

The Fate of the Bulgarian Jews during the Holocaust – the Menace, the Rescue, the Aliya

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Bulgarians and Jews have for centuries lived together in a tolerant and loyal manner. The very first Bulgarian Constitution, adopted in 1879 upon the Liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman Rule, guaranteed the political equality of the ethnical and religious minorities in a period when Jews had a major role not only in the economic, but also in the political and cultural life of the country. Bulgarian Jews were internationally recognized individuals like the painter Jules Pascin, originally from Vidin and the Nobel Prize winner for literature Elias Canetti, born in Rousse, as well as many other members of the Bulgarian intellectual elite. The Bulgarian Jewish Community maintained excellent relations with the state and in 1909 the Bulgarian Monarch family attended the grand opening of the impressive new Sofia Synagogue – the third largest in Europe and among the most beautiful.

As loyal subjects of the Bulgarian state the Jews took part in the wars for Bulgarian national unification. During the Serb-Bulgarian War of 1885 some Jews reached the rank of colonel in the Bulgarian army. The names of some Jewish soldiers and officers are prominent during the Balkan wars of 1912-1913 and during the First World War. The total number of Jews, killed in these wars is 952.

In the period between the two world wars the Jewish Community in Sofia accounts for around 0.8% of the total Bulgarian population, reaching approximately 50 000 people. More than half of them live in the capital – Sofia. Almost 90% of them were born in Bulgaria, 92% were Bulgarian subjects and their total share in the Bulgarian business and trade was 5.17%. Together with the Greeks and the Armenians the Jews were representatives of the commerce in the country only historically, as the number of wealthy Jews was very low.

The atmosphere started changing with Hitler's advent to power in Germany. The political and economic influence of Germany on the Balkans was beneficial for the appearance of anti-Semitism on the Bulgarian political stage. In mid-30-ies in Bulgaria the two main anti-Semitic political factions were shaped: the Union of Bulgarian national legions and the Supporters of the advance of the Bulgarian Spirit. Both organizations realized anti-Jewish propaganda and published anti-Jewish articles in their periodicals. Brochures were distributed, copying the Nazi racial documents but having little to no effect on the traditionally tolerant Bulgarian society. On September 20, 1939 an attempt was made to copy the "Crystal night" on the streets of Sofia, which took the form of ravaging the windows of the Jewish shops. However, attacks and accessions against Jews did not occur.

In the course of the decade Bulgaria became increasingly economically dependent by the Third Reich, which was Bulgaria's largest foreign trade partner before World War II. The economic and military ties with Germany and the territorial claims of the Bulgarian Government towards the countries, related to the Allies and the presence of a large German army on the Bulgarian northern border led to Bulgaria becoming a member of the Axis powers on March 01, 1941. This was a political act with major consequences for the Jewish population in Bulgaria.

The particular examples of political anti-Semitism in Bulgaria began in 1940 and were closely related to the foreign policy of the country. The anti-Jewish legislation was in line with the anti-Semitic laws of the national socialist party of Adolf Hitler and the racist legislation resembled the Italian one. In both countries anti-Semitism was imposed from above and based not on internal ideas, but aimed to accommodate the wishes of the German side.

From all repressive legislation the Law for protection of the nation (LPN) was the most eminent and legitimized anti-Semitism as governmental policy. The Law was drafted upon the initiative of Tsar Boris III and the Government of Prof. Bogdan Filov in the summer of 1940. It was forwarded for discussion to the 25th National Assembly on October 06 the same year.

The LPN was opposed by various circles within Bulgarian society, which did not share the racist theory of the Nazis. Bulgarian population existed together with the Jews for a long period and accepted them as their fellow nationals and Bulgarian subjects. Because of its ideological and racial grounds the LPN did not only find no support, but also evoked protests both within and outside the National Assembly. Ex Ministers, parliament members from the opposition, scholars, writers, other eminent social figures, the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Central Jewish Consistory, and representatives of the professional organizations and the majority of the Bulgarian people condemned the LPN as anti-constitutional, inhumane, immoral and declared their support for the Jewish population. Despite the opposition the majority at the 25th National Assembly voted in favour of and accepted LPN. On January 21, 1941 by a Tsar decree the Law entered into power.

Using religion as criterion the population of the country was separated in two categories: the first consisted of all people with Bulgarian background and the second was formed by the individuals of Jewish origin. All people had at least one Jewish parent were declared Jews. Under the threat of penal responsibility within a month from the Law entering into power the Jews, who lived on the territory of the Kingdom, irrespective of their citizenship were to declare their background and enlist in the municipality and police registrars. They were instructed to use their traditional Jewish names, so that their second and family names could not end in a traditional Bulgarian ending like "-ov", "-ev", "-ich" (like in Davidov or Leviev).

The LPN introduced very broad and general limitations to the political and civil freedom of the Jewish population. In accordance to the law the people with Jewish origin could not:

- Receive Bulgarian citizenship;
- Be elected or elect in public elections and in profitable or nonprofit organizations;
- Hold state, municipal and other public positions and receive state assistance;

- Buy out their draft responsibility;

The economic sanctions against the Jewish population were as serious. Jews were prohibited from owning, be in control or rent open agricultural property. In small village municipalities the limitations was extended to covered property also. Regardless of the fact that the Constitution declared property to be legally protected Jews, who owned property were forced to offer them for sale to the State Land Fund, to Bulgarians or to Bulgarian companies. The economic and professional activities of people of Jewish origin were limited. They were allowed to practice a profession and be involved in the industrial production only in proportion to their total percentage from the total population in the country. Within a month from the LPN coming into power every Jew is obliged to declare to the Bulgarian National Bank the whole of its moveable and unmovable property. This lays the foundation for a future confiscation of the property.

Through the Law for payment for uncovered property of persons with Jewish origin from 1941 the confiscated properties were to be paid by prices not exceeding 50 % of the market value of the property as of 1932. By accepting the Law for taxation of the Jewish population with a one-time tax of 1/5 to 1/4 stealing from the Jewish was legalized on the grounds of the Jews endangering the national economy. Administrative and police measurements against Jewish people were also accepted and they were forced to wear yellow stars, to declare their properties, furniture, etc. They were forbidden to possess automobiles, radio receivers and telephones.

In April 1941 the Bulgarian army entered Aegean Thrace and Macedonia. The new lands were included in the administrative area of the country. The Bulgarian military, administrative, police and judicial authorities were introduced. The courts of law were judging in the name of the Tsar and the Council of Ministers accepted the Order for citizenship in the name of the Tsar, under which all Greek and Yugoslavian subjects became automatically Bulgarian citizen. In accordance to point 4, article 3 this was not valid for the Jews, who were left without citizenship. The Jews from Thrace and Macedonia were thus deprived of civil rights and all restrictions and duties, valid in the old territories were imposed on them. Gradually the anti-Semitic legislation was supplemented by various orders, regulations and other legal acts.

By a Government Act from 29 August 1942 a Commission on Jewish Affairs (CJA) was created within the Ministry of Interior and Public Health. The Commission was given the task to organize the expulsion of the Jewish population and the liquidation of their property. The orders and regulations of the Commission were subject to no control. The number of its employees gradually increased to 113 and the 42 year old fanatic and systematic anti-Semite attorney at law Alexander Belev was appointed as the Chairman.

At the beginning of 1942 at the special Wannsee Conference the Nazis took the final decision for the physical elimination of the Jewish people, to be implemented not only on the territories of the Reich, but also across all occupied countries, including the countries, which were German allies. This decision regarded 48 thousand Bulgarian Jews as well.

The beginning of 1943 was marked by fierce pressure upon the Bulgarian Government to deport the Bulgarian Jews. On 22 February the Hauptsturmfuerehr from SS Theodor Denecker and the Chairman of the CJA Alexander Belev signed "Agreement for the initial deportation to the East

German territories of 20 thousand Jews (from the new Bulgarian territories Thrace and Macedonia).” Belev falsified the document, scratching with the same ink the words in brackets. In this way the Agreement was valid for the “old” Bulgarian territories also. To avoid mass protests the authorities did not promulgate the Agreement in the State Gazette, hiding the planned deportation from the Bulgarian society.

With the collaboration of the police and administrative Bulgarian authorities around 11350 Jews from Thrace and Macedonia were deported between 18 and 29 March 1943 to Poland, where almost all died in the Treblinka concentration camp. The Germans viewed this as a beginning of the deportation of all Jews, who lived in the old Bulgarian territories and their fate appeared on the agenda.

Bulgaria, however, did not send its Jews to the Germans. As a result of strong public and political opposition, which developed parallel with the anti-Jewish activities the whole Bulgarian Jewry was saved from the deportation, planned for March 1943. The social spectrum of people, who dared to protect and save the Jews covered the a wide range from the political left to the far right nationalists. Among the first to raise voice in defense of the Jews, even before the anti-Semitic legislation was promulgated were the Union of Bulgarian writers, the Union of Bulgarian lawyers, the Union of Bulgarian Doctors, among whom were Todor Vlaykov, Elin Pelin, Stoyan Chilingirov, Mladen Isaev, Ana Kamenova, Elisaveta Bagryana and others.

The protests of the writers were joined by prominent artists, businessmen, musicians, publicists, members of Parliament, politicians. The opinion of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was exceptionally strong, with the Church leaders like the Sofia Metropolitan Stefan and Plovdiv Metropolitan Kiril showing exceptional leadership. Using baptism, exhibitions and meeting Tsar Boris III among other initiatives to influence the authorities they were able to impose pressure on Government to save the Jews.

The action for saving the Jews from the old Bulgarian territories starts from Kustendil. In accordance to the Bulgarian-German agreement local Jews were prepared for deportation and gathered in the tobacco warehouse “Fernandes”. Information for their imminent deportation was leaked and mobilized their Bulgarian friends. A delegation, formed by four eminent Kustendil citizens: Assen Switchmezov, Petar Mihalev, Ivan Momchilov and Vladimir Kurtev departed to Sofia to negotiate the cancellation of the planned deportation. The delegation contacted the Deputy Chairman of the National Assembly Dimitar Peshev, a fellow citizen from Kustendil.

Under the pressure of the massive outrage within Bulgarian society, facing the insistence all the Jewish supporters and under the threat of interpellation actions in the Parliament the Government folded and on 9 March 1943 issued orders to cancel the deportation. On 17 March 43 MPs, including the Deputy Chairman of the National Assembly protested in writing against the Prime Minister’s Bogdan Filov deporting to Poland of those Jews, who were outside of the old Bulgarian territories.

The Kustendil action was followed by a saving operation in Plovdiv as well. During the night of March 9 against March 10, 1943 around 1500-1600 people were arrested and gathered in one of the large local schools, where a designated train was to take them to Poland. Kiril, the Metropolitan of Plovdiv, who was a well-known critic of the anti-Semitic policy of the Government, sent

a special telegram to Tsar Boris III, pledging for his mercy for the Jews. He was able, at the same, to get into contact with the local city police chief and insisted the Plovdiv police got into contact with the Government to arrange a release warrant for the prisoners. Metropolitan Kiril went to the school, where the Jews were gathered and told them, that wherever they would be taken he was going to share their fate. The actions of one of the most prestigious and popular leaders of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church alarmed the ruling authorities for the outrage, that was gathering momentum across the country against the anti-Jewish policy.

During his regular meeting with Hitler on 1 April 1943 Tsar Boris III declared he agreed to the deportation to East Europe of the Jews from Macedonia and Thrace only. Regarding the Jews in Bulgaria itself he wanted only a small number of communist-Bolshevik elements to be deported, to gather the remaining 25 000 in concentration camps in the country, using them for road building. On 24 May 1943 the Jews from larger cities started getting deported to work camps across Bulgaria.

Bulgarian Jews themselves offered a strong resistance to the planned deportation and undertook a series of effective actions in this regard. On 24 May, when the Apostles of the Slavs Cyril and Methodius are celebrated, a group of around a thousand Jews organized a protest manifest in Sofia against the Government's plans of realizing the postponed deportation. This act of bravery was supported by many Bulgarians and foremost by Stefan, Metropolitan of Sofia, who strongly condemned the governmental persecution of the Jews during his festive speech. On the same day the Bulgarian spiritual leader advocated for the Jews in front of the Prime Minister Bogdan Filov and spoke to Pavel Gruev-the head of the cabinet of the Tsar, trying to establish contact with the monarch. Boris III himself was not in Sofia at that time, but under pressure on the Jewish question from various sides had already decided for the deportation of the Jews to the country only. On 26 May the deportation of the Jews from Sofia had begun and by 07 June 1943 had left the capital. Across the country they found shelter at the homes of local Jews or were placed in specially designated empty schools. Their life conditions were difficult, but guaranteed was their physical survival. The existing legal regime was not cancelled, but was not implemented either, with the deportation to Poland not officially cancelled, but not carried out.

On 28 August 1943, only two week after meeting Hitler in Germany, the Bulgarian Tsar Boris III died suddenly. The most prominent figure at the Bulgarian political stage has departed, with his death additionally helping the saving of the Jews, since the pressure on Bulgaria in this regard became less severe. Three days after the death of the monarch the German Foreign Ministry had the strong impression, that German every action on the issue, however strong it could be would be resisted by the Bulgarian Government. On 02 October 1943 the Bulgarian Minister of Interior Dotcho Hristov summed up the Jewish question in the following way: "We are not going to displace Jews any more. They will stay where they are. They will be unofficially granted some benefits in order to not be a burden for the country and the Bulgarian people".

The consequences of the anti-Semitic legislation started getting overcome with Order for amendment and supplementation of the LPN, issued on 31 August 1944 by the Government of Ivan Bagryanov. The Order restored the legal rights and freedoms of Jewish people and the succeeding

Government of Konstantin Muraviev granted amnesty for all crimes under the LPN and under the Law for Taxation of the Jewish Population. All legal and governmental acts with anti-Jewish character were cancelled by a Law-Order for arranging the property consequences of the cancellation of the anti-Jewish legislation, issued by the Government of the National Front of Kimon Georgiev after 09 September 1944.

The historians differ as to whom the greatest merit for saving the Jews should be attributed to: the Tsar, the Church, the responsible Government officials, or the whole of Bulgarian nation. The basis was formed, however, on the resistance to the anti-Semitic policy, which the Bulgarian society showed and proved how alien anti-Semitism was to Bulgarian people.

The end of Second World War found Bulgarian Jews as survivors, but also as people with nothing, with no means of existence. The Jewish community itself was divided in the first years after the War (1944-1948) into two factions. The separation now was between communists and Zionist and the struggle between those two camps is well documented. This was the period of formation of the idea of Aliyah (the emigration to Palestine) even before the creation of the State of Israel. Zionist organizations across the country were very active, and especially enthusiastic after the visit of Ben Gurion (Head of the Jewish Agency "Sohnut" at the time and future first Prime Minister of Israel), who came to Bulgaria in the December 1944. At the same time many Jews were prominent fighters in the anti-Fascist struggle and this helped them receive a place in the new Government structures. Theirs was the task to stop the Zionists from leaving Bulgaria. As a whole Bulgarian Jews had a positive attitude towards the National Front and showed no anti-government activities. They even supported the authorities in 1946 by sending a special delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, insisting that special articles, related to the Jewish rights should be omitted from the peace agreements.

The years 1947-1949 were a crossroad for Bulgarian Jews, who had to choose between two motherlands: the one, which saved their lives in the years of the Holocaust, but was going into the direction of a Soviet type of state rule on one hand and the newly founded State of Israel, which attracted Jews from all around the world. In 1947 the international circumstances and the attitude of the World Powers changed drastically towards creation of a new independent Jewish state. The Soviet Union was a strong supporter and the position of Moscow increased the influence of the communist faction within the Jewish communities around the world. The Bulgarian Labour Party (communist) was very active and took the initiative for emigration. On 28 July 1948 a Plenum of the ruling party decided, together with a commission on minorities of the National Front, to organize the emigration issue. Bulgarian Jews made their choice and between 25 October 1948 and 16 May 1949 32 106 Bulgarian Jews left for Israel in an organized manner, while others left the country privately. A gap was opened in many economic sectors: trade, crafts, services, etc. Many intellectuals and governmental employees left also. The Jews who stayed increased the connections of the Jewish institutes with the Communist party. This was valid not only for the Jewish community, but for the society as a whole. The functions of the Consistory changed significantly and it took the role of educational and cultural institute with almost no social activities. Until 1952 all Jewish communities and institutions were under the control of the ruling party. A public party organization remained operational

and issued a Jewish Yearly, while the publishing of "Jewish news" went on uninterrupted. Many Jewish customs were preserved, but the variety and richness of the Jewish social life, the way it existed until the end of the 40-s was now absent. Until 1952 all private urban economic enterprises, which formed the basis of Jewish economic life, were eliminated. A new period arrived, during which a few generations became socially reoriented and searched new ways of realization in Bulgaria.