

The 28 envelopes

Mystery artifacts shed light on a little-known episode of the Holocaust
By Bernard Dichek
Skopje, Republic of Macedonia

NEW DISCOVERIES about the Holocaust continue to surface in every corner of Europe

Several years ago, a Macedonian historian came across a number of mysterious envelopes with Jewish names on them in government archives in the capital city of Skopje. Inside the envelopes, 28 in total, were documents, gold coins and other valuables.

Jasminka Namiceva's discoveries shed new light on the events of World War II and could lead to unclaimed Jewish property being restored to their owners' families. In this article, her findings, including the names of envelope owners, are presented to the general public for the first time.

Namiceva's research is important because it illuminates a great deal about the little-known history of Macedonia's Jewish community. Her efforts also help dispel commonly held notions about the Bulgarian government's role in the Holocaust.

Bulgaria has often been thought of favorably for saving the lives of its own Jewish community. However, as Namiceva and other historians have noted, the Bulgarian Jews also were forced to wear yellow badges and dispossessed of their rights and property. The Bulgarian government indeed planned to deport

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their Jews to the Treblinka extermination camp in Poland but those plans were thwarted at the last minute because of opposition by the leaders of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

Unfortunately, the Bulgarian Church was unable to influence Bulgarian government policy in either Macedonia or in neighboring Thrace (pre-war northern Greece), both of which were occupied by Bulgaria and where more than 12,000 Jews were rounded up by Bulgarian soldiers and deported to Treblinka. As a result, with more than 99 percent of the Jewish population killed in both Macedonia and Thrace, Bulgaria actually outdid Nazi Germany in the thoroughness of the genocide it perpetrated.

Namiceva, an architecture expert of Armenian descent, came across the 28 envelopes while researching the history of the Skopje Jewish Quarter. In the sec-



tion of the government archive relating to the Jewish community, she noticed that the envelopes with Jewish names on them had been issued by the Bulgarian National Bank.

"Knowing what happened to Macedonia's Jews during the war, I wasn't surprised to see that the Bulgarian National Bank was involved," she tells *The Jerusalem Report*. "What was mystifying was why these 28 envelopes weren't forwarded to the bank headquarters in Sofia, along with the property of the rest of the Jews."



BERNARD DICHEK

The involvement of the Bulgarian National Bank, Namiceva explains, stemmed from Bulgaria's occupation of Macedonia during the war. The Bulgarian government, closely allied with Nazi Germany, persecuted Macedonia's Jews along the same lines as did the Nazis in German-occupied countries.

Bulgaria, through a series of decrees, systematically tyrannized the Macedonian Jews. Starting with the enactment of the Law for the Protection of the Nation in January 1941, the Bulgarian gov-

ernment required Jews to pay a special tax amounting to 25 percent of the value of their homes and financial assets. The funds were immediately transferred to the Skopje branch of the Bulgarian National Bank. Then, in March 1942, the Bulgarian government passed legislation forcing the Jews to wear yellow badges that they had to purchase with their own money. Once again, the proceeds were transferred to the Bulgarian National Bank.

Finally, in March 1943, the entire Jewish population of 7,200 was rounded up

The discoveries of Jasminka Namiceva (above) about the fate of the Jews of Macedonia during World War II are presented here to the general public for the first time; (following page) some of the documents and artifacts found by Namiceva

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and brought to a temporary concentration camp at the Monopol train station in Skopje. At the entrance to the camp, their money and valuables were confiscated and placed in the Bulgarian National Bank envelopes.

Over a two-week period, the Jews were put on trains that took them to the Treblinka extermination camp. The annihilation of the Macedonian Jewish population in Treblinka was thought to have resulted in the total elimination of one of Europe's oldest Jewish communities with origins dating back 2,000 years to the days of the Roman Empire.

But, not completely. According to Namiceva's findings, a small number of Jews were spared from deportation. "The government decided to let those Jews who had foreign passports stay behind," says Namiceva, pointing to documents she unearthed during her research. "In total, 33 Jewish families with Spanish, Italian or Albanian passports, along with several families headed by doctors and pharmacists, were spared."

The unclaimed envelopes, Namiceva suggests, belonged to Jews who were interned in the Monopol camp but for some reason were not returned to them when they were released. She points out that the names of the Jews on the envelopes do not appear on the lists of Jews who were deported from the Monopol concentration camp.

The 28 envelopes, after being examined by officials in the Skopje Police Department, were secured with twine and stamped. More than 70 years later, Namiceva was the first person to examine their contents.

Among them was an envelope belonging to David Mushon Kastro that contained a gold-plated child's bracelet. Another, belonging to Josif Aron Beraha, held a gold Turkish lira coin, and a third envelope, belonging to Hananija Asher Biti, contained a children's earring and six gold tooth crowns.

Of the released Jews, about 20 families remained in Skopje while the rest left the country. For those who remained in Macedonia, conditions were difficult, especially if they tried to return to their homes.

"In some cases their neighbors had already moved into their homes," notes Namiceva.

After the war, most of the surviving Jews emigrated to Israel, though Namiceva has learned that a number are believed to have made their way to Chile and other countries.

Namiceva published her findings "Human Fate Clenched Between a Yellow Badge and a Paper Envelope – A Kaleidoscope of the Jewish Holocaust in Macedonia" in a small-circulation scholarly journal (The Jews from Macedonia and the Holocaust: History, Theory, Culture; Euro Balkan Press, Skopje, 2011) and the contents of the envelopes were turned over to the Holocaust Museum in Skopje, which has yet to display or publicize her findings.

Consequently, the story of Namiceva's discovery has not received the attention it deserves. Although it is unlikely that the actual owners of the envelopes (listed below) are still alive, their descendants, if they can be located, obviously would be eager to know what happened to their family property. ■

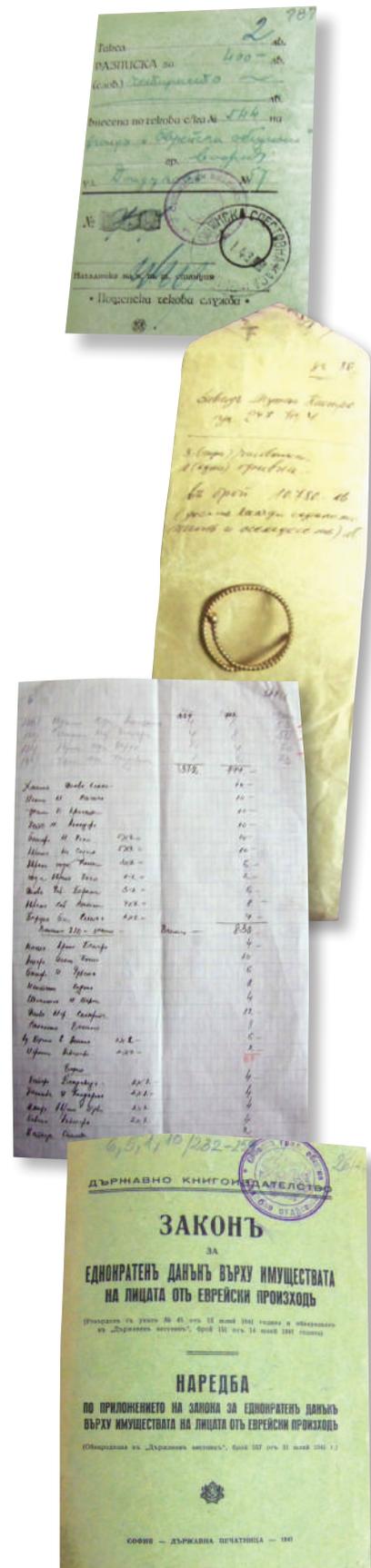
The list of names

The following are the names listed on the envelopes discovered by Jasminka Namiceva.

Family descendants are invited to contact either Jasminka Namiceva c/o Museum of the City of Skopje, Republic of Macedonia, or the author of this article, Bernard Dichek at Dichek@netvision.net.il

Leon Isak Adizes, Eshua Bohor Aladjem, Isak Chelebon Aladjem, Leon Bohor Aladjem, Salvator Haim Andzel,

Mois Jako Benadon, Josif Aron Beraha, Asher David Biti, David Asher Biti, Hananija Asher Biti, Klara Rachamin Bohor, Mentesh Harom Haim, Egon Karlo Hubert, Albert Ishaj Kastro, David Mushon Kastro, Ishaj Mushon Kastro, Zak Mushon Koen, Josif Solomon Konforti, Michel Solomon Menahem, Elvira Solomon Menahem, Josif Eliezer Navaro, Niko Solomon Nehama, Haim Mois Noah, Harom Haim Nova, Avram Beraha Rahamin, Moric Isak Saltiel, Isak Saporta, and Jakov Avram Saporta



COURTESY JASMINKA NAMICEVA