THE MORAL GREATNESS OF DIMITAR PESHEV[1]
by Gabriele Nissim

Over the recent years the figure of Dimitar Peshev, which I have tried to popularize around the world, has been somehow set aside in the attempt to present King Boris as the great saviour of Jews.
The prejudiced bias in favour of the Bulgarian king has thus prevented a critical and objective discussion about the fate of the Jews from Thrace and Macedonia, almost as if the responsibility of their deportation layed exclusively on the German soldiers. We have even witnessed the attempt to dedicate a forest in Israel to the figure of Boris III, to present him as the champion of the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews, but this manouevre was stopped on 16 July 2000[2] by a committee formed by Moshe Bejski, the late President of the Righteous Department of Yad Vashem.
Reflecting today about the moral and political meaning of the deeds of the Vicepresident of the Bulgarian Parliament, D. Peshev, can help create the conditions for a critical analysis of the history of Bulgaria during Second World War.
His example holds a universal value because he was a person who, initially charmed by Hitler like the whole Bulgarian leadership, found the courage to question his choices, and took action to stop the deportation of the Jews living in the inner regions of the country, thus compelling Minister of the Interiors Gabronski to suspend the departure of all trains destined for that purpose.

Peshev behaved responsibly and found the courage to admit the mistakes which had led him to support the racial laws within the Parliament. This is what he himself writes into his memories without reticence, even after the success of his initiative to rescue the Jews, as he could have presented himself as a spotless hero.
He wasn't ashamed to tell the truth.
"I had approved of such measures[3] because I thought they were important to strengthen our alliance with Germany and therefore safeguard our

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[1] Gabriele Nissim told the story of Dimitar Peshev in *L'uomo che fermò Hitler* (the Man who stopped Hitler) published by Mondadori, Milan, 1998. There is a German translation of the book entitled as *Der Mann der Hitler stoppte*, published by Siedler Verlag, Berlin, 2000.

[2] Document of 16.7.2000, Keren Kayemeth Archive, Tel Aviv. The inquiry commission formed by Moshe Bejski, Liola Eliav, Dalia Hofer highlighted, concerning the deportation of the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia, how "the control over those territories was held by the police, the army, and the Bulgarian state."

[3] Here we present Peshev's publications with the title translated into English, alongside with the archive location to make it possible to retrieve the original information. Some material about Peshev is also

national interests. I did not think those measures could become permanent and gain the momentum of those applied in Germany."
The Vicepresident followed the historical trend without questioning the nature of Nazism and the purposes of its antiSemitic policies.
He participated enthusiastically to an authoritarian government which suppressed the political parties, as he thought that was the best way to eliminate corruption in the country.
He was persuaded that the alliance with the Third Reich would make the good of his country.
"I thought the adhesion to the Tripartite pact[4] was inevitable because that was the only way for Bulgaria to escape major evil, i.e. to become the scene of the war operations, be occupied by Germany and be forced into the conflict."
When the German army hands over the territories of Thrace and Macedonia to Bulgaria, he praises Hitler before the Parliament by defining him as the greatest leader of the time, "committed with his forces to break the chain of the past to build a new, more just and content international community[5]".
On 19 November 1940 he presides, without objecting, the Parliamentary session passing the racial laws.
The Jews are excluded from the Bulgarian life, but Peshev does not seem to realise it; like the majority of the Bulgarian leaders, he thinks that in order to reconquer Thrace and Macedonia it is acceptable to approve the antiSemitic racial legislation. The nationalistic dream is worth the sacrifice of Jews, even if in Bulgaria there are no conditions favourable to antiSemitic hatred.
For example, on 19 November 1940, at the moment of voting for the laws, MP Nikolaiev, President of the Commission of the Internal Affairs, expresses his doubts to Mr. Popov who is the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Then he receives the following answer: "I myself do not agree with many things[6], but I bear them, I fight them as I can and, if I cannot, I step back. But I always try to achieve the most important thing." "But what is more important here? "asks Nikolaiev . "Come on, don't you see it?" he replied. "Succeeding in remaining non-belligerant until the end, without

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linked in the WeFor Website (www.gariwo.net/wefor) which is a European project dedicated to the memory of the Righteous run by my foundation, Gariwo. *Notebooks,* "On the Jewish question", Fund no.1335,u.a.156,Sofia, Sofia National Historical Archive.

[4] Peshev, *Notebooks,* "Memories on the trial before the People's Court", family archive.

[5] Peshev, *Report in reply to the crown's speech,* IV ordinary session of the XXV national assembly, 11 November 1942- Records of the trial before the People's Court -Attachments,1944-45, Sofia, Archives of the Ministry of the Interiors.

[6] Nikolaj Petrov Nikolaev, *Fragmenti ot memoari* (Fragments of memory), Sofia, Dialog, 1994, p.228.

overlooking the opportunity to fullfil our national aspirations. Hence, we were handed over Dobruja without shedding blood, soon we will be able also to seize the region on the Aegean sea, always without fighting. This is 'the most important thing, isn't it?'". Clearly, the Jews were less important than the territories.
What happened in the Fourties of the past century is a very clear representation of the banality of evil, described by Hannah Arendt in a masterful manner, as she noted that human beings can perpetrate serious crimes not because they are devilish and bad, but because they lose their prerogatives of thoughtfulness and judgement. Evil thus presents itself as *thoughtlessness*. Under extreme circumstances, which are typical of totalitarian systems, moral conscience does not perform because those who become passive bystanders of evil believe it is their duty to obey, comply with the laws in force and follow the political and ideological orientation of power.
Paradoxically, breaching this order becomes a guilt unless it is supported by thoughfulness and imagination.

This is exactly the core of Peshev's greatness.
When his friend Jako Baruch, a few hours before deportation, invites him to make a move in favour of the Jews who had already been gathered in the tobacco stores to be sent to Poland, Peshev faces two possible options:
behaving like Eichmann and all those who abetted the final solution, by purporting that an honest citizen had to comply with the state orders and the law in force even though he did not like them. This meant acting for the supreme Good of Bulgaria, by obeying to the crown's government and not feeling embarassed when faced with the calls for help coming from the Jewish community. In this case he would have pretended not to know.
Or else, he would have to question his choice and put himself in the Jews' shoes, by imagining their possible suffering.
In this case his judgement would have not have been based on pre-established rules, but only on his capability to think by himself. This is what Hannah Arendt defines as reflective judgement, i.e. everybody's capability to express an aesthetical judgment (I like it or not, it is beautiful or ugly) about everything, without basing their evaluation on the general political orientation.
Peshev faced a quandary, then followed this latter path.
He understood he could not feel in peace with himself if he continued being silent about the deportation of the Jews. Thus he behaved like Socrates, who taught us that it is better to suffer a wrong than to commit it.

Precisely as it is better to be in conflict with the entire world than with oneself.
In her Philosophy lessons held in New York, Hannah Arendt masterfully describes the secret of a man like Peshev, who is able to disobey orders and remain thoughtful under difficult circumstances.
"The criterion of right and wrong, the answer to the question, what ought I to do? depends in the last analysis neither on habits and customs, which I share with those around me, nor on a command of either divine or human origin, but what I decide with regard to myself. In other words, I cannot do certain things, because I know that otherwise I could not live with myself anymore. Being with oneself is something related to thought, and every thinking process is an activity in which I talk to myself about everything happening to me and which I care about."
This is why the Vicepresident of the Bulgarian Parliament decides to a responsibility upon himself.
The mainspring that pushes him into thought and then action is "the call of the face of the other", as Emanuel Levinas pointed out. It is that suffering face which calls him to assume responsibility and makes him feel deeply at unease. In particular, the other's face was the one of his Jewish friend Jako Baruch and the delegation from Kjustendil who implored him to act before it was too late.
Peshev found the strength to let this vision affect him, and after promising to save Baruch' family, he undestood that an action in favour of his old friend was not enough, that he had to devise a political action.
Thus he resorts to a trick. He summons some deputies and threatens to inform the public opinion about the decision to deport the Jews, which has not been approved by the Parliament and is in contrast with the Bulgarian Constitution.
Then, with a delegation of deputies he goes to the office of the Interiors Minister Petăr Gabrovski. Here, in a dramatic encounter he presents him with the perspective of a political scandal in case he does not call off the deportation order. As Gabrovski was put with his back against the wall, he promised to suspend the ongoing procedure, but Peshev kept mistrusting him anyway and compelled him to call all prefectures in his presence to make sure they would set free the Jews who had already been gathered in the transit centres.
This is the only case in the entire history of the Holocaust where a Minister of Interiors is forced to step back and free thousands Jews ready to be deported.
If only for this action, Peshev should be considered as one of the greatest Righteous in the Holocaust for his ability to pass from a bystander's and

complicit role to an impressive rescue action through the most surprising metamorphosis.

Yet what is of the utmost importance from the moral point of view is the political action that Peshev carries out within the Parliament.
In fact, the Vicepresident of Sobranie is aware that the Jews keep hovering between life and death, because the deportation order has been only suspended. He spots the need for a political signal from the Bulgarian Parliament in order not to let the Government yield again to German pressure.
"I wonder what I could do. I could not be silent[7] or remain passive anymore when such important issues were at hand ... so I decided to act, but how? I had understood that the personal gestures, albeit feasible, could prove to be little effective on the long run. They were not enough to ensure a positive outcome. The government could call them off with the same motivations by which it had justified the approval of the antiJewish measures ... To prevent the irreparable we had to put the question before the Parliament."
Thus on 17 March 1943 he wrote a document aiming at gathering the maximum number of signatures from the deputies of the filoNazi majority and he delivered it to Prime Minister Bogdan Filov, who was responsible for the deportation alongside with King Boris. On purpose he refuses to gather the support of the opposition. In fact, if his call had been taken for a challenge to the whole political line of the government, it would have not been taken into consideration.
The text is a real masterpiece, in that it aims at making the Minister aware of how the evil perpetrated against the Jews wouls sooner of later come back to haunt the Bulgarian nation.
Peshev does not ask the deputies to defend the Jews out of compassion, in the name of a universal love towards the others, which is a topic that cannot certainly convince those who have embraced the nationalist spirit of the time, but he invites them to imagine the unbearable burden of the guilt that will befall the entire country.
Hence, Peshev puts the patriotic discourse upside down. Territorial ambitions should not lead you to become complicit in a genocide. The "moral" mutilation is far worse than the "territorial" one.
"Such measures are unthinkable[8], not only because these people - Bulgarian citizens - could not be expelled from Bulgaria, but also because

[7]Peshev, *On the Jewish Question*, Fund n.1335, u.a.156, Sofia, National Historical Archives.
[8] Peshev, Protest letter to Prime Minister Bogdan Filov, Fund 1335,u.a.85, Sofia, National Historical Archives.

this could seriously harm the country. "The forehead of the nation" would be marred by a stain which would always be a moral and political burden, depriving Bulgaria of all good arguments in its foreign relations. Small nations couldn't ignore these arguments, which serve as powerful weapons. or us, all that is happening is of special significance.

The small number of Jews in Bulgaria, the strength of our own State, with so many legal tools, makes the elimination of any dangerous elements easy. This releases us from the use of exceptional and distressing measures that could be taken for genocide and would not only expose the Government, but affect the whole nation. The consequences of such a policy can already be foreseen and we cannot share any responsibility for it. Legal order is as necessary to government as is fresh air for breathing. The honor of Bulgaria is not only a matter of feelings but also of policy of the highest significance, and it must not be jeopardized without good reasons approved by the whole nation". The content of Peshev's call reminds us of the text of the letter that German writer Armin Wegner had sent Hitler in vain ten years earlier. In a letter addressed to the Munich chancellory in April 1933, Wegner had warned Hitler of the shame that would haunt Germany because of the antiJewish persecution.

"Shame and misfortune will befall Germany[9] and for a long time will not be forgotten! In fact who is going to pay for the evil we are now inflicting to the Jews if not ourselves?"

As we know, Germany is still paying for it, while Bulgaria, thanks to Peshev and all those who followed the spirit of this letter, can boast having partly saved its own reputation in the world.

In Peshev's document we find two ethical elements which have a universal value and make this text a key reference point also for the future generations.

First of all Peshev embodied the concept of self-esteem and moral reputation that we find in Socrates and was later resumed by Hannah Arendt. According to this concept an individual (like the human beings who represent nations) to feel well with him or herself cannot live with a murderer, a thief or a lier inside his soul.

The philosopher from Hannover reminds us of several duties: "I must be sincere with myself, I shall not do anything which I cannot live with, and whose memory I cannot remember".

The concept of similar possibilities, which was explained very well by Jean Jacques Rosseau who in the Emile showed how the lack of compassion

[9] Armin Wegner, *Open letter to the Chancellor of the Reich Adolf Hitler,* 1933.

towards the others stems from an idea of omnipotence. Those who set themselves irremovably on an pedestal do not care about the other precisely because they think, or rather deceive themselves, that they will never fall into disgrace or face persecution in the course of their lives.
"Why have kings no pity for their subjects? Because they never expect to be men. Why are the rich so hard on the poor? Because they have no fear of becoming poor. Why do the nobles look down upon the people? Because a nobleman will never be a commoner. [...] So do not accustom your pupil to look down from the height of his glory upon the sufferings of the unfortunate, the labors of the wretched; and do not hope to teach him to pity them as long as he considers them to be foreign to him. Make him clearly understand that the fate of these unhappy persons may one day be his own, that all their ills are just below him, that a thousand unforeseen and inevitable events could make him fall to their level in a moment. Teach him to put no trust in birth, health, or riches; show him all the vicissitudes of fortune." Thus it is the recognition of one's frailty that must lead us to go to the others' rescue.

When Peshev mentions the vulnerability of small nations, such as Bulgaria that in its past were hit in its national aspirations, he suggests that there has been a lack of sensitiveness towards the people who suffer. This in his opinion one day can come back to haunt the country, because there is no nation that is forever immune from disgrace and can say it will never feel the need for the others' solidarity.
For the Vicepresident of the Bulgarian Parliament small nations can be the first ones to show solidarity towards the suffering of others. This is what Jan Patocka, during the years of communist rule in Prague, used to call the solidarity of the shaken.

In his memories, Peshev did not openly mention the fate of the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia. We do not know how he reacted to the news that the deportation had not been stopped by his political action.
Yet by interpreting his letter we can assume Peshev called the Bulgarians to assume responsibility for that.
The only way to redress a crime one has committed or has been unwillingly complicit in or has not been able to prevent is not removing it, but dealing with it through a discourse of truth.
A nation becomes ripe when it is able to admit its guilt without reticence. Those who forget about evil show they have given up their capability to think by oneselves and ponder moral choices.
As we have seen before, Peshev focusses his parliamentary document on the need for Bulgaria to safeguard its own moral reputation that he defines as its most important political asset.
Assuming todate the responsibility for the death of the Jews from Thrace and Macedonia while remembering the rescue of the Jews residing in the

inner regions, would mean improving the moral image of the country in the world.
The capability to question a country's historical responsibilities always upholds the honour of the nations who possess it, while the countries that politically construct the myth of their pretended innocence, like for example modern Turkey denying its responsibility for the Armenian genocides, are to blame.

The envoy of the Polish Resistance Jan Karski had done everything possible to stop the Holocaust by warning American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, British Foreign Office Secretary Mr. Eden and all greatmen of the earth. Nonetheless, although he was one of the few people who had tried to inform the Allies about the tragic fate of the Jews, in one of his latest speeches he said he felt guilty for not succeeding in it.
He took the responsibility for the death of the Jews upon himself, even though he was one of the best men on earth in those dark times.

Eventually, I would like to remind all participants to this meeting that all Europe must be grateful to Peshev. In fact, the reflection about Peshev led me over the years to work through the *memory of good*, as a moral category we must teach the young generations. This can help educate them to individual responsibility. It is precisely with this spirit that my international foundation, Gariwo, in May of this year succeeded in obtaining from the European Parliament the establishment of an international day of the Righteous, to be held yearly on 6 March, as a warning to prevent genocides.
All Europe must thus say "thanks" to Peshev.

translation by Carolina Figini