

BULGARIA AND THE MYTH OF INNOCENCE

Editorial by Gabriele Nissim

Bulgaria went down in history for the miraculous rescue of all Jews from the inner territories during the Holocaust. They were 50,000. It has not happened in any country allied to Germany that the deportation planned by a pro-Nazi government was called off at the last moment precisely by the very people who had supported the racial laws.

However this memory has been manipulated for years. During the Communist era the party on power, which had persecuted and sentenced to death some of the prominent rescuers of Jews, presented itself as the *deus ex machina* of that operation. It even tried to nominate Todor Zhivkov, the party secretary, to the Peace Nobel Prize, pretending he had rescued the Jews. They put forward this although it was well-known that in the Forties the party had very few members and no political influence to stop the deportation. Then eventually, after 1989, also following the publication of my book about Dimitar Peshev (*L'uomo che fermò Hitler*), it became possible to start a political review of the case. The deeds of the deputies led by Peshev as well as the initiative of the Orthodox Church run by patriarchs Stefan and Kiril were pointed out. These men had compelled the Bulgarian king Boris III to step back and not hand the Jews over to the Germans. However in 2001, when Simeon, Boris' son, was appointed, we witnessed the start of the umpteenth attempt to manipulate history, to turn the Bulgarian king into the true rescuer of the Jews.

Those who had signed the racial laws and had approved the secret operation that would have led to the deportation of the Jews were thus presented as the best friends of the Jews, whereas it was well-known that without the pressure put on him by Peshev and his fellows King Boris would have agreed quite carelessly to the extermination of Jews. Over the same days – it was March 1943 – Bulgaria handed over to the Germans 11,000 the Jews from Thrace and Macedonia, i.e. the territories that Hitler had handed back to Bulgarian sovereignty.

Today we again witness a historical debate. Following the production of a movie for the Macedonian tv, “Third half”, which reminds us how those Jews were deported with the collaboration of Bulgarian police and armies, the national press and the political circles of Bulgaria have literally stood up against what they consider as “inciting to hatred” and “falsification of Bulgarian history”.

By remembering the rescue of the Jews residing within the historical borders the media shift the blame only on the Germans and refuse starting any self-criticism about the fate of the Macedonian Jews. The reason why is clear. They think that

the uncompromising defence of one's own "innocence" is the best way to keep one's reputation in the world. Hence paradoxically the memory of the rescue of the Jews from the inner territories is exploited to be silent again about the crown's responsibilities. Facing these new split, a group of brave intellectuals gathered around the Obiective magazine, convened in Sofia exponents of Judaism as well as scholars from all over the world to discuss the key questions that have remained unresolved in the Bulgarian memory within a great meeting which will take place at the beginning of October. The outcome is hardly predictable because moral self-criticism is always painful. But as Peshev remembered, in the document he presented before the Bulgarian Parliament in March 1943 the reputation of a nation is always safeguarded by not committing deeds that can put a shameful blame on the future generations. At the time the question was to do everything possible to prevent the deportation of Jews, today it is to present oneself to the world with the courage of historical truth.