

Open Letter to Simeon

by Gabriele Nissim

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On the occasion of Bulgarian Prime Minister Simeon's visit to Italy I would like to address two questions to him, a person whom I admire for his political courage.

Why, since the day of his election has he not yet made a public gesture to commemorate the figure of the parliament's deputy president Dimitur Peshev, the author of the entire Bulgarian Jewish community's rescue in March of 1943, when, with a powerful action, he forced Minister of the Interior Peter Gabrovski from his office to revoke the order of deportation?

And why has the Bulgarian parliament decided to shut down the foundation created in Peshev's name, even before the realization of any initiative, by stopping the bookstore distribution of my volume translated to Bulgarian as a parliamentary edition "The man who stopped Hitler" (Mondadori), which, after the long years of communist censorship, returned moral dignity to the high proponent of the regime, and was introduced in a ceremonial session of the national assembly?

It is as if the true presence of Peshev had suddenly become uncomfortable, because it risks cracking the historical judgment on the monarchy, and poses some questions on the role of Boris III, Simeon's father, now presented as the protagonist of the Jews' rescue, while keeping silent his responsibilities of the unfortunately successful deportation of the Jews from Thrace and Macedonia.

It is difficult to think that a son, as Prime Minister, can open a case of criticism on the figure of his father, the absolute master of the country until his premature death that occurred a few months before the Red Army's arrival in 1944. His feelings are to be respected, and it would be a mistake to pretend that the role he plays in the country can transform him into an impartial historian of the monarchy of which however, at least on a personal level, presents a sense of continuity.

Yet there is a moral question that should be addressed to Simeon himself laden with the memory of the politician who succeeded in changing the course of events at the time that his father Boris held the country's reins.

If today Bulgaria is governed by the first descendant of the royal palace, it is not only because of a great electoral outcome or his personal charisma, but also due to the prestige of the monarchy's past that continued to be exerted on the nation's sentiments.

It would be difficult for Simeon to enjoy the international credit as the champion of Bulgaria's entrance into the European Union and NATO if the responsibility of delivering the Jews to the Nazis would weigh on his father's figure.

Peshev himself had realized this when, in the document he introduced to parliament on March 17, 1943, demanding the halt of deportation, he affirmed that the future of Bulgaria's fate and that of the monarchy would depend on the behavior toward the Jews. "These measures are inadmissible because they would have serious consequences for the country. They would provoke such a serious stain of infamy on Bulgaria's honor, such an unbearable moral and political weight, that they would deprive her of every valid matter in international relationships."

After that letter, which caused the explosion of a scandal in parliament, and forced the government to withstand the Germans' pressures, Peshev was removed from the vice-Presidency on March 23, 1943 by a decision taken jointly by Prime Minister Filov and King Boris.

Despite the sudden betrayal, Peshev never renounced the monarchy and did not sell out to the communists and the Red Army when the Soviet troops entered Bulgaria. Rather than applaud the country's occupation, he preferred to risk a life of marginalized existence.

Italy has been the first nation in Europe to honor his extraordinary moral stature and, with a commemoration of our parliament on October 16, 1998, make known his story to these Bulgarians and the whole world. Therefore today, a public gesture of great moral value would be for Simeon, during his visit in our country, to commemorate Peshev's merit for saving Bulgaria's honor, and averting the monarchy from one of the most tragic errors of its history. Only Simeon can do that.

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