

*LEAH COHEN*  
*You Believe*  
*8 Glances at the Holocaust*

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Sample translation, pp. 42 - 49:

(.....)

### **The Bulgarian Orthodox Church**

In the debate on the fate of Jews, it was confronted by a well organized state machine, which it tried to influence by nonstandard means of communication between Church and State: a continuous pressure already at the discussion of the 'Law on the Protection of the Nation', which it strongly disagreed with, a pressure that it continued with, till the complete abolition of the anti-Jewish actions after September 2, 1944.

Throughout all this period the Church used to be in complex and contradictory relations with the Palace and the government that refused to grant it the right of electing a patriarch. Representatives of the higher clergy as Bishops Stefan and Cyril had overt conflicts with Czar Boris the Third, both on ecclesiastical issues, and due to disagreement with his pro-German policy. Without taking into consideration that they put in jeopardy the inner Church policy, the Bulgarian bishops made a moral choice regarding the Jewish question in Bulgaria, of which could not brag about, neither any religious institutions in Europe of that time, nor any other official organization, in general. Moreover, its unprecedentedly consistent position was not exhausted with humanistic appeals only, but was also expressed by actions, illustration of which gave Church leaders themselves. Episodes like the ostentatious taking under protection of the Sofia and Plovdiv Rabies, respectively by Bishop Stefan and Bishop Cyril, the dramatic letters and telegrams, sent by both of them to the Monarch, demanding the deportation cancellation, the threat of Cyril that he will get on trains together with the Jews, the written order to priests "to open up the doors of churches and monasteries for the Jews", are not urban legends and secondarily created myths, but real facts, accomplished with vigor and certain histrionics. Namely the emotional effect of these reactions had stimulated the population, which, fascinated by its clerics, had unified around them in an action that had transformed in a cause at an instant.

It's an amazing fact that the 11 Bulgarian Bishops, in spite of all contradictions, differences and sometimes conflicts within them, have managed to come to consent about their collective resistance against the anti-Jewish legislation and later against its implementation and the persecutions that followed. A testimonial about the Church struggle for protecting at first the rights and later the life of the Jewish population, are the Holy Synod protocols for the period 1940-1944, a document with amazing content, whose publication in 2002 has given a new direction to the whole "*theory of saving*". Everyone knowledgeable understands that ***the true moral leaders of the saving were the Bishops***<sup>1</sup>, who have exercised influence and power both over the ruling circles and for the unification of considerable, by their numbers, groups of people, where they were well esteemed. Thus, they carried into effect not only forms of protest, but real public civil disobedience that threatened the pillars of kingdom and power, shaking them from within and as a result forcing them towards a sole possible in that moment choice: deportation abrogation, although temporary. Government and Palace reacted to these actions with overt hostility: according to Stefan Gruev<sup>2</sup> the Czar was very angry and was even inclined to accuse Bishop Stefan of espionage in favor of the British, as to Bogdan Filov, in his "Diary" the prime-minister again lost his temper with the priests. With a proved success, this method of crude and unambiguous pressure over authorities has been applied afterwards, each time there was a new threat of deportation, sabotaging authorities' intentions and depriving them of popular support for their anti-Jewish actions. It has to be emphasized here that Jewish intellectuals were well esteemed. Examples are Pancho Vladigerov, author of the strongly patriotic "Bulgarian Rhapsody Vardar" (1922), composed as reverberation of the Bulgarian national propensities after the Treaty of Neuilly, the painters Jules Pascin, David Peretz, and many others.

However, due to the media censorship (newspapers and radio were all governmental) the intellectuals' protests did not find wide response.

A review of the newspapers between the autumn of 1940, when the Draft 'Law on Protection of the Nation' was introduced to the National Assembly, and March 1943, which is a tragic boundary for Jews' fate, shows that public interest indifferently winded around Jewish persecutions. One can't even claim that there was a particularly aggressive anti-Semitic propaganda to prepare the public for the afflictions, planned by authorities. Newspapers "Mir",

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<sup>1</sup> To the role of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is devoted a separate chapter of this book. (author's note.)

<sup>2</sup> St. Gruev „A Crown of Thorns”, published by „Bulgarian writer” PH, 1991.

“Zora”, “Utro” and others, informed the population of the war actions’ course, exercised their apologetics of the Germans, but didn’t indulge into virulent attacks towards Jews. In February 1943, only a month before the planned deportation of Jews, in “Mir” newspaper one could even find Jewish engagement and wedding announcements, and among advertised newly published books – a biography of Albert Einstein, who had long before left Germany to avoid concentration camps.

This policy of passing over in silence could be viewed as censorship, but could also be due to what the German Ambassador in Sofia Adolf Heinz Beckerle called regretfully “Bulgarians’ disinterestedness in the Jewish Question resolution”. Whether the press, controlled by the government had chosen this form of mimicry, not to intensify the Jewish problem, is a question that cannot be given a simple answer. Even the intervention of Dimitar Peshev with his letter to the prime-minister Filov, remained almost unknown to the public, as well as the consequences caused to Peshev thereof. Filov, in accordance with Boris the Third, organized a lightning speed counter-attack, as a result of which the MPs signatures were withdrawn from the document, and on March 27, 1943 newspaper “Zora” published a 4 rows announcement of the following text:

**„National Assembly news**

**Yesterday the National Assembly voted the proposal of the MP Dr. Al. Popov for giving a vote of non-confidence to the Deputy President of the National Assembly Dimitar Peshev. The proposal was accepted with a solid vote.”**

Seldom there was an obviously controlled media campaign: for instance in the autumn of 1940, when the ‘Law on Protection of the Nation’ was discussed, and at the beginning of 1943, when, even without mentioning the deportation of Macedonian and Aegean Jews, were published anti-Jewish articles and correspondences, accusing Jews of profiteering and jobbery, bromidic attributes of anti-Semitic propaganda, brought into play in strategic moments of anti-Jewish persecutions.

Exceptions were the anti-Semitic Bulgarian radio broadcasts that in a most explicit way “clarified” the actual goals of the politics, pursued against Jews.

*„The goal of anti-Jewish politics is to cause a gradual disappearance of Jewish blood from Bulgaria”,* says one of the commentaries.

*“An end should be put to sentimentalism - summons another commentary - there are intellectuals who whimper over the fate of Jews...The Jewish Question is not only economic, it’s a question of blood, biological extermination of Jews.”*<sup>3</sup>

And yet, all these actions (the Bishops’ resistance, the inner mobilisation of Jewish communities, the intellectuals’ reaction, the letter of Peshev, the sharp reaction of some diplomats) have gained at that moment enough weight to tip the balance into a trend, favorable for the Jews. This balance was, on the one side, already overloaded with such important facts as the “international situation”, governmental intra-political struggle, and, a couple of months later, with the unexpected death of the Monarch, after which no one already dared to take fatal decisions and bare responsibility for them. It might seem a provocative argument, but **the death of Boris the Third contributed more to the saving of Bulgarian Jews, than his ascribed actions in their favor, while he was alive.** From the middle and during the second half of 1943, in the Bulgarian political life shaped a constellation of elements, whose strategic goal was not at all the fate of Bulgarian Jews. At that moment they were an almost invisible particle of the big puzzle, called later “national catastrophe”. Significantly later, this particle was taken out of the chaotic pile, to obtain the character of a self-contained picture, declared as a “masterpiece of Bulgarian humanness”.

In the light of the abovementioned, when the role of public factors in saving the Bulgarian Jews is alluded, the use of the notion “people”, would look like a sociohistorical illusion, without the unifying meaning of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church’s actions that managed to give the character of a movement to the actions in protection of the Jews (the spontaneous demonstration at Plovdiv railway station, where Bishop Cyril participated and pronounced his famous phrase that he will get on trains with Jews, the public statement of Bishop Stefan at the second deportation attempt around May 24, and the following demonstration, joined even by communists, the appeal “to open up churches and monasteries for the Jews”). In a decisive for the Bulgarian Jews moment, exactly the Church has found the right approach to “get” the people on the Bulgarian political stage. It has formulated for the people a cause of moral dimension. It has created a moment of intransient historicism, which has not been found for the people, neither by the government, nor by the Monarch, with their territorial doctrine and ideas of Realpolitik.

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<sup>3</sup> D. Daskalov, ‘Czar Boris the Third: the Known and the Unknown’, pp. 125-126.

When we write the history of saving 48000 Bulgarian Jews, the notion of “people” would sound hollow and unconvincing, if we don’t write in front of it, in big letters, the name of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and if we don’t take into account the stormy reaction of Bulgarian intelligentsia and the high moral figure of Dimitar Peshev.. Perhaps, it was the intelligentsia and Peshev, which in that moment had the highest degree of consciousness that historically speaking, the Bulgarian Jews, settled on these lands for centuries and fully integrated in social life and history, including their participation in the liberation and national wars, are an integral part of this very same people. The forcible tearing off this part was a premeditated, criminal act, performed because of political blindness and in the name of a dirty deal. They couldn’t admit that the Bulgarians would not react to their own amputation jointly and unanimously as a people, as it used to happen also in other dramatic instances of their history.

And since the notion of “people” is not only a social and historical category, but also a collective noun for mental constitution, one could say that these personalities with particularly high moral stability, like Bishops Cyril and Stefan, like the public figures Petko Staynov and Dimo Kazasov, like the MP Dimitar Peshev, like Vladimir Kurtev, like a number of intellectuals as Dr. Pavel Gerdjikov, and other, known and unknown, ordinary people of courage and good hearts that have become the real spokesmen of the most precious virtues and Bulgarian popular spirit, by which they managed to influence national history evolvement. Thus, by stepping out in defense of Bulgarian Jews, they have saved not only them, but their own people from the heaviness of a disgrace that would have weighted heavily upon its consciousness.

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*Translation from Bulgarian by Tanya Ryan*