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When Storylines Pick Up All of a Sudden

This story began a long time ago. On March 4th 1943, to be exact, or possibly two weeks earlier, when Signora Donna Kamhi, a midwife, said to her daughter, Bella Grünberg “Come, daughter, let us move to the village. The air is better there, and the food is healthier. You will have a good birth there.” And so, the young couple, Bella and her husband Leo Grünberg, set off from Skopje along with Signora Donna, and settled in one of the nearby villages. On March 4th 1943, a healthy baby boy came into the world. Overjoyed, the young father went to Skopje to bring a Mohel (Jewish circumciser). Seeing him, the townsfolk yelled “Run for your life! The Germans have taken all the Jews!” Leo ran back to the village, and they three to a distant villages.

On March 4th 1945, the Germans ordered the Bulgarians to begin the extermination of Yugoslavia’s Jews.

On March 11th 1943, Skopje’s Jews were rounded up and taken to the “Monopol” tobacco factory near the city train station never to return. Of the Kamhi and Grünberg families, no one survived.

The baby, whose birth had saved the lives of his parents and grandmother, was named Matiyahu – God’s gift. Matiyahu, better known as Maty Grünberg, is the last Jew born at that time in Macedonia to have survived.

Years later, the following facts were discovered (from Wikipedia’s article on Skopje): *“On February 22nd 1943, Alexander Belev, the head of The Bulgarian Commission for Jewish Affairs signed an agreement with Theodor Danker, arranging the extradition of Thrace’s and Macedonia’s 12,000 Jews to the Germans, as the first step towards the eventual deportation of all Bulgarian Jews. The Jews’ private and communal property was to be seized by the government.*



At 03:00 on the 11th of March, all the Jews in Macedonia, including the Jews of Skopje, were rounded up and taken to the “Monopol” tobacco factory near the city train station, which served as a transit camp. 7,000 Jews, some of them wounded and sick, were forced to cope with overcrowding and hunger, with no medical treatment available. Data from the Bulgarian Ministry of the Interior indicates that of Skopje’s Jews alone, 3,290 people were arrested...

The first transport operation took place on March 22nd. 2,338 Jews were taken from “Monopol”. The last transport took place on March 29th. The Jews were loaded onto freight trains and taken directly to the Treblinka death camp. The conditions during the few-days’-long journey caused the death of hundreds. Several days after their arrival at Treblinka, the entire community was murdered. The Jews’ money was given to the Bulgarian Central Bank; their property was auctioned off and the proceeds given to the Ministry of Jewish Affairs...” The Bulgarian Jews were saved. The Bulgarians, who wanted to annex Macedonia, sacrificed the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia and performed the actions and deliveries to Treblinka themselves, with no less enthusiasm than the German Nazis.

Leo was an engineer, and ran the mill of a Christian family who risked its life protecting the Jewish family. Flour is an important resource in a war... Maty, then called Matya, lived in hiding with his parents and served as the Partisans’ lucky charm. He remembers it well: “Back then, the trucks’ engines were inside the cabin. The engine was hot and the air was

filled with the sharp smell of cigarettes. They would put me on the hood inside the driver's cabin and let me hold a gun."

When the war had ended, the family returned to Skopje, and in 1948, made Aliyah and settled in Bat-Yam with Maty's younger sister Liora Grünberg (Gol).

Years passed... Ladino, his mother's native tongue, had all but fled from his memory. Once in a while reminders would crop up, like that time when his mother saw his Bezalel Haggadah and was stunned, saying: "This is just like the Haggadah we had back in Yugoslavia!" It seems the image of the Haggadah was hidden away in Maty's childhood memories, lost for years, only to take shape again in his art. But Fate was not yet spoken its final word on this. A new thread has emerged recently and unexpectedly, and the next part of the story began to weave itself in earnest.

This year, an exhibition was held in Beit Ariella, the central library of Tel Aviv, centered on Maty G's three Artist's Books: "One Haggadah, Two Scrolls, Three Life Circles": the Passover Haggadah, the Book of Esther, and the Book of Ruth. Among the multitude of visitors, we were fortunate to encounter two very special people: the Israeli ambassador to Macedonia and the head of the Balkans' desk in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, **Mr. Dan Oryan**, and the Macedonian ambassador to Israel, **Mr. Pajo Avirovic** (this is his second stay in Israel, and he speaks Hebrew). Both were very impressed by the scope of the artist's work.

The driving force behind the connection with the ambassadors and the entire project is **Dr. Rachel-Shelley Levy-Drummer**, the granddaughter of Dr. Haim Abarbanel, who used to run the hospital in Bitola. Born in Macedonia, Rachel-Shelley is the Secretary of Academic Affairs of Bar-Ilan University and has a PhD in Biostatistics and Computational Biology. Her fascinating life-story and her efforts to preserve the memory of the now-extinct Macedonian Jewish community is best left for another time.

Thus, Fate, in its mysterious ways, and an invitation from Ambassador Dan Oryan, brought Maty, the last remnant of Macedonia, to begin the process of creating a sculpture to commemorate an extinguished Jewish community and his own family, who had been its members.

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