The Bulgarian camp described in *I Am David* was part of the Gulag, a system of forced labor established by the Communist regime in the Soviet Union. Millions of people were imprisoned (and died) in the camps, which were instituted during the 1920s and reached their peak during and immediately following World War II, the time period in which *I Am David* is set. The Soviet government gradually disbanded the camps after the 1953 death of leader Joseph Stalin.

“The Communist takeovers in the Eastern and Central Europe during the World War II led to mass arrests of non-Communist politicians and people identified as class-enemies. Many of them were sentenced to forced labor camps. In 1952 the International League for the Rights of Man was able to document the existence of more than 400 forced labor camps in Central and Eastern Europe.”

[From Forced Labor Camps: an on-line exhibition; Open Society Archives, “Introduction” For more information, see: http://www.osa.ceu.hu/gulag/index.html]

The Soviet labor camps went largely unnoticed by the rest of the world for many years. It took the publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956* (1973) to attract attention to this cruel system. Thirty years after Solzhenitsyn's revelations, Washington Post reporter Anne Applebaum took advantage of new access to Russian archives to compile a gripping, detailed account of life on the camps in *GULAG: A History*, winner of the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for general non-fiction. A number of Applebaum's reviewers noted that many people are still unaware of the severity and scale of the Gulag system. *I Am David* provides an excellent opportunity to give young people insight into the “whole story.”

“The word GULAG is an acronym, meaning *Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei* or ‘Main Camp Administration.’ Over time, the word ‘Gulag’ has also come to signify not only the administration of the concentration camps but also the system of Soviet labor itself, in all its forms and varieties: labor camps, punishment camps, criminal and political camps, women’s camps, children’s camps, transit camps.

“Even more broadly, ‘Gulag’ has come to mean the Soviet repressive system itself, the set of procedures that prisoners once called the ‘meat-grinder’: the arrests, the interrogations, the transport in unheated cattle cars, the forced labor, the destruction of families, the years spent in exile, the early and unnecessary deaths.…

“[The Gulag] continued to expand throughout the Second World War, and in the 1940s, reaching its apex in the early 1950s. The Gulag had its own laws, its own customs, its own morality, even its own slang…. [And] years after being released, the Gulag’s inhabitants were often able to recognize former inmates on the street simply from ‘the look in their eyes.’”