



An amazing and unforgettable diplomatic journey in the pearl of the Balkans: Israel's ambassador bids farewell to Bulgaria

In a few weeks, I shall conclude my term of duty as Israel's ambassador to Bulgaria for the past four years and return to my homeland.

It has been a real honour, a privilege and I am really grateful to have had the opportunity to represent Israel in such a magnificent and welcoming country.

When appointed as ambassador, I was given a word of advice: be aware, it will not be long until you will fall in love with Bulgaria. Very sound and accurate advice. Indeed, these four years have definitely succeeded to instill in the hearts, souls and minds of my family and myself much admiration and appreciation for Bulgaria and its people.

Serving as an Israeli diplomat in Bulgaria has a special significance. This is due to a great extent to the unique Bulgarian chapter of World War Two.

For us, Bulgaria is the country that saved the entirety of its Jewish population, numbering around 50,000 during World War Two. Indeed, this year we mark eighty years of the saving of the Bulgarian Jews. Brave Bulgarians rose up against the deportation of their Jewish compatriots to the concentrations camps. This is often referred to as an example of the unique Bulgarian spirit. The numbers of Bulgarian Jews killed during the Holocaust is zero!

Not only did Bulgaria save all of its Jewish population but in actual fact it is one of a hand full of countries that had more Jews after the war than before it. In addition, Bulgaria provided safe passage to Jews fleeing other countries in Europe.

Later, most of the Bulgarian Jews immigrated to Israel, after its establishment, and have contributed substantially to the building of our country. They and their children and grandchildren are very proud of their Bulgarian ancestry and form a living bridge of friendship between Bulgaria and Israel.

As a son of parents of German origins born in the first quarter of the 20th century and fortunate enough to escape the dire fate of six million Jews in Europe, thanks to the help of good people, the Bulgarian chapter of the Second World War resonates profoundly with me. For me as for all Israelis: in Israel, when one meets a Bulgarian visitor, the first thing that comes to mind is usually 'you originate from that Balkan country that saved all of its Jews'. Indeed, the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews is a unique chapter in our shared history; it is a beacon of light during humanity's darkest hour. The twin monuments which were erected in Bulgaria and in Israel some years ago, are a testament to the heroism of the Bulgarian people.

We Israelis and indeed Jews around the world will forever be grateful and thankful to the Bulgarian people for the determination and the courage demonstrated during World War Two.

Today, Bulgaria is one of our staunchest allies in Europe and further afield. It renders its support to Israel in international fora, in reference to the challenges it is facing there.

Bilateral cooperation is excellent in a variety of realms: political, economic, strategic and cultural.

There is a confluence of interests between the two countries in a wide variety of domains, namely innovation, cyber security, energy, health care, agricultural technology, water management, emergency care and green economy. Many Israeli companies have set base in Bulgaria in areas such as cyber security, medicine, IT, agricultural technologies and construction.

In the last four years several agreements and Memorandums of Understanding were signed, in the realm of energy, water, tourism as well as one on education, science, culture, youth and sports.

In the realm of cultural cooperation, I will just mention one poignant fact, which speaks volumes about the affinity between both our peoples: over fifty books by famous Israeli authors have been translated into Bulgarian. Many prominent Israeli writers have visited Bulgaria including Amos Oz, Etgar Keret, Meir Shalev, Michael Bar-Zohar, A.B. Yehoshua, Zuria Shalev, David Grossman and others.

Tourism is of course a major component in our relations. Some two hundred and fifty thousand Israelis visit Bulgaria each year. This is the largest number of tourists coming to Bulgaria from any one country outside Europe. Israelis admire the beauties of the landscapes, the rich history, the wonderful hospitality and the excellent cuisine. The potential to expand tourism further is substantial. Areas with potential for additional interest for the Israeli tourists could be the Jewish landmarks sites in Bulgaria which highlight the story of the Jewish presence in Bulgaria, medical tourism, wine and culinary tourism.

Our work as diplomats is to a great extent about official matters. But no less important is exploring the country in which we are stationed.

My family and I have greatly enjoyed our Bulgarian experience. Exploring stunning landscapes, delving back through rich archaeological history and culture, tasting delicious Bulgarian cuisine. But above all, having the privilege to meet many wonderful hospitable Bulgarians on our travels, from North to South, from East to West. We will be forever grateful to Bulgaria and its people who have always welcomed us warmly and with open hearts.

The uniqueness of Bulgaria is marvelously defined in the words of its national anthem: “your beauty, your loveliness, ah! they are boundless”.

Like all countries, Bulgaria is currently facing various challenges. But it is my sincere conviction after having spent four years here, that these can and will be overcome and that the future is indeed bright and promising.

It is often said that Bulgaria is a country of wonders and that its inhabitants have inherited the lands of one of the oldest civilizations in the world. One of these wonders is the Bulgarian spirit, which has endured in the face of countless difficulties throughout the centuries.

We will surely come back to visit as our attachment to Bulgaria is strong and everlasting.