

# Jewish Bulgaria: Get An Inside Look with JDC

2020



# Five Reasons to Visit Bulgaria

Where Jews have lived for thousands of years

1. Experience the beauty and century-spanning architecture of Sofia, Bulgaria's capital city
2. Hear the local gaida bagpipe, a distinctive staple of local folk music
3. Visit with members of an Eastern European Jewish community that survived the Holocaust
4. Sing traditional Ladino songs with this close-knit, multi-generational Sephardic community
5. Meet the alumni of JDC-funded Jewish summer camps who are powering local Jewish life



# Sofia: A city of religious tolerance



Sofia's city center is home to the "Square of Religious Tolerance," where an Orthodox church, a mosque, a Catholic cathedral, and a synagogue lie within walking distance of each other.

# Whose locals refused to deport "their" Jews during the Holocaust

When the Holocaust swept through Europe, ordinary Bulgarian citizens and religious leaders joined together to protest the planned deportation, and the majority of Bulgaria's Jews were saved.



# But Communism soon took hold, silencing Jewish life...

When the Bulgarian Communist Party took over in 1946, they put a halt to Jewish life.

Nearly 80% of Bulgaria's Jews emigrated to Israel in a brief window before the new Communist regime clamped down.

For over forty years, Sofia's small community of remaining Jews was unable to transmit their heritage to their children.



# So that JDC found a community with little Jewish knowledge, but a great thirst to learn

Throughout the 1990s, JDC quenched this thirst by introducing Jewish summer camps, JCC activities, community events and more.

JDC helped community members find their own paths back to Jewish life.



# Today, Bulgaria is a shining example of community activism & leadership

Today, Bulgaria's Jewish community is anchored by local leaders, many of them alumni of JDC's youth activities, leadership and regional programs.

These men and women grew up in the community and are now taking the reins of Jewish life.

It is a community well on its way to self-sufficiency – with a taste that is uniquely Bulgarian!



# Extending JDC's long history of care in the region

In Bulgaria, you can meet community elders who benefitted from JDC's assistance immediately following WWII.

Today, JDC continues to partner with the community to care for needy elderly and to ensure that this care continues for years to come.





# Meet Julia

Growing up in Communist Bulgaria, the word "Jewish" did not mean much to Julia Dandolo.ova.

But when the Iron Curtain fell, Julia slowly embraced her Jewish identity, first attending and then staffing JDC's Jewish camps, clubs and counselor trainings.

Soon, Julia was JDC's country director in Bulgaria.

Today, she is the CEO of Shalom, Bulgaria's Jewish community organization.





## Visit some of the community's programs

JDC partners with the Bulgarian community to support numerous Jewish life programs in the capital of Sofia including:



Activities at the JCC Beit Shalom and the annual Limmud program



The Gan Balagan preschool and kindergarten



The **NEW** Ronald S. Lauder Day School



Hadracha College – leadership training for teens and young adults



**2,500**

**Participants in Jewish  
Life**

# Bulgaria & Jewish Camping

**Over 1,600** members of Bulgaria's **6,000** strong Jewish community are alumni of Szarvas: The JDC-Lauder International Jewish Summer Camp

**Over 50%** of active Jewish adults under age 40 are Szarvas alumni

**220+** campers attend **Jewgathon**, Bulgaria's local Jewish summer camp each year



# See How the Community Cares for its Elderly

JDC partners with the Bulgarian Jewish community to provide needy elderly community members with:



Food Assistance



Social Programs



Crucial homecare to clients with limited mobility



SOS Emergency Assistance



Medications and other medical help



**613**

**Impoverished Jewish Elderly Helped by the Community**



## And provides aid to vulnerable Jewish children

In Sofia, JDC's Jewish Family Service helps at-risk children and their families, offering:



Holistic Assistance for Families



Inclusion programs for children with disabilities



Connection to Jewish communal life



Food, medical assistance, and more



**126**  
**Vulnerable Children**  
**Helped by JDC**



# ~6,000 Jews in Bulgaria

~4,000 in Sofia





# JDC: A Long History of Care in Bulgaria



**1946** In the initial years after World War II, JDC assists Bulgarian Jews. Thanks to JDC's efforts, the Jews of Sofia receive food, supplies, vocational training, youth camps, and more. The JDC-supported Jewish hospital becomes known as the best hospital in Sofia. To the left is a picture of the Sofia synagogue being repaired with JDC funds. In 1948, the Communist regime cracks down and JDC is forced to leave the country.



**1990** Bulgaria's Communist regime falls, and JDC returns to Bulgaria to help rejuvenate Jewish life. JDC opens a Jewish library, supports the local JCC and encourages Bulgaria's youth to attend Jewish camps. Pictured to the left are two young boys from Bulgaria competing in the Maccabiah games.



**Today** Sofia's Jewish population is small but resilient. The community's growing stability and independence make it a JDC success story.



# Jewish Bulgaria Through the Ages

- **46 CE** Jews first settled in the region
- **1340s** The Bulgarian Tsar, Ivan Alexander, marries a Jewish woman
- **1352** The Church Council orders the expulsion of the Jews of Bulgaria
- **1492** Spanish Jews fleeing the Inquisition settle in Bulgaria
- **1940s** Bulgaria allies with the Nazis and implements discriminatory laws against Jews, but refuses to deport them
- **1948** Post-WWII, many Jews leave Bulgaria, mostly immigrating to Israel
- **2020** **Come see how you can be part of Bulgaria's Jewish future**