



Saving the Bulgarian Jews in World War II

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 attorney in Israel, wrote, “This organised defence of a defenceless minority represents the most noble and hopeful manifestation of humaneness known to History”. For Wolf Oschlies, Bulgaria and Denmark were the only European countries that succeeded in preserving their Jewish communities. For him, “The entire country presented a united front to the Nazis; from the King to the Communists, the Bulgarians did everything possible to protect their Jews.” Oschlies was right. Bulgaria was not the only country to protect her Jews, neither was Denmark, as claimed by Ib Nathan Bamberg and Denis Wepman. Certain circumstances made the job of the Danes easier: the number of Danish Jews was 8,000 as against 48,000 in Bulgaria, and a friendly neighbour Sweden, facilitated the Jewish exodus. Lord Below, reviewing Martin Gilbert’s book “The Holocaust – the Jewish Tragedy”, wrote in the ‘Daily Telegraph’ of 7th Jan 1986, “Of the satellite governments, the Hungarians put up some resistance, the Bulgarians were rather more successful, the Italians – when Mussolini ruled – most successful of all, the Danes and the Norwegians put humanity first. One must not make too much of the superiority of the West when the fact is grasped that of all satellites, Vichy France was the most ready to cooperate in the deportation. In Nazi-dominated Europe (1940-1944) there existed a community of peoples, each trying to help their unfortunate brethren.

The Bulgarian people as a whole possess enough credentials to claim the leading role. It was an uninterrupted fight undertaken by all strata of the nation, started spontaneously to last until the day when the danger disappeared completely. The rescue of the Bulgarian Jews represents a rare event in the history of the civilized world. A small country of only 8 million people had the courage to withstand the constant pressure exercised by the Nazis, whose aim was to exterminate a defenceless minority. The pressure lasted four years. An entire nation arose against the inhuman theory of race superiority and risked security and lives in a fight that was long and exhausting. It was based solely on a human feeling, love for one’s neighbour. The challenge of a new Goliath was met by another David this time of Christian faith. How the rescue took place, how the game of “yes, but...” proceeded, how the Germans were led to believe that “if not today, the deportation will take place tomorrow”, to be postponed again to the next day, week, or month is the story of an astute policy of procrastination that the Germans never quite grasped. Among the European Jews that escaped the German gas chambers were the Bulgarian Jews, some 48,000 persons. The price they paid for remaining alive was considerable. They passed through great moral and physical suffering, yet they never doubted that the Bulgarian people would not abandon them. An extraordinary epic, still in search of its narrator...

The rescue represents a real miracle in war time, as the Nazis were present everywhere in the country and their military supremacy was still uncontested. The polemics that followed after the war about, for example, the questionable Communist participation in the rescue, and the role played by King Boris III, are important but not essential. They will be presented to the reader once the latter becomes acquainted with the events which took place during this human drama and with the persons that were part of it. Some day, when the Bulgarian people breathe freely again, maybe a kind of a Nobel prize will be awarded them for the rescue of 48,000 innocent men, women and children – an act of humaneness, unprecedented in world history. Between the Liberation (1878) and WWII, the Jewish community in Bulgaria showed a substantial social and cultural expansion. Talented individuals occupied high positions. They progressed and were treated as equals by Bulgarian society. Professor Yossif Fadenchecht became Minister of Justice; Yossef Herbst – Director of the Press at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Boris Schatz – Director of the Academy of Fine Arts; Dora Gabe – a leading poetess. Stefan Zweig. At a reception given in 1927 by the German Chancellor, Gustav Stresemann, he approached the Bulgarian Opera singer, Petur Raitchev, to whom he explained that his ancestors came from Vidin and that he planned to write a novel on the life of King Shishman of Vidin. Before 1940’s, anti-Semitism in Bulgaria was sporadic and artificial, introduced in most cases from abroad. Russian troops that fought on Bulgarian soil in 1877-78 had brought with them the legends of Jewish ritual murders of children (on the eve of Passover), which served as calls to persecution in some Bulgarian towns such as Pazardjik in 1884, Vratza in 1890, Lom in 1903 and Kustendil in 1904. In all cases the Jewish population was abolished after legally proving the falsehood of the accusations. In Vratza case, it was Dr. Konstantin Stoilov who in 1894 became Prime Minister, who successfully defended the accused Jews. According to the minutes of the People’s Court (1945), during the trial of those accused of abuses against the Jews during WWII, the Minister of Propaganda Dimo Kazassov was called to testify. To a question raised by the Defense Attorney. ‘Could the Bulgarian people have

intervened to save the Thracian and Macedonian Jews?’. Kazassov replied, ‘It was impossible to intercede because the measures were taken suddenly, surprising everybody. When the Bulgarian people learned about them, it was too late; the special trains were already arriving in Lom. The political influence of the Bulgarian people had not reached the newly liberated regions’. Defense Attorney: ‘Whose was the initiative for this deportation?’. Kazassov: ‘There was no initiative; the deportation was carried into effect by German agents’. Prof. Nissan Oren has written: ‘Since the Jews of these territories were never given Bulgarian citizenship, the Bulgarian Government could not effectively oppose German pressure’. The rescue of the Bulgarian Jews as related in this book was the result of a series of actions by popular forces. Large or small, all deserve the same attention. They were wonderful because they were genuine. The Bulgarian Jews were lucky to be caught by the hurricane while living on Bulgarian soil; and fortunately – as Benjamin Arditti has said – to have a head of State such as a King Boris III. Many observers and scholars admit that, alone, the King couldn’t have achieved his aim. The contrary was also true. Neither the Church, nor the politicians of any color, not even D. Peshev and the 42 members of the National Assembly, could give orders to Prime Minister Bogdan Filov. These had to come from the King. He, however, needed as much support as possible. He had to convince the Germans that his decision to stop or delay deportation was the result of a series of strong protests that coming, as they did, from very influential circles, could not be ignored. “During the entire WWII the King (Boris III) had to deal with a colossus who, in a short space of time, made the whole of Europe tremble, Adolf Hitler. Boris’ main task was to convince the Germans, and particularly Hitler, that he was their ally and friend, a most faithful one.” “In this game of chess the King used people around him as his pawns, such were the Prime Minister Bogdan Filov and the Minister of the Interior, Petur Gabrovski. Neither of them understood the Royal tactics... They were entirely trusted by the Nazis and could never admit that the King was capable of betraying the Germans. Boris needed exactly such specimens as collaborators.” ■

In Memoriam



The tribune of the National Assembly during the commemorative meeting

The Bulgarian Parliament Pays Tribute to the Memory of Dimiter Peshev

“The international celebration in memory of Dimiter Peshev pays tribute to a glorious page in the history of the Bulgarian people,” the Chairman of the National Assembly Yordan Sokolov said from the parliamentary tribune. Bulgarian, Israeli and Italian MPs gathered at a solemn meeting in parliament to posthumously honour the deputy chairman of the 25th National Assembly and his 42 colleagues, who in 1943 sent a written protest to then prime minister Bogdan Filov against the deportation of 48,000 Bulgarian Jews, thereby saving them from the Holocaust.

The celebrations put an end to the myth that the Bulgarian Jews were saved by Todor Zhivkov and the communists. The historic truth is the exact opposite – not a single one from the left-side of the 25th National Assembly signed Dimiter Peshev’s letter, Yordan Sokolov said. The initiator of the celebrations, the Italian journalist Gabriele Nissim, who is also the author of the book about Peshev “The Man who Stopped Hitler”, proposed the institution of an international prize in the name of the Bulgarian,

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Dimiter Peshev (13.06.1892 – 20.01.1973) was born in Kustendil. Graduated in law from Sofia University. Promoted to the rank of officer during the First World War. Worked as judge and lawyer in Plovdiv and Sofia. Minister of Justice from 1935 to 1936. MP in the 24th and 25th ordinary National Assembly. Elected deputy chairman of parliament during both mandates. In the spring of 1943 prepared a protest letter to Prime Minister Bogdan Filov against the deportation of the Bulgarian Jews, signed by 42 national representatives. Relieved of his post of deputy chairman as a consequence, remaining an ordinary MP until the dissolution of the 25th National Assembly. Arrested by the communists on 14 September 1944. Sentenced to 15 years imprisonment by the People’s Court on 1 February 1945. Released in December, but deprived of the chance to exercise his profession. The communist regime confiscated his property. From 1965 until his death Israel sent its benefactor a minimal monthly sum of money, miraculously officially approved by the Bulgarian authorities.



Yordan Sokolov, Chairman of the National Assembly

Dimiter Peshev is not completely unknown to the people interested in our real history. One good side of this celebration is also that it simply reminds people of the feat of this great Bulgarian which means just as much today. People like Peshev are leading figures. And if the historians are doing their job, the politician Peshev should go into the textbooks. The way in which Peshev was commemorated in the Italian Parliament less than a month ago, the fact that he will be celebrated in the European Parliament, testify to the importance of this Bulgarian. Modern Europe feels indebted to his cause and Bulgaria should be proud of this. ■

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Yordan Sokolov and the Speaker of the Knesset Dan Tichon at the cocktail after the meeting

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to be awarded every year for contribution in the struggle against genocide. "His exceptional history could have travelled the world – he personally fought Hitler in a decisive battle and won – the Jews are still alive," Nissim said. The book of the Italian Jew is shortly to be translated into Bulgarian, Yordan Sokolov said. "It is a chance for Bulgaria that the world is getting to know it through figures such as Dimiter Peshev, one of the righteous men of the 20th century, for which credit also goes to Gabriele Nissim, the author of the book 'The Man Who Stopped Hitler'," the Bulgarian Prime Minister said in his address which was read at the solemn meeting by Deputy

Prime Minister Alexander Bozhkov. In his message Ivan Kostov expresses his conviction that the traditional ethnic and religious tolerance should be the face of Bulgaria and its pass to the 21st century, for ever since its beginnings the Bulgarian nation has been the fruit of a solid mixture of different religions and traditions. The Chairman of the National Assembly read out the decree of the President, whereby Petar Stoyanov confers the order of the Madara Horseman, first degree, on Gabriele Nissim for particularly great merits in popularizing the role of Bulgaria and of outstanding Bulgarians in the salvation of the Jews born in the Bulgarian lands. "The 48,000 Bulgarian Jews

PM Kostov Meets the Bulgarian Turks Banished by the Zhivkov Regime

Exactly at the time of the solemn meeting in memory of Dimiter Peshev, the Bulgarian Prime Minister Ivan Kostov met with over 10,000 Bulgarian Turks in the Turkish town of Bursa. Mr. Kostov visited Turkey at the invitation of Mezut Yilmaz. The meeting in Bursa, where Turks live who were forcefully exiled from Bulgaria, was requested by the Bulgarian PM. The Ataturk Sports Center was unable to accommodate all those

who wanted to meet him. The security guards could not stop people, wanting to shake his hand. Tears could be seen in the eyes of many women. "The policy of ten years ago did not come from the mind and hearts of the Bulgarians, it was a policy of national criminals," Kostov said before the multitude. He ended his speech with the words: "I am very moved, I love you!" ■

Italy Creates A New Image of Bulgaria

"When we decided to celebrate the heroism of Peshev and his colleagues, we aimed to build a true image of Bulgaria among the Italians, to clear away the negatives from the country's alleged involvement in the attempt on the Pope," the MPs in the Italian parliamentary delegation said at a press conference in Sofia. "Italy has never accused the Bulgarian people of this," the Vice President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies Pierluigi Petrini underlined. "History is built by the actions of ordinary man and Peshev's feat is the lesson," said Gabriele Nissim, the author of the book about the Bulgarian. The director of the Israeli State Archives, Moshe Mosek, voiced

survived thanks to the actions of the dauntless statesman Dimiter Peshev and a lot of other Bulgarians," said the head of the Israeli delegation and Speaker of the Knesset, Dan Tichon. He emphasized the fact that, in contrast to other countries in Eastern Europe, anti-Semitism has never existed in Bulgaria. "I had the great fortune to be born in Bulgaria," said the Chairman of the Union of Bulgarian Emigrants in Israel, Yossif Kioso, who stressed once again that before having their own state, the Jews felt free in Bulgaria. "Our deep roots have remained here. We sincerely hope that the sacred land which raised us will occupy its deserving place in the great family of nations," he said. A letter of greetings from the son of Peshev's lawyer Yossif Yasharov was also read

Who Saved the Jews in Bulgaria?

2 February, 1995, Sofia, Bulgaria

Prof. Bar-Zohar and Dr. Ben-Yaakov presented the conclusion that this great humanitarian act was the result of a combined effort. It was the Bulgarian people, including leading intellectuals, parliamentarians, civil servants and politicians, the Orthodox Church and the King, who were the actual saviours of the Bulgarian Jews. It was stressed that on several



The Vice President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies Pierluigi Petrini

the hope that the book about Peshev would soon also be translated in his own country. "We do not forget our friends," said the Speaker of the Israeli Parliament Dan Tichon. He said that Dimiter Peshev's cause will be continued in a general meeting of the Bulgarian and Israeli parliament. ■

at the meeting. The author points out the utter poverty and isolation to which the communists doomed the outstanding Bulgarian politician and humanist, banished from public life, without a house of his own, deprived of the right to exercise his profession or to associate with people. In his letter he announces the world initiative to set up an international foundation in Dimiter Peshev's name, to "immortalize the heroic feat of the great Bulgarian, unprecedented in the history of World War II". The saved Jews will never forget Dimiter Peshev, Mr. Yasharov writes. "The ideological and cultural mistakes which bred that history and that policy' have still not been cleared away," the Vice President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies Pierluigi Petrini underlined in his address in this connection. ■



occasions King Boris III skillfully resisted the German pressures and demands. The audience, including a vast majority of members of the Jewish community in Sofia, applauded the arguments and conclusions presented by Prof. Bar-Zohar and Dr. Ben-Yaakov: the Nazi efforts to deport the Bulgarian Jews to the death camps could not have been successfully resisted without the decisive participation of King Boris III. ■

Ethnic Composition of Bulgarian Citizens According to the Latest Census in 1992

The old Bulgarians founded their own state for the first time in Europe in the 2nd century, after the second ruler of the Dulo Dynasty signed a peace treaty with the Roman Empire. Later rulers of the same dynasty concluded similar treaties with Byzantium in the 7th and 8th century. Initially, the Bulgarians inhabited the region to the northwest of the Caucasus. Under pressure of the tribes coming from the East, they were driven to the West. At the end of the 7th century they had established their own capital within the boundaries of present-day Bulgaria. In the Balkans the Bulgarians found Slavs, Thracians and other tribes. Their ethnic consolidation was stepped up after Christianity was adopted as the official religion in the year 865. The Bulgarians in Bulgaria today number about 7,250,000. Less than 1.2% are Muslims, the rest are Christians.

The Turks invaded the Balkan Peninsula in the early 14th century. By the mid-15th century it had become part of the Ottoman Empire. The some 800,000 ethnic Turks living in Bulgaria today are descendants of then settlers from Asia.

The Roma settled in the Bulgarian lands much like they did elsewhere in Europe. There are about 350,000 Roma living in Bulgaria today.

The Jews have been living in Bulgaria for centuries. Some of them were refugees from Spain where they were persecuted during the 15th century. Fifty years ago there were more than 50,000 Jews in Bulgaria. Although Bulgaria was an ally of Germany during World War II, not a single Bulgarian Jew lost his life or property on account of his ethnic origin. Most Bulgarian Jews emigrated to Israel after its foundation. There are less than 3,000 Jews in Bulgaria today.

The Russians in Bulgaria are either descendants of refugees who fled from the Bolshevik revolution in Russia or the offsprings of mixed marriages. They number about 17,000.

The Armenians sought asylum in Bulgaria after the massacres in the beginning of the 20th century. Some 14,000 live in the country today.

Other minorities are negligible in number. ■



Mr. Nissim signing autographs

Communism Killed Peshev A Second Time

by **Gabriele Nissim**

I think that it was communism which tried to destroy the memory of Peshev and only very few people knew about him until now. Communism managed to kill Peshev a second time. When he undertook a parliamentary campaign to stop the Nazi deportation, he was discredited and removed from power – this was his first death. And then they expunged the gesture Peshev made in 1943 from books and textbooks. The history of this great Bulgarian should have been known on a level with other prominent figures already 50 years ago. That's when Peshev was killed for a second time. This is a great responsibility which rests on the conscience of politicians.

The communists tried not only to obliterate Peshev's memory, they also tried to steal his merits. They wrote books and made films, claiming that Todor Zhivkov was the saviour of the Jews. Lies are one of the main characteristics of communism. History had to be written to fit their ideology. The communist party wanted to show itself as instrumental in the salvation of the Jews

Gabriele Nissim was born in 1950 and lives in Milan. His parents were Jews from Salonika who moved to Italy after World War II. His book "The Invisible Jews", dedicated to the fate of the Jews in the former socialist countries, was published in Italy in 1995. After 1991, in collaboration with translator Emilia Daskalova, he set out to find out all he could about Dimiter Peshev. The book about Dimiter Peshev's fate, entitled "The Man Who Stopped Hitler", presented in the Bulgarian Parliament on 6 November 1998, is an inspired essay about this figure of world stature.

and therefore the real heroes were replaced by an invented hero. Throughout many years, in thousands of brochures, the propagandists of the regime of Todor Zhivkov presented him as the political initiator who had forced the King to renounce his intentions. According to these writings, thousands of people were claimed to have emerged in the streets of Sofia after Zhivkov's appeal. I think that today we are able to conquer this lie, circulated for so many years. ■



After an almost 50-year silence, the Bulgarian papers today freely write about the truth of the salvation of the Jews

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