

The Yellow Star of Hope
By Neil Glick
Washington DC

In September 1994, while traveling, I had two layovers in Sofia, Bulgaria. Sofia was my transit point for my vacation from my then home of Moscow, Russia to Greece. On my way back to Moscow, I would be celebrating Rosh Hashanah in Sofia, so I looked for the Jewish community to learn about services.

I found my way to the great Synagogue of Sofia. It is built in a Moorish style and has an incredible main dome, with little domes all around. The interior was under complete reconstruction at the time. Not many American Jewish tourists appeared in Bulgaria during the period after the fall of Communism. My fluent Russian facilitated making my way in the Synagogue and in Sofia in general.

After two minutes, I got an impromptu meeting with the President of the Community. He was an older Gentleman who was so warm and friendly. He was probably in his 70's and we both spoke in Russian, which like Bulgarian is a Slavic language. I told him that I would be in Sofia for Rosh Hashanah, and asked to participate in their service. I was warmly welcomed. Since the Synagogue was under reconstruction, services would be in a small chapel across from the office. "Get here early – the seats will quickly be filled!" he said.

After my trip to Greece, I arrived in Sofia early in the day. I walked around central Sofia and came upon a small antique store.

One item quickly caught my eye - a small shiny yellow Mogen David – a Jewish star. It was larger than a quarter and smaller than a half dollar. It looked like it was bake-lite on wood. The label on the item said "Igrushka" which translated to "toy" or "game." I knew the history of yellow stars, and thought it might be a hat badge for the Jewish Ghetto Police or Judenrat during the War. The clerk what it was. She told me that it was from a game of some sort. The price was the equivalent of \$8.00. I bought it and put it in my pocket.

A few hours later I got to the Synagogue early for services. The President of the Community saw me, and we greeted each other. Then I pulled out the yellow star, and asked if he knew what it was.

His jovial face changed to a worn look in an instant.

"This is what I wore during the War. I wore mine right here as a boy" and he pointed to his left breast. The star had two small holes in the middle so it could be sewn on, like a button.

Now realizing the gravity of the meaning of this little yellow star, I asked "what happened here during the war?" like a child asking his grandfather why he had numbers tattooed on his arm, anticipating a sad answer.

Growing up, I read copious stories about the Holocaust, but the Jews of Bulgaria never stuck out in my mind. So much about life behind the Iron Curtain was not taught to children growing up during the Cold War.

The President told me the greatest story that I never heard from the Holocaust.

Bulgaria voluntarily joined the Axis powers and supported Nazi Germany in hopes of winning back territory in the Balkans.

But this was not a nation with a history of anti-Semitism. The 50,000 Jews of Bulgaria at the start of the war, were an integral part of the country.

Under strong pressure from the Nazi's, beginning in July 1940, Bulgaria passed laws similar to the Nuremberg Laws: stripping Jews of citizenship; banning intermarriage; and not allowing Jews to practice certain professions. Jews were forced to settle out of Sofia, the Capitol, and Jewish males were conscripted into forced labor in public construction projects. Money and gold held by Jews was confiscated. The Nazis kept demanding to deport the Jews of Bulgaria to Poland and certain death.

When it came time to round up Bulgarian Jews, there was a huge protest by all levels of society, from the King, Boris III, His Majesty's Government; to literary circles and artists; to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church; to the Bulgarian people.

Jews were forced to live in Ghettos, and forced to wear this little yellow star. But the people of Bulgaria did not allow anyone to kill, or deport, their fellow Bulgarian citizens who were Jewish. Life was not easy for Jews in Bulgaria – food was scarce and Jews did perform backbreaking labor. Nevertheless, the Jews of Bulgaria stayed and lived in Bulgaria, even as the Nazi's controlled their nation.

At the end of the war, the Jewish population of Bulgaria was still 50,000. It was the only European country during World War II to see an increase in its' Jewish population rather than a decrease.

Words could not express what I learned from this survivor of World War II. I was on the verge of tears. I looked at my star, and held it tight in my hand. I learned that an entire nation of Jews survived the Holocaust in their own country; saved by their fellow citizens. It was a bewildering thought for me, since so many from my family did not survive World War II.

I went to join the Jews of Sofia, Bulgaria in prayer to welcome in a New Year. This New Year gave me a new meaning on the yellow star.

This was not a yellow star representing hate, injustice, intolerance and murder. This yellow star represents the best and brightest golden light of humanity during the darkest hour of history. It shows when people stand up to pure evil, they can succeed and they can win. This represents the zenith of the human spirit. This is the Yellow Star of Hope.

Read the incredible account of the Jews of Bulgaria, Beyond Hitler's Grasp: The Heroic Rescue of Bulgaria's Jews by Michael Bar-Zohar.

Sources

Michael Bar-Zohar, *Beyond Hitler's Grasp: The Heroic Rescue of Bulgaria's Jews*. Holbrook, MA: Adams Media, 2001. ISBN 158062541X

"History of the Jews in Bulgaria." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. 21 Jun 2009, 21:15 UTC. 21 Jun 2009
<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=History_of_the_Jews_in_Bulgaria&oldid=297793606>.

A Yellow Star of David Button, Which the Bulgarian Jews were Forced to Wear in 1941 with the Onset of the German Occupation¹ Bakelite

The Germans invaded Bulgaria in 1941. A curfew was imposed on the Jews, permitting them to leave their homes for only two hours each day. In addition, every Jew was ordered to sew a yellow star button on his/her lapel.

Yellow stars were distributed to the Jews in Bulgaria by the KEV, the "Commissariat for Jewish Questions," and the KEV also saw to it that it was worn by all Jews.

However, it encountered some unexpected difficulties in carrying out its tasks.

First, privileged and converted Jews were exempt from wearing these stars, which were the smallest Jewish stars produced for this purpose in Europe.

Second, factories were not manufacturing the stars as quickly as the Germans wanted (by November 1942, only 20% of stars had been produced).

Third, some Jews created their own stars, inset with pictures of the king and queen of Bulgaria. These initiatives portrayed the solidarity of the Bulgarian people with their Jewish neighbors. They also reflect the fact that Bulgaria's king demanded a softening of restrictions against its Jews, for which the Jews were obviously grateful.²

¹

<http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/artifacts/star.asp>

² Michael Bar-Zohar, *Beyond Hitler's Grasp: The Heroic Rescue of Bulgaria's Jews*. Holbrook, MA: Adams Media, 2001. ISBN 158062541X

In 1943, the Jews of Sofia were deported to the peripheral areas of Bulgaria, leaving behind their possessions and their homes.

In December 1943, the Bulgarian Government allowed the Jews of Sofia to return to the capital to attend to private affairs.³

All anti-Semitic orders were rescinded on August 24, 1944, when the Russians entered Bulgaria and those who had been deported could permanently return to their homes. And confiscated property was returned to their rightful owners.

King Boris III

BULGARIA: Boris III (1918-43)

Monday, Sept. 06, 1943

Obituary

Behind the grey walls of Sofia's grey palace, death came suddenly to Boris III, King and Dictator of Bulgaria. His 25-year reign had begun in war and chaos. It closed in war and chaos.

Premier Bogdan Filoff broadcast tersely to the people: "Our beloved King died after a brief illness." Rumor, unconfirmed but persistent, added varying details:

That Boris had been assassinated by Bulgaria's underground. Sofia radio tagged the tale as "grotesque and fantastic."

That Boris had returned in broken health from a stormy visit with Adolf Hitler. Sofia and Berlin denied there had been a visit. But no one could forget other men who had left the Führer's presence the worse for wear. At Berchtesgaden in 1938, just before the annexation of Austria, stubborn Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg had been shattered by hysterics and threats.

At Berlin in 1939, on the eve of Czechoslovakia's dissolution, plodding President Emil Hacha had collapsed after 45 minutes of the Führer's ranting.

Present Crisis. Boris had died at one of the most uncertain moments in a rule plagued by internal violence and external pressure. His alliance with the Axis, signed in 1941, had gained for Bulgaria portions of Greece and Yugoslavia. It had cost thousands of casualties in Balkan guerrilla fighting. It had meant tighter belts so that Germans could have more of Bulgaria's wheat and potatoes. As the German lines sagged in Russia and the Mediterranean, Berlin demanded greater help from Sofia.

But Boris, long known as the foxiest monarch in Europe, saw the time had come to shift from a pro-German policy. Even if he had not faced the Führer's fury, the pressures squeezing his throne might have felled any man of weak heart.

³ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/bulgaria.html#ww2>

Past Error. Before 1941 Boris had said: "My ministers are pro-German, my wife is pro-Italian, my people are pro-Russian—I am the only neutral in the country." The decision to discard his neutrality, rather than defend it against Nazi infiltration, was his prime mistake.

His Germanophile father, tyrannical Ferdinand I, had made the same mistake in 1914, had paid for it by abdicating in 1918. Boris III, at 24, began with a constitution, a Sobranje (Parliament), political parties and his people's respect.

But his government soon turned into a semi-dictatorship. The King was a puppet of politicians and generals. He preferred to spend his time in driving locomotives, collecting wild flowers, netting butterflies.

Civil strife racked the nation. Between 1921 and 1929 three spectacular attempts were made on the King's life. In 1924 the country had 200 political assassinations. Then, in 1934, Boris approved a military coup that suppressed the constitution, dissolved the Sobranje, abolished political parties. A year later he installed himself as dictator, began to play power politics.

His old father, an exile in the ancestral home at Coburg, urged a Germanophile course. Perhaps the son listened, unwisely.

Future Course. With the strong man gone, these were possibilities:

A regency would be established. The Filoff government announced the ascension of Boris' son, six-year-old Simeon II. The Bulgarian Army swore fealty to the boy King. Premier Filoff, according to Berlin's radio, summoned the Sobranje to approve a regency.

A popular movement would overthrow the monarchy, establish a leftist, anti-German government. Europe's listening posts described the temper of Bulgaria's people as ugly. Peace demonstrators marched in Sofia's streets, stoned the Nazi Embassy.

The country seemed destined to become a battlefield. To keep their hold and ensure a pro-Nazi regime, the Germans might send in an army of occupation; the Allies might counter with an invasion of the Balkans; watchful opportunist Turkey might now enter the war on the Allied side. Cabled New York Timesman Ray Brock through the Turkish censorship: "The time might come when the Turks would consider it necessary to march into the Balkans in order to protect Turkey's frontiers and security."

In World War I Bulgaria was the first of the Central Powers to crack. Less than two months later, Germany surrendered.

Read more: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,802945,00.html#ixzz1TsfFixeT>

King Simeon II

The Honorable Dimitar Peshev

Like many other political figures in his country, Dimitar Peshev, the Vice President of the Sbranie - Bulgaria's Parliament – had favored Bulgaria's alliance with Germany. Germany rewarded its ally, and when Yugoslavia was divided between the Axis powers, Bulgaria regained the territories that it had lost in the Balkan war of 1912-3.

Peshev's party which was the government majority party enacted anti-Jewish legislation, such as the 1940 Law for the Defense of the Nation, which restricted Jews' participation in the country's economic and social life and imposed a special tax on Jews. In addition Jews were ordered to wear a Jewish star and male Jews were drafted for forced labor. The proposed bill produced mixed reactions. There was a certain support for the anti-Jewish measures, as well as protests by organizations such as the Bulgarian Writers Union and the Physicians Union. Peshev supported the bill, as he explained in his post war memoirs: 'I was of the firm conviction that all this was indeed about bringing Bulgaria's policies in line with those of Germany...No one imagined that the measures would become permanent, let alone that they would take the same forms and proportions as those that were being carried out in Germany'. Faced with the complexities of the political situation, Peshev believed that the price the Jews had to pay was justified as it was balanced against what Bulgaria was to gain. As it turned out, other German demands were to follow.

In February 1942 the Bulgarian government agreed to deport 20,000 Jewish from Thrace and Macedonia. However, since there were nowhere near 20,000 Jews in these provinces, it was agreed to make up the difference with 6,000 Jewish from Bulgaria itself. The first such group of Bulgarian Jews was to come from Kyustendil. When rumors about the intended deportations reached Peshev he acted promptly and traveled to Kyustendil. There he met with the assistant chief of police who told him about the planned roundups. He also received delegations of Jews and non-Jews who implored him to intervene. Peshev, who two years earlier had accepted the anti-Jewish measures as necessary, felt that he had reached a point where acquiescence was no longer an option. Rather than shut his eyes and continue to persuade himself that the alliance with Germany benefited Bulgaria, he confronted the consequences of this pact and decided that it was his responsibility to act. He organized a parliamentary delegation and went to see Petr Gabrovski, the Minister of Interior.

Peshev did not satisfy himself with the Minister's assurance. He decided to bring the matter to the parliament. On 17 March he wrote a letter of protest and had 42 parliamentarians sign it. He ignored the Prime Minister's request not to submit the letter, and it was discussed by the majority caucus in its meeting on 23 March 1943. The session turned into a confrontation between Peshev and the Prime Minister, who in order to intimidate the signatories of the petition, insisted on having each one of them stand up and announce their support of the letter. This caused some of them to falter. Under the Prime Minister's pressure, only 30 of the original 42 stood fast. As it turned out, the debate actually focused on the parliamentarians' loyalty, not on the deportees' fate.

In a final vote, the party declared its support of the Prime Minister and decided to censure Peshev. On March 30 he was forced to step down as the Parliament's vice president, and his request to be allowed to speak was rejected. Peshev was politically ostracized, but his protest was echoed by other political and clerical voices and the Bulgarian government had to abandon its plans to deport the Jews of Bulgaria. The deportations from Bulgaria were suspended, but while the political negotiations were going on, the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia were being deported by the Bulgarian authorities. The last transport to the death camps left on March 29, 1943.

In 1973 Peshev was awarded the title of Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem.⁴

⁴ <http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/stories/peshev.asp>