Jewish Community Center. Publicity is given for the refutations made regarding the decision to close community center "Haim N. Bialik". An initiative committee was formed to restore its activity. It includes Mancho Rahamimov, Eli Eshkenazi, Nissim Mevorah, Eli Bassat, Chelebi Beraha and others. In view of the fact that the previous community center has been closed as a result of a court decision, a new founding meeting is convened. The same took place on November 11, 1936, in the hall of the Sofia Jewish Municipality. The issue of opening a community center for the Jewish community is being discussed. To avoid complications, the talks are being conducted in the direction of creating a completely new community center, and not restoring the existing ones. Unlike previous years, there is no talk of merging existing organizations. It is positive that disputes are not allowed between the separate currents that continue to exist. Unifying is the urgent need for cooperation between the various Jewish organizations in Sofia and the country, which should be carried out on a voluntary basis. This is caused by the observed overt anti-Semitic manifestations and statements, which are becoming more frequent. The need to create a main coordinating center in relation to the built Jewish ones is noted community centers (communities) - in Shumen ("Agodat Iladim"/ "Connection"), Kyustendil ("Good future"), Vidin, Varna, Dupnitsa, etc. They were not subject to closure as in Sofia, but continue to function in the country, which is used as a basis for new community centers. The conclusion is reached that they stand in isolation, which is why it is necessary to be able to join forces in the name of the unity of the Jewish community.⁴³ The following are listed as founders of the new community center: Eli Eshkenazi, Dr. Nisim Mevorah, Jacques Nisimov, Mancho Rahamimov. They become trustees and join the new management board. It also includes several well-known representatives of the Jewish community: Isaac Navoi, Dr. Asher Hananel, Leon Farhi, Charlotte Gerskovich, Eli Bassat. A control board was also elected, consisting of: David Leshik, Eduard Arie, Dr. N. Haravonov, Gitsela Alkalai, Dr. N. Rosenfeld. Eli Eshkenazi was unanimously elected as chairman. It is noteworthy that the leadership has an expanded composition. This can be explained by the goal of seeking the widest possible support for community activities among the various Jewish organizations and their internal formations. Basic work rules are accepted. To ensure organizational stability, as well as the discovery of

⁴³ Avramov, Simanto. Cited works, p. 54.; Isakov, Simcho. Selected, Sofia, IC "Shalom", 2007, pp. 5 – 16.

new forms, premises provided by the joint-stock company “Union”, located at 13 Lege Street in the capital, have been rented. Thus, at the end of 1936, the Jewish People's Community Center was established in Sofia. In its founding documents, it is written that it will defend the views traditional to the Jewish community, as well as that “through cultural and educational activities to encompass, bring together and unite the Jewish and Bulgarian youth in the name of common cultural interests”. It will also work “to preserve and enrich the spiritual and social life of the people”.⁴⁴ To this end, a wide-ranging charitable activity is being launched aimed at collecting funds to support the future activities of the community center. In the minutes books of the meetings of the board of trustees of the community center for the period from 1936 to 1943, significant donations were recorded. They receive money as well as real estate, property, etc. Among the priority activities of the community center is the restoration of the library with its reading room and the provision of new literature to all those in need. A series of lectures and stories are organized on issues related to upholding traditional Jewish values. Rising anti-Semitic sentiments lead to the need to spread the truth about the processes that took place in other countries as well. Those working during this period as librarians were engaged in this activity: Haim Benadov, Berta Isakova-Kalaora, Haskia Levi, Ashar Alajem, Shelley Benvenisti and others. The initiative to form the so-called “friendly companies”. In fact, these represent the construction of peculiar interest groups. They bring together different people who, after extensive preliminary preparation, encourage discussions on different topics of social, cultural, and political life. Special attention is paid to children, for whom special groups are made, in which they can join and participate. The activity of the Jewish Singing Society is restored. All this became public knowledge during the first organized public appearance of the new community center, which took place on January 25, 1937. It announced its presence, as well as the desire for its activity to develop and popularize Jewish culture and traditions. The intention to form new groups that did not exist before is also announced. In 1938, a symphony orchestra and a mixed choir were formed. To work with them, the well-known musicians of that time, Jacques Safonov, and Israel Alajem, were brought in. To this can be added the active activity with other Jewish organizations working both in Sofia and in the province, and in addition with charitable societies, Jewish schools, and health institutions. The wide variety of activities, as well as the continuous initiatives to involve young people, lead to a significant increase in the membership of the community center. According to the memories of

⁴⁴ CSA, f. 516 B, i. 1 – Memoirs of Betty (Rebecca) David Danon.

contemporaries of these events, by the end of 1940, there were more than 1,000 active members.⁴⁵

The beginning of the 1940s was marked by a number of changes. The rise of Nazi Germany, which began as early as 1933, marked a new stage of development. The ideology associated with preaching about the superiority of the “pure Aryan race” goes beyond the borders of Germany. It finds its supporters in the other countries as well, as its expression becomes the unfolding of a broad anti-Semitic mood. Although in Bulgaria it is not possible to speak of a similar mass as there is in other countries, there are examples of anti-Semitism here as well.⁴⁶ In 1940, the Bulgarian government developed and submitted for consideration to the National Assembly a completely new law for the country, which completely contradicts the principles of the current Tarnovo constitution - the Law for the Protection of the Nation (LPN). It was adopted on December 24, 1940, and approved by Decree No. 3 of January 21, 1941, and entered into force on January 27 of the same year.⁴⁷ A Regulation for its implementation was immediately issued, approved by Decree No. 21 of February 15, 1941.⁴⁸ In essence, this law, which also caused mass protests among a number of representatives of the Bulgarian public and political circles, was announced as part of the Bulgarian government's policy for resolution of the so-called “Jewish question”. The government motivated the need for it with the need to introduce strict measures against all “secret and international organizations”. But Title II, entitled “Regarding Persons of Jewish Origin”, is highly discriminatory. It said action was needed against “persons of Jewish origin who work against the state”. Jews are prohibited from applying and being accepted as Bulgarian subjects. Also, people of Jewish origin do not have the right to apply for, as well as be elected to, various state posts, as well as municipal or local ones. A ban on the formalization of mixed marriages between Jews and Bulgarians is also introduced. A quota for students of Jewish origin (Jewish quota) is regulated, creating obstacles for admission to various state educational institutions. The requirement is also introduced that, within one month after the entry into force of the LPN, all persons of Jewish origin must do the necessary to declare their origin and make a special registration in the local municipalities and police departments. The latter do this in special registration books. Those registered in

⁴⁵ **Avramov, Simanto.** Cited works, pp. 55-57.

⁴⁶ Already in 1937, it was published in the form of a book "The Bulgarian public against racism and anti-Semitism. Survey among prominent representatives of the Bulgarian public, science, literature, art". It collects statements made during a survey conducted with prominent Bulgarian and public figures, scientists, poets, writers, artists, musicians, theatre people, etc., held by Buko Pitti on the occasion of the anti-Semitic policy of the National Socialists in Germany. – CSA, f. 366 B, i. 1, a.u. 1699, pp. 1-203.

⁴⁷ State Gazette, No. 16 of January 23, 1941

⁴⁸ State Gazette, No. 36 of February 17, 1941

them are prohibited from changing their place of residence, as well as from notifying the authorities of the Police Directorate of any movement. Restrictions are also being introduced on the eventual settlement of people of Jewish origin in the capital. Jewish organizations face significant restrictions on their work. In the financial sphere, a new type of tax is created, with which Jewish property - private or public - is taxed.⁴⁹ This act of the Bulgarian state was also influenced by the view of “Endlösung der Judenfrage” adopted in the circles of some of the Bulgarian rulers, widely advocated in Germany (“Final Solution of the Jewish Question”). Nazi Germany's approach to achieving the complete extermination of the Jewish population used systematic actions in this direction.⁵⁰ Although the state policy forces everyone to have a negative attitude towards the Jewish population and its organizations in the country, many representatives of the Bulgarian public, political and economic elite express disagreement with this. As soon as the first information about its content appeared, well-known Bulgarian intellectuals, including Elin Pelin, Elisaveta Bagryana, Stiliyan Chilingirov, Todor G. Vlaikov, Lyudmil Stoyanov, Nikolay Liliev, etc., came out with a sharp protest to the Bulgarian government and people's representatives. It is insisted that such a legislative act not be adopted by the Bulgarian parliament. It is pointed out that the adoption and legalization of such extreme actions will have disastrous consequences for the Bulgarian people. It is pointed out that his non-admission will help to “preserve the prestige of the nation and the won traditions of religious tolerance and humanity”.⁵¹ The Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church also announced a sharp reaction. A special message is being sent.⁵² For their part, Jewish organizations themselves also express their disagreement and call for the repeal of this highly discriminatory law. Letters are sent to individual MPs, former ministers, and politicians, in

⁴⁹ **Sunday, Petya.** Anti-Jewish legislation in Bulgaria. - In: *Scientific works of Russe University* - 2011, volume 50, series 7, pp. 85-89.

⁵⁰ The policy of genocide adopted by the Nazis in Germany against the Jews, called “Endlösung der Judenfrage”, was confirmed by the Hitler government during the so-called Wannsee Conference held on January 20, 1942.

⁵¹ CSA, 1303 K, i.1, a.u. 120, p.1.

⁵² On November 14, 1940, in full composition, the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church for the first time considered the texts of the draft Law for the Protection of the Nation and determining the composition of a commission to prepare a report to the National Assembly. Minutes No. 12, 13 and 14 record the debates that took place during this and the following two meetings. They were signed by the full body of metropolitans of the Holy Synod - Stephen of Sofia, Cyril of Plovdiv. Also included here are Metropolitan Boris of Nevrokop, Neophyte of Vidin - at that time the deputy presbyter of the Synod, Metropolitan Michael of Dorostol and Cherven, Metropolitan Paisiy of Vratsa, Bishop Joseph of Varna and Preslav, Filaret of Lovchan, Evlogii of Sliven, Kliment of Stara Zagora. In a letter from Neophyte, Metropolitan of Vidinsky and Vice-Chairman of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to the Prime Minister and Speaker of the National Assembly, deposited on November 15, 1940, it is said: "One cannot fail to pay attention to the responsible factors that this bill, and in some of its other decrees, contains some provisions against the Jews-Israelites, which cannot be considered fair and useful for the protection of the nation. If there are dangers for the nation somewhere, measures against these dangers must affect acts, not nationalities and religious groups, and in this way create the impression that the draft law aims at special treatment of an ethnic minority in Bulgaria." - CSA, f. 371 K, i. 5, a.u. 1573, pp. 19-20.

which they are called upon to support the Bulgarian Jews in their right.⁵³ There is also an official statement on behalf of the Central Consistory. Three statements addressed to the Speaker of the National Assembly are sent consecutively. They are joined by representatives of the various Jewish organizations in the country, as well as the Jewish community centers in Sofia, Kyustendil, Dupnitsa, Ruse, Varna, etc. Special letters were also sent personally to Tsar Boris III before whom it was insisted that a meeting be held so that he himself could listen to the demands of the Bulgarian Jews. Unfortunately, this is taking place. There is no information about the king's personal position. Despite all attempts, the law is considered, adopted, and subsequently confirmed. To confirm it and calm public opinion, the government issues a special opinion. Among the reasons for the need for new legislative measures, it is stated that a large number of Jewish organizations, including members of the Jewish Community Center in Sofia, participate in various anti-government events. Examples are given of how the same representatives openly supported the Communist Party, which is why their activity can be qualified as anti-state.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, anti-Semitic sentiment is on the rise. Various final organizations created, among which stand out the so-called "Legionaires" (Union of the Youth National Legions), take ostentatious actions against the Jewish population. Several attacks on Jewish shops were registered, and they were destroyed. The premises used by the Jewish community library, located on the capital's Lege Street, were attacked by legionnaire groups. Part of the property was destroyed. The same thing happens in the branch of the library, which is located on nearby Klementina Street. Some of the books in the library were seized by police authorities, and they were declared "Bolshevik propaganda" and "anti-state oriented". Similar actions do not happen only in Sofia. There are such in relation to the Jewish cultural organizations and community centers in Kyustendil and Dupnitsa. All this leads to their activity being narrowed down and to a large extent stopped. The traditional gatherings, parties, cultural events are stopped. The organized visits of students are also stopped. To a certain extent, only the functioning of the libraries and their reading rooms is preserved, but they are also of a rather limited nature.⁵⁵

During the first days of March 1943, on the rumours of the upcoming deportation of Bulgarian Jews to Germany, representatives of the Bulgarian intelligentsia organized numerous

⁵³ CSA, f.173 K, i. 6, a.u. 1087, pp. 50-105.

⁵⁴ Reports preserved in the archives of the Directorate of Police show that various actions were carried out by the police authorities. They are the result of unregulated activities found in their opinion. It comes out with recommendations that some Jewish organizations should be disbanded as quickly as possible - In: **Oliver, Haim**. We the saved. Or how the Jews in Bulgaria were torn from the death camps. S., 1967, pp. 48-51.

⁵⁵ **Benadov, Haim**. Pages to the history of the Jewish People's Community Center in Sofia (1936-1943). – In: *From general rise to "Emil Shekerdzhiski"*. Sofia: 2020, pp. 150-153.

signatures and protests. It is insisted that Bulgarians of Jewish origin should be considered Bulgarians. It is urged that their organizations, especially the community centers, not be disbanded. People's representative Dimitar Peshev issued a special declaration in this spirit. Another 42 MPs join him with their signatures.⁵⁶ At the beginning of the summer of 1943, by order of the "Commissariat for Jewish Affairs" created under the ZZN, purposeful actions were taken aimed at emigrating part of the Jewish intelligentsia outside Sofia. Some of them were interned in cities along the Danube River. The official explanation for this measure is the police reports that some of the Jewish organizations in Sofia, despite the bans, planned to hold processions through the streets of Sofia on May 24. That is why they are accused of intending to carry out anti-state activity.⁵⁷ In reporting all this, the press is making assumptions that the next step of the authorities may be to intern Jews inside and outside the country. Once again, well-known Bulgarian intellectuals, including senior representatives of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, speak out against these actions of the government. New letters are being sent demanding a halt to the internment proceedings. Despite this, the displacement of Bulgarian Jews to different settlements did not stop. This leads to a sharp decrease in their number in the big cities and especially in Sofia. At the end of May 1943, in the library of the Jewish Community Center in Sofia, which only partially continues to work, a letter was received on behalf of the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs. With it, it is ordered that all community center activities be terminated, and the property, consisting of books and inventory, be handed over to the municipality. The used premises should be vacated. The chairman of the community center board Haim Benadov, together with the librarian Asher Aladjem protested, but it was not accepted. They are forced to pack the available books, as well as the rest of the community center's property. They hand it over with a special protocol to the secretary of the Sofia Municipality - Petar Slavinski. For the second time, a Jewish community center is declared closed. This marks the end of the existence of an independent Jewish community center in Sofia.⁵⁸ The fate of the other community centers and community centers in the other Bulgarian cities is the same. Thus, at the end of 1943, the organized cultural and educational activities of the Jewish community in Bulgaria died down. Buildings are closed and activities suspended. Separate appearances are observed in some of the remaining community centers where the Jews were displaced, but they are sporadic.

⁵⁶ CSA, f. 1335 K, i. 1, a.u. 126, pp. 1-3.

⁵⁷ **Oliver, Haim.** Cited works, p. 52.

⁵⁸ **Benadov, Haim.** Cited works, p.154.

Conclusion:

The development of the cultural and educational activity of the Jewish associations and the opened Jewish community centers during the first 40 years of the 20th century represents an important moment in Bulgarian history. Preserved archival documents, as well as the memories of contemporaries of these events shed light on the process's characteristic of those years. All of them show the need for joint action and implementation of common actions with the aim of consolidating the Bulgarian people. The difficulties faced by some of its representatives lead to taking different types of actions. The Jewish community centers discovered in the 1920s and 1930s contributed not only to the shaping of the cultural identity of the Jewish community in the country, but also of the Bulgarian community. The formation of libraries with reading, music and literary circles, fairy tales, help the cultural and educational work. The numerous organized balls, lectures, creative evenings, theatres, and musical performances are part of the general cultural life of Bulgaria from this period. The adoption of anti-Semitic legislative actions, as well as the closing of community centers, creates obstacles in the preservation of cultural identity. However, it persists. The opening of new Jewish community centers in the following years is based on the experience of the first ones and creates conditions for the consolidation of the Jewish community, which relies on its past and traditions.

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