

Presentation for Federal Interagency Program on Holocaust Remembrance, May 1, 2003

Good Afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen:

Standing before you today, I feel privileged to speak to you about some dramatic and extraordinary World War II events in Bulgaria. I come to you not as historian or student of political science, but one who bears the scars caused by Hitler's henchmen. As one of 48,000 Bulgarian Jews, I feel it is my duty and obligation to pay homage to the people that, against all odds, have fought on our behalf in our struggle against the menace of the Nazi murder machine.

On March 1, 1941, Bulgaria's fascist government asserted the country's alliance with Nazi Germany by signing the Tripartite Pact. On that day, Hitler's troops entered Bulgarian territory, even before the ink was dry, and prior to the Parliament's rubberstamping of the fait accompli.

My heart sank as I saw through our apartment window the spit-shined, arrogant German troops in their armored cars and motorcycles, their loud and obnoxious roar signaling impending danger.

I felt the beginning of our slide down the slippery slope towards the precipice! This parade of German military power throughout one of the most beautiful Sofia neighborhoods gave us pause. The population's exuberant, open-arms welcome given the Nazi troops caused us to tremble before the gathering storms ahead, the likes of which we could not yet fathom. It served to reinforce the rumors about Hitler's diabolical plans.

The Bulgarian population's sense of euphoria and jubilation however, spawned from Hitler's enticing proposal to Bulgaria. He had in fact made Bulgaria's King Boris III an offer he could not refuse. It was a gift – the territories of Thrace, Macedonia and Dobrudja that his father Ferdinand had lost during the Balkan wars and at the end of World War I – lands, which the majority of Bulgarians had always believed were rightfully theirs. In the eyes of the majority, these territories were offered with seemingly little expected in return. The passing of the racial anti-Semitic laws deceptively appeared as a small price to pay, and most believed that they would never be enforced. In the planning of Operation Barbarossa, the massive incursion into Soviet Russia on June 22 that year, Hitler's strategy called for securing the southeastern flank of operations. Hence, by offering Thrace and Macedonia to Bulgaria, and inviting her troops to occupy and control them as part of United Bulgaria, he shrewdly accomplished that, and the fringe benefit of blinding Bulgaria's leadership and population with the mythical image of himself as the world's greatest leader and the country's noble benefactor. This was indeed the gift that continued giving.

The people's false sense of euphoria blinded the majority to the fact that King Boris had in reality signed a pact with the Devil!

One person, who was blinded as well, and later was to play a critical role in our lives, was the pro-Nazi Dimitur Peshev. He was the Parliament's vice-President, and on November 19, 1940 he presided over an important session – the approval of the anti-Semitic racial laws.

“The Law for the Defense of the Nation”, as euphemistically referred to, was drawn up a month before by the Minister of Interior, Petur Gabrovski – a staunch pro-

Nazi and founder of Ratnik – an extreme rightist organization, whose objective was to align the country with the Third Reich.

Gabrovski enjoyed introducing himself with the unmistakable “Heil Hitler” salute at the youth rallies of “Brannik”, Ratnik’s sister organization parallel to Hitler’s youth in Germany.

The LDN (acronym for Law for the Defense of the Nation) called for stripping the Jewish population of every right – from the right to vote, to the right to practice one’s profession. Many Jewish businesses and shops were closed. We were forced to wear the yellow Star of David, were prohibited from owning any means of transportation, telephone, radio, and were banned from all recreational or theater events, concerts, sporting events, or stay at hotels.

A strictly enforced 9 PM to 6 AM curfew was imposed on us throughout the country.

The Parliament majority voted to pass the LDN bill on January 21, 1941. Dimitur Peshev voted in favor and King Boris signed it into law. It effectively destroyed the lives of the whole Jewish population, turning us into second class citizens.

My memory of this dark period is that of a teenage boy, who, because of the oppressive conditions, was never to have his much longed for Bar-Mitzvah celebration. The enforcement of wearing the yellow Star of David was immediate. It made us targets for anti-Semitic attacks by the Ratnik and Brannik thugs, and there were numerous times when I endured beatings as a result of being marked fair game. Our apartment door displayed the clear sign “Jewish Residence” for everyone to see. It was in effect a Government Issue license to perpetrate vandalism and mischief.

Few of us dared test the 9 PM to 6 AM curfew. On numerous occasions, in some of Sofia’s best neighborhoods, shouts of “Cheefoot” (Bulgarian for “Kike”), and rocks were thrown in my direction.

I can not forget when one evening, secret service agents showed up at our doorstep and took my father to an unknown destination. My uncle Samuel went with him. We didn’t know whether we will ever see them again. They were out for what seemed an eternity, and after an agonizing night for the whole family, they returned home, looking as if they were run over by a truck. I never learned exactly what they had been subjected to, but it was easy to tell by their appearance.

By June 1941, a law imposing a heavy property tax on all Jews was passed. All possessions, household and personal, were subject to draconian taxes that many could not afford. Appraisal of properties was arbitrary, and depended on the various officials’ whims. Those unable to pay had their properties confiscated and were thus reduced to poverty.

In June 1942, the Parliament approved the formation of the KEV (acronym for *Komisarstvo za Evreiskite Vuprosi*, or Commissariat for the Jewish Questions). It gave full power of all decisions on the Jewish Questions to the government. KEV was under the supervision of the Minister of Interior, Gabrovski, and was kept outside the control of the Parliament, thus protecting it from the impact of public opinion.

As head of the KEV, Gabrovski placed Alexandur Belev, a fellow Ratnik, and a staunch pro-Nazi anti-Semite, who had thoroughly studied the Third Reich’s anti-Jewish legislation and stratagem on deportation to concentration camps. Armed with the “carte

blanche” given him by the Ministry Council, Belev fervently threw himself to the task assigned. Soon, the Council approved a sanction in principle that “all Jews of Sofia were subject to expulsion to the provinces, or outside the kingdom”, and gave Belev free hand in making decisions.

Many of us were relocated closer to the sites of the Jewish consistories. We were forced out of our high-end Moscovska Street condo, and sent to the ghetto-like older section of the city Yuch Bunar (the poorest Jewish section of town). Twelve of us were squeezed into a small three room apartment.

All Jewish men between the ages of 20 and 45 were drafted to forced labor camps, and their families left with no means of support, while their bread earners were vulnerable to deportation on demand.

Demands came from Germany for the deportation of the 12,000 Jews from the territories of Thrace and Macedonia, and the 48,000 from inside Bulgaria. The Reich also demanded from Bulgaria the payment of 250 DM per capita for the Jews’ deportation as reparations, and transportation expenses to the concentration camps in Poland.

The response of the king’s obedient servant, Prime Minister Filov, was somewhat vague. He and the king claimed that the Jews from the “liberated” territories **were immediately available**, however the Jews from old Bulgaria, or part of them, were presently needed for work in road construction.

This hesitancy prompted the Third Reich to then pick up the pace. On January 20, 1943, it dispatched from France specialist Theodor Dannecker, Adolph Eichmann’s right arm, who had recently completed the deportation of thousands of French Jews to death camps.

On February 22, Dannecker signed a text of a **top secret** agreement with Belev, setting the plans for deporting the 12,000 Jews from Thrace and Macedonia. Slyly altered by Belev, the original figure of 12,000 was inexplicably raised to 20,000.

Since the number of Jews in those territories was under 12,000, in order to reach the figure of 20,000 as called for in the agreement, Dannecker and Belev chose to include Jews from within Bulgaria’s interior, (or old Bulgaria, other than the re-conquered territories). By so doing, their plan was to open the floodgates to further deportations from all of Bulgaria. Done in strict secrecy, as to not alarm the population, or stir up reaction from public opinion, it was approved by the Ministry Council on March 2.

The covert plan however, leaked profusely. Rumors were circulated about the whole Jewish population’s deportation to Poland.

Despite his position as vice-President of the Parliament, who frequented the circles closer to the government, Peshev doubted these rumors. He had however heard confirmed distressing news from the town of Dupnitza about a harrowing scene – a convoy of Jews from Thrace, passing through on foot – men, women, children, old men – all desperate people with no strength left, being dragged to places unknown.

Even all this however, did not suffice to trigger alarms or at least concern in Peshev’s conscience. He was not an anti-Semite; he had grown up among Jews in Kiustendil, the town where I was born. His and my father’s families lived just a few doors from each other in the thermal baths Jewish neighborhood. The two families were very close, and Dimitur’s sister even attended a Jewish school for a while. It was customary for his parents to be invited to the Baruch family’s Passover Seder dinner, and

it was also a regular event for Peshev's family to give the Baruch children treats of colored hardboiled eggs and "kozunak" (sweetened bread) on Easter. Every Bulgarian holiday was also a holiday for the Jews, and all this was considered absolutely normal. My uncle and Dimitur were classmates in high school, and my father attended classes in the University law school with him.

Hitler's charisma however blinded Peshev from his past – the happy years with his Kiustendil Jewish childhood friends. He had forgotten them.

But on March 7, 1943 he was in for a rude awakening. His long forgotten friend, Yako Baruch, my father, the clandestine Zionist activist in Sofia, telephoned him after all these years. He told him that he had just received news from his brother Samuel in Kiustendil, that the preparations for deportation were under way as they spoke. After confirming the news and exhausting all of his connections in the capital, my father realized he only had one card left to play – the pro-Nazi vice-President of the Parliament – his childhood friend from the good old days in Kiustendil. He believed that Peshev was the only one who could possibly intervene, and as Kiustendil's elected deputy, he would have to take a stand on all that was happening there.

My father bluntly confronted his former classmate with the truth. Peshev was stunned. He became angry and resentful that he had been kept out of the circuit on such matter of grave importance.

He was jolted out of the torpor of his pro-Nazi dream by his friend Yako, who spoke of his Jewish friends in danger, of my grandfather Pinkas, and my uncle Samuel, his friend from high school. He struck a chord in Peshev's conscience and made him think.

The **top secret plan's** cover was quickly blown, and news about the many thousands of Jews rounded up in Peshev's hometown Kiustendil, and other towns such as Dupnitsa, Gorna Djumaia and Radomir spread like wildfire.

Peshev's initial reaction was to meet with my uncle Joseph and tell him that he had obtained safe-conduct passes for the escape of our entire family. But, my uncle reminded him that at stake were not just the lives of a few but the lives of Bulgaria's entire Jewish population, and it was crucial to take some action. Peshev seemed bewildered and made no promise.

After this meeting, things moved rapidly. My father called to inform him that a delegation of four from Kiustendil was on its way to the capital as they spoke. At this point, Dimitur's attitude completely changed. He became resolute, forceful, and determined. He told Baruch to set up a meeting with the Kiustendil delegation at his house to plan the political initiative.

During discussions with my father, Peshev remembered that the following day, the Parliament's plenary session was scheduled, providing the perfect opportunity for triggering a political scandal. He agreed with his suggestion to sound out the reactions of as many deputies as possible.

On the morning of March 9 at 10 AM, Peshev met with the Kiustendil delegation in his house. It was decided that they all meet in the Parliament at 3 PM, and request a meeting with the Prime Minister.

Peshev then asked Minister Gabrovski for confirmation on the events in Kiustendil, but the latter denied everything.

He tried to see Prime Minister Filov, but the Minister forbade him, as well as the delegation from entering his office.

Seeing that it was time to forego protocol, Peshev, together with ten delegates, burst into the office of the Minister of Interior and ordered him to retreat.

Gabrovski attempted to calm the delegation, claiming it was all a misunderstanding, and that the issue only concerned the Jews of the territories, controlled by the Germans, and the government had no say in the matter, but for Bulgaria the problem did not exist.

Peshev and Kiustendil deputy Mihalev then, firmly insisted that Gabrovski telephone the Kiustendil prefect in their presence to verify the state of affairs.

Forced to talk with Kiustendil, Gabrovski at last was faced with the unmistakable evidence. He tried to rationalize, but saw that the “cat was out of the bag”. Assuming an air of astonishment, he maintained that he had not given the order of deportation.

Peshev took advantage of the moment and invited him to do his duty and refute the decision. He threatened not to leave the Minister’s office until the order was revoked, and the revocation circulated to all the prefectures.

The frightened Gabrovski asked to be allowed to consult with someone at a higher level. It is not certain who he consulted with, and he may have talked to Filov or attempted to contact the king.

Upon returning, the Minister informed the delegation that, regretfully the order could not be revoked, but its execution could be temporarily suspended.

Nonetheless, Peshev was not satisfied with Gabrovski’s answer that could be nothing more than a maneuver to calm the delegation. He then asked to call the various cities to stop the operation that was under way. Gabrovski tried to prevaricate and assured him that he would have his secretary do the calling. Seeing this as another ploy, Peshev himself then called Governor Miltenov in Kiustendil to communicate to him directly the revocation of the order. Another deputy called the city of Dupnitsa to stop the operation there immediately. In view of the impending chain reaction by the rest of the deputies, Gabrovski then ordered his secretary to telegraph all the cities and circulate the order to suspend the roundup of the Jews.

Suddenly the direction of events took an about face, and all Jews poised for the journey of no return, were told the unbelievable news that they could return to their homes.

Thus, through the threat of public scandal, Peshev caused the office of the Minister of Interior to halt the deportation order. He later confided to my father that after his confrontation with Gabrovski, he had received a guarantee from the Royal Palace on suspension of the deportation. **Nothing similar to this event ever happened anywhere else in Europe.**

King Boris’s authorization for suspension shows who really held the reigns of power in fascist Bulgaria, and that the autonomy of the government on the Jewish Question had been pure fiction, which had served to shield the monarch from eventual criticism. In an April 5, 1943 report to Berlin, German secret agent Karl Hoffmann wrote that Belev had been overridden by the king, who was worried about his own image before the public opinion, and that “The deportation in Bulgaria proved to be much more difficult than in Germany and other countries,

because the government could not move without taking into account the interior and international consequences.”

Suspecting that Gabrovski would not call off the deportation, and view the suspension as only temporary, Peshev prepared a forceful letter of protest to the Prime Minister, to be signed by the deputies of the Parliamentary majority, and be introduced at the next meeting.

The letter was signed by him and 42 other deputies.

After an unsuccessful attempt to introduce it through proper channels, he personally delivered it to the head of the Prime Minister's cabinet. **The date was March 17, 1943. From then on his life was never to be the same.**

Fascist youths in Kiustendil broke the windows of his house and painted hostile graffiti on its walls. For the first time Peshev was afraid for his life.

On March 20, the Ministry Council, at Filov's request, voted to remove Peshev from his position as vice-president of the Parliament. **Three days later, the decision received the king's authorization.**

On March 25, at a special Parliamentary session, Peshev was officially dismissed from his vice-Presidency.

On orders from the throne, the king's adviser Sevov promptly gave the king's seal of approval to the Prime Minister for dismissal. Peshev was thus turned into a scapegoat that the king could offer Hitler following a possible failure of the deportation.

Although Peshev's behavior against the government had been punished with the king's consent, it had caused the king to rethink his position on the Jewish Question. **But no attempt whatsoever was made on the monarch's part to stop the deportation of the Jews from the territories. There is no evidence or reason to believe that the Nazis exerted more pressure for them than for the others. It was carried out on schedule under the total control of the Bulgarian government with approval from the throne. The only voice, raised in their defense by opposition deputy Petko Stainov in Parliament, was viciously stifled with boos and hisses from Boris's henchmen.**

From eyewitness accounts, among them a report by Italian General Pieche, who saw the rounding of Macedonian Jews in Skopje, the manner in which the Bulgarian policemen treated the deportees was even crueler than that of the Germans!

A grievance appeal from Metropolitan Stefan was sent to the king. On March 10, Metropolitan Kyril from Plovdiv sent a telegram to Boris, threatening to lie down on the tracks in front of the trains transporting Jewish martyrs. **The protests remained unheeded. The highest power in Bulgaria sent a total of 11,343 of our brethren from Macedonia, Thrace and Pirot to their deaths in Treblinka. Eleven of them were my cousins from Macedonia, who were gassed just because they were Jewish.**

On April 15 King Boris unexpectedly made an extremely prosecutorial anti-Semitic speech before the Small Cabinet of the Holy Synod. His entire discourse was aimed at the Jews, maintaining that their spirit damages all of humanity, in as much as it creates “hatred among the population, skepticism, and moral corruption”, and that “the actual world cataclysm is owed to a large extent to their

speculative spirit. The faster the people of the world free themselves of their influence, the stronger patriotism and national spirit will become.”

Innumerable interpretations were given to this speech, which was indeed too definitive to fit the king's ambiguous noncommittal style. It is indeed puzzling why the king would let himself go into such blatantly anti-Jewish pronouncements. Would these have been his true feelings, expressed in anger, despite his seemingly close association and friendship with so many prominent Jews in Sofia, such as his personal dentists, his Packard automobile dealer, his personal tailors, and many others? Is this the same king who, occasionally, during my Sunday morning walks with my father, I would see drive his convertible through the palace gates, and in a most friendly manner smilingly greet us with a salute?

Although our deportation of March 9 was halted, it was officially still pending.

Hitler's executioner Belev regarded Gabrovski's order as temporary. KEV's original scheme was to clear Bulgaria of all Jews, and that is what the Commissar set out to do.

He prepared a new plan that called for the deportation of Bulgaria's whole Jewish population to Poland by the end of September. To preempt any further Jewish political influence, Belev then organized the evacuation of all Jews from the capital. Lists of 16,000 were prepared for evacuation to the provinces with final destination Poland.

On May 21, orders of expulsion started arriving, allowing only three days to pack, and leave the capital for the provinces.

Strong letters of protest from the Parliament opposition, and others, including sixty three of the intelligentsia were sent to the government and the king.

The Holy Synod's bishops led by Metropolitan Stefan pledged their full support and presented to the king the Church's strong objections to the government's anti-Jewish policy. The government however, remained unresponsive, and closed its doors to all appeals.

This expression of solidarity motivated Sofia's Jewish community to organize a public protest. **True to form, Boris found it best to slip away to the countryside, and by making himself unavailable, avoided being forced to take a stand.**

The protest was scheduled for May 24, a big holiday celebrating Saints Cyril and Methodius, the two Greek brothers who invented the Cyrillic alphabet. It was led by the nonconformist Rabbi Tzion, and Sofia's Chief Rabbi Hananel. The plan was to march from the Central Synagogue to the Royal Palace. The attempt to do so, however, turned into a disaster.

The KEV agents, lined up along the route with their motorcycles and police vans, were ready. They arrested four hundred demonstrators and immediately transported them to the provinces. Rabbi Tzion was arrested and sent to the Somovit camp in northern Bulgaria. KEV agents arrested Jews scheduled for expulsion that day, and sent them that night to the same camp. A number of them escaped by hiding in homes of their Bulgarian friends.

Rabbi Hananel, on the run and wanted by the police, hid in the home of Metropolitan Stefan, who publicly announced that he would baptize all Jews who so desired. The price the prelate paid for that was house arrest.

Carrying the torch ignited by Peshev's spark on March 9, the Orthodox Church, by vociferously opposing the deportation, succeeded in influencing the behavior of the entire political leadership, as well as that of King Boris.

In light of the recent events, German Ambassador Beckerle, in a June 7, 1943 report to Berlin asked not to push too hard on the Jewish Question, for it could open an unnecessary crisis between the two countries. He went on to say that even if the Prime Minister and the government had tried to reassure the Germans in every meeting, in reality they had continued to delay decision on the deportation, because they did not have the consent of public opinion. "The Bulgarians are tolerant people, accustomed to coexisting with other ethnic groups, and had no reason to hate the Jews."

In a later report of August 18, 1943 he concluded that only a German military victory would force the Bulgarians to change their minds.

But Hitler's aspiration for military victory was quickly becoming a pipe dream. Having suffered severe losses in Stalingrad, then in North Africa, and in the famous massive battle at the Kursk salient, The Reich's demise was inevitable.

Shortly after the May 24th tumultuous events, we were sent to the provinces, and our family was moved to Kiustendil, where 15 of us were cramped in my grandparents' house – the house where I was born, and still standing today!

Prohibited from owning a radio, we were reduced to listening to state controlled censored broadcasts played on street corner loudspeakers. In mid-August, news of the king's illness after his return from a meeting with Hitler was heard. Boris never recovered, and on August 28, 1943 his death was announced.

Many rumors floated about concerning the cause of the monarch's death. A popular theory among those that believed in the myth of Boris as savior of the Jews, was that Hitler had poisoned him in retaliation for his refusal to commit Bulgarian troops, and/or deport the Jews. It was never proven, and in the opinion of the cardiologists dispatched to his death bed, the cause of his demise was certain to have been a heart attack.

Despite difficulties in contacting the outside world, my father managed to find channels of communication whereby he could continue his clandestine operations as Zionist leader. He succeeded in obtaining immigration visas to Palestine for groups of Jewish children as well as his brother Samuel and his family.

On December 31, 1943, I joined my uncle Samuel and his family and left Sofia by train on our journey to Palestine via Turkey, Syria and Lebanon. Our entire luggage was stolen somewhere in Turkey, and we arrived in Palestine with just the clothes on our backs.

In Bulgaria between 1943 and 1944 the world turned upside down. In view of the impending Russian invasion, the racial laws were abolished in August of 1944 and the Jews were able to return to their homes after months of forced exile in the provinces and labor camps.

The morning after the Red Army's entry into Bulgarian territory on the night of September 8, 1944, it was greeted with a swift coup d'état led by Damian Velchev, a

figure, who was destined through no initiative of his own, to play a crucial role in Peshev's life during the incoming Stalinist regime. Bulgaria's politics suddenly turned a full 180 degrees, and the country found itself in Moscow's arms.

In August of 1946, I returned to my family in Bulgaria, which was now under the new communist regime. My parents welcomed me in our still beautiful apartment, but we were forced to share it with another family. The communist authorities deemed it to be too ostentatious for just us. During the next three years I focused my attention on my studies in High School and the Conservatory of Music, and at the first opportunity, in 1949 I immigrated to Israel, and joined the Israeli Army.

By refusing to be part of the communist sponsored welcoming chorus for the Red Army, Peshev who had stood up against the fascist Filov government and the king, and had been punished by them, now placed himself in jeopardy with the incoming Stalinist regime. He was arrested and accused of being both an anti-Semite and anti-Communist.

The People's Court was determined to condemn him to death, as it did with twenty other colleagues of his from the Parliament, who had signed the letter of protest against the pro-Nazi government. A small miracle occurred however: Peshev's defense counsel, Joseph Nissim Yasharoff pulled the proverbial rabbit-out-of-the-hat by reminding the Court through testimony that in 1936 Peshev, as Minister of Justice at the time, by cleverly manipulating the King into issuing a pardon, had saved death row inmate Damian Velchev's life. The latter at the time of Peshev's trial before the Communist court had just been named the new Minister of War, and was the author of the communist coup d'etat upon the Red Army's arrival. The price Yasharoff paid for bravely defending Peshev before this Kangaroo Court was the demise of his very successful career. The Sofia Lawyers Association, in compliance with Communist Party demands, disbarred him. He will be remembered as one of the heroes, who believed that the truth must live on at all costs. His son Norbert, who is very proud of his father, is here with us today... Norbert?

Peshev was sentenced to 15 years in prison, and was released after one year. The remainder of his life was empty and aimless, and he was forgotten by everyone. All of Bulgaria's Jews left the country en masse for Israel. During the sixties, after emigration difficulties had been overcome, some of them began efforts to help the man who had saved them through monetary donations and individual letters of gratitude.

There was an offer to immigrate to Israel, as well as one to the United States, but Peshev refused: his desire was to be rehabilitated in his own country. Alas, he did not live long enough to see his wish come true. He died on February 21, 1973.

Peshev's heroic act had been covered up by the Bulgarian Communists for 45 years with the purpose of claiming credit as being the true protagonists of the Jews' rescue.

Now that the cloud of obfuscation has been lifted, the world has started to remember Peshev.

The Italian author Gabriele Nissim, after extensive research has written a book, which I have translated into English titled “The Man Who Stopped Hitler”. It depicts Peshev’s life in detail as well as the political landscape in 20th century Bulgaria. The English translation of the book has not yet been published. The Italian, German, and Bulgarian versions have been honored in **five different Parliaments: the Italian Parliament, the European Parliament, the Bundestag in Berlin, the Bulgarian Parliament, and the Knesset in Jerusalem**. Peshev was named “**Righteous Among The Nations**” by Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

In Israel, a forest of trees was planted named “Bulgaria Forest”. In it two marble plaques were erected: one commemorating Peshev, the Bulgarian clergy, and the persons who fought on our behalf; the other was in memory of the 11,343 Jews of Macedonia and Thrace who perished in the death camps.

Later, without any publicity whatsoever, a third plaque, commemorating King Boris III and his wife Queen Giovanna was erected in Bulgaria Forest. Thus, the anti-Semite monarch, responsible for the devastating anti-Jewish legislation, the expulsion of thousands of our brethren to Nazi Germany, and the macabre plans to deport Bulgaria’s entire Jewish population, was ironically being honored, alongside with Peshev, the man whom he had punished for fighting on our behalf!

Following a tremendous outpouring of indignation and protests by survivors, descendants of Treblinka victims, and many Bulgarian and Israeli political leaders and historians, a public committee led by the man who created “The Garden Of The Righteous” for Yad Vashem, Supreme Court Justice Moshe Beiski, was formed. After lengthy deliberation, it ordered that the monuments be removed, and that a new monument be built in memory of the 11,343 Jews from Thrace, Macedonia and Pirot that died in Treblinka. In April 2002, indeed such a monument was erected, reversing this outrageous travesty.

The United States Congress, in Resolution 77, dated March 4th of this year, and passed a few days later, specifically honors King Boris III along with the true heroes of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, politicians, intellectuals, and citizens that played a part in the resistance to Nazi pressure to the Jews’ deportation.

Thus, possibly because of incomplete information, our elected legislators honored the leader of Fascist Bulgaria, who in December 1941 declared war on the United States, and gave his tacit approval to the gassing of 11,343 of his own citizens! May I remind us all that a little over a month ago we went to war against a dictator who did the same to his own citizens? It is indeed another travesty and a grave insult to the victims and survivors of the Holocaust, and it would behoove the hierarchy of this great country of ours to find a way of rectifying this serious blunder in a manner similar to that of the Israeli committee headed by Supreme Court Justice Beiski.

While we celebrate the survival of the 48,000 Jews from within the confines of Old Bulgaria, the painful reality of the heavy price the Jews of United Bulgaria paid will always remain part of the Holocaust’s tragic history. The lives of more than 11,000 of them were sacrificed as payment for the gift of lands and spoils of war Hitler offered King Boris III.

On October 25, 2002, a Museum dedicated to Peshev was inaugurated in Kiustendil, and with my assistance, the International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation coined a special medal in honor of the event.

The question of the Bulgarian Jews' survival while the rest of their East European brethren were being sent to the gas chambers en masse is surrounded by scores of conflicting theories and falsehoods. To credit one individual or entity with the so called salvation of the Jews, would be much too simplistic. In order to attempt an explanation about what really happened, one needs to look into the multiple components of the political mosaic and events in Bulgaria, the great losses Germany was suffering on the battlefields, Peshev's heroic acts, those of the visionaries among the Bulgarian people and intelligentsia, the righteousness of the Orthodox Church, and especially the number of brave Jewish leaders, who risked their lives by standing up and being counted. Nevertheless, one must not lose sight of the fact that had Nazi Germany won the war, none of the above would have had any influence on a tragic outcome, and the lives of all these brave people would have been snuffed out along with the rest of the Bulgarian Jewish population.

I hope to have helped shed some light on this dark period in the history of the Bulgarian Jews' plight. Until very recently, historical facts were confused with falsehoods, mystifications, and outrageous claims stemming from opportunistic self-serving political agendas by authors of fictitious tall tales, singing the praises of undeserving individuals, who in reality couldn't care less about our survival. My father's initiative to spur Dimitur Peshev into action against his own government, the actions of several prominent Jewish leaders, and those of my uncles Samuel and Joseph, helped cause the avalanche of protests that followed. Had it not been for them, it may never have taken place in time for the 48,000 Jews to escape annihilation at one minute before the witching hour! As I have said in the beginning of my presentation to you, I am one of these 48,000. If it weren't for their bravery, I would not be standing here today! In the words of Vaclav Havel: **Long Live The Truth!**

Thank you!