From Sofia to Jaffa
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Of all the countries of Europe, only in Denmark and Bulgaria did the majority of Jews escape the clutches of the Nazi murderers and their indigenous lackeys. This dramatic and astonishing fact has produced a large body of literature, much of it partisan and polemical. In the case of Bulgaria, the literature has centered around the question, “Who saved the Jews of Bulgaria?” As Nissan Oren, historian of Bulgarian politics, has pointed out, the proper question should be, “How is it that Bulgaria’s Jews were not exterminated?”

Credit for saving the Jews of Bulgaria has been attributed to the Bulgarian masses, the Communist Party, King Boris, and even Bulgarian incompetence. In contrast to these partisan accounts stand the works of Oren and Frederick B. Chary. Chary’s dissertation, which was later published in book form, is a masterpiece of historical writing founded on painstaking examination of documents and interviews from libraries, archives, and informants around the world. What is revealed by this research is that the salvation of Bulgarian Jewry was the result of a complex set of factors involving ideology, politics, the course of the war, self-interest, and personal sacrifice. The most crucial factor was the timing of events.

This is not the place to present a detailed discussion of the anguish which was Bulgarian Jewry’s portion between 1940 and 1944. It is necessary, however, to examine those events and persons which had a profound impact on the attitude of Bulgarian Jews toward Bulgaria and their own national identity. There is no period of history that influenced Bulgarian identity in Israel more directly than this. Although historiographically unproductive, the question, “Who saved the Jews of Bulgaria,” would become a central theme in the Bulgarian-Israeli consciousness.
The interpretation of the events of 1940–1944 that follows is based largely on perceptions of the nature and extent of antisemitism in Bulgaria. We noted earlier that Tamir views antisemitism as both endemic and widespread, and that this conclusion is consistently contradicted by the interview data collected for this study. It is not the purpose here to evaluate these opposing views. It is important, however, that the sources of Jewish perceptions of the past, and thus perceptions of the present, are understood.

Anti-Jewish actions took place in several cities in Bulgaria around the turn of the century: Vratsa in 1890, Pazardzhik in 1895, Lom in 1903, and Kyustendil in 1904. In comparison to similar actions elsewhere in Europe, these were relatively minor, isolated incidents. According to Peter Meyer, historian of eastern European Jews: "The most favorable conditions for the development of the Jewish communities prevailed in the first third of the twentieth century, roughly in the years 1900–1930. In this period there were no anti-Jewish excesses, relatively little open discrimination, and considerable opportunities to develop Jewish cultural life."5

The comparative lack of antisemitic sentiment in Bulgaria during earlier periods was discussed previously. With liberation and rapid social and economic development, however, new opportunities for conflict arose which had violent consequences in other European countries. The fact that these developments did not lead to Bulgarian-Jewish conflict is explained in part by Oren:

Being few in number, they [the Jews] never constituted an acute problem for Bulgaria. While in most other East European countries the urban preponderance of the Jewish population constituted a threat to the rising middle class, in Bulgaria the conflict of interest did not arise. Although moderately influential in the economic life of the country, the Bulgarian Jews played no political role of any significance. They were an unassimilated and largely introverted national group. Historically, the Jews had been barred entry into state bureaucracy and the professional army. They were left in peace, however, to develop their own ethnic cultural life.6

This picture of constructive isolation was repeated by Chepo Pasi, the electrician at Kibbutz Yad Mordekhai:

I think that the Jews had a good life, because they lived, in actuality, in a ghetto. A spiritual ghetto. In general they lived within Jewish neighborhoods, there was a Jewish school, and
there were Jewish youth movements which were very active. So that I think that Jewish life, which was very active, gave the Jews fulfillment, and it was concentrated around the synagogue, school and Jewish community. (Pasi, p. 12)

In addition, the recurrent pattern in Eastern European countries of a rising Christian urban middle class clashing with an entrenched Jewish middle class was not repeated in Bulgaria, due to the small number of Jews and the large number of available opportunities to conduct business in the cities. Also, since five centuries of Ottoman domination had eliminated all traces of an indigenous Bulgarian nobility, the resentment produced by a system of Jewish agents and middlemen for royalty did not exist in Bulgaria. "In the final analysis, the small number of Jews made antisemitism largely irrelevant as a political or economic agent."[7]

Lack of enthusiasm for, and even opposition to, antisemitic activities cannot be attributed solely to the small number of Jews in the country. Examples can be cited of countries and regions with a minimal Jewish presence in which antisemitic attitudes are strongly in evidence. Bulgarian tolerance toward ethnic minorities and the reinforcement of that tolerance during the Ottoman period was previously noted. This characteristic, abhorrent to Nazi ideology, was decried in a letter from Adolf-Heinz Beckerle, German ambassador to Sofia, to the Reich Chancellory on June 7, 1943:

I beg you to believe me that my service is doing everything possible to reach a final solution to the Jewish question in conformity with decisions taken. I am deeply convinced that the Prime Minister and the Bulgarian government also desire a final settlement of the Jewish problem and are trying to reach it. But they are forced to take into account the mentality of the Bulgarian people, who lack the ideological conceptions that we have. Having grown up among Turks, Jews, Armenians, the Bulgarian people have not observed in the Jews faults which would warrant these special measures against them.[8]

The consistency of response by informants regarding antisemitism in Bulgaria is astonishing. All of them strongly resisted the notion that antisemitism was present in more than a small proportion of the population. The historical record indicates that this conception may be somewhat idealized. Nevertheless, it is a central factor in the development of Bulgarian-Jewish identity and attitudes toward Bulgaria and her people. Haim Molkho of Kibbutz Urim
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echoed the sentiments of most informants when he stated: “In my opinion it was a wonderful place, one could live in peace, there were no pogroms, here and there there were some incidents, but it was nothing” (Molkho, p. 1).

This idealization is particularly evident in the minimizing of restrictions on Jewish participation in public life. Many rationalized this fact by stating that the Jewish community looked inward, and that few were interested in careers in the professional army, the state bureaucracy, or political life. The fact remains, however, that very few Jews were able to attain positions in these areas; the historical record on this is clear. Yet these restrictions did not appear to be of significance to my informants. Throughout the fieldwork, the question arose, why were the Jews so forgiving of the antisemitism that did exist in Bulgaria and was a part of daily life? The answer, although difficult to accept, is simple; everything is relative. Lidia Barukh, who came to Israel from Vidin in 1952, felt that “the conditions weren’t very good, but the conditions weren’t as of those who suffered in other countries” (Barukh, p. 3).

The Jews of Bulgaria were not deported to the death camps, and though most experienced severe hardship, they found this hardship bearable. They found it so because the Jews of Bulgaria were tenacious, optimistic, modest, and united. They also found it bearable because they were aware of the fate befalling the rest of European Jewry. Each informant was asked the following question: “What happened to you and your family during the war?” The inevitable answer was “Nothing.” When pressed further they would tell stories of suffering and deprivation which they made sound more like inconveniences than tragedies, and sometimes even described as positive experiences. Avi Cordova, who came to Israel with his family at age ten and teaches sociology at Tel Aviv University, analyzed this phenomenon as follows:

There are perhaps two or three reasons, one of which is that it was relative. After all, they knew what happened in Europe. And I think it’s natural that they say ‘nothing happened.’ But if the Red Army had been held up another six or seven months, it [deportations] might have started in Bulgaria. The other reason is that those Jews love the Bulgarians as a people. They don’t have the feeling of jealousy or spite toward the Bulgarians. On the contrary, they lived with them very well. There was no feeling of strangeness between the Jews and gentiles in Bulgaria, at least not in the generation that I knew. They were very integrated within the Bulgarian culture such as in the songs and way of life. In spite of the fact that they preserved their Jewishness
don’t forget that they spoke Bulgarian and weren’t some kind of sect. (Cordova, p. 20)

Somehow, at least in retrospect, Bulgarian Jews took expropriation, forced labor, expulsion, indignity, and impoverishment during the war in stride.

Bulgaria never forgave England the Treaty of Berlin, and never relinquished her irredentist claims. She fought and lost the Balkan Wars over them, and she joined the Central Powers in the First World War in order to win back territories she felt were rightfully hers. Britain was disliked for her policy in the Balkans which helped deny those claims, and America, although better liked, was largely unknown.9 In Nazi Germany, Bulgaria saw another opportunity to press her claims against Yugoslavia, Greece, Romania and Turkey, and Hitler was happy to promise her anything in order to convince her to join the Axis. In addition, King Boris III was preoccupied with preserving the monarchy, which he would be unable to do if Germany conquered Bulgaria.

The atmosphere in the country began to change after 1933, partly as a result of the increase in German economic and political influence and the influx of students returning from their courses of study in German universities. The number of antisemitic right-wing groups increased. They included White Russian emigres, Macedonian nationalist revolutionaries, the Bulgarian National Socialist Party, the National Society for Political Renaissance, the Homeland Defense, the Ratnitsi, the Association of Bulgarian National Legions, and the youth organization Brannik. Peter Meyer relates that “according to all Bulgarian and most German sources, the influence of these groups on public opinion was small.”10

In 1940 there were approximately 55,000 Jews in Bulgaria of a total population of 6,100,000 (0.9 percent): 45,000 were Bulgarian citizens, 5,000 were aliens (Turkish subjects and refugees from Germany, Austria, Poland, Romania, and Hungary), and 5,000 were from Dobrudja, annexed from Romania in 1940. In addition, the new territories of Thrace and Macedonia contained 12,000 Jews.11 The fates of these groups during the war would differ radically.

The pro-German government was willing to accept Germany’s terms of alliance, including its demands that it take measures to “solve the Jewish problem.” Because of strong Slavophile sentiments and gratitude toward Russia for her role in Bulgaria’s liberation, Bulgaria refused to declare war on the Soviet Union. Even the opposition, made up of Agrarians, Democrats, and Social Democrats, supported the government’s irredentist claims, and so at first did not oppose the anti-Jewish measures.
In December of 1940, the first anti-Jewish law went into effect in Bulgaria. This was the infamous *Zakon za zashtitata na natsiyata*, the Law for the Defense of the Nation, based on the Nuremberg laws, with some modifications:

It barred Jews from citizenship, public office, army service, the ownership of property, the publication of newspapers, film production, intermarriage, and the employment of non-Jewish domestic servants. Jewish participation in commerce, industry, the professions and educational opportunities were limited to the population ratio. Forced labor for Bulgarian Jews was introduced. . . . Registration of property owned by Jews was ordered.

In addition, the Law set up a Commissariat for the Jewish Problem, whose task it was to oversee the disenfranchisement and impoverishment of Bulgarian Jews, as well as to install the apparatus for eventual “resettlement in the East.”

Open opposition to the Law came from several quarters, and belies the notion that all Bulgarians accepted the government’s anti-Jewish measures passively. Chary points out that as antisemitism became more powerful in Europe, Bulgaria’s intellectuals began to value increasingly the relatively good relations between Jews and non-Jews in the country:

They emphasized the favorable relations, and the myth of the absence of anti-Semitism grew up. Although this was not strictly true, the myth became as important as the fact, for a large section of the Bulgarian intelligentsia became committed to fighting the growth (or, as they preferred to think of it, the appearance) of anti-Semitism in their country. In 1937, a Jewish journalist, Buko Piti, published a book of statements of some one hundred and fifty leaders of Bulgarian society denouncing anti-Semitism and the reasons for its absence in Bulgaria.

This “myth” of the total absence of antisemitic sentiment in Bulgaria before the war seems to have been adopted by the Jews as well, as evidenced in the interview data. Nevertheless, it served an important role in activating intellectuals from many areas of Bulgarian society to take bold action:

The Union of Bulgarian Writers sent a letter to the government and parliament not to pass a law which would “enslave part of the Bulgarian people and would blemish modern history.” The Executive Council of the Union of Bulgarian Lawyers in a de-
tailed exposé to the government emphasized that the proposed new law would be a blow undermining the Constitution, which explicitly prohibits any “division of the Bulgarian people into higher or lower categories.” In a letter to the Minister of the Interior the Executive Council of Bulgarian Doctors expressed its dissatisfaction with the measures being planned against the Jews.16

Despite these protests, the Law went into effect, and government oppression increased. In addition to the ideological support of these measures on the part of many members of the government, Germany’s demands that Bulgaria take more drastic steps against her Jews increased as Bulgaria pressed her demands regarding territory, and King Boris struggled with Hitler to keep his country and his troops out of the actual fighting. Numerous laws were promulgated; in August, 1942, all Jews were required to wear the yellow star. Curfews were put into effect and Jews were allowed to shop only at specific times, usually when most products had already been sold out. Viska Uziel, who spent the war years in Pleven, described the effects of the restrictions on the Jews:

We in Pleven remained there the whole time, but we were like in a ghetto. We had been spread throughout the city, not only our family, all the Jews. But then, when the fascists came, when the influence of fascism came to Pleven, it was forbidden for us to be on certain main streets. We were forbidden to go to the cinema, to any public place on the main street. We could stay outside until nine o’clock. There was one hour when we were allowed to go shopping. For example, in the morning they bring the fresh vegetables. First the non-Jews finished their shopping, what was left was left. After eleven we could go out. Still there was great help from the Bulgarian people. There were gentiles who had very close relations with the Jews, they would keep for them the (vegetables) either for money, or for the good feeling they got from helping them. (Uziel, p. 8)

Jewish organizations, except the official Consistory, were banned, and the Jewish school system collapsed.17 More property was confiscated. All Jewish males were pressed into the forced labor battalions.18 Isidor Toliko, who spent many months in forced labor, described the hardships which were inflicted:

I’ll tell you what happened to all the Jews in Bulgaria. First of all, they prevented them from being able to work and make a living.
That is, if someone had a business he had to dissolve it, if he was a clerk, they had to throw him out according to the law. In addition to that, they did as the Germans, took people to forced labor. . . . I can tell you, all of the men, invalids, with physical handicaps. Without exception, it was enough that he was called a male from age eighteen to forty-five. Later in the last years, even to age fifty . . . I worked like that like a slave . . . in the Balkan mountains. We built them roads, but not with the tools they have now, everything was done with a shovel and that’s all . . . Eight months every year. In the winter they weren’t interested, because it’s a cold country, everything was covered with snow, we couldn’t work . . . That’s how I worked for four straight years. (Toliko, p. 3)

Several concentration camps were set up. The camp at Samovit housed at one time 520 persons, including most of the leadership of the Jewish community. The beginning of 1943 saw intense pressure on Bulgaria to deport her Jews to the concentration camps of Eastern Europe. On February 22, 1943, the Commissar for Jewish Problems, Alexander Belev, and Nazi extermination “troubleshooter” SS Hauptssturmführer Theodor Dannecker, signed an “Agreement for the deportation of the first batch of 20,000 Jews to the East German territories.” Bulgaria allowed her Jewish nationals in Thrace and Macedonia, and other areas under Reich control, to be deported. Twelve thousand Jews from Macedonia and Thrace were deported and killed. Hypocritically, as these Jews were not “Bulgarian,” there was little protest within the country over their murder. The death of twelve thousand Jews was apparently a small price to pay to regain the coveted territories.

Although the Belev-Dannecker agreement was approved by the government, part of it was not made public knowledge; the remainder of the twenty thousand Jew death-quota was to be filled by the deportation of Jews from Bulgaria proper, who were to be rounded up on the nights of March 10 and 11 in greatest secrecy. On March 5, the authorities in charge of the operation attempted to requisition supplies for the deportation from the local government in Kyustendil. When it refused to cooperate, the authorities requisitioned the supplies from the Jewish communities. When word of the impending deportation leaked out, an unprecedented drama unfolded which would stymie the implementation of the Final Solution in Bulgaria.

The leaders of the Jewish community in Kyustendil met with local government leaders, including several members of the Sobranie. That same night a Bulgarian delegation headed by vice-president of the Sobranie, Dimiter Peshev, set out for Sofia. Suprisingly, the delegation
included Macedonian revolutionary representatives, not well known for their liberal attitudes or aversion to violence. The delegation demanded an audience with Minister of the Interior Gabrovsky, and insisted on an immediate countermanding of the deportation orders. They could do this on the legal grounds that the Belev-Dannecker agreement, approved by the government, included no provisions for the deportation of Jews from Bulgaria proper. Gabrovski complied and the orders were cancelled.\textsuperscript{23} This heroic action, which cost Peshev his seat, set into motion an unprecedented series of protests:

a storm of protest against the planned deportation arose even in the government camp. Protests were sent to Parliament, the cabinet, and the King by unions of Bulgarian writers, lawyers, physicians, by town meetings, by noted men, and even by some officers of the army. Protesting deputations arrived from Plovdiv, Kustendil [sic], Lambol, and other cities. Especially strong protests were made by the Bulgarian Orthodox church and its Exilarch, the Metropolitan Stephen of Sofia [who was a personal friend of the chief rabbi, Dan Ziyon]. Even in the Sobranie, a group of pro-government deputies, headed by the vice-president of the Chamber, Peshev, protested the deportations.\textsuperscript{24}

These events did not occur in a political vacuum, however, and although many of the protesters were sincere in their feeling that Jewish persecution had gone too far, many others were responding to developments in the international arena. Germany was being turned back on several battle fronts, and Bulgarians began thinking of the consequences of their actions in the event of an Allied victory:

By this time, the realization that Germany was losing the war had become widespread. Influential elements within the left, the center, and even the reactionary right, had come to realize the futility and possible adverse consequences of Bulgaria’s allowing the Jews to be exterminated. This interplay of political forces constituted striking proof of the existence within the Bulgarian body politic of political pluralism, which had survived even at the height of the crypto-Nazi regime.\textsuperscript{25}

This wave of protest did not halt the government’s increasing persecution of the Jews. Many in the government viewed the events of March-May 1943 as a delay in the inevitable deportation of the Jews. In June, all Jews were ordered to leave Sofia; 19,339 Jews left for towns in the provinces, most moving in with relatives, friends, and even strangers in the Jewish communities of cities and towns.
The Jews in Bulgaria throughout the country. Several families often crowded into small homes and apartments. The refugees' homes in the capital were appropriated by the government. Even this action was not completed without open opposition.

On May 23, a march was organized in the Jewish quarter of Yuch Bunar, and thousands rallied at the city center to protest the expulsion orders. The march was broken up by the police, and many were arrested. Historian Reuben Ainsztein relates:

And when on the following day the Bulgarian police entered the Jewish district, it met with the resistance of organized Jewish groups and was forced to retreat. Similar demonstrations all over the country made the Bulgarian police chief report that “the native Bulgarian population expresses its complete solidarity with the Jews and is taking part in their actions. Every attempt to deport the Jews has met with not only the peoples' indignation, but also with their resistance. We are forced to give up our plan to resettle the Jews in Poland.”

The question of the role of King Boris in the anti-Jewish measures in Bulgaria remains unclear. However, it is known that Boris was in control of the government, and little transpired without his approval. There are those, including some of my informants, who hold that he delayed implementation of anti-Jewish measures as long as possible, and even that he was killed by Hitler because of his refusal to deport the Jews. The existing evidence does not support this hypothesis, and it appears that he had no great love for the Jews, but could use them as a bargaining chip with his Nazi masters.

With each battle Germany lost, the government became more aware of the possible consequences of its anti-Jewish measures. In November, 1943, a new cabinet was formed, headed by Dobri Bozhilov, which began to make concessions on matters affecting the Jews, at the same time it was secretly sounding out the Allies on possible agreements. Bulgaria, mostly through the cunning of the King, had managed to make all its political gains without committing men to the field in significant numbers, and the Bulgarian population had weathered the war largely unscathed. In January 1944, mass bombings of Sofia and other cities created panic in the populace. The plan to deport the Jews from Bulgaria was withdrawn. Belev, Commissar for Jewish Affairs, was brought up on criminal charges of graft. In August, with the Soviet army poised on its borders, the government abolished all anti-Jewish laws. On September 9, 1944, the Red Army entered Bulgaria.

The historical record of the fate which befell the Jews of Bulgaria
between 1940 and 1944 is complicated, and the reports and their interpretation are often contradictory. Although not deported to the death camps, the Jews were severely persecuted, and their lives and society were totally disrupted. They were threatened with imminent extermination and forced into banishment, forced labor, and poverty. One would expect these events to have a traumatic and debilitating effect which would cause demoralization and desperation. In fact, the opposite occurred. The Zionist predictions had been confirmed, and the social framework created by the movement served to sustain the community through the worst of times.