

The Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews

By Patrick Kofalt



Patrick (Pat) Kofalt is retired and lives with Mari, his wife of 48 years, in Winchester, Virginia. They have two adult children and two grandchildren.

Pat has a BS in Social Studies from West Chester University and two MAs from Central Michigan University, one in Business Management and one in Logistics Management. He is a graduate of the Defense Acquisition University and a Certified Supply Chain Professional (CSCP).

Pat is an Army veteran and worked as an Army civilian in the area of logistics and supply chain management for 31 years. His postings included time in the Pentagon, Texas, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Virginia, Massachusetts, and Germany.

After retiring from government service, he worked for Booz Allen Hamilton for ten years; one of his postings was to the Republic of North Macedonia, where he first learned of Bulgaria's resistance to the "resettlement" of their Jewish community during the Second World War.

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He may be reached at patkofalt@gmail.com.

What are the factors that made it possible for a diverse group of citizens in a small, remote nation to defy the Nazis' ruthless pursuit of "ethnic cleansing"? The events and factors relating to the rescue of Bulgaria's Jews are best understood when viewed in context with Bulgaria's geography and history.¹

Geography

Bulgaria is located in southeastern Europe in the east central portion of the Balkan Peninsula and is about the size of the state of Nevada. Its position puts it at the juncture of Western European (Roman Catholic), Eastern European (Eastern Orthodox) and Middle Eastern (Islamic) cultures.

History

As Ambassador Kenneth Hill notes, the Balkans create more history than they can consume and Bulgaria is certainly no exception.

What is now current day Bulgaria was incorporated into the Roman Empire in 46 CE, and there is evidence that Jews settled into this area shortly after the Roman conquest. In the early 6th century CE, Slavs and Bulgars (a semi-nomadic people akin in ethnicity to the Huns and Tatars) migrated from Central Asia into this area. These peoples intermingled and established the Bulgarian ethno-culture and an empire which existed from 681 CE to 1396 CE.

In 1396, the Ottomans (Turks) incorporated Bulgaria into their



Islamic Empire. Bulgaristan, as it was called by the Turks, remained part of the Ottoman Empire until 1878. The Ottomans did not normally require the Christians in their territories to convert to Islam, but a small group of Bulgarians, some voluntarily and some by coercion, did convert.

Bulgarian nationalism began emerging in the early 19th century under the influence of western ideas emerging from the French Revolution, and Bulgaria seceded from the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century. In 1878, the Treaty of Berlin established modern day Bulgaria as a constitutional monarchy. However, after 500 years of Ottoman rule, all trace of the former Bulgarian royal families had been lost. In 1886 a delegation from the newly formed Bulgarian Parliament, with influence from the powerful German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, offered the Bulgarian Throne to King Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg Gotha, who accepted it. Significantly, this newly selected King of Bulgaria was ethnic German, not a Bulgarian Slav, a circumstance that provided Bismarck influence within the Slavic/Russian sphere.

Between 1878 and the end of the First World War, Bulgaria existed as a buffer nation between the Hapsburg (Austro-Hungarian) Empire, the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire, and the Russian Empire. Following the First World War, Bulgaria, along with the other newly formed nations that were carved from the former Austro-Hungarian Empire by the Treaty of Versailles, served as a buffer

between the Germanic nations (Germany and Austria) and the Soviet Union.

Most Bulgarians are South Slavs, use the Cyrillic alphabet, and share a common ethnicity with Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Macedonians, Montenegrins, and Bosnians.

On March 1, 1941, Bulgaria joined the Axis bloc.

Jewish history in Bulgaria dates back to the second century CE and was initially Romaniote, an ethnic Jewish community that spoke a Greek dialect. In 1470 CE, Ashkenazi (Yiddish speaking) Jews who were banished from Bavaria settled in Bulgaria. However, the largest influx of Jews into Bulgaria came during the 1490s when the Ottoman Turks offered the exiled Spanish/Sephardic (Ladino speaking) Jews, who were expelled from Spain for refusing to convert to Catholicism, refuge in Bulgaristan. In 1940, Jews comprised .8% (48,000 people) of the total Bulgarian population of 6 million and were predominantly Sephardic.

In the late 1930s, Nazi Germany negotiated with King Boris III, the reigning Bulgarian monarch, to join the Axis. The Nazis wanted to shore up their southeast European flank and enticed Boris by offering to help Bulgaria incorporate

territories that were part of the ancient Bulgarian Empire. On September 7, 1940, the Nazis initiated the Treaty of Craiova, which forced Romania to cede the province of Southern Dobruja to Bulgaria, and on March 1, 1941, Bulgaria joined the Axis bloc, which enabled it to seize territories in Yugoslavia (Macedonia) and Greece (Thrace). This provided Germany a base in the eastern Balkans to stage operations against Greek and Yugoslav anti-Fascist guerilla operations and to protect her southern flank during her June 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union.

The Final Solution in Bulgaria

Nazi atrocities against the Jewish communities in Germany, Austria, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, and other Nazi-occupied territories were well underway at the time of the March 1941 Axis Treaty with Bulgaria, but the Nazis had not yet established extermination camps.

Based on Germany's history as a civilized and cultured nation and on the relatively benevolent actions of the German occupation forces in eastern Europe during the First World War, there was a sentiment among some of the senior members of eastern European Jewish communities that the German Army would be a more benign occupier than the Russian/Soviet Army. In her book *There Once Was a World*, Yaffa Eliach details the 900 year history of her ancestral Shtetl (Eishyshok) in northeastern Poland. "News of Nazi atrocities began filtering into Eishyshok in 1939," she writes, but

notes that “many people dismissed the stories, unable to believe that the sons of the ‘good Germans’ of World War I could be so different from their fathers” (59).

Also, up until the January 1942 Wannsee Conference, the Nazi plan for the Jews was to execute their community leaders, “resettle” the remaining Jews into ghettos, and use them as slave labor in support of the Third Reich. These were brutal actions, but not industrialized mass extermination. There is also evidence that Nazi leadership tried to negotiate the resettlement of European Jews into Palestine or Madagascar. Unfortunately, the Nazi effort to resettle Jews outside of Europe was unsuccessful, and the Jewish ghettos were becoming overcrowded and too expensive for the Third Reich to maintain. The Wannsee Conference determined that the solution to the “Jewish Problem” was mass extermination.

Laurence Rees, in his book *Auschwitz*, chronicles the development of the industrialized killing operation that was set in motion by the Wannsee Conference. Since the “hands-on” exterminations by Schutzstaffel (SS) guards resulted in significant Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among the SS, after the Wannsee Conference the Nazis accelerated their development of mass execution alternatives that did not entail direct SS involvement. Gas chambers were determined to be the most effective and efficient. Since Auschwitz was both a political and an extermination camp, there were an ample number of both Jewish and

non-Jewish prisoners available to do the “hands-on” tasks involved in the gassing without having to directly engage the SS Guards. While this relieved the incidence of PTSD in the SS Guards, it also engaged non-SS personnel in the execution process—and this proved significant for how the events unfolded in Bulgaria. Escapees from Auschwitz and contact by Auschwitz inmates with the local Polish population got the word out to both Polish and Jewish underground guerrilla groups about the mass industrialized exterminations. This information duly made its way to Bulgaria.

Unfortunately, the Nazi effort to resettle Jews outside of Europe was unsuccessful.

In February 1943, pro-Nazi Bulgarian government leaders and German leadership in Bulgaria implemented the plan for the transport of Bulgarian Jews to extermination camps in Poland. The plan called for the initial “resettlement” to begin in early March 1943 with 20,000 Jews from Greater Bulgaria, i.e. the entire Jewish communities in Thrace and Macedonia (12,000) plus another 8,000 from Bulgaria proper. Unfortunately, Thrace and Macedonia fell under German military administration, which

facilitated the Nazis’ plan to “resettle” these communities, resulting in their total annihilation.

However, in Bulgaria proper (including Southern Dobruja) members of the Bulgarian Parliament, Bulgarian Orthodox Church leaders, and Bulgarian citizens from all economic and social classes rose up to resist the deportation of their fellow Bulgarians. The result was that despite having the “resettlement” plans in place and transports loaded and ready, neither the Nazis nor their Bulgarian collaborators were able to successfully transport Jews from Bulgaria proper in March 1943.

Over the next five months, there were numerous attempts to re-initiate the transports, but continued active and passive resistance from King Boris III and citizens throughout Bulgaria continued to preclude the transport of Jews from Bulgaria proper. This resistance culminated in a meeting between Hitler and Boris on August 14, 1943, at which it was determined to no longer pursue the “resettlement” of Bulgarian Jews outside of Bulgaria. We will tell the story of that resistance shortly, but first, let us look at some of the unique features of the Bulgarian situation that enabled the resistance to succeed.

Accounting for the Bulgarian Resistance

The independence and civil disobedience of the Bulgarian citizens and leaders within the government, the Orthodox Church,

and the Jewish community itself significantly contributed to the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews. However, their actions would likely have been in vain had it not been for the following three factors: 1) the historical diversity of Bulgarian culture; 2) Bulgaria's remote location; and 3) the SS leadership in Bulgaria.

Historical diversity of Bulgarian culture

Although, as noted above, Jews comprised only .8% of Bulgaria's population in 1940 and most other Bulgarians were Orthodox Christian Slavs, there were also significant Bulgarian minorities of Roma (Gypsies), Albanians (primarily Muslim), Pomaks (Bulgarian Slavic Muslims), Armenians (Christian) and Turks (Muslim). Bulgaria enjoyed a long history of ethnic and religious diversity, and there was minimal evidence of strident anti-Semitism in Bulgaria. We should note that Metropolitan (Bishop) Kirill, a key figure in the rescue of Bulgaria's Jews, later elected to serve as the Patriarch (Chief Bishop) of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, was an ethnic Albanian.

Jacky Comforty, the son of Bulgarian Jewish Holocaust survivors and the director of *The Optimists*, a 2001 documentary about Bulgarian resistance to the Nazi deportations, points out that Bulgarian Christians, after a millennium of peaceful co-existence with Jews and 500 years of oppression by Turks, considered Bulgaria's Jews as fellow Bulgarians and were not

influenced by Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda. Michael Bar-Zohar in his book *Beyond Hitler's Grasp* cites a quotation from the German Ambassador to Bulgaria, Adolph-Heinz Beckerle: "The Bulgarian society doesn't understand the real meaning of the Jewish question. Beside the few rich Jews in Bulgaria there are many poor people [Jews], who make their living as workers and artisans. Partly raised together with Greeks, Armenians, Turks and Gypsies, the average Bulgarian doesn't understand the meaning of the struggle against the Jews, the more so as the racial questions is totally foreign to him" (259).

Bulgaria's remote location

At the outset of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, as mentioned earlier, Bulgaria's location was instrumental in protecting the German Army's southern flank and in suppressing the anti-fascist guerillas operating throughout the Balkans. However, the German Army lost considerable personnel and equipment when they surrendered at Stalingrad in February 1943, and these losses took German leadership's focus off of the Balkans.

SS Leadership in Bulgaria

Theodor Dannecker oversaw the roundup and deportation of over 13,000 French Jews to Auschwitz. However, he was an opportunist who was transferred out of France for illegally pilfering money and valuables expropriated from deported French Jews—the Nazi rule was that this wealth

rightfully belonged to the Third Reich. After his dismissal from Paris, Dannecker was assigned to work for Adolf Eichmann with the primary task of exterminating the Southern European Jews. He was appointed as the head of the SS in Southern Europe in January 1943.

Dannecker encountered significant resistance to the deportations, starting with that of King Boris III. Also, as pointed out in Ambassador Beckerle's quote cited above, there was very little wealth to plunder in the Bulgarian Jewish community. Dannecker's performance in Paris suggests that he very likely did not believe there were sufficient financial benefits to countering the Bulgarian resistance. Dannecker, like Eichmann, opted to focus his efforts on wealthier Jewish communities; during this same period, Dannecker succeeded in the deportation of Italian Jews to extermination camps despite heavy resistance to the deportations within the Italian Catholic community.

In December 1945, Dannecker committed suicide after his arrest by the U.S. Army.

Bulgarians' Protests against the Deportations

In *Beyond Hitler's Grasp*, Bar-Zohar points out that King Boris III focused on building relationships and alliances to enhance Bulgaria's position. In particular, he leveraged his German ethnicity to develop a collegial relationship with Hitler, using his deal making talent to expand Bulgaria's borders and, from March to August 1943, to passively subvert the Nazis' plans

to “resettle” Bulgarian Jews. This, in combination with the more active resistance throughout Bulgaria, successfully thwarted the Nazis.

This resistance is poignantly narrated in an article by Jim Forest, “A Bishop Who Stood in the Way.”

On March 10, 1943, 8500 Jews were loaded into boxcars in Sofia, Bulgaria for transport and ‘resettlement’. Metropolitan Kirill (the Bishop of Plovdiv and later Patriarch, i.e. Chief Bishop, of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church) showed up at the station and pushed through the SS officers guarding the area; he made his way to the Jews inside the boxcars. Kirill, whose protest had the blessing of Patriarch Stephan, opened one of the boxcars in which Jews were packed and tried to get inside but SS officers stopped him. Kirill next walked to the front of the train and declared he would lie down on the tracks if the train started to move. News of Kirill’s act of civil disobedience spread quickly.

On March 10, 1943 the deputy speaker of the Bulgarian Parliament, Dimitar Peshev, persuaded Boris to delay the deportations, and on March 19, 1943, Peshev introduced a parliamentary resolution to halt the deportations. The resolution was rejected by the ruling party, but this rejection was followed by further protests, notably from Patriarch Stephen and Metropolitan Kirill, other Bulgarian Orthodox

Clergy, members of the Bulgarian Parliament and many ordinary Bulgarian citizens. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church Leadership was lobbied to protest the deportations by the Bulgarian Jewish community’s two chief rabbis, Daniel Zion and Asher Hannanel. These protests persuaded Boris to cancel the deportations entirely in May 1943.

Shortly thereafter, the Bulgarian government expelled 20,000 Jews from Sofia to the provinces for conscription into forced labor within Bulgaria. The Bulgarian government cited labor shortages as the reason for refusing to transfer Bulgarian Jews into German custody. The expulsion of Jews to intra-country forced labor camps halted their deportations to extermination camps and helped fill critical labor shortages in Bulgaria. This action placated the Germans and saved Jewish lives. After returning to Sofia from his August 14th meeting with Hitler, King Boris III died of apparent heart failure.

The civil disobedience within Bulgaria coupled with the sense of defeat within German leadership after their loss at Stalingrad and the lack of wealth in the Bulgarian Jewish Community dampened Dannecker’s and Eichmann’s enthusiasm for the deportation of Bulgarian Jews. Hitler was well aware of Bulgaria’s resistance to the deportations but chose to not address it.

Conclusion

Although the Bulgarian Jewish

population grew from 48,000 in 1940 to 50,000 in 1945, these figures do not take into account the extermination of the 12,000 Macedonian and Thracian Jews. Unhappily, these communities were under German military administration and could not be protected by the Bulgarian King and Parliament. Nonetheless, the rescue of the Bulgarian Jewish community in 1943 stands out for its magnitude and success. There were other successful rescues of Jews during World War II, most notably the rescue of over 7200 Jews by Denmark, that of over 5,000 Jews by the tiny French Huguenot Community of Le Chambon-Sur-Lignon, and Oskar Schindler’s famous List. There were also some very notable martyrs, such as the Swedish Diplomat in Budapest, Raoul Wallenberg, who saved countless Hungarian Jews by issuing them diplomatic passports but eventually lost his life in the process. However, taken in context, the Bulgarian rescue was epic and is commemorated at the Yad V’Shem memorial in Jerusalem where Dimitar Peshev, the deputy speaker of the Bulgarian parliament in 1943, has his name listed as Righteous among the Nations.

Epilogue

At the conclusion of World War II, the Bulgarian Jewish population was 50,000, but it shrank to 1,162 in the 2011 Census. Most of the Bulgarian Jewish population shrinkage occurred between 1945 and 1953 when almost all of the Bulgarian Jews migrated to Israel. The reason cited by Bar-Zohar

for this massive migration is the post-World War II Bulgarian government's support of Zionism. The newly found nation of Israel provided Bulgaria's Jews the opportunity start anew in a Jewish homeland as opposed to remaining as a cultural/religious minority in an impoverished and communist Bulgaria.

NOTES

¹ I first learned of the Bulgarian Jewish community's rescue from the Nazi Holocaust in 2005 while working on an assignment in Skopje, North Macedonia. The defiance displayed by the Bulgarians piqued my interest and as I investigated the details I was more impressed with the magnitude of the rescue. Unfortunately, this story remained relatively unknown until the fall of the Bulgarian Communist government in the early 1990s. My research into this topic was significantly assisted by my Torch sponsor, Rabbi Jonathan Brown,

who referred me to the 2001 documentary film *The Optimists*, directed by Jacky Comforty, the son of Bulgarian Jewish émigrés to Israel. This documentary led me to the excellent book *Beyond Hitler's Grasp: The Heroic Rescue of Bulgaria's Jews*, by Michael Bar-Zohar, who was born in Bulgaria in 1938 and moved to Israel with his family in 1948. I also received significant insight into this topic from the Honorable Kenneth Hill, who was the US Ambassador to Bulgaria in the early 1990s and intervened with Vice President Gore to ensure the President of Bulgaria was properly honored during the dedication of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

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Upcoming Club Events

Please check with individual clubs to confirm these dates. (Clubs: Submit your events to be published here! Send information, or the link to your published schedule online, to info@torch.org.)

CENTRAL PA

February: Planning in the Centre Region
Robert Igo

March: Railroad History of Scotia
Mike Bezilla

DURHAM-CHAPEL HILL, NC

February 19: Insider Trading
Jim Cox

March 18: Magic Flute Opera
Eric Mitchco (tentative)

ERIE, PA

February 6: Journalism in the Age of Trump
Pat Cuneo and Ben Speggen

March 6: The Berlin Airlift
Mark Squeglia

FOX VALLEY, WI

February 13: TBD
Jan Smith

HAGERSTOWN, MD

February 18: TBA
Shironda Brown

March 17: Strange Bedmates
Dr. Mike Parsons

MONTGOMERY COUNTY, VA

February 11: Black Gifts Denied
Wornie Reed

March 10: Under the Trestle
Ron Peterson

ST. CATHARINES, ON

February 13: Indigenous Children in Care
Andy Koster

March 11: Recycling in Niagara
Bert Murphy