

THE LEGACY OF THE HOLOCAUST IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH

THE FATE OF THE BULGARIAN JEWS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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Abstract

The basic aim of the present article is to provide a historical overview of the Bulgarian state policy towards Jews in the country during the Second World War. The paper analyzes the variety of factors that played role in this specific case - such as the positive historical legacy of Bulgarian-Jewish relations that contributed to the salvation of Bulgarian Jews but also the negative factors that led to the deportation of the Jews from the occupied and controlled by Bulgaria territories.

Key words: *Bulgarian Jews, salvation, deportation, World War II.*

INTRODUCTION: FROM BULGARIA'S LIBERATION TO THE OUTBREAK OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The Russian-Turkish War of 1877-1878 brought about Bulgaria's liberation from Ottoman dominance. Around that time the biggest Jewish community in Bulgarian lands lived in Sofia - around 20,000 - constituting one fourth of the total population of the city that will become Bulgaria's capital. Bulgaria's first Constitution, the Turnovo Constitution of 1879 guaranteed the political equality of all ethnic and religious minorities living in the Bulgarian Principality. Bulgarian Jews will play an important role in the political, economic and cultural life of the country. Some of them will even become famous worldwide, like the painter Jules Paskin born in the city of Vidin, and the Nobel prize-winner in literature, Elias Canetti born in the city of Russe.² Bulgaria's Jewish community maintained excellent relations with the Bulgarian state. In 1880 Gabriel Almozino (Габриел Алмозино) was appointed Chief Rabbi, receiving a government allowance, according to the law that regulated religious and educational issues for the minorities. In 1909 the Bulgarian royal family participated in the inauguration of the new Synagogue in Sofia, the third largest and

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² Stefanov, P., "Bulgarians and Jews throughout History", in Religion in Eastern Europe, Vol. XXII, № 6, 2002, www.georgefox.edu/academics/undergrad/departments/soc-swk/ree/stefanov_baj.doc, accessed 29/10/2008.

one of the most impressive and beautiful in Europe. As loyal citizens of the Bulgarian state, the Jews participated in the wars that Bulgaria conducted for its national unification. Thus, during the Serbian-Bulgarian War of 1885 some of them reached the rank of colonel. We find names of Bulgarian Jews, soldiers and officers, in the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, as well as in the First World War; the total number of Bulgarian Jews that fell during these wars was 952³.

The Jewish community grew, albeit slowly, between the two world wars: from 43,000 or 0.9% of the total Bulgarian population, of around 4,850,000 in 1920, to 48,000 or 0.8% in a total population of 6,080,000 in 1934.⁴ Some authors even mention the number of 51,500.⁵ More than half, around 25,000 lived in Sofia, with most other Jewish communities numbering between 1,000 and 7,000. Around 90% of them were born in Bulgaria and 92% were Bulgarian citizens. The great majority of them, around 40,000, were workers, craftsmen and petty tradesmen. Only a small number were bankers and industrialists. Their involvement with commerce and business in general was not so important: around 5.17%. Their presence was more noticeable and important in the export trade and in the trade of tobacco, as well as in the medical profession and among layers.

In the middle of the 1920s, Bulgarian society as elsewhere in Europe went through a phase of radicalization: chauvinistic ideologies with strong fascist and anti-Semitic elements gained in popularity. Jews were being portrayed not only as “big capitalists” but also as the personification of the “Bolshevik evil”. Nevertheless, apart from a few sporadic, anti-Semitic incidents with religious undertones, we can hardly talk about anti-Semitism as a popular and accepted current in Bulgarian society. If in normal times Bulgarian society viewed with “indifference” its Jewish community, in times of crises it dealt with it with tolerance.

Hitler’s rise in power in Germany, in 1933, affected Bulgaria too. The growth of Germany’s political and economic influence in the Balkans contributed to the rise of anti-Semitism in Bulgaria’s political life. In the mid-1930s in Bulgaria appeared two main nationalistic, anti-Semitic political organizations: “The Union of Bulgarian National Legions” (Съюзът на българските национални легиони) and “The Fighters for the Progress of Bulgaria’s National Spirit” (Ратниците за напредък на българщината). Both organizations indulged in anti-Semitic propaganda and publicized anti-Semitic literature, copying Nazi, racist texts - however their influence on Bulgarian society remained limited. On the 20th September 1939 an attempt was made

³ Genov, R. Baeva, I. “Incomprehension of the Nature of the Race Question: Saving the Bulgarian Jews from the Holocaust”, www.stm.unipi.it/Clloh/tabs/libri/7/11-Genov-Baeva_153-176.pdf

⁴ *ibid*, p. 157

⁵ Chary, F. *The Bulgarian Jews and the Final Solution*, Pittsburg, PA 1991, p. 58

for a repetition of the “Crystal Night” (Kristallnacht)⁶ in Sofia: windows of Jewish shops were broken. However, no one was physically attacked.⁷

THE SECOND WORLD WAR PERIOD

Bulgaria’s close relationship with the Third Reich, commercially and militarily, its territorial claims on neighboring states allied with Britain and France, as well as the menacing presence of the German Army on its northern borders, led the country to join the Axis Powers on the 1st March 1941.⁸ It was a decision that had almost fatal consequences for the Jewish population of Bulgaria.

Specific, anti-Semitic, official actions began to take place in Bulgaria in 1940 and were closely related with the country’s foreign policy: The introduced anti-Semitic legislation followed closely the anti-Semitic laws passed by the Nazi Party in Germany, whereas the history of the racist laws in Bulgaria reminds that of Italy. In both countries (Italy and Bulgaria, anti-Semitism was imposed from above in an effort to please Germany.⁹

The Law for the Protection of the Nation is of special importance for the anti-Jewish legislation introduced after 1939, as it essentially made anti-Semitism a state policy. The drafting of the law began in the summer of 1940, under the auspices of Tsar Boris III (цар Борис III) and Bogdan Filov’s (Богдан Филов) government. It was presented in the parliament on the 6th October of the same year. In the arguments, accompanying the law, it was asserted that “... during the times we live in, the nation needs such a defense, especially as far as the Jewish community is concerned, which as part of the international Judaism remains alien to the Bulgarian spirit, and (furthermore) threatens the national state with its cosmopolitan ties...”¹⁰

⁶ The *Kristallnacht*, 9th and 10th November 1938, was triggered by the assassination in Paris of German diplomat Ernst vom Rath by Herschel Grynszpan, a German-born Polish Jew. In a coordinated attack on Jewish people and their property 91 Jews were murdered and 25,000 to 30,000 were arrested and placed in concentration camps. 267 synagogues were destroyed, and thousands of homes and businesses were ransacked. While the assassination of Rath served as a pretext for the attacks, the *Kristallnacht* was part of a broader racial policy of Nazi Germany, including anti-Semitism and persecution of the Jews.

⁷ Поппетров, Н. Фашизмът в България. Развитие и прояви. София, 2008, р. 84-96 [Poppetrov, N. Fashizmat v Bulgaria. Razvitie i proyavi. Sofia, 2008, p. 84-96]

⁸ Калинова, Е., Баева, И. Българските преходи 1939-2005, С., 2006, р. 18-19 [Kalinova, E., Baeva, I. Balgarskite prehodi 1939-2005, S., 2006, p. 18-19]

⁹ All the researches that have worked on the issue agree that the Bulgarian society had a positive attitude towards the Jews. The anti-Semitic change of policy took place under German pressure and was the result of Bulgaria’s foreign policy orientation and the establishment of close ties with the Reich.

For more details see Барух, Н. Откупът. Цар Борис и съдбата на българските евреи. София, 1991; Бар-Зоар, М. Извън хватката на Хитлер. Героичното спасяване на българските евреи. София, 1999; Бояджиев, Хр. Спасяването на българските евреи през Втората световна война. София, 1991; Нисим, Г. Човекът, който спря Хитлер. Историята на Димитър Пешев, спасил евреите на една нация София, 1999; Калчева, Д. Холокостът в Третия райх и неговите съюзници. София, 2008; Ардити, С. Човекът, който изигра Хитлер. Цар Борис III – гонител или приятел на българските евреи. Русе, 2008 [Baruh, N. Otkupat. Tsar Boris i sadbata na balgarskite evrei. Sofia, 1991; Bar-Zoar, M. Izvan hvatkata na Hitler. Geroichnoto spasyavane na balgarskite evrei. Sofia, 1999; Boyadzhiev, Hr. Spasyavaneto na balgarskite evrei prez Vtorata svetovna vojna. Sofia, 1991; Nisim, G. Chovekat, koyto sprya Hitler. Istoriyata na Dimitar Peshev, spasil evreite na edna natsiyal Sofia, 1999; Kalcheva, D. Holokostat v Tretia rayh i negovite sayuznitsi. Sofia, 2008; Arditi, S. Chovekat, koyto izigra Hitler. Tsar Boris III – gonitel ili priyatel na balgarskite evrei. Ruse, 2008] Chary, F. The Bulgarian Jews and the Final Solution, Pittsburg, PA 1991

¹⁰ Йочев, Е. Законодателството в Царство България (1878-1944). Конституция, закони, мотиви, доклади, укази, наредби, наредби-закони. София, 1999, р. 598 [Yochev, E. Zakonodatelstvoto v Tsarstvo Bulgaria (1878-1944). Konstitutsia, zakoni, motivi, dokladi, ukazi, naredbi, naredbi-zakoni. Sofia, 1999]

Against the Law declared themselves various sections of the Bulgarian society, rejecting the Nazi's racist theories. The Bulgarian population had lived side by side for years with the Jews and perceived them as "part of itself", as loyal citizens of the state. In the absence of favorable to it ideological and racial conditions, the Law generated hostile reactions inside the parliament as well as outside of it. In parliament Petko Stainov (Петко Стайнов), Professor at the Faculty of Law at the University of Sofia, and an influential politician stated, "using as an excuse the defense of the nation, racism and even religious inequality is being introduced, for the first time, in our legislation... a kind of Bulgarian racism for the first time is being introduced..."¹¹ Against the discriminatory law also spoke the well-known politician and leader of the *Democratic Party* Nikola Musanov (Никола Мушанов), who declared, "Honorable representatives of the nation! I honestly tell you: Bulgarian thinking, the Bulgarian National Assembly, the common interests of this country, cannot be reconciled with the provisions of this law!"¹²

Against the Tsar, the Prime Minister and Members of Parliament (MPs) of the government came out former ministers, MPs of the opposition, academics, writers, influential citizens, the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the central Jewish religious council, intellectuals, representatives of professional associations, as well as the majority of Bulgaria's population. All of them described *Law for the Protection of the Nation* as unconstitutional, inhuman, and immoral and sided with the Jewish population.¹³

Despite the reactions against it, the government majority in the 25th National Assembly voted for the *Law for the Protection of the Nation*. On the 21st January 1941 the Law was ratified by a Royal Decree, and two days later came into force. It was an emergency law following the emergency, anti-Semitic laws that had been introduced by Nazi Germany.¹⁴ Based on the criterion of the religious identity of the citizens, the population of the country was divided into "persons of Bulgarian origin" and "persons of Jewish origin". According to the *Law for the Protection of the Nation*, anyone who "had at least one parent Jew was a Jew". Under the threat of criminal proceedings, and within a month after the Law had come into force, all Jews living in the territory of the Kingdom, irrespective of their nationality, were obliged to declare their "origin", and to register in municipal and police inventories. They were ordered to have distinctive Jewish names, as their own surnames

¹¹ *ibid*, p. 71

¹² *ibid*, p. 95

¹³ For a rich collection in documents dealing with the reactions from different social strata see: Борбата на българския народ за защита и спасяване на евреите в България през Втората световна война (Документи и материали). София, 1978, p. 17-102 [Borbata na balgarskia narod za zashchita i spasyavane na evreite v Bulgaria prez Vtorata svetovna voyna (Dokumenty i materialy). Sofia, 1978, p. 17-102]

¹⁴ Милкова, Ф. Българската държава и изключителното и законодателство в периода 1923-1944 г. София, 1991, p. 501 [Milkova, F. Balgarskata darzhava i izklyuchitelното i zakonodatelstvo v perioda 1923-1944 g. Sofia, 1991]. The structure of the law included 3 Parts. Part I "On Secret and International Organizations": Chapter A "Common Provisions", Chapter B "The Dissolution of Secret and International Organizations", Chapter C "The Liquidation of the Property of the Dissolved Secret and International Organizations". Part II "On Persons of Jewish Origin": Chapter A "On their Origin", Chapter B "Common Limitations", Chapter C "On the Residence of Persons of Jewish Origin", Chapter D "On the Property of Persons of Jewish Origin", Chapter E "On the Professional and Economic Activities of Persons of Jewish Origin". Part III "On Unpatriotic and Suspicious Activities": Chapter A "On Unpatriotic Activities", Chapter B "On Suspicious Activities". Part IV "Special Provisions". Закон за защита на нацията, Държавен вестник (ДВ), бр. 16, 1941, p. 1-5

and family names could not carry Bulgarian suffixes, -ov, -ev, -its and other, for example Davidov (ДАВИДОВ), Leviev (ЛЕВИЕВ).

The *Law for the Protection of the Nation* introduced widespread limitations in the political and civil rights of the Jewish population. According to its provisions persons of Jewish origin could not:

- acquire Bulgarian citizenship;
- elect and be elected in local elections, as well as in elections for non-profit associations and unions;
- occupy state, municipal or other public positions or to receive state assistance;
- buying out their military service.

To the Jews it was forbidden to participate in organizations under the control of the Ministry of War (Ministry of Defense); they did not have the right marrying non-Jew Bulgarian citizens, or to employ under whatever form in domestic employment persons of Bulgarian origin; their military service took place in special labour groups; in education only a limited number of Jewish children could be accepted, determined by the Minister of Education, under the precondition that no “Bulgarian children” were candidates; no Jew person had the right to change his/her address without prior police consent, and they were forbidden from settling into Sofia.

The economic sanctions introduced against the Jewish population were also quite hard. The Jews lost the right to possess, use, or rent land as well as buildings in farming communities. Although, according to the Constitution, property was an unalienable right, Jewish owners of real estate were forced “to offer” their property to the State Land Fund, sell it to Bulgarians or to associations owned by Bulgarians. The Law restricted the economic and professional activities of persons of Jewish origin. They were only allowed to be engaged in the so-called “free professions” or with industrial production and only in proportion to the total number of those who exercised the specific professional activities, as well as in proportion to the percentage of the Jewish population in the country. In trade, Jews could not own more than 505 commercial firms. All these measures were taken, under the pretext that the Bulgarian economy would be “allowed to recover”. The government had the right to limit, partially or totally, the personal or capital participation of Jews in specific trade or industrial fields or in any other economic activity and to supervise and ascertain the property status of persons of Jewish origin. Within a month after the adoption of the law, every Jewish person was obliged to inform the Bulgarian Central Bank about his/her property, thus creating the preconditions for a future confiscation of Jewish property¹⁵.

The forced “arianization” of Jewish businesses was introduced under the provisions of the *Law for the Protection of the Nation*. It was forbidden to persons of Jewish origin to be owners and shareholders under whatever form in educational institutions, theaters, cinemas, in firms producing printing material, in the production and trade of films, gramophone discs, arms and other businesses. It was forbidden to Jews to become directors, managers and to occupy other directory

¹⁵ Аврамов, Р. “Спасение “ или падение. Микроикономика на държавни антисемитизъм в България 1940-1944, С., 2012 [Avramov, R. “Spasenie“ ili padenie. Mikroikonomika na darzhavni antisemitizam v Bulgaria 1940-1944, S., 2012]

positions in specific businesses. Jews did not have the right to become chartered accountants, stockbrokers and members in directory boards, directors and deputy directors, commercial representatives in banks, pharmacy owners and owners of shops selling medical products. In such a way the Jewish population was deprived of its means for survival and was ostracized from the economic life of the country.

The majority of introduced limitations soon proved “inadequate” in specific fields in commerce, light and heavy industry. As a result, Prime Minister Bogdan Filov stated that the Law was too “liberal” and “weak” and introduced supplementary legislation¹⁶: under the *Law for the Settlement of Land Property for Persons of Jewish Origin* of 1941 it was foreseen that expropriated properties would be evaluated and paid in prices not higher than the 50% of their 1932 market price; under the *Law for the Taxing of Jewish Population* Jews were taxed with a lump sum corresponding from 1/5 to 1/4 of their property, in effect justifying their robbery under the pretext that they were a threat for the national economy; under a subsequent law all pharmacies of Jewish ownership were shut down; the government introduced a regulation, according to which Jews would serve their military service in special groups formed by the Ministry of Public Buildings, Roads and Works. While extra measures of administrative-police character were taken for persons of Jewish origin: they were obliged to wear yellow stars, to declare their property, bank accounts, valuable books, furniture and other; they were also forbidden from possessing cars, radios and telephones.¹⁷

In April 1941, the Bulgarian Army occupied Aegean Thrace (Беломорска Тракия) and Vardar Macedonia. The “newly added territories” were put under the control of Bulgarian administration and incorporated into the territorial-administrative organization of the Bulgarian Kingdom. Bulgarian administration, courts, police and the army moved in. Courts ruled in the name of the Tsar and the government issued a *Decree Concerning Citizenship in the Liberated Territories*, according to which Greek and Yugoslav citizens of Bulgarian and non-Bulgarian origin obtained automatically the Bulgarian citizenship. However, according to article 4, par. 2, the law did not concern persons of Jewish origin. Jews in Aegean Thrace and Macedonia were deprived of their rights of citizenship and at the same time were subjected to all the obligations, limitations, and prohibitions existing in the old borders of the Kingdom. Gradually, the anti-Jewish legislation was supplemented with a series of published and secret decrees, rules and regulations.¹⁸

In June 1942 the parliament adopted a new law, providing the government with the legislative power to adopt all those measures necessary for the “settlement” of the Jewish question. According to it, the government had the power to issue decrees and resolutions, in order “to strengthen” and make more effective the limitations already existing for persons of Jewish origin. The government

¹⁶ Неделева, П. Антиеврейското законодателство в България през Втората световна война, С., 2015; Сб. „Антиеврейското законодателство в Европа и България – правни изследвания“, Съставител: Албена Танева, автори: Б. Цеков, Здр. Кръстева, М. Манолова, П. Неделева, Е. Георгиев, А. Салуло, С., 2015 [Nedeleva, P. Antievreyskoto zakonodatelstvo v Bulgaria prez Vtorata svetovna voyna, S., 2015; Sb. „Antievreyskoto zakonodatelstvo v Evropa i Bulgaria – pravni izsledvania“, Sastavitel: Albena Taneva, avtori: B. Tsekov, Zdr. Krasteva, M. Manolova, P. Nedeleva, E. Georgiev, A. Salupo, S., 2015]

¹⁷ Токушев, Д. История на новобългарската държава и право 1878-1944. София, 2006, р. 369-370

¹⁸ ibid, p. 370-371 [Tokushev, D. Istoria na novata balgarskata darzhava i pravo 1878-1944. Sofia, 2006, p. 369-370]

was authorized to change and supplement laws already adopted by parliament, in practice substituting legislative power. Government decrees were confidential, were not published and no public scrutiny over them existed.¹⁹

Under a government decree, a *Commissariat for Jewish Affairs* (*Комисариатство по еврейските въпроси*) was established on the 29th August 1942 in the Ministry of the Interior and People's Health, having as its task the organization of the deportation of the Jews and the liquidation of their properties. Orders and rules issued by it were not subject to any kind of public scrutiny. Staff working for the committee increased gradually to 113 persons and at its head was appointed by the government, a 42 year-old legal expert, Alexander Belev (Александър Белев), who displayed a persistent and fanatic anti-Semitism.²⁰

At the beginning of 1942 during the Wannsee conference, the Nazis decided to pursue a policy of genocide against the Jews²¹; not only against those Jews living in the territory of the Reich and in the occupied countries, but also in the countries that were allied to the Germans. This decision also concerned the 48,000 Bulgarian Jews. On 24 September 1942 the head of the Department concerning the Jews in the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dispatched an internal memo to the General Secretary of the Ministry, communicating to him Ribbentrop's order to get in touch with the governments of Denmark, Hungary and Bulgaria for a definite solution of the question of the Jews' deportation. On the 14th October 1942 the German diplomatic mission in Sofia received an order to begin negotiations with the Bulgarian government; in a secret telegram to the deputy General Secretary of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Martin Luther, sent by the German Ambassador in Sofia, Adolf-Heinz Beckerle on the 15th October 1942, the financial aspect of the issue is being discussed: "for the sake of a proper settlement of the property issues, we propose, based on article 11, to take away the citizenship from all Jews that would be expelled. Having in mind the fact that Bulgaria would obtain the Jewish property, and in advance of the significant expenses that the Reich will have to shoulder, we propose the payment of a sum of money, which initially could number around 250 Reichsmark per person".²² Beckerle sought to meet Prime Minister Bogdan Filov. On the 2nd of November 1942 Beckerle dispatched a telegram to Berlin, informing his superiors about the outcome of his meeting: from the telegram it becomes clear that the Bulgarian government approached the whole issue, i.e. the deportation of the Jews, with cautiousness and procrastination. It's an assessment that is confirmed by a further German report of the 16th of November.²³

¹⁹ Оцеляването. Сборник от документи 1940-1944. София, 1995, р. 184-184 [Otselyavaneto. Sbornik ot dokumenti 1940-1944. Sofia, 1995, р. 184]

²⁰ Бар-Зоар, М. Извън хватката на Хитлер. Героичното спасяване на българските евреи. София, 1999, р. 65 [Bar-Zoar, M. Izvan hvatkata na Hitler. Geroichnoto spasyavane na balgarskite evrei. Sofia, 1999]

²¹ The so-called "final solution to the Jewish problem".

²² България – своенравният съюзник на Третия райх. Съставители: Тошкова, В., Котев, Н., Стоименов, Н., Николов, Р., Нойков, Ст. София, 1992, р. 89 [Bulgaria – svoenravniyat sayuznik na Tretia rayh. Sastaviteli: Toshkova, V., Kotev, N., Stoimenov, N., Nikolov, R., Noikov, St. Sofia, 1992]

²³ Бояджиев, Хр. Спасяването на българските евреи през Втората световна война. София, 1991, р. 43 [Boyadzhiev, Hr. Spasyavaneto na balgarskite evrei prez Vtorata svetovna voyna. Sofia, 1991]

At the beginning of 1943 Germany began to exercise strong pressure on the Bulgarian government concerning the deportation of the Jews. On the 22nd of February, SS Hauptsturmführer, Theodor Dannecker and the head of the *Committee on Jewish Issues*, Alexander Belev, concluded an “agreement for the deportation, at an initial stage, of 20,000 Jews (from the new Bulgarian territories of Thrace and Macedonia) to the German eastern territories”.²⁴ The agreement referred exclusively to the Jews from Thrace and Macedonia, Belev however forged the agreement, by writing off the words Thrace and Macedonia from the agreement. In such a way the agreement became valid for the whole territory of Bulgaria.

On the 2nd March 1943, with Decree № 127 the government approved the agreement, specifying at the same time that it was valid only for the Jews living in Thrace and in Macedonia. To avoid any public protests, the agreement was not published in the State Journal; thus the Bulgarian society “was kept in the dark” about the scheduled deportation.

In March 1943 the Bulgarian administrative and police forces deported 11 362 Jews - 7165 from Vardar Macedonia, 4039 from Aegean Thrace, 158 from Pirot. They were sent to the concentration camp in Treblinka where less than 300 of them survived.²⁵ In a secret report of the German Consul General in Skopje Vitte to the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 18 March 1943, we read the following: “The deportation took place without troubles on the part of the Jews... While the majority of the Macedonian population, without exception, welcomed the deportation, declaring with joy that following the deportation they can find in the market all sorts of products, mainly milk, seed-oil, eggs and meat, and all these in prices lower than 50% than previously existed... It is a welcoming fact, that following the removal of the Jews the biggest part of the population has (finally) understood what kind of a burden the Jews were representing. First of all, (the Macedonian population) has observed that in the food market an end has been put to the robbery...²⁶. The authorities viewed the deportation of the Jews from Thrace and Macedonia as the beginning of the deportation of all Jews from the territory of Bulgaria, the fate of whom was now on the agenda.

However, it did not happen. The result of these two policies on the Jewish question - persecution as an official policy and protection (as a cause advocated by many different groups and individual citizens), led to different results - the Jews in the borders of the old Kingdom escaped from the scheduled deportation in March 1943 but the Jews from the “new-added” territories were sent to the death camps²⁷. The people who raised their voice in defense of the Jews belonged to the full spectrum of Bulgaria’s political life, from the left to the supporters of the nationalist far-right. Among the first ones who already in 1940 and in the years after, supported the Jews were the *Union*

²⁴ Оцеляването. Сборник от документи 1940-1944. София, 1995, p. 204-205 [Otselyavaneto. Sbornik ot dokumenti 1940-1944. Sofia, 1995, p. 184]

²⁵ Калчева, Д. Холокостът в Третия Райх и неговите съюзници. София, 2008, p. 117 [Kalcheva, D. Holokostat v Tretia Rayh i negovite sayuznitsi. Sofia, 2008]

²⁶ България – своенравният... p. 121-123 [Bulgaria – svoenravniyat sayuznik na Tretia rayh. Sastaviteli: Toshkova, V., Kotev, N., Stoimenov, N., Nikolov, R., Noikov, St. Sofia, 1992]

²⁷ Albena Taneva, The Rescue of the Jews in Bulgaria: An Old Theme in a New Political Science Interpretation. The Power of Civil Society in a Time of Genocide: Proceedings of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church on the Rescue of the Jews in Bulgaria 1940-1944, Sofia University Press St. Kliment Ohridski, 2005, in p. 23-25

of *Bulgarian Writers*, the *Union of Bulgarian Lawyers*, and the *Union of Bulgarian Doctors*. In defense of the Jews spoke a series of Bulgarian writers, among them Todor Vlaikov (Тодор Влайков), Elin Pelin (Елин Пелин), Stoian Tsiligirov (Стоян Чилингиров), Mladev Isaev (Младен Исаев), Anna Kamenova (Ана Каменова), Elisaveta Bagriana (Елисавета Багряна) and others. In a speech in favour of the Jews poet Emmanouil Popdimitrov (Емануил Попдимитров) declared: “Now the whole Jewish community of Germany is heart-broken from the threat, no... it is heart-broken from the hard measures of merciless persecution... To the Jews they have taken away the right to participate in culture... Their soul, their thinking and the highest deposits of Jewish communal culture have been hit hard. This however could become a beginning not only in Germany but elsewhere, and not only for the Jews, but for other nations as well; this is where this danger can lead us to”.²⁸

The writers protest was endorsed and supported by eminent artists, musicians, journalists, businessmen, Members of Parliament and politicians. Especially commendable was the position adopted by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, its leaders and above all by the Bishops Stefan of Sofia (Стефан Софийски) and Kiril of Plovdiv (Кирил Пловдивски). Through baptisms, statements and meetings with Tsar Boris III and other initiatives, the highest clergy exercised pressure on the government and acted for the salvation of the Bulgarian Jews.

Actions for opposing the plan for deportation of the Jews within old boundaries of Bulgaria began in the city of Kyustendil.²⁹ According to the Bulgarian-German agreement signed, the local Jews had been prepared for deportation and gathered in the local tobacco warehouse “Fernandez”. As news spread on their scheduled deportation, local Bulgarian friends took actions: delegation composed of four distinguished inhabitants of Kyustendil - Assen Sountsmezov (Асен Суичмезов), Petar Mihailev (Петър Михалев), Ivan Momtsilov (Иван Момчилов) and Vladimir Kurtev (Владимир Куртев) – left for Sofia seeking to cancel the scheduled deportation. The delegation met with the Vice-President of the National Assembly, Dimitar Peshev (Димитър Пешев), also born in Kyustendil.

Worried from the indignation felt by the Bulgarian society, the insistence of their supporters, as well as by the threat of questions in the parliament, the government retreated and on 9 March 1943 issued an order, cancelling the deportation of the Jewish population from Kyustendil. On 17 March 43 MPs of the 25th National Assembly, among them Dimitar Peshev, sent a protest letter to Prime Minister Bogdan Filov, against the scheduled deportation of Bulgarian Jews to Poland.³⁰ In a closed-door session of the parliament, on 24 March, Peshev was removed from his place, while two

²⁸ Калчева, Д. Българската общественост срещу Закона за защита на нацията. Реч на Емануил Попдимитров в защита на еврейското малцинство. В: Университетски четения и изследвания по българска история. IV международен семинар, Смолян, 11-13 май 2006, р. 544 [Kalcheva, D. Balgarskata obshtestvenost sreshtu Zakona za zashtita na natsiyata. Rech na Emanuil Popdimitrov v zashtita na evreyskoto maltsinstvo. V: Universitetski chetenia i izsledvania po balgarska istoria. IV mezhdunaroden seminar, Smolyan, 2006]

²⁹ Бар-Зоар, М. Цит. Съч, р. 107 [Bar-Zoar, M. Izvan hvatkata na Hitler. Geroichnoto spasyavane na balgarskite evrei. Sofia, 1999]

³⁰ Борбата на българския народ..., № 103, р. 167-169 [Borbata na balgarskia narod za zashtita i spasyavane na evreite v Bulgaria prez Vtorata svetovna vojna (Dokumenti i materiali). Sofia, 1978]

days later a vote of censure against Peshev became “accepted without debate, in great noise and protests on the part of the opposition and Peshev’s friends”.³¹

Completely different were the reactions of the Tsar and his Prime Minister. As a committed anti-Semitic, Bogdan Filov was outraged and on 19 March wrote in his diary: “this is a big protest that will not remain without consequences. Now I can really see how big influence the Jews have and how much harmful they are”.³² On the other hand, Tsar Boris III made a radical turn in his policy. Peshev’s initiative in combination to the position of the Church and of the intellectual elite “shook” the Tsar: he realized clearly that the whole of the Bulgarian society, even some of his most loyal supporters could not accept such a behavior towards the Jews. From that moment on the Tsar could not procrastinate anymore, manoeuvring in an effort to gain time, as he had done until then. He had to choose; either to expel the Jews or to refuse coming into confrontation with the Germans.

Following Kyustendil, another effort developed to save the Jews in the city of Plovdiv. In the night of 9th to 10th March 1943 around 1,500 to 1,600 Jews were arrested in the city and imprisoned in a big school building, where they were waiting deportation to Poland. The Bishop of Plovdiv, Kiril, a declared enemy of the anti-Semitic policy of the government, sent a telegram to Tsar Boris III, pleading with him to show compassion to the Jews. He also came into touch with the police director’s assistant in Plovdiv, insisting that the police should contact the government and obtain an order for the release of the detained Jews. Bishop Kiril went to the school where the Jews were kept and declared that he was ready to share their fate, “where ever they would send them”.³³ The actions of one of the most eminent leaders of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church troubled deeply the government, as they illustrated the extent of the discontent and indignation the country felt from the followed anti-Semitic policy.

During his next meeting with Hitler and Ribbentrop at Berhstetang, on 1 April 1943, Boris III underlined that he had agreed on the deportation of the Jews but only from Macedonia and Thrace. Among the Jewish population of Bulgaria, he wanted to expel only a small number, “Bolshevik-Communist elements”, and the rest, around 25,000, was thinking of gathering in labour camps in the country, as they were needed in the construction of roads.³⁴ Using this pretext the Tsar sought to avoid the deportation of the Jews. His intentions did not remain secret from the Germans. In documents of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs we read the following: “The practical result by the use of Jews in the construction of roads and railway lines in Bulgaria until today is particularly insignificant. For example, in the area of Stara Zagora they mobilized around 2,000 Jews, who in the presence of untrained and poor supervisors work for only a few hours every day

³¹ Филов, Б. Дневник (под общата редакция на проф. Илчо Димитров). София, 1990, р. 529 [Filov, B. Dnevnik (pod obshtata redaktsia na prof. Ilcho Dimitrov). Sofia, 1990]

³² *ibid*, р. 526

³³ Калчева, Д. Холокостът на Балканите..., р. 120 [Kalcheva, D. Holokostat v Tretia Rayh i negovite sayuznitsi. Sofia, 2008]

³⁴ Оцеляването..., р. 234 [Otselyavaneto. Sbornik ot dokumenti 1940-1944. Sofia, 1995, р. 184]

and live in comfort... We must conclude that the Bulgarian government is obviously using the labour battalions basically as a pretext against our wish for a deportation".³⁵

On the 3rd April 1943 the Section "Deutschland" at the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, prepared a memo, concerning the progress of the Jewish question in Bulgaria. In the document we read: "As in these instances concerning deportation, like in others as well, one can see that the orders for the Jewish question in Bulgaria, which by themselves are quite strict, are being loosely implemented and sometimes even pushed aside, because practically there is no understanding of the importance of the Jewish threat and because the Jews nevertheless remain in a position to exercise influence even on high-ranking officials. For example, in certain cases, at the last minute were excluded from deportation some intellectuals and more specifically doctors. Typical is the example with the transit of Jewish children from Romania to Palestine.³⁶ Once the German diplomatic mission in Sofia learned about the planned transit it attempted to foil it. From the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs they were given assurances that such a transit would never be allowed to take place and no visa permits would be issued (to the Jewish children). Nevertheless, following instructions from Sofia, the Bulgarian diplomatic mission in Bucharest issued the necessary visa permits. We have information concerning deportation of Jews from Bulgaria to Palestine and about its preparation. There are rumors that George Earle³⁷ has been involved in a similar transfer of Jews".³⁸ Another secret report of the German diplomatic mission in Sofia to Berlin, on 5th April 1943, gives testimony to the non-implementation of the obligations, the Bulgarian government had undertaken in relation to the Jewish question: "In order to understand properly the attitude of the Bulgarian government, one should have in mind that in Bulgaria no Jewish question exists in the way that it exists in the Reich. Indeed, there are also Jews here that have reached leading positions in the Bulgarian economy. They however are particular cases. In this country (Bulgaria) the ideological and racial preconditions are missing, in order to present the (final) solution of the Jewish question to the Bulgarian people as an urgent necessity, as is the case in the Reich. With the deportation of the Jews, the Bulgarian government is seeking above anything else material benefits, as the intention to give property belonging to the Jews to friendly Bulgarians, satisfying the latter and at the same time to replace the troublesome Jews in the new Bulgarian territories with Bulgarians. There is no doubt that the Bulgarian government is ready to expel the Jews living in the territory of old Bulgaria. It is behaving however in a particular way in the Jewish question in order to avoid attacks by the international press. Only in this way we can explain the readiness of the

³⁵ България – своенравният съюзник..., p. 135 [Bulgaria – svoenravnnyat sayuznik na Tretia rayh. Sastaviteli: Toshkova, V., Kotev, N., Stoimenov, N., Nikolov, R., Noykov, St. Sofia, 1992]

³⁶ For the transfer of Bulgarian Jews to Palestine see Шалтиел, Шл. От Отечество към Родина. Емиграция и нелегална имиграция към Палестина от България и през България в годините 1939-1949, Тел Авив, 2004 [Shaltiel, Shl. Ot Otechestvo kam Rodina. Emigratsia i nelegalna imigratsia kam Palestina ot Bulgaria i prez Bulgaria v godinite 1939-1949, Tel Aviv, 2004]

³⁷ Former American Ambassador in Bulgaria

³⁸ България-своенравният съюзник... p. 127-128 [Bulgaria – svoenravnnyat sayuznik na Tretia rayh. Sastaviteli: Toshkova, V., Kotev, N., Stoimenov, N., Nikolov, R., Noykov, St. Sofia, 1992]

Bulgarian government, as expressed to the Swiss Ambassador, to allow thousand Jewish children to live for Palestine”.³⁹

The deportation of Jews from the big cities and their concentration into labour camps began on the 24th May 1943. Eminent politician Stoicho Moshanov (Стойчо Мошанов) and Professor Petko Stainov (Петко Стайнов) protested strongly, however Prime Minister Bogdan Filov refused to stop the deportation. Nevertheless, both of them wrote a letter to the Tsar asking again for a termination of the deportation.⁴⁰

Bulgarian Jews themselves resisted the scheduled deportation and undertook a series of actions. During the celebrations in the name-day of the Slav Illuminators, St Kiril and Metodi, on the 24th of May, a group of around thousand Jews organised a protest meeting in Sofia against the government plan for their deportation. Their brave action found the support of many Bulgarians, and above all of the Bishop of Sofia Stefan who during the liturgy, conducted in honor of the two saints, he anathematized power for the attempted deportation. On the same day Bulgaria's spiritual leader intervened with the Prime Minister on behalf of the Jews, while he also spoke with the head of the Tsar's Chancellery Pavel Gruev (Павел Грueв), seeking to communicate with the Tsar.⁴¹ Boris III was outside Sofia, however having received criticism from many sides on the Jewish question, he had already decided to exile the Jews only in the countryside. The forced eviction of the Sofia Jews began on the 26th of May and until the 7th of June 19,153 of them had been removed from the capital. In the countryside they were received in houses of local Jews or were settled in empty houses where their living conditions were difficult, however their physical survival was guaranteed. The decision for the deportation of the Bulgarian Jews to Poland remained, without however being implemented.

On the 28th August 1943, only two weeks following his meeting with Hitler in Germany, the Bulgarian Tsar, Boris III died. So ceased to exist the most important personality of Bulgaria's political scene, while his death to a certain extent contributed to the salvation of the Jews, as German pressure on the Bulgarian government on the issue weakened. Three days following the death of Boris, in the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs they were convinced that the Bulgarian government would reject any German action, even if it was accompanied by strong pressure. The German diplomatic mission in Sofia believed that “not only there are no chances of success, but would even be politically risky to undertake any initiatives on the Jewish question”.⁴² On the 2nd October 1943 Foreign Minister Dotso Hristov (Дочо Христов) summarized as following his government's position on the Jewish question: “We will not deport anymore Jews. They will remain

³⁹ *ibid*, p. 130-131.

⁴⁰ Димитров, И. Буржоазната опозиция в България 1939-1944 г. София, 1997, p. 76-77 [Dimitrov, I. Burzhoaznata opozitsia v Bulgaria 1939-1944 g. Sofia, 1997]

⁴¹ Борбата на българския народ..., № 105, p. 169-170 [Borbata na balgarskia narod za zashtita i spasyavane na evreite v Bulgaria prez Vtorata svetovna voyna (Dokumenti i materialii). Sofia, 1978]

⁴² *ibid*, № 147, p. 240-241

where ever they are. They will be assisted discreetly, in the sense of not burdening the state and the population”.⁴³

The consequences of the anti-Semitic legislation began to be annulled with the *31st of August 1944 Decree for the Change and Supplementation of Law for the Protection of the Nation* issued by the government of Ivan Vagrianov (Иван Вагрянов). The new decree restored the rights and freedoms of the Jewish population. The next government of Konstantin Muraviev (Констатин Муравиев) issued an amnesty for all violations committed against ЗЗН and the law for the imposition of a lump-sum tax to the Jewish population. The complete annulment of all the legal and executive measures taken against the Jews, took place with the *Decree-Law for the Settlement of Property Issues and the Annulment of the Anti-Jewish Laws* issued by the government of the fatherland Front of Kimon Georgiev (Кимон Георгиев) following the 9th of September 1944.⁴⁴

History's judgment for the policy Bulgaria followed towards the Jews varies. On the one hand, the deportation of Jews from Thrace and Macedonia did not stop and they perished in the concentration camp in Treblinka. On the other, Jews within the limits of the old Kingdom of Bulgaria were saved, despite the preparations for their deportation. Historians are not in unison on another issue as well: on who deserves praise for the salvation of Bulgarian Jews; the Palace, certain representatives of the Bulgarian elite or the whole nation? Examining the actions of the authorities and the main factors which led to the salvation of the Jews, we can conclude that until 9 March 1943, Tsar Boris III, willingly or unwillingly, was following a policy against the Jews, with main elements the adoption of the *Law for the Defense of the Nation*, the establishment of the *Committee on Jewish Issues* and the agreement Belev-Dannecker. After the 9th of March, the Tsar changed abruptly his policy and until his death he defended his position, rejecting the plans existing for deportation in May (1943). Boris III actions, during March and May, were greatly influenced by the steady position of the Vice-President of the National Assembly, Dimitar Peshev, the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the firm position of the Bishops Stefan and Kiril, a large part of the Bulgarian political and cultural elite, as well as the resistance meted out to the anti-Semitic policy by a significant part of the Bulgarian society. Although ambivalent, the role of the Tsar Boris III at certain moments was positive as he was the main political factor in the country. The major factor of the salvation however is the active involvement and reaction of the majority of the Bulgarian society, which felt anti-Semitism as something alien to it. The words of the German Ambassador in Sofia, Adolf-Heinz Beckerle, provide the best support to the above argument: “Bulgarian society does not understand the real meaning of the Jewish question. Next to the few rich Jews there are many poor, workers and craftsmen. Having grown up with Greeks, Turks and Roma, an ordinary Bulgarian does not understand the meaning of the struggle against Judaism, even more, that the racial question from its nature is incomprehensible to him”⁴⁵.

⁴³ *ibid*, № 148, p. 241

⁴⁴ Държавен вестник, бр. 227 of 16th October 1944. With article 2 of the Decree-Law all laws that had been issued in relation to the Jewish question were annulled, among them the Law for the Defense of the Nation, and the Law for the Imposition of a Lump-Sum Tax to Persons of Jewish Origin.

⁴⁵ България – своенравният съюзник..., p. 112

These values of tolerance and empathy most of the Bulgarian society showed during these difficult times are the fundament on which we should build today a shield against Antisemitism, xenophobia, hate speech and all kind of unhuman ideologies.

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