Bulgaria has long been home a homeland a haven for Jews. Today, JDC is proud to be a part of this legacy and help cultivate Bulgaria’s Jewish future.


These three things — and more — encapsulate Jewish Bulgaria. And in Sofia and beyond, JDC is a proud partner to the Bulgarian Jewish community, helping to serve its most elderly, isolated members and power its future.

Jewish Bulgaria has an almost 2,000-year history. In 46 CE, Jews first came to the region, creating a home at the edge of the Roman Empire. When, in the 1340s, the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Alexander married a Jewish woman, Jewish life reached a new apex, only to be devastated in 1352 when all Jews were ordered to be expelled.

Despite these ups and downs, Bulgaria has long been a home for Jews seeking safety. In 1492, when Spanish Jews were fleeing the Inquisition, they found safe harbor here. And centuries later, when Nazi terror devastated Jews throughout Europe, Bulgarian citizens and religious leaders protested the planned deportation of Bulgarian Jews, the vast majority of whom were saved.

Right after World War II, JDC helped Bulgarian Jews rebuild their lives. Thanks to these efforts, the Jews of Sofia received food, supplies, vocational training, youth camps, and more, and the JDC-supported Jewish hospital became known as the best in Sofia. In addition, JDC helped repair the magnificent Sofia Synagogue, and to this day, the community still uses it frequently for Jewish spiritual life.

When the Bulgarian Communist Party took over in 1946, Jewish life went underground, and JDC was forced to leave the country. Many Jews left, too, and for over 40 years, those who remained could not openly pass down their heritage to their children.

Throughout the 1990s, Jewish life experienced a revival, and JDC was a large part of this story, introducing Jewish summer camps, JCC activities, community events, and more.

JDC helped Jewish Bulgaria find its way back into the open. And over three decades later, we’re still there, partnering with the Bulgarian Jewish community to build something rich, lasting, and authentic.
JDC in Bulgaria: A Snapshot
AIDING VULNERABLE JEWS
Care for the elderly is a hallmark of JDC and the Jewish community of Bulgaria. JDC partners with the Shalom Jewish Community Center (JCC) to deliver lifesaving aid to the most vulnerable Jews: food, homecare, winter relief, medical and psychological support, clothing, educational assistance, as well as social programs connecting them to Jewish life. Many of our elderly clients were the very same people we helped right after WWII. Today, Shalom helps aid more than 1,080 individuals from more than 540 households.

The youngest generation also benefits from this humanitarian work. The community’s JDC-supported Children and Families Program helps at-risk Jewish children and their families. Families involved in this program can access many valuable programs and resources, including food and medical assistance, education support and scholarships, inclusion programs for children with disabilities, and connection to Jewish communal life, easing their isolation.

CULTIVATING A JEWISH FUTURE
Each and every day, JDC helps power Jewish Bulgaria’s future. At both the JDC-supported JCC Beit Shalom and JCC Beit Ha’am, children, teenagers, parents, and the elderly gather for Jewish programming — Shabbat dinners, dance classes, and much more. And for teens and young adults at Hadracha College — a leadership training program — JDC gives them the tools to write the newest chapter of Jewish Bulgarian life.

Robust Jewish education is also at the core of JDC’s work around the world. The schooling starts when children are at their smallest, at the Gan Balagan preschool and kindergarten. When they graduate, they progress to the JDC-supported Ronald S. Lauder Day School, a new, state-of-the-art facility that provides a rigorous and holistic Jewish education to Bulgaria’s young Jews.

But it’s not all about school: During the summer, children play and have fun at the JDC-supported Jewgaton camp, which hosts more than 220 attendees each year. And those who attend Szarvas, the JDC-Ronald S. Lauder Foundation international Jewish summer camp in Hungary, step into a wider world of Jewish life, enriching their home communities when summer ends. Bulgaria boasts 1,600+ Szarvas alumni out of the 6,000+ strong Bulgarian Jewish community. Put another way, over 50 percent of active Jewish adults attended Szarvas.

COVID-19 RESPONSE
When COVID-19 hit Bulgaria, JDC didn’t skip a beat. In partnership with the community, we created an immediate Humanitarian Relief Fund for those suffering through the economic fallout of the pandemic. With JDC’s help, the Bulgarian Jewish community augmented this quick, thorough response, matching homecare workers with struggling families and elderly clients, Holocaust survivors wrote messages of support for the Bulgarian Jewish community and recorded themselves reading children’s stories so that preschoolers could enjoy them. Three years on, JDC continues to help Jewish Bulgaria tackle the pandemic.

UKRAINE RESPONSE
As the devastating Ukraine crisis rages on, JDC is leveraging its century-plus humanitarian legacy to aid the many Jewish refugees who have fled to Bulgaria. JDC has partnered with the community to provide vital resources, including food, medicine, and accommodation. JDC also facilitated workforce opportunities and refugee integration into local Jewish institutions and programs.

JDC in Bulgaria: Images Across Time