

Citizenship Education Facing Nationalism and Populism in Europe

Strategies - Competencies – Practices

Conference Paper

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„You can go home!“ The rescue of the Bulgarian Jews from deportations

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Dear ladies and gentleman,

in my lecture I will focus on a big event in history: the saving of Bulgarian Jews from deportation in 1943. The main actors in the drama of „rescuing the Jews“were: Dimitur Peshev, Executive chairman of Bulgarian National Assembly; a delegation from the town of Kiustendil and also representatives of the Church. Despite the hard geopolitical situation in Bulgaria during the Second World War, despite the military pact with Nazi-Germany, a small country in South Eastern Europe dared to achieve balance not only in its interior policy but also in the foreign affairs. Until March 1941 Bulgaria kept neutrality. Tzar Boris III and the government kept diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Military troops didn't fight in the East front in support of the German army. The Tzar and the government did not deal with the Bulgarian Jews as with an opposition. Nevertheless, by the pressure of Nazi-Germany, the Jews would become victims of secretly planned deportations.

There existed anti-Semitic morals by some individuals. Bulgaria didn't make an exception. But in comparison to other countries Bulgaria didn't originate any anti-Semitic plentiful delusion. The anti-Semitic morals were concentrated only in single groups. A unique historical fact is, that representatives of the politics and the Church managed to stop the deportation of about 49 000 Jews from the country. Representatives of the parliament and of the executive committee of the Church conducted hard negotiations with the Nazi - Germany sympathizing government on March 9th, 1943 even in April 1943 and on May 24th 1943. Their aim was: saving the Jews from the concentration camps. In the end these organized efforts were successful. Due to this fact Bulgaria entered the recent history.

Of course this political act was based on a long prehistory.

In 1933, as the rabbi of Berlin, Leo Baeck announced: „The thousand year old history of the German Jews is over“, the archimandrite of the Rila Closter, Kliment Riletz, wrote in 1934 a

series of articles „New heathenism in Germany“, later published in a brochure. After the book burning, the Bulgarian weekly newspaper „Literaturen glas“ published a critical analysis by the popular Bulgarian scientist Professor Assen Zlatarov, „The deployment of the barbarian“. Here the author emphasizing, that despite the official Nazi-Germany sympathizing policy, Bulgaria cannot afford applauding such discriminating morals. The culmination of the solicitousness supporting the Jews community by the Bulgarian elite was the popular public-opinion poll published 1937 by the Jewish journalist Buko Pitty and titled „Poll and statements by Bulgarian representatives from society and culture about racism and anti-Semitism“. The author interviewed former minister, prime-minister, scientists and writers about their opinions on the anti-Semitism and racism and also on the Judaism in Bulgaria. The common tenor was, that neither the racism nor the anti-Semitism can develop in Bulgaria because of the tolerance of the society and because of the constitution, which guaranteed equal rights for all citizens in the country. We can say, that the anti-Semitism wave during the Second World War turned in Bulgaria into demonstration of tolerance by the Bulgarian society.

The full-blown wave of protest went over all social and political levels. Professional associations, parliament deputies, representatives of the Church protested in 1940 against the anti-hermitical „Law for the protecting of the nation“. It existed also a return-flow. For example the right-wing-extremist movement „Ratnik“, founded by the lawyer Peter Gabrovski, who became later interior minister as well as leader of the „Alliance of the national legions“ founded 1930. Both organizations were orientated on the NS-model.

In 1930-s they published appeals against the Judaism, communism and the freemason. They rejected the liberalism and the capitalism. These organizations, forbidden by the law, represented the anti-Semitism in Bulgaria.

The anti-Semitism gain power during 1937-1939. In this moment the opposition against the anti-Semitism became louder. German anti-Semitism affected the domestic policy in the European countries. Thus it was possible passing the anti-Jews „Law for protecting the nation“ in Bulgaria. According to this law, the Jews were obligated to pay higher taxes, the men from 18 to 48 had to work in summer and in springtime in labor camps. However, Bulgarian Tzar and government didn't propagated anti-Semitism.

One reason for this policy was the belief that Bulgarian society wouldn't respond to it. Another reason was that the Bulgarian policy was a policy of balance. The Bulgarian regime didn't look at the Jews as an opposition. This was based on domestically political reasons: Since 1934 Tzar Boris forbade the multi-party system, there was no state party, the parliament became as under part. The government conducted the policy of the Tzar. By this reason the activities of the rights extremists and of the communists were strongly limited.

On September 20th 1939 supporters of the right extremist movement „Ratnik“ initiated a Chrystal Night like that in Germany, but they were stopped by people, very much upset about the aggressiveness of „Ratnik“ bands. These reactions of Bulgarian citizens were documented in the police protocols. These anti-Semitic morals appeared as an echo of the European anti-Semitism, because Bulgaria didn't have any traditions in it. Actually the only example of anti-Semitic politician was Alexander Belev, head of the Commissariat for Jews affairs. He tried several times to extradite the Jews from the country.

By a secret agreement from February 1943 between Belev and Theodor Danneker, SS-Hauptsturmführer and police attaché in Bulgaria, Bulgarian government was obligated to deport totally 20 000 Jews: about 8 000 from the territories of old-Bulgaria and also about 12 000 from Macedonia and Trakia. In March 1943 about 8000 Jews from Kiustendil, Plovdiv, Gorna Djumaia, Pazardjik and other cities were informed, that 9th March they had adjourning to gathering points. The Jews in Kiustendil were the first, who came to know, that goods trains could bring the Jews to concentration camps. The Jews looked for the help of the Bulgarian deputies as Peter Mihalev and Dimitur Ikonov. A group of politicians, one businessman and a teacher decided to help and to inform the Executive head of the Bulgarian parliament Dimitur Peshev about the secret deportation plan. In the morning of

March 9th the delegation from Kiustendil drove to Sofia, to inform Dimitur Peshev. Dimitur Peshev was resolved to do something. He was certain, that Bulgarian citizens could not be deported. He tried to be received by the Prime Minister Filov, but the minister refused to meet Peshev. Here we have to notice, that the interior minister Gabrovski, former founder of the right-wing extremist movement „Ratnik“, was disposed to receive Peshev.

During the negotiations Peshev explained to the interior minister Gabrovski, that the deportations of Bulgarian citizens would violate the law and consisted of the immediately invalidation of the deportations. At the end Gabrovski called the police chief in Kiustendil and gave him instructions to invalidate the deportations. In the other cities he sent telegrams. But, the telegram to Plovdiv was delayed. Bishop Kyrill Plovdivski hid the converted Jews in the Church and tried to contact the Tzar and to beg him for salvation of the Jews of Plovdiv. In the gathering places the Jews heard the unbelievable news:

„You can go home!“. Therewith the government desisted from further deportation plans. Dimitur Peshev wrote March 17th 1943 a letter to Tzar Boris and to the government, which was signed by 43 deputies. In his letter he said: „...We must not allow the evacuation of these people... this could be an illegal action, not only by reason that Bulgarian citizens would be displaced, but also this action would have serious consequences for Bulgaria and for the destiny of the country in the international policy in the future“. Mr. Peshev had been driven by his political and ethical responsibility as an Executive chairman of the parliament and also as a human being. In his memories he wrote: „To be silent would be in conflict with my conscience as a deputy and a human being. This would make me an accomplice in all incidents, which could happen as a result“.

The letter was signed also by right conservative politicians as Alexander Tsankov. In result Dimitur Peshev was forced to resign the seals as Executive chairman of the parliament and fell from favor. In April 1943, the executive board of the Church negotiated directly with the Tzar to protect the Bulgarian Jews.

The 12 000 Macedonian and Trakian Jews wouldn't be rescued because they were stateless. Hitler's diplomats in Sofia insisted on the deportation of these people. Trakia and Macedonia were territories, which Nazi-Germany promised Bulgaria in case of winning the war. „De jure“ they didn't belong to Bulgaria.

The second important effort for deportation of the Bulgarian Jews started in May 1943. on May 24th, 1943, 50 000 Jews from the whole country, got the instruction by Alexander Belev's commissariat of Jews affairs to leave their houses immediately with a small baggage. The Head Bishop from Sofia Stefan decided to help converting formally the Jews, therefore they mustn't leave the city. The interior minister Gabrovski wouldn't accept these conversations. He would bring Stefan to trial, but without success. On May 24th, a very important public holiday in Bulgaria, Stefan hold a speech and criticized the anti-Jews policy of the Tzar and of the government. Nobody knows, but already in this moment Tzar Boris accepted only a part of Alexander Belev's deportation plan. The Jews should be evacuated only in other cities in the country, but they shouldn't be deported out of the country. The domestic pressure was too strong and Tzar Boris wouldn't risk provoking a misbalance in the country. Therefore he didn't follow the needs of Nazi-Germany. In the protocols of the Bulgarian Church from 1943 regarding the Jew issue we can read the statements of the board members of the Church about the Jew policy: Bishop Kyrill said:: „The Jew issue wasn't a question of morality, but of security, this we heard recently in a speech of the propaganda minister Goebbels... How has our Church judge this statement? For our Church the Jew issue is also a question of morality, because security devoid of morality is unthinkable ...“

Conclusions and recommendations for political and civic education today:

- Is there a public memorial or a place to learn more of this event in Bulgarian history?
- Is the event mentioned in history textbooks?
- Is there a popular book or magazine taking upon this story?

- Is anti-Semitism a problem in Bulgaria today? The story should be presented in the framework of a European approach to history in which national perspectives are merged and reconciled with each other.
- Is there any initiative (NGO) focusing on anti-Semitism or /and xenophobia in Bulgaria?

We have exploring the Rescue issue in the political education today. Therefore we can enlarge the permanent exhibition about the Rescue from deportation in the main synagogue in Sofia. Besides it could be very useful to organize trips for students to Dimitar Peshev's museum in Kiustendil or to establish a Jews' museum in Sofia, which can represent the whole story regarding the live together of Jews and Bulgarian. It could be also reasonable to organize events in the European Parliament and telling the story of the rescue of Jews.

The person, who made Dimitar Peshev's story in the European Parliament popular, was the Italian journalist and writer Gabrielle Nissim. In 2000 he published also a book about Dimitar Peshev and the Rescue, titled "The man, who stopped Hitler. Dimitar Peshev and the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews". The book was translated in many languages. The story about the Rescue became popular also in Israel. Therefore it is necessary scientists, journalists and victims to initiate seminars and forums about the Rescue in Bulgaria but also in other European countries. In Bulgaria we have presenting documentary on the radio and also on the TV about the Rescue. In 2000 the film producer from USA, of Jewish ancestry, Jacky Comforti, presented in 2000, in Berlin in the course of the festival Berlinale a television documentary about the Rescue, titled "The Optimists", but this movie is pretty unknown in Bulgaria. It could be possible, to show this documentary on the TV in Bulgaria.

This year, the Bulgarian National Radio will broadcast my radio documentary "You can go home! The Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews", produced by SWR2 and also broadcast by SWR2 as well as by the radio stations RBB and MDR in Germany.