

# FORUM

*The Forum is intended to promote dialogue by providing space for shorter pieces of writing including opinions and suggestions, brief responses to papers, reports of research in progress, meditations, and descriptions of pedagogical strategies.*

## **Bulgaria's Response to the Holocaust as Portrayed in T. Todorov's *La Fragilité du bien***

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*"Facts do not cease to exist just because  
somebody is ignoring them."  
—Aldous Huxley (quoted in Kaltchev)*

*La Fragilité du bien* (published in English as *The Fragility of Goodness*) is a story of goodness and courage, which are too rarely seen in everyday affairs. The work presents a true-life story that has faded into obscurity and is based upon a compilation of little-known historical documents collected by Tzvetan Todorov, an important contemporary European thinker, historian, critic, writer, and director of the Centre National de Recherches Scientifique (CNRS) in Paris.

Many books have been written about World War II and the plight of European Jews. Whereas many of these focus on the rescue of eight thousand Danish Jews with Sweden's help, in *The Fragility of Goodness* Todorov delves into World War II Bulgaria and the attitude of its seven

million inhabitants toward its fifty thousand Jewish citizens. In a time when European Jewry experienced one of the most tragic moments in human history, the Bulgarian Jewish community found refuge without ever crossing the border into other lands.

Among the evidence supporting his view that there was a conscious effort on the part of non-Semitic Bulgarians to protect their Jewish compatriots, Todorov draws upon documents from the state archives of the Republic of Bulgaria and the memoirs of then Prime Minister Bogdan Filov. He also incorporates statements made by the vice president of the National Assembly, Dimitar Peshev, and other politicians. Todorov does not neglect the Jewish perspective on the events he is addressing, and places considerable emphasis on excerpts from the book *Otzelyavaneto—The Survival*, written by David Cohen, who was rescued from his Nazi captors and dedicated his life to explaining the miracle of salvation that happened in Bulgaria during the Holocaust. In his book Todorov mentions the deportation accord of King Boris III with Germany and its consequences. In addition, within Todorov's discourse one can find the answers to questions such as how the Bulgarian Jews survived the Holocaust and why they were treated differently than Jewish people residing in other European countries.

Dimitar Peshev, former vice president of the Bulgarian National Assembly, shines in *The Fragility of Goodness* as a highly moral man who "fought not for one or two individuals but for all of them together" (Todorov, 24). The story of the salvation of the Jewish community in Bulgaria unfolds in the city of Kyustendil, Bulgaria, where forty prominent individuals met to discuss the impending deportation of the Jews to the Nazi concentration camps. A delegation of four people, thought to be out of their minds for their willingness to defy Nazi authority, traveled to the Bulgarian capital of Sofia and asked Vice President Peshev to defend his fellow citizens. Facing a cruel political climate in which any humane solution seemed impossible, Peshev placed himself in a tremendously risky position, with apparently little motivation other than his conscience.

It was through Peshev's action in successfully convincing forty-two deputies of the ruling majority party to support and sign his appeal that the deportation of the Jewish population was halted. The ensuing rebellion of the National Assembly and Peshev's prodding led King Boris and his government to change the agreement with Germany and oppose the deportation. In a dramatic climax, the Jewish groups who had already been gathered for departure to the camps of death were allowed to return to their

homes. For his heroic challenge, Vice President Peshev is referred to as *l'uomo che fermò Hitler*, the man who stopped Hitler (see Nissim).

Although an important figure in the deliverance of Bulgarian Jews from the clutches of the Nazi threat, Dimitar Peshev was only one of the many Bulgarians involved in unraveling the evil plans of the Nazi regime in Bulgaria. In his search for the truth, Todorov traces victims and heroes who played a role in this contest of opposing wills to power. His book sheds light on long-forgotten details of fervent intervention by many intellectuals during the resounding debates in the Bulgarian National Assembly, of letters of protest sent to deputies of the National Assembly, of myriad phone calls and personal visits to government officials and the king, all in an effort to stop the relentless machinery that had been put into motion. Todorov gives credit to those who deserve it, professional and trade organizations—such as those of Bulgarian writers, lawyers, doctors, artists, and craftsmen—and members of the former government. He draws attention to a leaflet distributed by the Worker's Party as well, an organization responsible for organizing the majority of Bulgarian workers to combat the Nazi regime and resist the barbarity being perpetrated against the Jewish population in Bulgaria.

Religious documents and observations taken from Prime Minister Filov's diary reveal the determination of Orthodox church leaders to defend not only Jews who had converted to Christianity, but the entire Jewish community. Filov's diary stresses the contentiousness that was exhibited during the meetings between Orthodox church leaders and the king, ending with his reply that the Jewish question was not a Bulgarian problem but a European one. This opinion did not discourage Mitropolite Stephan, who sent King Boris a telegram: "Do not judge, so you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Know Boris, that God watches your actions from Heaven" (Todorov, 12).

There is an accident that escaped Todorov's attention but is described in David Cohen's *The Survival*. This is a meeting of the Evangelical church leaders with Boris III to protest the king's stand on the Jewish situation. Thus, Evangelical Christians were also instrumental in securing the lives of Bulgaria's Jewish population. The protests of the Catholic priests and Monsignor Angelo Roncalli (the future Pope John XXIII), quite possibly influenced by the King's wife, Queen Jovanna (an Italian Catholic), also fail to receive attention in *The Fragility of Goodness*, though Cohen notes them. In one other glaring instance, Todorov overlooks an event that holds special

significance for the story he weaves; in this case, Jewish intellectuals met with the writer Elin Pelin—a personal friend of Boris III—who agreed to ask the king to put an end to the threat of Jewish persecution in Bulgaria (Bar-Zohar, 212).

Furthermore, Todorov points out that no one from Bulgaria's Jewish population was ever sent to the German concentration camps. This is corroborated by Hanna Arendt, who, in the process of chronicling the circumstances surrounding Adolf Eichman in Jerusalem, notes that "not a single Bulgarian Jew had been deported or had died an unnatural death. . . . I know no attempt to explain the conduct of the Bulgarian people, which is unique in the belt of mixed populations" (Arendt, 188).

The story of the salvation of Bulgaria's Jewry, however, is not entirely free of controversy. At first glance King Boris appears to have been insensitive to the inhumanity of the fate that awaited the Bulgarian Jews should they be delivered into Nazi hands. However, as Todorov readily points out, the historical context of that period must be taken in consideration. At the end of the fourteenth century, Turkey conquered the Balkan countries, including Bulgaria, which with the San Stefano Treaty of March 3, 1878, regained both its freedom and its territories, restoring it nearly to the size of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, which had ended in 1396. However, western European diplomatic pressure reshaped that treaty into the Congress of Berlin (June 13–July 13, 1878). As a result, approximately half of Bulgaria, with predominantly Bulgarian population, was torn away and assigned to the neighboring countries: Dobrudja went to Romania, Aegean Thracia went to Greece, and Macedonia went to Serbia. At the same time, the political interests of the western European countries in Bulgaria were assured by Ferdinand Saxe-Coburg-Gotta from Prussia, who was crowned king of Bulgaria in 1879. The Balkan War was of no help to Bulgaria in regaining the former territories, despite the fact that their populations were primarily Bulgarian. At the conclusion of the First World War, Bulgaria had to accept the definite loss of the provinces. King Ferdinand had to abdicate and give the crown to his son, Boris III. At the beginning of World War II, Bulgaria's young king did not have a choice but to agree to the annexation of the country by Germany.

Against this background King Boris was faced with the political dilemma of maintaining the delicate balance in appeasing the many moral and religious authorities passionately pleading for the Jews' security and upholding the country's reputation, while at the same time striving to protect the nation's territorial interests with Germany's promised return of Dobrudja, Aegean Thracia, and Macedonia. In the spring of 1943, 11,343

Jews from Aegean (Greek) Thracia and Macedonia were deported. In his keynote speech at a recent conference on anti-Semitism in Vienna, Bulgaria's former foreign minister, Solomon Passi, stated, "My compatriots at that time tried hard but regretfully, failed to rescue also eleven thousand Jews—non Bulgarian citizens from Macedonia and Aegean Thrace where irrespective of the Bulgarian military presence the ultimate authority was in the hands of Nazis. . . . I shall request you not to accept as a cynicism the proportion that I shall present to you, but the truth is that if all European states had the policy and the degree of success of Bulgaria's effort to save the Jews, then five of the six million Jews that perished would have survived" (see Passi).

Several months after the tragic events in Aegean Thracia, Boris III himself died from a mysterious illness after meeting with Hitler in the Führer's chambers. To this day there are debates over whether King Boris truly deserves to be regarded as the rescuer of the Jewish citizens in Bulgaria. In a recent interview for the Macedonian daily *Dnevnik*, the then prime minister of Bulgaria, Simeon II Saxe-Cobourg-Gotta—son of King Boris III—gave the answer: "We mourn, of course, the fate of those who could not be saved. It is known that at that time Aegean Thracia and Macedonia were not under Bulgarian jurisdiction" (see "Interview").

Another controversy of the story is a letter written on May 16, 2003, by Professor Israel Borouchoff to U. S. Representative Tom Lantos. In that letter, copies of which were sent to the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, Professor Borouchoff disputes the claim that the Jewish population in Bulgaria increased during the Holocaust. However, not only did Bulgaria refuse to deport its citizens of Jewish ethnicity, but as another rescued man, Michael Bar-Zohar, claims, "The Bulgarian Jews became the only Jewish community in the Nazi sphere of influence whose number increased during World War II" (Pavlova, 8). Bar-Zohar's conclusion is not to be taken lightly, as he meticulously presents the results of his research, which involved comparison of numerous documents, personal observation, and census data, which is openly accessible. This fact is supported as well by Solomon Passi: "To put it in just a few words, during World War II Bulgaria was the only European state that saved its Jews while keeping them in their own native land. It is also noteworthy that Bulgaria is the only European country that could register an increase in its Jewish population in the years of World War II" (see Passi).

Exploring the reasons behind the story of the salvation of the Jewish population in Bulgaria, Todorov points out that there was an ab-

sence of hostility toward the Jews by the other segments of the population. He attributes this to the widely dispersed Jewish families that were more or less integrated with the rest of the population, rather than being isolated either territorially or linguistically. In illustrating this, Todorov refers to a letter from the German ambassador Beckerle in which he states, "Having grown up among Armenians, Greeks and Gypsies, the Bulgarian finds no defect in the Jews that might justify special measures against them" (Todorov, 32). Furthermore, it is Todorov's opinion that another factor contributing to harmony among the ethnically diverse groups was the Bulgarians' capacity for self-criticism that was used "against the temptation to make scapegoats of others" (Todorov, 33).

Additional historical references and survivor accounts presented by Todorov also support this claim that the circumstances of the Jewish people at this time could be characterized in terms of social and cultural harmony. Others have also arrived at conclusions consistent with Todorov's views based on the fact that the Jewish citizens of Bulgaria were not hated but assimilated as an included minority. The movie critic George Singleton interprets the interview of Jacky Comforty, whose parents survived the Holocaust in Bulgaria. He examines the integration of the Jewish population in Bulgaria, saying,

A key question is why so many ordinary citizens would act so courageously in the face of so much raw power? The often scoffed at notion of integration and diversity appears to be the answer. Jews and Bulgarians, among other things, celebrated each other's religious holidays. They had friendships that mattered. There existed a mentality similar to that Americans have regarding the United We Stand concept following the events of 9/11. A key factor that allowed this respect and these friendships to flourish, was the history of Bulgaria. They had been under oppressive rule from the Turks for over 500 years and had come to believe that "... everyone is entitled to have their own faith." The country had been independent for only 50 years yet they had developed a sense of true loyalty to their friends and believed in the concept of humanism for all. They respected diversity and theirs is a lesson to learn. (Singleton)

Todorov's intent is to weave together the events, personalities, and facts of goodness that took place in Bulgaria. As the years have passed, so too the reality of the Bulgarian rescue has faded. Today there are some who see these events of years ago merely as "a wonderful story, but it can't be true. If it were true, we would have known about it" (Bar-Zohar, IX). In contrast to this view, though, every year on March 9 Israel pays homage to the heroes of the very same events that are doubted by the unaware and celebrates the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews. Bulgarian-born Israelis and their children, together with the leaders of the country, "express their deep gratitude to this small far-off nation that stood up and saved her Jewish citizens" (Bar-Zohar, 258)

In his book Todorov delves deeply into a set of circumstances with a happy outcome. His search for the truth is relentless, and during the course of it he encounters people who stand up for the freedom and the lives of their neighbors. Still, this would not have been enough to thwart the evil intent of the Nazis, who had crushed and paralyzed Europe, toward the Bulgarian Jewish community. As Todorov demonstrates, what was required involved an interplay among key elements in this particular place and at this particular moment in history. In addition to the general acceptance of the Jewish population by other ethnic groups in Bulgaria, the happy ending to this story was brought about by the heroic stand taken by Dimitar Peshev and the public actions of various individuals, religious people, and leaders. King Boris III is justified by a Jewish man with the words "Had the king not done what he did, neither you nor I would be able to be here to argue" (see Kaltchev). Explaining why it is important to stay focused on Bulgaria, Solomon Passi, the son of Holocaust survivors and former foreign minister of Bulgaria, shows the reason for his pride: "Because my country is among the few European states that have no reason to look back ashamed to the times of the Holocaust, but—quite on the contrary—it can be proud of its conduct" (see Passi).

*The Fragility of Goodness* does not pretend to illuminate the entire story embracing the rescue of the Jewish people in Bulgaria during the Holocaust. Rather, the author has dusted off sources that are quickly becoming forgotten on archival shelves, and he has cast light on the impact of individuals with important roles in this obscure drama. As Todorov and others make clear, the story of Bulgaria's Jewish community goes beyond simple accounts of "glory and humanity. It is a story which reveals the interconnections among big nations and small in modern world" (Chary, 3)

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