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The Power of One

The Holocaust in Bulgaria with Aaron Cohen

October 05, 2016

57 minutes, 19 seconds

Speaker: Aaron Cohen

Transcribed by: Rachel E Lieu

[Holocaust Living History Workshop](#)

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Time	Transcription
00:00	[The Library / UC San Diego]
00:06	[A Holocaust Living History Workshop Event]
00:10	[October 5, 2016 / The Power of One: The Holocaust in Bulgaria / - with Aaron Cohen]
00:15	<p>Susanne Hillman: Welcome to the first Holocaust Living History Workshop of the new academic year. I am Susanne Hillman, the program coordinator. I would just like to draw your attention to our next event before saying a few words about the theme of this year's lecture series. On November 2nd, we are going to show a film. It's free and open to the public, like all our events. And this film is called <i>Mr. Rakowski</i>. It deals with the difficult relationship of a Holocaust survivor and his son. And his son will actually come to San Diego. He will be here and the film is followed by a discussion, a panel discussion. It's a very powerful film and I encourage you all to attend if you can. So, this year's theme is the burden of history. The Holocaust and the burden of history. Ever since the last concentration camp survivor was liberated in the spring of 1945, historians have tried to make sense of this massive tragedy, the Holocaust. Initially, as some of you know, the Holocaust was pretty much ignored by historians and it was only starting in the [19]60s that scholars began to attend to and to study this tragedy, this massive calamity. Since then, there has been a flood of works, of studies, of monographs, of histories and sometimes, despite all this important work that has come out, one thinks that one still cannot quite grasp what this tragedy was all about. Now the Holocaust Living History Workshop, which was founded in 2008, is intended actually to add to our understanding of the Holocaust, to add to our understanding by bringing together survivors, like our speaker today, Mr. Aaron Cohen, and community members, students, scholars, and just to serve as a forum that ideally and hopefully will broaden our understanding over time. Approaching the Holocaust from various angles, the workshop aims to throw light on the various aspects of the Holocaust, and this year, as I said, we particularly will focus on, or our events will focus on, the burden of this history, the burden on survivors, on their families, on civilization. And now it is my pleasure to introduce, or you know her all, to ask Deborah Hertz to the microphone. Deborah Hertz is one of the two founders and directors of the program. Please, Deborah.</p>
02:58	<p>Deborah Hertz: Thank you, Susanne. Thank you. So first, to all those who are celebrating and to all those who are aware of the Jewish time schedule, I would like to wish you a Shana Tova and God knows we need it, right? It's been a year in which teaching of the Holocaust and memory of the Holocaust has been particularly poignant as we face a worldwide refugee crisis, an economic crisis. Some people think a possible fascist politician in the wings there. And so, for those of us who are German historians, we're constantly walking around talking about our lecture notes to each other and saying, and what have we learned? So hopefully this event and all of</p>

the events of the year will help us learn more. Why do we want to learn more? So that we can change life in the present, an elusive goal perhaps. Now, I'd particularly like to welcome Mrs. Estelle Dunst and maybe we could have a round of applause for her. This is the first Lou Dunst Memorial Lecture. I'll pause for the applause.

04:12 Deborah Hertz: From the very first time that we started rooting around looking for local survivors, her late husband, Mr. Lou Dunst, was really an inspiration for his clarity, for his dedication to the memory. And as the circle around Lou Dunst grew, with the filmmakers who were making the movie about him, and getting to know Estelle better after his untimely death, it's a circle that's really come into fruition. Her gift, her very generous gift, is not only supporting this as the first Lou Dunst memorial lecture but the wonderful classroom around the corner. UCSD classroom number one is going to be renamed the Lou Dunst Memorial Classroom. And if you've ever had a group of 25 students in there, all going through the Internet, looking at this and that and this and that and this and that, and you're able to teach them at the same time instead of them looking at their telephones second-guessing you that the 1848 revolution really happened in 1847. So, this is just a wonderful, wonderful gift and we're extremely, extremely grateful. I'd like to now just turn my attention briefly to our speaker, Mr. Aaron Cohen, whose son I met less than a year ago and his son said, you have to have my father, you have to have my father. And we said, Of course, of course, of course, because if the son is brilliant and charming then the father must be too. So, we're very, very happy to have Mr. Cohen here and as you listen to his story, there's one moment in the story which for me as a historian just leapt right off the page and I'm sure it will come up in the talk. And it was in October 1944 when he left with 36 other teenagers by train to go to Palestine. 1944 on a train from Bulgaria to Palestine. It was very bad luck but it was very historic, so welcome.

06:07 Aaron Cohen: Hi everybody. Can you hear me? Mark, can you hear me?

06:12 Mark: Yeah!

06:13 Aaron Cohen: Okay. My name is Aaron Cohen and I'm a Holocaust survivor. I believe in miracles. There are two miracles that I lived through in my lifetime. In the first miracle, I will tell you all about how 50,000 Jews, ready to be shipped out to their death, were saved and I am here to tell you the story. And the second miracle, in which I participated, was the founding of the state of Israel. And we're not going to talk about it. If we do, I'll have to keep you here through the night. So, let me start with my story. My name is Aaron Cohen. I was born in Bulgaria. Now, Bulgaria is- this is Bulgaria. Bulgaria is in the, in Europe and is situated as follows: On the north, right here, is the Danube River between Romania and Bulgaria. On the west is Macedonia and Yugoslavia. On the east is the Black Sea. We heard enough about the Black Sea lately. And on the south is Turkey and Greece. Bulgaria is a very picturesque beautiful country. It's called the Switzerland of the Balkans. Balkan in Turkish is a

mountain and Bulgaria, very mountainous country, and it's called, again, Switzerland of Bulgaria, again very picturesque and very beautiful country.

07:55 Aaron Cohen: One thing I would say about the Bulgarian people to the 15th century, it was a Kingdom. And Bulgarians were very characteristic by being very tolerant of their minorities. In Bulgaria there were gypsies, there were Turks, there were Greeks, there are Armenians, very tolerant to them. In fact, very little known fact in the 15th century the Bulgarian King, Shishman, falls in love with the daughter of a Bulgarian, of a Jewish merchant. Falls in love with her, he sends his wife away, and he marries her! And very little-known fact that we had a Bulgarian queen which was Jewish. Her name was Sarah. The Bulgarians very affectionately called the Sarah. She became the mother of the next King and a grandmother of Byzantine emperor. I don't know how that is related but that's the fact. She was a wonderful queen. She becomes the queen of Bulgaria and of course converts to Bulgarian Orthodox Christianity and takes the name of Theodora. And during her reign, they progressed. She brought culture, she brought music, she brought literature. It was very well known in Bulgaria. I'm surprised that it is still not known in our circles but Sarah [unclear] and Theodora was very famous.

09:27 Aaron Cohen: Now how the, there were 50,000 Jews in Bulgaria. How did the Jews get to Bulgaria? If you remember during the Inquisition 1492, Queen Ferdinand and Isabella expelled the Jews of Spain. While they were languishing on the shores of Spain, Portugal, and Europe, the Sultan of that time, Bayezid [Sultan Bayezid II], sent his ships to Europe, picked up the Jews, and brought them into Turkey. Very quickly, look what happened to the empire of Spain after the Jews left and look what happened to the Ottoman Empire after Jews arrived there. Bottom line: don't mess with the Jews.

10:14 Aaron Cohen: So anyway, it's now my ancestry; they're Sephardic Jews. Sephardic means, Sfarad in Hebrew means Spain, so Sephardic Jews which means in Spain. So they came into Turkey, my folks, and they moved inland, which was Bulgaria at that time, as merchants. Now, I have to tell you a little bit about my family. On my father's side, they lived right here. Here is where I was born. Where is Garna Dzhumaya, there you are, right here: on the border of Macedonia and Bulgaria. On my father's side, they were very, very tough [unclear]. Any one of you seen the movie *War Horse*? Okay, on my father's family they were into horses. Jews into horses? Horses, tobacco, and furs. For my father's bar mitzvah, they gave him a beautiful Arabian horse and he loved that horse. He slept with that horse. He lived with that horse. Now at the age of 13, he goes through town. It was just before World War I. The general of the garrison stationed in Garna Dzhumaya spots the horse and confiscates it. Breaks my father's heart. The war, I think, it lasted about three, three and a half years. After the war, my father went all over the country and found his horse and he brought him home. He was in incredible. And the same thing is during the Nazi occupation, we were the first ones to have a radio, so they've confiscated

the radios and there were all kinds of warehouses. My father found the radio and brought it back home. So that was on my father's side: horses, tobacco, furs.

12:06 Aaron Cohen: On my mother's side, they were right here in Plovdiv and they were totally opposite. They were very urban, very erudite. They sent my saintly mother to college. She became a teacher. They sent my uncle to study pharmacy in Vienna and my other uncle was president of Franco Bulgarian Bank. So just goes to show the Bulgarian people were kind of progressive and they accepted the minorities very well. So, I told you how the Jews got there. Again, Turkey and they moved inland and that's the way we were there. Now, my father was very well known by the Macedonians. Macedonians, they had their own party and they were very tough [unclear]. You made a joke about the Macedonians, they hung you. Simple as that. So they liked my father and they called him affectionately evrejsko, which means like the Jewish lad and they wanted him to become their controller, their bookkeeper, their controller. They liked him! Well, my father couldn't do that. Why? Because he had friends in other parties. So in order to not antagonize, you know, the Macedonians, which you don't do that, they moved to Plovdiv. Where is Plovdiv? Right here. And this is where my mother's family were there. We moved in there and I was, at that time, five years old and we lived in a beautiful place, like a duplex. Downstairs we lived, and upstairs were the landlady and a retired gentleman. The lady's wife was of Greek origin. Beautiful lady. They were so enormously wealthy, let me tell you. That was 82 years ago. If you can imagine, at that time, she had a steam bath with a bed. Today they don't have that! But, so as a kid they kind of adopted me. From five years old, they took me upstairs, they bathe me there, they fed me there. It was Disneyland! It was lovely.

14:18 Aaron Cohen: Two years later their daughter, who was married to the Bulgarian council general to Germany, he finished his stint and we had to leave. So, from that beautiful place, we moved inland into a house, four apartments. Here was the landlady with her kids. One of them was my age. On the other side were Armenian people. The other side we're here and below were Turkish people. Now, again, tolerant of their minorities. When you saw the kids playing on the street - Armenian, Turkish, Bulgarian, Jewish, you would know. And my father became a emissary and he became a representative for very big company. They imported china and crystal. And I was a lousy kid. Didn't eat. Skinny. But I loved working. I was eight years old, nine years old and I would work in the summer. One month I worked at my father's store selling china and crystal to the ladies, and one month they sent me to camp. Now, when we send the kids here to camp what do we do? We're gonna make sure they're in shape, they lose weight. They sent the kids there to gain weight. I was skinny like this so they sent me and I gained 500 grams, just half a pound.

15:51 Aaron Cohen: So my father said, well this one expensive half a pound. They sent me a fly and I came back a mosquito, you know? But it was a lovely life, and like I said. Then one day, as I was growing up, my father would travel, would take me with him

on a day trip. Then second, when I was growing to be nine years old, he took me to a two-day trip and a three-day trip. That was Disneyland! I loved going, and the train, and going especially to tunnels. And then, Disneyland was over. I'll never forget that. I am home - I'm sorry - I'm at the store and the representative, the owner of the store, had just come back from Germany. He was on a trip, a buyer's trip there. He comes back and I can hear him telling my father, we are in trouble. He just witnessed in Berlin the Kristallnacht. Every window in Berlin owned by the Jews was broken and this is when the dream was over. He said we are in trouble and at that time Germany, with the Nazis, take over Europe and they go into Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary. Now, Bulgaria was a Kingdom and it was run by the King, Boris III. Very progressive. I tell you, if you can imagine, my mother's cousin was lady in waiting for the queen. Okay? His dentist was Jewish. He just was King of the people. In order for him - it was brilliant - he could see how the whole of Europe is falling under the Nazi. And the worst time, he just wanted to say, axis means the treaty between Germany, Japan, and Italy. Okay? So, he came.

18:08 Aaron Cohen: The King was half German. He came from one of the most prominent German families. There were three very prominent German families in that time: the Hohenzollern, the Hapsburgs, and the Coburg-Gotha. He came from the Coburg-Gotha family. His father was full-blooded German. He was, you know, half German. So he sees what's happening to Europe. Instead of fighting and what he - Nazis over in Europe, he saw how Hungary, how, I mean, everything falls. He becomes part of the Axis. And by becoming part of Axis, he joins the forces of Germany. And very quickly now, I want to just go reverse back to. Now when Bulgaria was a Kingdom, like I said, but in the 15th century, they fall under the dominance of the Ottoman Empire. The Turkish empire at that time conquered most of Europe. They were at the gates of Vienna. Now, the 19th century the Bulgarians, after being 500 years under the Ottoman Empire, they rebelled. They wanted their freedom. They wanted their independence. They were no match at that time. The Sultan Mehmed sends his best, best force and about to squash that rebellion when at that time, the Russian Tsar Nikolai, all the way, comes all the way from Russia, all the way down to Bulgaria, fights the Turks, liberates Bulgaria, and goes back.

20:01 Aaron Cohen: He could very easily take over Bulgaria but no and he goes back. You ever go and visit Bulgaria, you go to Sofia. We have a beautiful memorial there, it's called Tsar Nikolai the Liberator. So just want to give you something to think that Bulgaria would never fight Russia. It could be a monkey running Russia. It doesn't matter - whether a tsar, whether it's a communist - whatever it is, they'll be very loyal to the Russian people as they liberated them. Now, going back, at that time after their liberation, the most unusual thing happens in Bulgaria. They established a constitution by which they gave equal rights to all their citizens. No place on earth this happened except here. They gave equal rights to gypsies, to Armenians, Turkish, Greeks, Jews. Equal rights. And they enjoyed a wonderful freedom at that time. Like I said, looking at my mother's family: president of a bank, pharmacy, teacher, lovely

life. Now comes World War II. The Nazis take over. Bulgarian King, Tsar Boris, realizes that there is no way he can fight the Germans and he becomes part of the Axis. And with this, it becomes - it establishes a fascist new Nazi government. And Disneyland was over. They established the most horrible actions against the Jews. My father lost his job, they lost everything and were sequestered in like in a ghetto and were not allowed to go any place. In the age of 10, I had to wear the Jewish star. We had that. Here we are. Here, I am age of 13. Here is the Jewish Star that we had to wear.

22:15 Aaron Cohen: Now that was already 13. At the age of 11, I would take the Jewish Star off and sneak out and go stand in line with the Bulgarian people so I can get bread for the family. How we existed at that time, my uncles and my family, they just moved into like a ghetto. And they had enormous amount of artifacts that accumulated during the year. And they would be selling all these artifacts and they would be selling all their valuables. And by this, we existed. And my father also had some friends that they sneaked food into us. And I'll never forget, Yom Kippur is coming to us, to the Jews, and we are in temple and the worst times we can imagine. The word is coming from all over about the concentration camps, how the Jews are being exterminated, and here is a rabbi telling us, and you have chosen of all your people to be your chosen people. And my father, very quietly, so choose somebody else already.

22:35 Aaron Cohen: But anyway, things were unbearable, like I said. And when the Bulgarian people join the Axis - Okay, get the Europe. Here. Okay, when Bulgarian people joined the Axis, they were given two provinces. One was Macedonia, in total, was given to Bulgaria and, bottom here, Thrace. There were 20,000 Jews that lived in these two places and they were not Bulgarian citizens. Now, the Bulgarian King is summoned to Germany. Hitler wants two things of him. He systematically cleaned all of Europe. Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, comes to Bulgaria. 50,000 Jews were in Bulgaria. And the fascist government was absolutely cruel. Now, something happened in Bulgaria that no place on Earth had happened. The clergy of Bulgaria - Can we get Metropolitan Stefan here? This is Metropolitan here.

24:50 Speaker 1: You said Macedonia, and what was the other place?

24:52 Aaron Cohen: I'm sorry?

24:54 Speaker 1: You said Macedonia and the other place?

24:57 Speaker 2: Thrace.

24:59 Speaker 1: Thrace? Graci?

25:00 Speaker 2: T-H-R-A-C-E.

25:01 Speaker 1: Thank you.

25:02 Aaron Cohen: So there are two saints: Metropolitan Kyril and Metropolitan Stefan. They went to the King with the President, Deputy President of the Bulgarian Assembly, [Dimitar] Peshev. The one, we had on before. There he is! I did not know until I went to Bulgaria 20 years ago that he happened to have been my father's best friend. And that was one of the reasons also he left Macedonia. That, he, that was his best friend. Now, the Bulgarian clergy, Metropolitan Stefan, Metropolitan Kyril, with Peshev, and several deputies, formed the delegation and went to the King to plead on behalf of the Jews. The clergy said to the King, Bulgarian people will not tolerate that. It's not in the psyche of the Bulgarian people to persecute people. They're our brothers. You can't do that. Well, the Bulgarian King had no choice because he was part of the Nazis and he had to comply with them. Again, now, he was summoned to Germany, and two things Hitler wants from him, being that now he's becoming ally of Germany. After he cleaned systematically all of Europe, he still sticks like a crow to see there are 50,000 Jews that they have not been sent to the camps. So he wants: A) Send the rest of the Jews to the camp and B) I want to brigade the Bulgarian soldiers to fight alongside my people against Russia because Germany, at that time, had declared war on Russia.

26:50 Aaron Cohen: Again, there is no way the King would send a brigade. So, he does two things. He tells the King and the King tells Hitler that the soldiers are being trained for the purpose to go alongside a few people to fight. What he did with the Bulgarian Jews, he took the entire male population with ages of 18 to 55 into, put them in labor camps, and they were paving roads and they're under terrible conditions, but, nevertheless, that was his excuse. And if they would say about the Jews, he said, well they're paving roads for you. Because they were going-the German Army - went to Bulgaria to fight in Greece against the Greek partisans and the British army there. So, he kept stalling and stalling and stalling. And now, again, there were 20,000 people in, 20,000 Jews that lived in Thrace, Macedonia, which were given to them as provinces and they were not Bulgarian citizens. Now, well, we lived there with a very, very strict measures against us. The Bulgarian people couldn't accept that. The majority of them, with the clergy and I emphasize that no place on earth, the clergy interceded on behalf of the Jews, that they interceded in Bulgaria. And my saintly mother, every time would mention the words of Metropolitan Stefan and Kyril, she would cry and she beseeched me to make a promise that one day, I will pray at their graves on behalf of our family, which I did. I'll talk about later.

28:45 Aaron Cohen: So, now there are 20,000 Jews in Thrace and Macedonia. Not Bulgarian citizens. While the King is in Germany, the Bulgarian, the Nazi regime, decides this is the time now to get these 20,000 Jews. They got them all together, but instead of 20,000, there are only 11,000. Those Jews were sent to the camps and they perished. Now, when they find out that there are only 10,000 or 11,000, the remaining 10,000, they took upon themselves, while the King is in Germany, take us

over, all of us, all the Jews were put in schools. Trains are waiting, trucks are waiting to be shipped out. As we're in school, gathered, the worst time in our lives. The kids are crying, the women were crying, and everybody, we're all waiting to be shipped out. Metropolitan Kyril comes with some of his monks, they raised him over the fence, and he yells to us, children, I will save you. I'll prostrate myself across the railroad tracks you're not going anywhere. They have to go over my dead body before they touch you. You tell me where on earth that thing happened! Those saints went all out. In fact, I'll give you a quick example. The Jews in Sofia, they were demonstrating against the measures and some Nazis really attacked them and they beat him up. So, the chief Rabbi, where does he find refuge? In the house of Metropolitan Stefan. Not only that, Rabbi Hananel, who was at that time the head Rabbi of Bulgaria, served in World War I in the outfit of Prince, at that time, Boris. So, they were very close. He always had access to the King because he fought with him. I can tell you just how the clergy, how they really interceded in our behalf. And, now, here comes - I don't know exactly what happened. We're assembled in the schoolyard. The Russians were advancing, the King is in Germany, we're all ready to be shipped out. The King comes back, they have to have his signature to sign it. The King disappears. They can't find him.

31:54 Aaron Cohen: Now, I don't know exactly. I can call it a miracle. I can call it destiny. You can call it providence, act of God, anything you want to call it. Last moment, as the Russians were advancing and Germany is getting defeated all over, the King reluctant to sign that, combination of all that, all of a sudden, we're right there, in the schoolyard with Metropolitan, you know, Stefan until they tell us, you're not going to go anywhere. All of a sudden, the chief of police stands up and he says, Jews, go home. Your lives have been spared. And that's the miracle I want to tell you about. How, while we're being ready to be shipped out until today we don't know exactly whether it was providence, whether it was lady luck, whether it was the King, whether it is the clergy. Combination of all. Here, I am to tell you the story of survival. How 50,000 Jews survived in Bulgaria. I reiterate, no place on earth the clergy interceded on behalf of the Jews there. No place. They didn't lift a finger. How six million people were exterminated.

33:26 Aaron Cohen: I was speaking to a class and one of the children asked me, Could you find forgiveness in your heart? And they quoted my quote in a, in a movie. And I looked at him and I says, to find forgiveness in my heart for people that killed And I looked at him I says, To find forgiveness in my heart, for people that killed a million and a half children only because they were born Jews? To kill six million of my brothers? May God forgive them. I never will. And, now, that's my story and now there is one more thing that I had to do. Shortly after that, there was a movement in Europe, at that time, to send as many children as possible and how they arranged that, I don't know whether they bought our weight in gold, or what? But many children from different countries, ages between 13 and 15, 12 and 15, were put on trains with British papers, sent at that time to Palestine. So right as the Russians were coming,

at that time, 32, 33 were children with which I was one of them. I was 13 years old and I was never bar mitzvahed because that was the time during the Nazi occupation.

34:50 Aaron Cohen: So they put us in a train and from Bulgaria, right here, we go to Istanbul. Istanbul, we disembarked for two days, and they put us on trains after that all the way through Anatole and Turkey, all the way to Aleppo. We've heard enough about Aleppo. In Aleppo it was interesting, now British soldiers there gave us tea with milk. They were very nice to us about it. And then, from Aleppo, we go to Lebanon. We disembarked in Lebanon, stayed there overnight, and by buses, they took us, this time, to Israel and we stayed one week in a camp, which is, it was - for a week, we were just in quarantine. They wanted to make sure that we're clean. And then, we were distributed, all the children groups, into Kibbutz. And Kibbutz was an agricultural settlement in Israel and I have to tell you, at that time, two of my best years I spent in Geva, which was in the Jezreel Valley and - yeah - beautiful. I loved living there. Freedom. Free! Going into the fields and working. I love working with animals. I guess that came from my father! So, it was just, we worked a half a day, and the other half of the day, we studied. In the age of 15, we began to train. Military. And, shortly after that, at the age of 16, I joined at that time, which was called the Palmach, which is the most elite underground commando group of the Haganah, the underground. And we established a paramilitary settlement in the desert. And this is the paramilitary settlement that we established, you see. And there's the [David] Ben-Gurion at that time, the father of Israel, the George Washington of Israel, had a dream to settle the desert. And he sent his troops. And we were right here and, again, two of my best years spent there, and then we founded this Kibbutz Urim, which today is a beautiful thriving community. And that's my story and that's what I wanted to share with you. And I love being here and thank you very much.

37:35 Aaron Cohen: He wants me to tell you a little story about after we found it, the Kibbutz there, para-military. Well, you see how this thing is? Okay, we were about 32 guys there with three ladies with us, three young women. And they were all, we're very respectful of our neighbors, which were Bedouins. We had a special man that we have trained on a horse just going there and establishing a relationship with Bedouins. We had three ladies with us and they were very respectful, as you see, you could see them through here! There is no way you could hide, so they wore long pants, long sleeve, long shirt sleeves, you know, and cover their heads. And one of them that was a very tall beautiful lady, her name was Rina. We used to call her Rina Ve'hetzi. Ve'hetzi means with a half in Hebrew. So Rina and a half because she was so tall.

38:32 Aaron Cohen: Now, we have this liaison, which is very, very well trained to be very, very respectful of our neighbors, the Bedouins. So, he brings him over, which is the sheik of the Bedouins, and he sees me and he thinks I'm in charge of the area. And I don't know why I remind him of his brother. I never knew what happened to his

brother but I reminded him of his brother. And the next day he brings an extra horse. So, three of us will go back to their tent. We befriended him. I spoke a few words in Arabic. Now the next day he comes and he looks at me and he says, Rina Ve'hetzi-no, he didn't know who she was - that woman there, that tall one, I'm gonna buy her. I wanna buy her. And my liaison keeps saying, just nod your head. Don't say anything. I said okay and he says to me, how much you want for her? Again, he says, say nothing. Oh, tough bargain! I'll tell you what I'm doing. I'm gonna give you three cows, five sheeps, and twelve British sterlings! And I never paid that much for a woman!

- 39:46 Aaron Cohen: Alright. That night we shipped her out. Next day, he comes in and through the translator says, boy you one lucky sucker. She got so sick, I don't think she'll make it to the hospital. That's the story. Alright. Wait! Wait! It gets better. Thirty years later, 35 years later, I'm in Santa Barbara. I don't know how, I'm at the Biltmore Hotel getting some sun, tall scotch, cigar, what the heck, we're in America! And all of a sudden, this stunning lady in a bikini comes in. She's across from me. But I tell you, stunning lady. And of course, I'm not looking. And pretty soon, a gentleman with a little boy come in and they started talking. And I said I can hear Hebrew. I walked up to them and I said, What language you're speaking? They said Spanish. I said, No you're not! I speak Spanish. What do you think we speak? You're speaking Hebrew! Well, how do you know Hebrew? he says. Well, I grew up in Israel and also founder of a Kibbutz. Really! Which one? Urim. So was my mother! That was the daughter of Rina Ve'hetzi! Now, why was she so stunningly beautiful? She used to be Miss Israel, okay? So, she gave me the phone. Now, I hadn't talked to Rina for 30 years. So she gives me the number and I call Rina. It must've been in the middle of the night. The minute I opened my mouth, she knew right away. It was me. So that's the story I wanted to share with you. I want to thank you very much for listening. Now, if you have any questions, I'll be happy to answer.
- 41:31 Susanne Hillman: We will now take questions, but please remember to talk into the microphone because this event is being taped.
- 41:40 Speaker 3: I have two questions. First -
- 41:44 Aaron Cohen: One at a time.
- 41:46 Speaker 3: Okay, the first one. You didn't mention it, that the King died shortly after a, afterwards, mysteriously and a lot of people think it was Hitler that had him assassinated. What do you think?
- 41:57 Aaron Cohen: Definitely!
- 41:59 Speaker 3: Definitely it was Hitler?
- 42:01 Aaron Cohen: He was assassinated because, A) Again, he kept refusing to, and he came from Germany. He has to tell you three days before that, he had climbed the

tallest mountain. He was a picture of health, you know? And, he dies. They poisoned him.

- 42:19 Speaker 3: Okay, my second question. As you know, being Israeli, Israel honors people who save Jewish lives. King Boris has never been honored as a righteous among nations-
- 42:31 Aaron Cohen: No, not true.
- 42:32 Speaker 3: He's not been honored.
- 42:33 Aaron Cohen: You go to Yad Vashem.
- 42:34 Speaker 3: No, Yad Vashem does not honor him as a righteous.
- 42:37 Aaron Cohen: You go into the Holocaust Museum in Israel.
- 42:39 Speaker 3: Well, I'm just saying is, the last I checked and that was a few days ago, he has not been honored as a righteous among nations by Yad Vashem and I'm wondering if you think he should be honored.
- 42:49 Aaron Cohen: Absolutely. He should be honored and the two saints should be honored. I have a quick story to finish about that. I had promised my saintly mother that I will go and pray at the graves of these two saints. So, about 15 years ago, I went back to Bulgaria for the first time and I asked an audience with the successor to Metropolitan Kyril, the saint. He grant, he grant me 15 minutes. Very nice, that's all I needed. Hour and a half, he wouldn't let me go because he couldn't believe that I spoke Bulgarian so fluently. So he arranged for me, there is a Monastery of Bachkovo in which these two saints are buried. And, my wife and I went to the monastery and the monastery's — the head of the monastery is called igumen. He received us beautifully. He served us lunch. Lamb and of course a bottle of arak, didn't hurt. And I asked him, Could you give us some of your monks to perform a memorial for the saints? And he said, absolutely. So we went, the monastery was packed. As soon as they started the memorial, you could drop a pin. And I went back and I wrote in the purest of Hebrew: [speaking in Hebrew], meaning that I have given an oath and I'm fulfilling it today. Now that's one thing that I had promised my saintly mother. I fulfilled. Now there was one more thing for me to do is go to the Monastery of Rila, in which the King is buried there. And again, I went to the igumen and I said to him, Could you give us some of your monks to perform a memorial for his majesty? He looked at me and he said, no! And I was taken aback. Why not? To tell you how versed the clergy was there, he says, you don't need an intermediary. You Jews have your own memorial. Now, if you don't know it, it's called the Kaddish. God knows I know it. I wish I didn't. And I said you are absolutely right. So I was with the representative of the state department who said he was partly Jewish. Whatever. So we went in there and I recited the Kaddish. Of course, I couldn't finish it. I got all

choked up and cried, but I had fulfilled my oath to my saintly mother and I did that.
You had another question?

- 45:31 Speaker 4: Just, still curious about Bulgaria today. When you were there ten years ago did you get the same feeling of openness to foreignness and are there any Jews out now?
- 45:46 Aaron Cohen: Okay, good question. There are only about 2,000 Jews left there. The interesting thing was, under the communist regime in Bulgaria, they allowed 48,000 Jews at that time to do Aliyah [ascent or going up] to Israel. So, it is well known that they became one of the most progressive part of Israel. The Bulgarians, they were very, very resourceful and they were, they never asked for anything from the government. They were self-sufficient and they progressed and they became very important part of the fabric of Israel. Yes, there are 2,000 today that remain there and some of them are staunch communists and they remained there and one was, like I said, one of them was my cousin and I went to visit them. I did not know at that time that Peshev - there he is. He was my father's best friend and he is the one that formed delegation with the deputies with the clergy to go the, to really plead mercy on us from the King. Again, I didn't know it.
- 47:12 Speaker 5: Thank you for sharing your story. What happened to your parents? Did they go to Israel with you?
- 47:19 Aaron Cohen: I always [uclear] When they put me on the train, you know, my saintly mother running alongside the train - talk about heartbreaking, you know - and not knowing if I'll ever see her again. But, thank God, they all came to Israel. And my kid brother at that time, he was, let me tell you about him. I fought the War of Independence in the most elite underground commando group, it's called the Palmach. My kid brother was the first platoon to liberate the Western Wall, Ha-Kotel Ha-Ma'aravi. He was right next to Motta [Mordechai] Gur, who was the head of the paratroopers, that he said three words which will go in history forever. Har HaBayit Beyadeinu which means the hill of the home, our home, is in our hands. It was right there and I have - I'm going to tell you about the miracle about Israel is, how in the first 48 hours, after founding the state of Israel, the Jordanian Legion, excellent soldiers, really, really British-trained, British equipped. My brother captured one of the officers. In my office I have the keffiyeh, the headdress of the Jordanian officer because he knew that I really, I don't want to say this, said politely, I really had very strong feelings against the Jordanian soldiers because they killed a lot of my friends, especially on the route to Jerusalem. And talk about a miracle, I mean, you know, my son keeps telling me, we had nothing! We were besieged by the Egyptians. And the first machine gun that they brought us, they gave it to me. I could take that apart blindfolded and put it back together. And we had to go to two settlements, which were besieged by the Egyptians, and we had a scout that, and I'm carrying that machine gun, which is heavy, carrying it with me through the lines to get to these places. At

night they would take me and, you know, in a car, a car, in a pick-up [truck] and we go to different settlements at nights. We'll shoot the machine guns so they think that we have firepower all over. You know, we did everything we could. But, again, I fought the Egyptians. Okay. But the Sudanese were good soldiers, but the Jordanians were superb soldiers. Any other questions? Yes ma'am.

50:14 Speaker 6: Such a privilege to hear you speak. I had the pleasure of being in Sofia at the end of August. My daughter is a Fulbright Fellow teaching English in a secondary school in Sofia and I'm a journalist and had the opportunity to meet with leaders of the Jewish community there, who were just so lovely and welcoming, And I wanted you to know that there's a Moishe House, I don't know if you're familiar with Moishe House? Moishe House? It's a program for young Jews. They have houses all over the world where they invite other young Jews to come and socialize with them, celebrate Shabbat. And there's actually a Moishe House in Sofia and they've included my daughter in their activities, which is wonderful because she'd never been to Bulgaria before. We have no family there.

51:02 Aaron Cohen: What did you think of it?

51:03 Speaker 6: Sophia is a beautiful city!

51:05 Aaron Cohen: Did you go in the [unclear]?

51:07 Speaker 6: We went to Varna and there's a memorial, I just stumbled across. There's a giant stone shofar in Varna that says, From the Jewish community of Varna in honor of the fact that you saved us and it's a really moving memorial so we'll never forget, you know, that you saved us. So it's an incredible country, it really is.

51:32 Aaron Cohen: If you went to Plovdiv, you'll see also a memorial there and the Jewish community was very grateful and they have that memorial also, you know, and, again, I reiterate no place on earth they interceded on behalf to save them. Imagine, the trains are waiting. There is there's a movie. It was called *Empty Boxcars* because they were right there waiting for us to be shipped out and that's a miracle. And again, I keep talking about the second miracles, the founding of the state of Israel. God bless them. So, thank you. Yes!

52:14 Speaker 7: I have two quick questions. The first question is, you were talking about when Boris came back from Germany meeting with Hitler and you said that he just disappeared. Where did he go?

52:25 Aaron Cohen: Who, the King?

52:27 Speaker 7: The King, Boris. You said that he disappeared, the Russians were advancing, the Germans were losing, the clergy was there, and the chief of the police stood up and said The Jews go home. So where did Boris disappear to?

- 52:41 Aaron Cohen: There is a retreat.
- 52:43 Speaker 7: Oh, he was a retreat. Okay.
- 52:45 Aaron Cohen: That's, that's -
- 52:46 Speaker 7: And that's where he disappeared to?
- 52:48 Aaron Cohen: And not only there but from the retreat, he went into this small city. That's what we know.
- 52:52 Speaker 7: Okay.
- 52:54 Aaron Cohen: But, without his signature [unclear]
- 52:58 Speaker 7: It was not there. And then the other question I had, real quick, is you said that you would never forgive the people who had turned the Jews in there. Will you ever forgive the Catholic church for not taking a stand? Except for the people, Metropolitan Stefan and Metropolitan Kyril, will you not ever forgive the Catholic church for not taking a bigger stand against the Holocaust?
- 53:29 Aaron Cohen: May God forgive them.
- 53:33 Susanne Hillman: Any other questions?
- 53:35 Aaron Cohen: Sir. Oh, you got the message.
- 53:40 Speaker 8: I have a question back here. I know a family that comes from Plovdiv and I was just wondering if you know the Confino family?
- 53:48 Aaron Cohen: Confino? Oh, I know the Confino family.
- 53:53 Speaker 8: Yeah.
- 53:54 Aaron Cohen: Very, very prominent family. Yes?
- 54:00 Speaker 9: I have a comment. I visited Bulgaria maybe 15 years ago.
- 54:03 Susanne Hillman: Excuse me, could you use the -
- 54:05 Speaker 9: I visited Bulgaria maybe 15 years ago when we were celebrating the bar mitzvah of my son. My family is from Bulgaria. We are the Moscona family.
- 54:17 Aaron Cohen: From where?
- 54:18 Speaker 9: Moscona from Plovdiv.
- 54:20 Aaron Cohen: Moscona, okay. I had a doctor, Moscona. You speak Hebrew?

- 54:30 Speaker 9: To our surprise, we found that the Jewish properties were returned to the Jews after the war and I personally find that amazing.
- 54:44 Aaron Cohen: Not only that -
- 54:45 Speaker 9: We were visiting. We were in Plovdiv visiting the synagogue and we wanted the key. The synagogue was in a block surrounded by green. One small building, locked. And it had a sign in Bulgarian, but they don't read Bulgarian so we started talking in Spanish among us to see how do we get this building open. And an old lady heard us and approached us and started talking to us in Ladino. She told us that we have to go to the butcher shop and that the lady from the butcher shop has the key to the synagogue. So that's exactly what we did. We went to the butcher shop. The lady from the butcher shop has the key to the synagogue. And when she opened the synagogue for us to see, she started talking about the shalom building in Plovdiv. I suppose you know? A building that somebody donated that was returned to that person or family and donated to the city of Plovdiv, to the Jews of Plovdiv, where they did a something like a small Jewish community center where there were people learning Hebrew, playing cards, all people eating, youth getting to know each other. I think this is remarkable.
- 56:12 Aaron Cohen: Very quickly, apropos [with reference to] that Dr. Moscona was our family doctor. His daughter and I went to school together, graduated the same class so yes, I know very well that family. Now, the Jews of Sofia, half of the Jews of Bulgaria lived in Sofia. They were expelled from Sofia. And they were dispersed all over the country. When they went back, their apartments were untouched. They did not go into their apartments, they didn't bother them. In fact, one lady apologized. He says, I help myself to one of your ashtrays, but here it is I'll bring it back. I mean, Incredible. So and -
- 56:59 Speaker 10: Didn't happen anywhere else!
- 57:01 Aaron Cohen: No place. No place. Any other questions? Well, I want to thank you very much.
- 57:09 Susanne Hillman: Thank you.
- 57:15 [The Library UC San Diego]