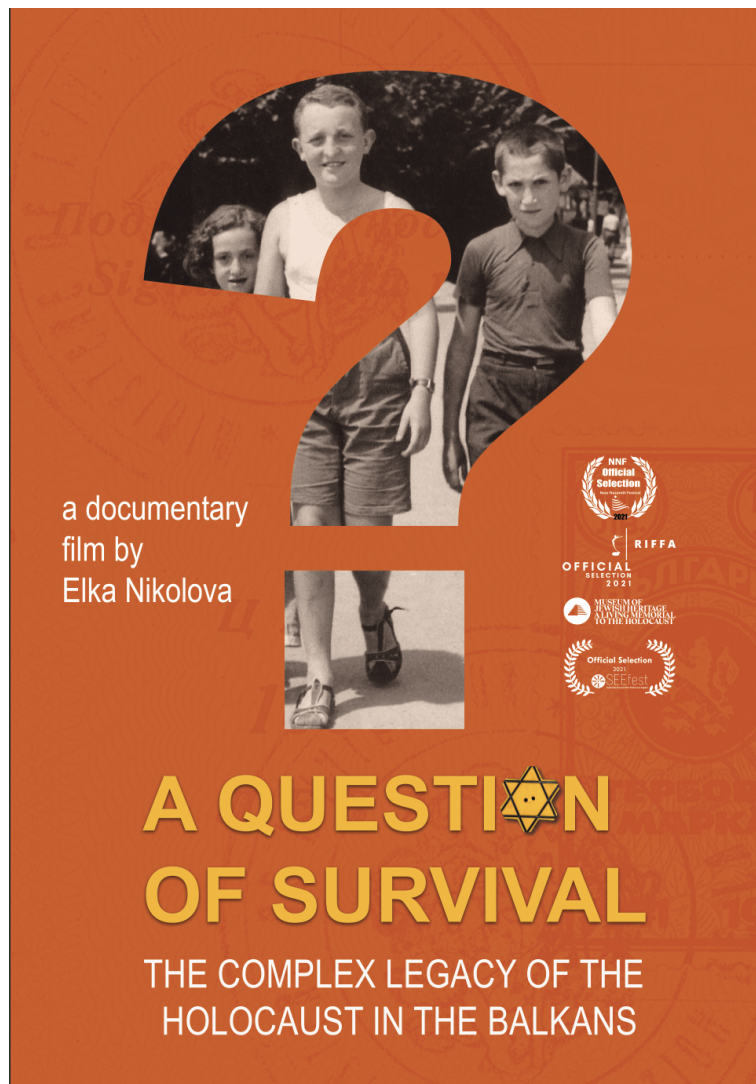


**END OF THE ROAD MEDIA Presents**

“...once introduced into public life, evil easily perpetuates itself, whereas good is always difficult, rare, and fragile. AND YET POSSIBLE.”

- Tzvetan Todorov



Contact:  
Elka Nikolova  
718.986.6136  
elkanikol@yahoo.com  
@AQuestionOfSurvival  
[www.aquestionofsurvival.com](http://www.aquestionofsurvival.com)

a film by Elka Nikolova  
USA. 55:58, 2020  
in English

## **LOGLINE**

A documentary film about the legacy of the Holocaust in the Balkans, as seen through the eyes -and conflicting memories- of three Bulgarian Jewish survivors in New York.

## **SHORT SYNOPSIS**

A QUESTION OF SURVIVAL is an eye-opening portrait of three Bulgarian Jews - Chaim Zemach, a cellist; Robert Bakish, an engineer; and Misha Avramoff, a social worker on the Lower East side of Manhattan in New York - as they struggle to place their unusual experiences during World War II into the more common narrative of the Shoah. When in March 1943 the Bulgarian pro Nazi government first postponed and ultimately cancelled the imminent deportation of the entire Bulgarian Jewish community of 48,000, Chaim, Robert and Misha were children and young adults. They only grasped how close they came to death after they arrived in New York and learned the fate of millions of European Jews. This realization has left them questioning the value of their stories and to debate whether they are true Holocaust "survivors."

## **SYNOPSIS**

A Question of Survival introduces audiences to a little known but consequential story of survival through the personal narratives of three Bulgarian Jews from New York. Misha Avramoff was 5, Chaim Zemach 14, and Robert Bakish 17 years old when in March 1943 the imminent deportation of Bulgaria's 48,000 Jews was suddenly postponed and ultimately cancelled. Prior to that the Bulgarian pro-Nazi government, an ally to Germany, had handed over to Germany 11,343 Jews from Northern Greece and Macedonia, territories it had occupied during the war. Under pressure from the leadership of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, influential politicians from the ruling party and most notably the vice president of Parliament, Dimitar Peshev, as well as opposition leaders and

some regular citizens, the government caved in, sparing the lives of the country's entire Jewish population.

Fearing for their safety but not fully realizing the magnitude of the Holocaust ("for us the war was an abstraction" remembers Robert, who observed Allied airplanes on their route to bomb neighboring Romania), the Bakish and Zemach families left Bulgaria for Palestine before the end of 1944. The family of Misha Avramoff joined the mass exodus of Bulgarian Jews in the period 1948-1949 after the creation of the state of Israel. By the end of the 1950s all three families had immigrated to New York City.

Only in the U.S. and now adults, did Misha, Robert and Chaim fully grasp the magnitude of the Holocaust and what had happened to millions of European Jews. The images of children showing their tattoos from the concentration camps haunt Misha to this day. Surrounded by Jews who had lost so much, they began to downplay their own story in order to fit in. Misha became a social worker and devoted himself to working with Holocaust survivors, mainly from Poland, with Project Ezra on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Robert Bakish became a metallurgical engineer and immersed himself in his work, rarely speaking about his past, not even with his only son. "I never looked back." Chaim Zemach had a successful career as a cellist in New York, and was at the time the only Bulgarian musician in the Metropolitan area. All three remained silent about their own survival.

In *A Question of Survival* the three men for the first time are given a platform to talk in public about their experiences. The film, enhanced by rare archival footage from newly-accessible Bulgarian archives, is centered around the men's lively debates and their differing views of whether they can be considered Holocaust survivors, the pressure they felt to conform to the accepted narrative of the Holocaust, and the shock of realizing, as young adults, how close they came to death at the hands of the Nazis.

## DIRECTORS STATEMENT

Despite the vast literature and films on the history and legacy of the Holocaust, the story of what happened in the Balkans remains little known and relatively unexplored.

The devastating effects of the Nazi's "Final Solution" on the small, predominantly Sephardic Jewish communities in that region are evident in the ruins of once-thriving synagogues across Bulgaria and the other Balkan countries, the untended Jewish cemeteries, and the memorial plaques, which often have unclear or misleading texts.

The synagogue in the town of Bourgas, where Chaim Zemach was born and spent his childhood, is now an art gallery. The Sofia synagogue, the largest Sephardic temple in Europe, where Robert Bakish's great grandfather was once the rabbi, can barely function due to a diminished congregation. To raise a **Minyan**, a Jewish tradition that requires a minimum of 10 men to conduct a religious service, male tourists or even women are often enlisted.

What many people don't realize is that during WWII Bulgaria was the only country which postponed and ultimately cancelled the scheduled deportation of its Jewish citizens to the death camps. Since then the nation has prided itself on the survival of Bulgarian Jews with much focus on what the government did to save them, not on what it didn't do.

The short version: After enacting harsh antisemitic legislation in 1941-1942, in March 1943 the Bulgarian government rounded up and handed over to its ally, Nazi Germany, 11,343 Jews from Macedonia and Northern Greece, territories Bulgaria occupied during the war. They all perished at Treblinka. Up next were the 48,000 Bulgarian Jews, who had been living peacefully in Bulgarian territories since they were expelled from Spain in 1492. After public outcry from a handful of prominent politicians, from the Orthodox Church hierarchy, and from ordinary citizens, in March 1943 the government called off the deportation of Bulgarian Jews, thus sparing their lives.

What is easily swept under the rug is the fact that the Bulgarian government also took actions to target Bulgarian Jews with the Law for the Defence of the Nation, forced them to wear yellow stars, seized their property and

businesses, and ultimately attempted to send them to death camps in compliance with Nazi cohorts. It was not until tremendous pressure was applied by public outcry and by a small group of intellectuals, politicians and clergy that the government caved. When in 1948 the communist regime fully established itself, the government took control of the narrative, using only its heroic aspects to promote Bulgaria's standing in the world.

Until 1989 Bulgaria remained behind the Iron Curtain; access to its archives was rare and minimal. It was only after the fall of the communist regime that access was finally allowed, but by then the "official" narrative of the Holocaust had already been formulated. The little known and "unusual" survival of the 48,000 Bulgarian Jews sounded too unbelievable and unreal to fit into that narrative. It also posed very uncomfortable and uneasy questions, such as: what was the role of public resistance in saving the Jewish population? Why didn't similar resistance happen in other countries? It also left the survivors of this story to grapple with many and unsettling questions: Who saved us? Why did we survive while others didn't? How does our story fit into the larger narrative of the Holocaust?

To this day, the Bulgarian story remains little known outside of Bulgaria, its tremendous value lost in controversy and confusion.

*A Question of Survival* aims to shine a light on the relevance of this chapter in history to our current political climate. Looking at that chapter today one can't help but experience a sense of déjà vu. With the rise of antisemitism and totalitarianism as a result of political uncertainty across the world, minorities are again being scapegoated for political gain, and the role of public opinion in protecting them is ever so critical. Will public resistance be mobilized this time around to protect human and minority rights? Or will most citizens remain indifferent and complicit with the actions of their government? For those of us who are living through turbulent days, these questions remain wide open.

## TEAM

### **Elka Nikolova, Director/Producer/Editor**



Elka Nikolova was born in Bulgaria and studied psychology at the University of Sofia before she moved to the United States in 1994. In 2000 she received her MA in Media Studies, with a focus on film production at the New School in New York. She has worked in film and television in New York since 2003. Her documentary film, "Binka: To Tell a Story About Silence," completed in 2007, premiered at MOMA in New York. She co-produced and edited the documentary film "Angel Wagenstein: Art is a Weapon" directed by Andrea Simon completed in 2017. At the end of 2020 she completed her second documentary film "A Question of Survival" about the legacy of the Holocaust in the Balkans as seen through the eyes of three Bulgarian Jewish survivors from New York. The film premiered on April 5, 2021 at the South East European Film Festival in Los Angeles. She is currently working on her third documentary THE DRESSMAKER, which continues the exploration of the Holocaust in the Balkans.

### **Vanyo Georgiev, Cinematographer/Producer**



Vanyo Georgiev was born in Bulgaria and graduated from the New Bulgarian University in Sofia with a BA in film and television production. He worked as a cinematographer for Bulgarian Documentary Studio "Vreme" and the TV series "8 & 1/2," produced by Film Studio Boyana, before moving to New York in 2006. In New York he works as a freelance DP and Lightning Director for Bank of America Video and Broadcast, and on various independent documentary productions. He is the producer/cinematographer for the documentary film A QUESTION OF SURVIVAL completed in 2020. Currently he is the producer/cinematographer for the documentary film THE DRESSMAKER, in post-production.

### **Ben Wolf, Additional Camera**



Ben Wolf's work as a cinematographer on documentary films range from Emmy winner "Baring It All" (Dir: Patricia Zagarella) to "Deceptive Practice: The Mysteries and Mentors of RickyJay" (Molly Bernstein & Alan Edelstein), a Kino Lorber release, as well as "Amsterdam Stories USA" (dirs: Rob Rombout & Rogier van Eck), a 6-hour road movie of small town America. He helped develop and shoot a web series for The Indian National Congress Party entitled "Billion And One Voices," a collage of modern India.

### **Lora Myers, Writing and Story Consultant**



Lora Myers is a writer, film producer, and educator. As a producer and writer, she has worked in the USA, Italy, and Brazil on numerous award winning documentaries, public television specials and feature film scripts. She is currently developing a song-based app for teaching English literacy.

### **Vanya Gezenko, Archival and Historical Consultant**



Vanya Gezenko is an expert at the Central State Archives of Bulgaria, and specializes in the Jewish archives. She has consulted on many international documentaries and feature film productions.

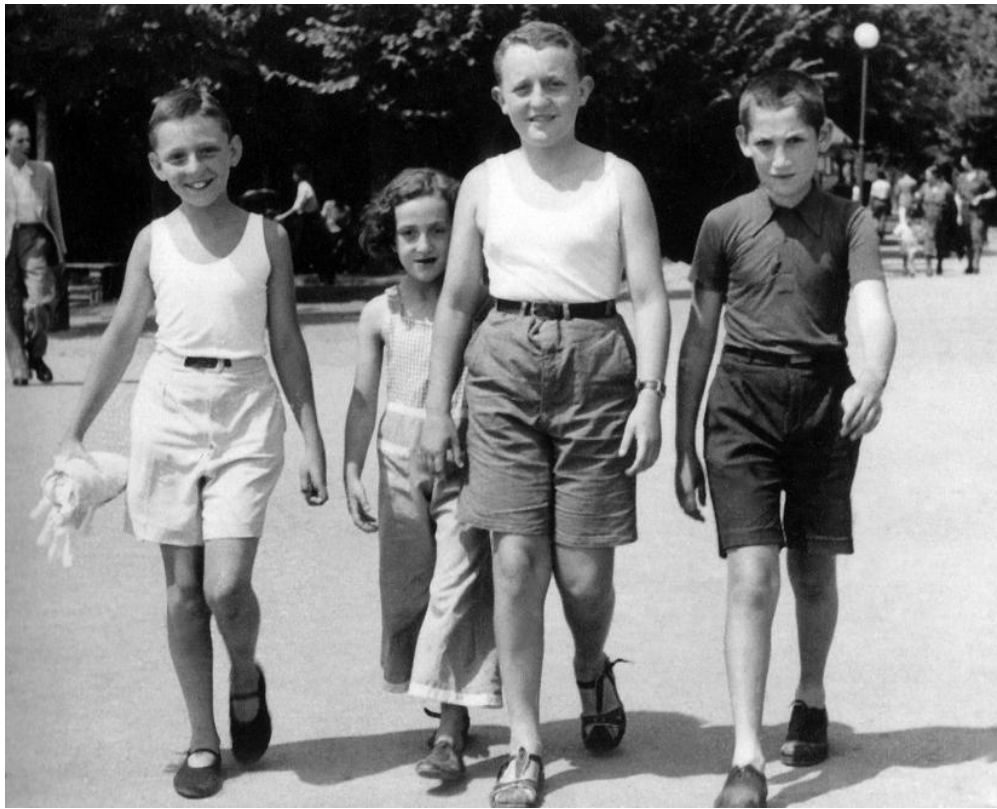


## IMAGES

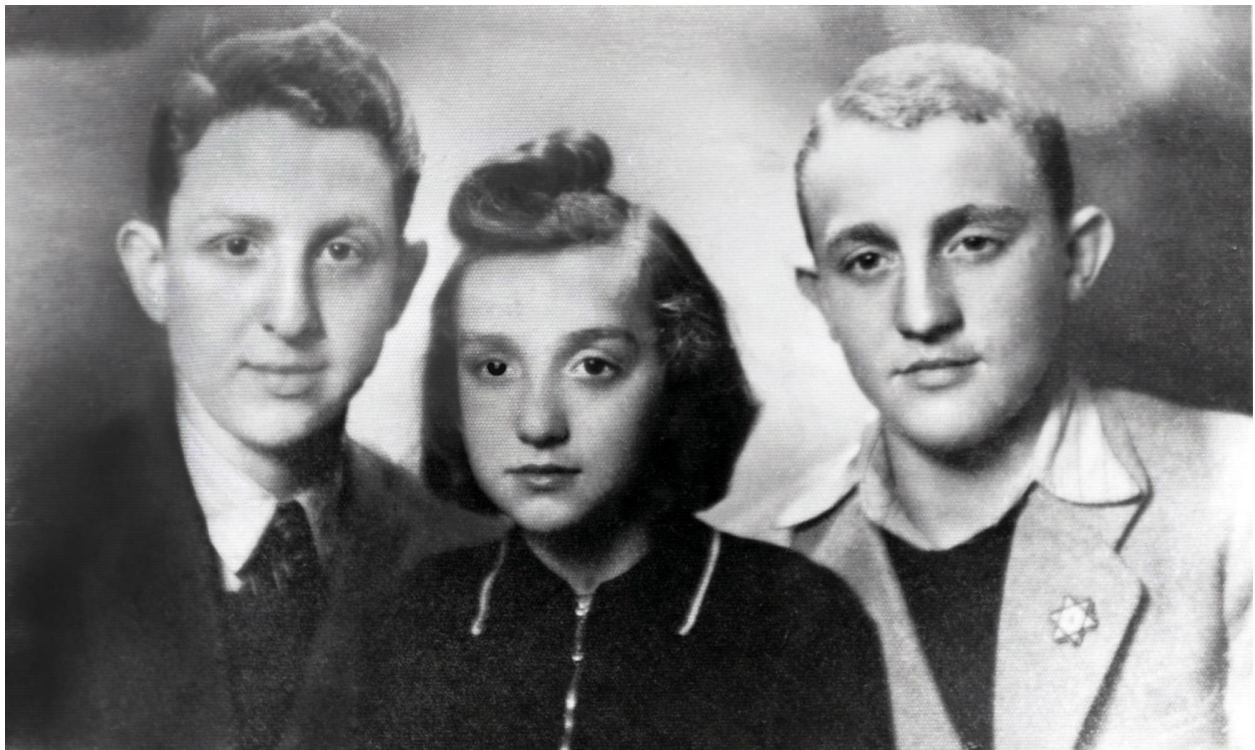


Misha Avramoff, Robert Bakish and Chaim Zemach with Elka Nikolova in New York, 2009





Chaim Zemach with childhood friends in Bourgas, Bulgaria



Chaim Zemach wearing yellow star with his brother and sister, 1940ies, Bourgas



Misha in Sofia, 1940ties



Robert with a friend on the boat to Palestine, 1944

**World Premiere April 28, 2021 South East European Film Festival, LA**

<https://seefilmla.org/films/>