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Peshev, the man who made a whole nation feel ashamed

Can a feeling of shame prevent a genocide and make even the accomplices of a radical evil doubt of their own creed at the last moment?

Can a qualm of conscience remain hidden in their hearts and then explode thanks to the action of a single individual or a group that openly makes them face their responsibilities?

From this point of view the story of Dimitar Peshev in Bulgaria is an exemplary one.

The vice-chairman of the Bulgarian Parliament was a worthy man that, like many others, had been dazzled by Germany, to the point that he did not take an active part against the racial laws. However when faced by the actual deportation of the Jews not only did he feel ashamed for his supporting the laws, but he succeeded through his political action in transforming his feeling of shame into the feeling of shame of the entire political class in Bulgaria.

Dimitar Peshev was actually able to transform those persons that until the day before had not had the courage to take responsibility and were even becoming accomplices of the final solution: he made them the artificers of the rescue of all the Jews in his country.

He succeeded in transforming important politicians who hitherto then had turned their heads away and had opportunistically fallen in with the Germans, into men with a conscience and a thought of their own.

No one in no other country with a pro-nazi government had ever used his political power to bring about a moral crisis among the accomplices of the final solution. This is the key to understanding the mechanism of the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews rescue and the particular role played by Dimitar Peshev.

In what way did shame determine the positive evolution of Bulgarian history in this period?

First of all, a few peculiarities must be underlined.

First, in Sofia there was no anti-Semite tradition and radical anti-Semite groups did not have much influence over the rest of the population.

Therefore, when the Government passed the racial laws, it did not find support among the people.

Secondly, the anti-Semitism of the political class was essentially opportunistic. In other words, it did not have a real ideological basis, even though there were quite a lot fanatical anti-Semites, like Alexandar Belev.

As a matter of facts the Nazis were throughout convinced that the persecution and elimination of the Jews could give birth to a perfect and happy society, and that a wonderfully spotless lawn could replace the contaminating weeds, as sociologist Zygmund Bauman has observed¹. The

¹ Zygmund Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Polity Press, 1989

Bulgarian political class, instead, adhered to the Nazi project not because they actually believed that the Jews were the enemies of humankind, but rather to obtain from Germany two "favours": they wanted to recover Thrace and Macedonia, and they did not want to participate in military operations. The Jews were thus a good "bargaining chip" to achieve their national goals. When, for instance, deputy Nikolaiev, during the voting for the racial laws, expressed his perplexities to Popov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the latter replied: "I do not agree on many things either, but I try to endure it, I fight the best I can, and if I cannot, I give in, but I keep in sight the most important thing". "And what is the most important thing?"² asked Nikolaiev.

"Don't you see? Try to keep out of the war until the end without rejecting the possibility of making our national aspirations come true. We got Dobruja back without bloodshed. We could soon take the region of the Aegean Sea without going to war. Isn't this the most important thing?"

Clearly the Jews were less important than territory.

The third peculiarity of the Bulgarian situation was that the Jews were not separated by the rest of the population, even in the worst period. Therefore, the process of victims "dehumanization", erasing all feelings of pity – which took place, for instance, in Poland - did not really happen in Bulgaria. It is not by accident that the majority of the Bulgarian Jews have memories of solidarity and altruism from that historical period rather than of prevarication and loneliness.

Paradoxically, the Bulgarian political class had to face, day by day, three elements which contradicted one another without managing to solve the puzzle: the need to please the Germans in order to fulfil their national dream, but at the same time the reluctance of the population towards the racial laws, and last but not least, their own lack of conviction. Therefore, they acquired an exemplary moral duplicity, towards both the external world and themselves. This is typical of all those who become accomplices in extreme evil solely for opportunistic reasons and do not have the courage to change direction until their conscience rebels –if it ever does- and shame breaks out.

Bulgarian politicians tried not to appear real anti-Semites and tried to justify their actions by saying that they were acting under compulsion: otherwise it would have been difficult to implement anti-Jewish policies in a country where a great tradition of tolerance existed. As a matter of fact it was easy to win popular consent by presenting Germany as the champion of the Bulgarian nationalist dream, but it was not so easy to find cooperation in actually implementing the racial laws.

It was even more problematic for the political class to hide the evil in which they were becoming accomplices from their own consciences. For this reason countless excuses were found in order to justify themselves and put the blame on the Germans or on their superiors for the anti-Jew policies. Immanuel Kant analysed this mechanism of repression acutely. There is only one way, he said, through

² Nikolaj Petrov Nikolaiev, *Fragments of memory* [Fragments of memory], Sofia, Dialog, 1994, p. 228

which men can escape that anxious state of mind deriving from self-despising: through lying to themselves. A few Bulgarian politicians were masters of this moral self-deception.

Let me present some episodes which show this ambiguity.

King Boris III, who had given his consent to the racial laws, revealed to his counsellor Ljubomir Lulchev his own unease and justified himself by saying that he had tried to "anticipate" the Germans, rather than having to submit to a German "*diktat*":

"I have tried to postpone the approval of the racial laws and I did not have any intention whatsoever to introduce them in the country. But since Romania, Hungary and even France had approved them, I preferred to promulgate them myself directly rather than having them imposed by someone else³."

In other words, the King wanted to make it known in his own country and abroad that he had been forced to persecute the Jews but that he personally did not agree. He had even reassured Rabbi Hananel, explaining to him that the Jews would have been protected anyway, as long as he was head of the country⁴.

Even more significant was the behaviour of the Minister of the Interior Gabrovski, who, after being employed as a lawyer in a Jewish enterprise⁵, became an anti-Semite for the sake of his career and actually directed the bureaucratic mechanism that led to the approval and implementation of the racial laws. Even Gabrovski, however, who, together with prime minister Filov, was mainly responsible for the anti-Semitic policies and was considered a reliable man in Berlin, did not want to ruin completely his reputation and appear as a convinced accomplice of the Nazis. In September 1942 he explained to a delegation of Jews demonstrating out of his Ministry that "the worst was over⁶" and that they did not have to fear for their lives. When the German Ambassador, Mr Beckerle, suggested that he stage an anti-Jewish exhibition right in the centre of Sofia to explain the population the evil role of Jews to the population, he refused. He was ashamed of showing the population the way the Nazis saw the Jews and he was persuaded that such an exhibition would have aroused a negative reaction. He explained the German Ambassador – who was stunned - that a different strategy had to be followed, namely that of acting against the Jews without explaining their intentions to the population⁷. He did not

³ Lyubomir Kh. Lulchev, *Dvenik*, CHSA, f. 95, vol. 1, p. 118

⁴ Ref. Stephane Groueff, *Crown of Thorns* (Lanham, USA; Madison Books, 1987). P. 320.

⁵ Todor Kuljumov, King Boris' secretary, who escaped the trials of 1944 and lived secretly under the communist regime for over half a century, recalls that 'for years, he [Gabrovski] worked as the legal representative of the company Patak, which was owned by a Jewish businessman'. The metamorphosis of the minister of the interior was truly surprising. Kuljumov wrote: 'There was absolutely no way of predicting that one day he would become the father of the country's racial laws, euphemistically called "Laws for the Defence of the Nation". Gabrovski seemed like a stable person at the time. Later, he was influenced by the talk of young students who had returned to Bulgaria after studying at German universities. He saw anti-Semitism as an opportunity to quickly advance his political career. So from the protector of the economic wealth of a Jew, Gabrovski became a key supporter of the expropriation of "Jewish capital". Quoted in Gabriele Nissim, *L'uomo che fermò Hitler* (Milan, 1998), p. 80.

⁶ Quoted in Nissim, *L'uomo che fermò Hitler*, p. 107.

⁷ Nissim, *L'uomo che fermò Hitler*, p. 107.

say so explicitly but he was afraid that too strong a position could provoke resentment in part of the Bulgarian political class⁸.

This is why, as Peshev remembers, Gabrovski tried to reassure a few perplexed deputies about the anti-Jewish laws at the assembly of the pro-Nazi majority on 19 September 1942. He told them that the Jewish problem would have been dealt with "reasonably, humanely, and with moral good sense"⁹.

Gabrovski understood the situation better than anybody else. There was only one way in which Bulgaria could satisfy the Nazis and carry out the deportations without arousing the population: to act in secrecy. In a country without an anti-Semitic tradition, the Jews could only be deported if consciences were prevented from reacting.

This is why, to avoid any rebellion on the part of the deputies, decision-making about the Jewish question was taken from the parliament¹⁰ and full power over the fate of the Jews was given to a Jewish Committee, directed by Belev.

On 2 March 1943 the Government approved, with the King's consent, the secret plan of deportation, so that the nation would be presented with a *fait accompli* and consciences would not have the opportunity to rebel.

The assembly was a masterpiece of hypocrisy: the ministers approved the deportation of the Jews from Thrace and Macedonia on the pretext that that the decision depended on the Germans only, and then without ever saying it openly, they added the eight thousand Jews of historical Bulgaria.

They did not want to pronounce the word "Jews" in order not to declare the truth aloud, so they used the terms "undesired individuals" and "subverters", who were dangerous for the nation's security.

⁸ Gabrovski's behavior shocked the German ambassador Beckerle who was trying to stir up Bulgaria's anti-Semitic campaign. Beckerle suggested that the minister of the interior organize an anti-Semitic campaign in the centre of Sofia in order to explain the ideological war against the Jews to the Bulgarians. The ambassador failed to understand the behavior of Bulgaria's leaders, who had become particularly zealous in executing the racial laws, especially those regarding the expropriation of Jewish economic goods, but overlooked its ideological aspects. The Bulgarian government, and Gabrovski in particular, was uninterested in educating the people about the historical argument for anti-Semitism. Gabrovski explained to the German ambassador that it was better to act than to issue anti-Semitic propaganda. Beckerle later wrote in a report to Berlin that 'he [Gabrovski] thinks that it is inopportune to publicly speak about this issue. He told me that he prefers concrete facts. He claims that the important thing is not to discuss the Jewish Question, but to act upon it'. The ambassador thought that it was simply an issue of political strategy and 'cultural' differences. He did not understand that this was typical of Bulgarian politicians eager to save face. Gabrovski intelligently suggested organizing not an anti-Semitic demonstration, but rather a display of the Third Reich's social achievements. This way the Bulgarians could see the ways in which Hitler had improved the Germans' quality of life, and would understand that a Nazi victory would make Europe richer and more prosperous. Beckerle, 'Letter to the Foreign Affairs Minister', 22 January 1943, Yad Vashem, K. 2075557/6.

⁹ Dimitar Peshev, *Memoirs*, f. 1335, u.a. 157, Sofia, Central Historical State Archives.

¹⁰ Dimitar Peshev once again was assigned the duty of presiding over the parliamentary session that would give Belev total power, without 'democratic' checks, in anti-Semitic actions. Various members strongly opposed conceding such powers, but Peshev never officially expressed his objection. He did not suspect that such decision would lead to the genocide of Bulgarian Jews. Like most of the deputies of the majority bloc, Peshev felt that, in light of the extraordinary conditions imposed by the war, the government needed to reinforce its own executive powers. The crumbling international situation was drastically limiting the rights not only of Jews, but also of all citizens. Petko Stanjov, a deputy from the opposition and a noted judge, published a book even before approving the racial laws in which he explained that, in extreme cases, the Bulgarian Constitution allowed for the possibility of reducing democratic guarantees in favour of government autonomy. 'Maybe we made a mistake', Peshev admitted, 'when we didn't expressly criticize certain political decisions... We thought that it was unwise in those difficult times to doubt the prestige of the government, which was essential if it were to continue operating successfully'. D. Peshev, *Memoirs on the Trial of the People's Court*, Family (Peshev) Archive, Sofia.

Everything would have worked out properly if not for the mechanism of shame. Gabrovski might never have thought it could happen, but in spite of himself one day he was overwhelmed by this mechanism of shame.

Peshev's support of nazism

Dimitar Peshev was also overwhelmed by collective opportunism and the climate of self-deception which characterized the whole nation at that time, and particularly the political leadership.

Peshev had become involved in politics just because he had felt the weight of the degeneration of democracy.

As he explained in a speech in the Bulgarian Parliament on 11 November 1942, he had willingly approved an authoritarian government because he firmly believed that Bulgaria, just like Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia, which were experimenting with new political trends, had to find a new direction¹¹. He thought that a government without parties would help to regenerate the country and stop corruption.

As minister of Justice, however, he showed that he was extremely sensitive to the value of human life.

While the Army, influenced by the minister of defense, wanted a death sentence for Damjan Velcev, a republican who had failed in his anti-monarchist *coup d'état*, Peshev used all his power to avoid a death sentence and obtain the King's pardon for Velcev¹².

This firm attitude cost him his position as minister of justice, since his was a lonely battle fought against the Government majority.

Yet his sensitiveness was initially still not sufficient to make him understand what Nazism really was.

It was not easy to find the right direction in Bulgaria, mainly because of the particular international position of the country.

Many decisions seem to be taken only because there were no alternatives. Peshev honestly explains in his memoirs why he sympathised with Germany not because he liked Hitler's ideology but out of patriotism for Bulgaria.

¹¹ Peshev entered politics with the idea that Bulgaria should experiment with new methods of political reform. When Lenin and Trotsky returned to the collapsed Tsarist Russia – Peshev affirmed in a passionate parliamentary discussion – they had certain ideas about what should be done. But then the road they followed in establishing a new regime was paved by experience: 'The Soviets did not build on the basis of a definite formula. It took some time before the new armed forces and administration replaced those that had been destroyed'. The same thing happened in Germany. Hitler did not come to power with a fully developed strategy. He worked out his plans during his years in government and gradually discovered the most efficient means to implement them. 'Do you think that Hitler had already formed his recipe for national socialism when he came to power, and then just applied it to his government? No, dear deputies!'. Peshev could not possibly imagine the true consequences of the historic events, the loss and ruins that the two totalitarian regimes were to bring, not only for their people, but for the entire world. He interpreted the new political strategies of the two great powers as acts of courage in times of crisis, a readiness to experiment with alternative strategies. If two important countries had already tried authoritarianism, Bulgaria could look for innovative strategies as well. 'Originality', Peshev affirmed, 'should be the main objective of a new governing system'. D. Peshev, *Speech in Reply to the Discourse of the Crown*, Session of 11 November 1942,

¹² D. Peshev, *Memoirs on My Activity as Minister of Justice*, Fund 1335, u.a. 155, Sofia, National Historical Archive.

First of all, he hoped that Berlin could finally satisfy Bulgaria's aspirations for Thrace and Macedonia since the League of Nations and the democratic countries had isolated Bulgaria.

Peshev remembers the great pro-German enthusiasm throughout the country when German diplomacy succeeded in winning back Dobruja.

"After so many misfortunes, after so much pain for the loss of our beloved Bulgarian territories –he wrote- for the first time the country was again finding hope for its future¹³."

Secondly, Peshev saw the Ribbentrop-Molotov Agreement of August 1939 as a way to peace and security.

"I personally participated in the great happiness of the people when the agreement was signed by Germany and the Soviet Union. While I was travelling north, I found myself by chance in a town called Botevgrad when the newspapers published the news of the signing of the Agreement. I stopped on the central square where I was soon surrounded by a crowd of people who kept asking me more details... I could see the sheer joy on their faces¹⁴."

Stalin's Russia supported Germany's politics and the Bulgarians felt more reassured.

When the Italian Army found itself in great difficulty during the Greek campaign, Bulgaria's dream of seeking Germany's help in order to pursue its national interest of remaining a neutral country was suddenly destroyed. Bulgaria had to take sides with Hitler and sign up to the Tripartite Act on 1 March 1941, according to which the German troops could cross Bulgaria in order to help Mussolini, in order not to end up like Yugoslavia.

"I considered adherence to the Tripartite Act inevitable, since it was the only way for Bulgaria to avoid the worst, that is to become the "scene" of war manoeuvres, occupied by Germany, and overwhelmed by the conflict¹⁵."

Peshev's love of his country brought him to see Hitler from the point of view of Bulgaria's national interests, without asking himself how much evil was the German dictator bringing to the near-by countries. He even went as far as declaring in Parliament on 11 November 1941 that Hitler was the greatest leader of the age, but only because he saw in him the *trait-d'union* for winning back the lost territories¹⁶.

¹³ Peshev, *Memoirs*, Fund 1335, u.a. 163.

¹⁴ Peshev, *Memoirs*, Fund 1335, u.a. 163.

¹⁵ Peshev, *Memoirs*, Fund 1335, u.a. 165.

¹⁶ On 11 November 1941, after hearing the king's annual speech, Peshev also hailed Hitler: 'After the Balkan affair, the great leader of the Reich said: "We are particularly pleased that we were able to repair the injustices committed a long time ago at Bulgaria's expense. After establishing the (territorial) reparation, the German people are convinced they are doing their duty by expressing their historical gratitude towards Bulgaria, our faithful companions in arms from the Great War". This is not just a speech. It is a declaration of intent, a precise political commitment by the greatest leader of our times, the creator of the New Order, the man who personifies the power of the Third Reich, and who has committed his own forces to breaking the chains of the past in order to build a new, international community that is more just and happier'. D. Peshev, *Speech in Reply to the Discourse of the Crown*, Session of 11 November 1941.

Even more incredible was Peshev's silence regarding the anti-Semitic policies of the government, since he, a celebrated lawyer, came from a small town called Kjustendil, where his family had excellent relationships with the Jewish neighbours; his sister had attended the Jewish Elementary School, and it was quite normal for a Jewish woman to breast-feed the baby of a non-Jewish woman.

Yet on 19 November 1940, Peshev presided over a session in parliament in which the minister of the interior, Gabrovski, presented the anti-Jewish legislation. It was a hard decision because a few days earlier Peshev had spoken with his Jewish friend, Jako Baruch, and told him how he loathed these laws.

"I do not think that a single deputy could be found in the entire Bulgarian nation that would vote such a law. Ours is a small country and we have demonstrated tolerance towards minorities many times. It is very unlikely that Gabrovski approves such a law¹⁷." During the debate in parliament Peshev, as chairman, let the opponents Nikola Musanov and Pekto Stainov express their doubts¹⁸ about a law that represented a radical break with the tradition of the country.

Later Peshev justified his silence and his compromise by saying that he, like many other deputies, considered those laws a farce, a way to get into the Germans' graces, and thought that the laws would never be applied.

"When the problem was raised I was convinced that we were trying to adjust our policies to those of Germany. Many people justified the laws, which were considered only temporary and limited, as a way to achieve national goals. Nobody suspected that the laws could become permanent and as hard as those applied in Germany¹⁹."

Peshev's crisis of conscience

For a long time Peshev preferred to live with a kind of unease, generated by interior conflict, rather than state openly the terrible injustice the government was responsible for.

There was a human reason behind Peshev's passive attitude: the racial laws were the price to be paid to the Germans for returning their homes to the Bulgarians of Thrace and Macedonia. This is why Peshev tried to play down discrimination against the Jews and found excuses to hide his troubled conscience.

The first crisis arrived when the Bulgarian parliament approved the declaration of war against the United States after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7

¹⁷ Jako Baruch, *Testimony before the People's Court*, Records of the People's Court II, Sofia, Archives of the Ministry of Interior, p. 2066.

¹⁸ Peshev firmly defended Nikola Musanov, the former prime minister who reminded the assembly that the 'pure Bulgarian race' never existed, but was a mixture of different ethnic groups. After violently scolding the other deputies who tried to interrupt the speaker, Peshev took up his defence, gesturing to the crowd and saying: 'Don't worry Musanov. Please continue. I will defend you'. He defended Musanov's right to dissent. When Musanov tried to extend his speech for as long as possible, Peshev reproached him good-naturedly, saying: 'Honourable Musanov, there is only one rule that dictates the rights and duties of the members of this assembly. I therefore ask you that you please adhere to the rule. You claim to support the Constitution for its application of the laws. Therefore, you must be the first to bow to them'. While Musanov referred to the Constitution in defending the rights of Jewish citizens, Peshev only formally evoked the Constitution in order to enforce democratic civil law. Handwritten minutes of the 25th National Assembly, second session, Vol. I, pp. 235-42, 19 November 1940.

¹⁹ Peshev, *Memoirs*, Fund 1335, u.a. 157.

December 1941. The vice-chairman of parliament tried in vain to convince the deputies that Bulgaria should not take an anti-American approach after the Japanese aggression. His effort was unsuccessful because the pro-government party prevented him from talking²⁰.

Only a desperate encounter with his friend Jako Baruch and the visit of a whole delegation of Jews from his native town, Kjustendil, which informed him of the imminent deportation of his childhood friends made Peshev remove all false alibis from his conscience and become aware of the evil in which the Bulgarian leadership was becoming an accomplice.

The meeting with Jako Baruch is extremely symbolic and essential for an understanding of Peshev's personal struggle.

At first he totally rejected the truthfulness of the news that his friend brought him, although he had also received alarming information in the parliament.

"How could I be ignorant of everything, since I am the vice-chairman of the parliament?"²¹ he told his friend.

Then he tried to overcome his unease by offering Jako Baruch the opportunity to save his family by the means of a safe-conduct. It was only when Jako Baruch made him face the political responsibility for the fate of all the Jews in the country that he decided to act openly to stop the deportations.

At first Peshev did not understand the "general dimension" of evil. He started to perceive it only when he saw the desperation of his home town friends. However, when he did understand it, he decided to act, not only out of love for his friends, but rather because he was ashamed of his own complicity which he had pursued in silence and indifference.

He understood that it was not only the lives of the Jews that were in danger, but also his own dignity as a politician and a human being. Their rescue also meant regaining his self-respect.

In an "internal dialogue" Peshev underwent a Socratic experience. He "thought", as philosopher Hannah Arendt would say. He started questioning socially accepted rules because he understood that that one's ego could not live together with the

²⁰ Peshev finally decided to voice his objections when the parliament was suddenly called to convene without an agenda in order to ratify a decision imposed upon them by the Germans. 'After consulting with Spas Ganev, we agreed that I would represent the majority in the meeting and take the floor in requesting an explanation for our declaration of war, since the Tripartite Act did not oblige us to take such a decision. The Pact obliged us to declare war only if one of the states adhering to the Pact was invaded by another state'. But the situation was totally different. The conflict was sparked by Japan's attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbour. There was no reason for Bulgaria to declare war. 'We went into the majority meeting room where I asked to speak after Filov opened the day's agenda. I began speaking, but deputies from around the room began to interrupt me and accuse me of violating the unity and unanimity of the majority forces. I was unable to continue and had to return to my seat. There were no objections after mine. The majority decided not to even discuss the problem. It had all been decided anyway. So the matter went to vote with the majority, but I refused to vote'. In Protocol of the People's Court – Second Supreme College – On the Trial against Dimitar Peshev, 10th Session of 30 December 1944, *Examination of the Defendant Dimitar Peshev*, Sofia, Archive of the Minister of Interior.

²¹ Baruch remembers being shocked to hear that Peshev was completely ignorant of the matter: 'When I called him and convinced him to receive me in his house that Sunday morning to tell him about the Jews' imminent deportation to Poland, he reacted with total disbelief, saying: "This is untrue; it is a pure lie". "No", I told him, showing him the letter I had received from Kjustendil. "You are poorly informed". "It's not possible", he insisted. "As vice-chairman of the parliament, I should know. I just spoke with minister Gabrovski and he denied that anything remotely like this would happen", I said. "Look, Gabrovski lied to you. We are sure that everything is ready in Kjustendil – the water tanks and the area where the Jews are to be assembled. It has already been set in motion. I suggest that you try to find out not from Gabrovski, but from Ljuben Miltenov, the district governor of the Kjustendil police. You could call him". He immediately tried to call, but was unable to get a line to Kjustendil. He told me to come to his office the next day to witness his telephone call to Miltenov'. Baruch, *Testimony Before the People's Court*, p. 2068.

knowledge of being a murderer. He became the counter-Eichmann that Arendt was looking for in her philosophy.

Peshev realised that he had to make the whole political class face the false alibi of conscience and make them feel ashamed of their co-responsibility in the genocide of Jews.

He understood that he had the key to make the deportation plan fail. He decided to make public the secret decision to deport Bulgarian Jewish citizens at the meeting of the parliament scheduled for the following day.

He went, together with a delegation of deputies, into Gabrovski's cabinet threatening him with a scandal and after a dramatic encounter he forced him to suspend the order of deportation.

Then, together with the other deputies, he personally phoned all the prefectures to make sure that the counter-order was enforced.

Peshev perceived that Gabrovski's assent derived from personal unease; from the fear of losing his reputation because of an action of which, deep down, he was ashamed.

If the plan had remained secret, Gabrovski would not have had a problem, but now that he was unmasked, he felt ashamed of himself. As Peshev wrote in his memoirs:

"I was impressed by the way he was confused and upset and even though it seemed to me unlikely that he could go on stating there was nothing going on against the Jews, in spite of my protests supported by facts, I did not see in him only deceit and evil. I thought he had found an easy way to escape his uneasiness. So I persuaded myself that he would not take his plan further.²²"

Gabrovski obtained the suspension of deportation from "the highest authority", as a report from the German Embassy states, probably from the royal palace itself. However, he showed surprising autonomy in the matter.

In fact on that day he saw Peshev twice, while Prime Minister Filov slammed the door when the delegation went to him. In other words, thanks to the obstinacy of the deputy-chairmen of Parliament, the order of deportation was revoked in the cabinet of the Minister of the Interior, a unique case in Europe.

Peshev's document in the Parliament

Peshev was not satisfied with a simple temporary revocation of the order: he wanted an unmistakable political signal from the parliament itself against the genocide. He knew that the government could suggest deportation again at any moment unless that conspiracy of silence and hypocrisy on the fate of the Jews was broken.

"I wonder what I could do. I could not be silent²³ 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

²² Peshev, *Memoirs*, Fund 1335, u.a. 157.

²³ Peshev, *On the Jewish Question*, Fund n.1335, u.a.156, Sofia, National Historical Archives.

the approval of the antiJewish measures ... To prevent the irreparable we had to put the question before the Parliament.”

Prime Minister Filov tried to persuade him not to go to Parliament and told him that his perplexities could be solved and discussed in private, but Peshev did it his own way, and made a second miracle come true. He convinced 42 deputies from the majority to sign a document²⁴ in which the King and the Government were asked not to stain the honor of the country with such a ferocious crime.

The text is a real masterpiece, in that it aims at making the Minister aware of how the evil perpetrated against the Jews would sooner or later come back to haunt the Bulgarian nation.

On purpose he refuses to gather the support of the opposition, but he demanded the signatures only from the filo-German majority. In fact, if his call had been taken for a challenge to the whole political line of the government and the deputies of the opposition had signed it, it would have not been taken into consideration.

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.

In the document he wrote:

“Such measures are inadmissible²⁵, not only because these people – Bulgarian citizens – cannot be expelled from Bulgaria, but also because this would have serious consequences for our country. It would sully the honour of Bulgaria with an infamous brand of infamy, which would be a very heavy political, as well as moral burden, depriving the country of any good argument in the international relations. Small nations cannot allow themselves to overlook these arguments which, whatever happens in the future, will always constitute a powerful, maybe even the most powerful weapon in international relations. For us this is very important because, as You may remember, we have recently suffered from heavy moral and political losses because of the deviations from the human and moral laws on the part of some Bulgarians and often because of irresponsible people.

Which Bulgarian government could take on such a responsibility for our future?

The small number of Jews in Bulgaria and the power of the State, which holds so many laws and legal instruments at its disposal, make every dangerous or harmful element innocuous, no matter which social level he belongs to, up to the point that it is completely no use to adopt new exceptional and cruel measures which could lead to a massacre. Anything of that sort would backfire above all on the government, but also on Bulgaria. The potential consequences of such a deed are easily predictable and this is why this must not happen.

Based on these considerations we do not feel like taking on any responsibility on this matter.

²⁴ Quoted in Nissim, *L'uomo che fermò Hitler*, p. 307.

²⁵ Peshev, Protest letter to Prime Minister Bogdan Filov, Fund 1335,u.a.85, Sofia, National Historical Archives.

A minimum level of legality is as necessary for the exercise of government, as air is for life.

The honour of Bulgaria and the Bulgarian people is not only a matter of feeling, it is first of all an element of its policy. It is a political capital of the utmost significance and this is why no one has the right to dispose of it indiscriminately when the people does not consent to this.”

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 chancellery in April 1933, Wegner had warned Hitler of the shame that would haunt Germany because of the anti-Jewish persecution.

“Shame and misfortune will befall Germany²⁶ 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.

Peshev and the moral prestige of a nation

Peshev succeeded in conveying a fundamental concept that Hitler's supporters in Germany, Mussolini's supporters in Italy, Hungarian deputies in the Horthy Government, Rumanian and Slovak deputies, dazzled as they were by Hitler’s charm, did not understand. The Bulgarians understood that the evil they were doing to the Jews was an evil they were inflicting to themselves. Handing over the Jews to the Germans meant a mark of infamy on Bulgarian national history for centuries to come. The moral prestige of the nation would have been destroyed along with the extermination of the Jews.

Peshev, the nationalist, had turned the theory of patriotism upside down, upsetting its meaning. One cannot become the accomplice of genocide because of a nationalistic ideal.

The "moral amputation" would have been much heavier than the amputation of the territories.

Peshev observed how after signing most deputies felt almost liberated, as if they had an enormous stone on their conscience until then.

"I remember the words of a deputy from Breznik, Alexander Simov Givov, who after signing it exclaimed with great joy: "the dignity of Bulgaria has been saved."²⁷

Peshev made evil visible, and, going against the attempt to commit it in secret, he broke up the mechanism of opportunism that almost made the Bulgarian leaders hand over the Jews without being really convinced of its propriety.

Up to that moment the powers-that-be ignored their unease concerning the fate of the Jews, but after Peshev's act this unease manifested itself openly, thus allowing the rescue of the Jews of the interior.

King Boris III expressed his refusal despite pressure from Hitler in a meeting on 31 March 1943.

²⁶ Armin Wegner, *Open letter to the Chancellor of the Reich Adolf Hitler*, 1933.

²⁷ Peshev, *Memoirs*, Fund 1335, u.a. 157.

The Bulgarian government moved the Jews into labour camps but did not hand them over to the Nazis, in spite of the efforts of Belev's and Eichmann's envoy Dannecker's efforts.

The courageous Patriarch of the Orthodox Church, Stefan, took an open stand against the deportation.

The new Regent Filov followed Boris' political line after the King's death, even though it was believed that he had been appointed after a Nazi plot to poison the King.

Paradoxically, the German Ambassador himself telegraphed to Berlin to say that pressure on Sofia was self-defeating. He explained that the Bulgarians did not want to go further because they feared bombing from the allied countries²⁸.

The bombing he was talking about was in fact the "bombing of shame" that a man like Peshev had roused.

Ethical issues in Peshev's document

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 liar 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 Rousseau who in the Emile showed how the lack of compassion 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

²⁸ 'Because of its panicky fear of air attacks, the Bulgarian government hopes that by this behaviour it will maintain among the enemy forces a false image of the internal political situation in Bulgaria'. Beckerle, Telegram to the Foreign Ministry in Berlin, 25 May 1943.

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 Patočka, during the years of communist rule in Prague, used to call the solidarity of the shaken.

The ambiguity of king Boris

Did Boris III actually feel as shame-stricken as if he were the victim of a "moral bombing" after Peshev's deed? The King did not oppose the secret Belev-Dannecker plan, and freed his conscience by holding the government responsible for it.

He felt reassured by the decision to keep the deportation secret in order to avoid a hostile public reaction.

When Peshev made the scandal explode in parliament after meeting with the minister of the interior, the King began to distance himself from the aims of the Nazis. He first backed Gabrovski's decision to suspend the deportations, then he approved the mobilization of the Jews in the labor camps, but refused to hand them over to the Nazis, as the leader of the Kev, the Commissariat for the Jewish Question, was demanding.

The King's shame, however, was only partial; it was always uncertain and never fully conscious.

This can be easily seen in the King's personal reaction to Peshev's deed.

The dramatic denunciation of the vice-Chairman of Parliament was not seen by the King as a kind of liberation. His conscience did not feel lighter; on the contrary, he always felt a kind of personal resentment against Peshev. In agreement with Prime Minister Filov²⁹, the King removed Peshev from his office in Parliament after denigrating him morally, hinting that he had acted for his own sake, for money and hidden purposes.

Peshev never received a sign of sympathy from the royal palace. The King could nor bear that a deputy from the majority bloc had openly forced him to assume responsibility for the deportation.

The King's behaviour was completely different from Peshev's towards his friend Baruch. He was grateful to his friend for forcing him to think. The King, on the contrary, hated Peshev until his sudden death.

He never had a deep conviction but reacted more out of fear of losing his reputation. This is clear from the different attitude he had towards the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia. After 9 March 1943 and Peshev's action the deportation of the Jews in the territories could have easily been avoided, just like the deportation of the Jews in the interior. The whole logistical apparatus depended, as a matter of fact, from Bulgarian soldiers. The King did not prevent this because there were no

²⁹ On 26 March Bogdan Filov convened the Council of Ministers and asked for the resignation of the vice-chairman of the parliament. 'At my insistence', Filov wrote in his personal diary, 'we decided to use this case as a verification of the majority, asking for a vote of confidence in Peshev's dismissal from the deputy-chairmanship, and the resignation of all those deputies who did not immediately retract their signatures'. Three days later, his proposal was approved by the king. 'The king agreed with me in discrediting Peshev in order to neutralize him once and for all'.

strong protests from Bulgarian society, and thus Boris did not feel under threat. His shame stopped half way, it did not really become a crisis of conscience, as it clear from the document presented by Peshev in parliament.

The extraordinary story of the deputy-chairman of the Bulgarian Parliament should have been celebrated around the world, and Peshev's name should have become well-known – just like that of Anne Frank – to schoolboys and schoolgirls. He was the only powerful politician in a country allied to Germany who was able to break the conspiracy of silence.

Even though he never fired a shot at the Germans, he was their greatest enemy, the most dangerous “partisan” in Bulgaria.

Peshev's humiliation during Communism

But Peshev was forgotten. As we have seen, he became a man who thought with his own mind, a man who could no longer be seduced by ideologies. Just a short time before the Red Army entered Bulgaria, he denounced in parliament the risk of a new totalitarianism. While other deputies like Kimon Georgiev and Damian Velcev sided with the Communists, Peshev refused to be involved in a new dictatorship. That cost him very dear: he was brought to trial with the charge of being an anti-Semite and anti-Soviet.

During the trial the prosecutor even hinted that he had acted in favor of the Jews out of greed for money. Actually his only fault was that of not adhering to the new regime.

Peshev experienced thus the most painful humiliation, the humiliation of a man who had defeated evil by saving the Jews of an entire country. In the Sofia court in January 1945, he realised that it was only out of poor luck that he escaped the death sentence.

Only the extraordinary abilities of his Jewish lawyer, Joseph Nissim Jasharoff, saved his life. And Peshev's defense cost this courageous lawyer from Sofia very dear: the Communists forced him to leave the country, abandoning everything he had and starting a new life far away.

Peshev was "only" condemned to 15 years of hard labor. He saw his dear friend Spas Ganev, an engineer and deputy with whom he had fought all his political battles, sitting on the bench of the condemned. He listened to the words of the chairman of Court sentencing to death 20 out of the 43 deputies who had signed the letter of protest against the genocide³⁰. Six of them were sentenced to life

³⁰ A sentence was issued on 1 February, and with it, the communists achieved their goal. Peshev recounts: ‘The morning of 1 February we were ordered to prepare to go to court. We would finally hear the sentence. We felt our blood freeze. We were unable to hide our emotional state; it was obvious that we had reached the end... I noticed something unusual when I entered the Palace of Justice. There was no audience, just the annoying noise of policemen and other functionaries. But instead of bringing us into the open courtroom, they had us enter another room and painfully wait. We didn't understand why. Then security guards entered the room and began to search us. They made us empty our pockets completely and gather all our personal goods (watch, comb, wallet, rings, pens, pencils) in handkerchiefs. We immediately understood what was happening when we saw the handcuffs... They made us stand in line in the empty part of the hall. There was nothing except this macabre silence. Todor Kostadinov, one of the majority deputies, was standing next to me”. He was a calm man, and had predicted his future with resignation... The judges finally sat in their chairs. The president broke the deadly silence to read us the sentence: “In the name of the people...” he declared that all the 137 deputies (13 of whom were absent and 12 of whom died) were guilty. First he read the names of those condemned to death, there were 67. Then he announced the names of the other guilty men, according to their crime.. In the end, after reading the list, he concluded with: “The sentence is definitive and irreversible”.

imprisonment, eight were condemned to 15 years of imprisonment, for to five years, and one to one year.

For a moment he thought –as he writes discouragingly in his memoirs- that his rebellion against evil , the same evil that had brought the Jews to Auschwitz, had not taught the world anything. A new evil was taking shape in his country, and thousands of people were brought into labour camps.

He was stunned because during the years of Nazism some people had felt ashamed for the fate of the Jews, while now the conscience of the new political leaders seemed totally passive, indifferent to this new kind of persecution of mankind. In the last pages of his memoirs, Peshev wrote:

At that moment, Peshev heard his destiny and that of the other 42 deputies who had signed the letter in defence of the Jews:

Col. Alexander Simon Gigov, condemned to death

Lawyer Aleksandar Tzlov Tankov, condemned to death in absentia

Georgi Rafailov Popov, condemned to death

Dimitur Atanasov Arnadov, condemned to death

Kyрил Kostantinov Arnaudov, condemned to death

Lawyer Dimitur Nikolov Ikonov (who had informed Peshev about the deportation of the Jews in the territories), condemned to death

Ivan Beskov Petrov (who had spoken many times in parliament in defence of the Jews), condemned to death

Lawyer Ivan Kirov Vazov, condemned to death

Ignat Iliev Hajdudov, condemned to death

Nikola Ivanov Gradev, condemned to death

Nikolaj Petrov Nikolaiev, condemned to death in absentia

Rusi Ivanov Marinov, condemned to death

Lawyer Simeon Kirov Halacev, condemned to death

Sirko Stancev Petkov, condemned to death (the court claimed that if he had defended the Jews, he had done so for money!)

Spas Marinov Popovski, condemned to death

Todor Pavlov Kozuharov, condemned to death

Lawyer Georgi Petrov Kenderov, life sentence

Lawyer Aleksandar Gatev Krastev, life sentence

Lawyer Petar Georgiev Mihalev, life sentence

Petar Ivanov K'oseivanov, life sentence

Lawyer Ivan Dimitrov Minkov, life sentence

Lawyer Danail Gecev Kanev, life sentence

Visil Hristov Velchev, sentenced to 15 years imprisonment

Georgi Zeljiakov Svinarov, sentenced to 15 years imprisonment

Georgi Mikov, sentenced to 15 years imprisonment

Georgi Popov Stefanov, sentenced to 15 years imprisonment

Lawyer Dimitur Josifov Peshev, sentenced to 15 years imprisonment

Ivan Kotzov Jotov, sentenced to 15 years imprisonment

Ilija Dimitrov Slavkov, sentenced to 15 years imprisonment

Panajot Todorov Stankov, sentenced to 15 years imprisonment

Stefan Stojanov Statelov, sentenced to 5 years imprisonment

Donco Dimov Uzunov, sentenced to 5 years imprisonment

Filiv Dimitrov Mahmudziev, sentenced to 5 years imprisonment

Hristo Stojanov Taukciev, sentenced to 5 years imprisonment

Tasko Stoickov Stoilkov, sentenced to 1 year imprisonment

Nikolaj Ivanov Durov, absolved

Georgi Todorov Krastev, absolved

Petar Markov Hadzipetrov, absolved

In Peshev, *Memories on the Trial of the People's Court*, Family (Peshev) archive, Sofia.

“It was a tragedy that surpassed anyone could have imagined or invented, and would weigh on Bulgarian history forever... Perhaps one day, when the past can be viewed from a distance, some sensitive writer will use these events in order to recount the drama of a period, a time that future generations will look upon with disbelief and shock. Let’s hope that they will be more cultured, more intelligent and nobler, and they do not attempt similar acts of political fanaticism³¹ .”

Luckily Peshev escaped the Gulag thanks to the help of a neighbour of his, Boris Cokin, a professed Communist that was nevertheless grateful to him for helping him in the past.

Although alive, Peshev experienced a particular kind of death: the assassination of memory. He lost his house, his books, his job. He could not marry. He was forced for years to vegetate from morning till night waiting for the end to come. Communism erased every trace of Peshev's and his follower's deed and turned the Communist Party and particularly its secretary Todor Zhivkov into the rescuers of the Bulgarian Jews. Communism illegitimately appropriated the good deeds of others, not to make a universal lesson out of them, but to legitimate its own crimes. Peshev had been an extremely courageous man, not only because he had risked his life by opposing the German plans, but also because he had the strength to react against his own political milieu. He had been a respected man, and all of a sudden he was insulted and humiliated by being dismissed from parliament. The widow of Petar Mihalev, one of the deputies from Kjustendil who accompanied Peshev to the minister of the interior, told the author that both her husband and Peshev had been more stunned by the loss of their prestige in their own political milieu than by the communist trial itself.

The Jewish community and Peshev in the communist era

In Bulgaria, the only East European country in which the Jews were saved, a particular event took place. During the communist time, the leaders of the Jewish Community in Sofia (conditioned by the totalitarian regime) tried to explain the story of their rescue with abstract ideological theories, and did not stick to the facts.

Since they honestly believed in a new world they interpreted their past by taking as a starting point the ideology in which they fully identified.

Thus the actions of people on the left were exalted, while the real protagonists of the rescue were forgotten, since they represented the enemy. The need to identify themselves with the new regime and to believe in salvation from the new socialist world distorted the past. This is why Stefan, Peshev, Mihalev, Kurtev, and all the other members of the delegation of Kjustendil were forgotten and never officially recognized by the Bulgarian Jews.

In the course of my research, during the Communist time, I happened to have a discussion with some influential members of the Jewish Community in Sofia and I was told that Peshev was a "fascist" anyway.

It is obvious that such a biased opinion cannot lead to a willingness to analyse the figure of Peshev more thoroughly. It seems that a man's political creed is more important than his actions. In other words, a man must be judged by his political

³¹ In Peshev, *Memories on the Trial of the People's Court*.

label, and not as a human being. The ideological explanation that the communist leaders of the Jewish community gave of Peshev's act was that Peshev had taken a stance against deportation just because he was frightened by the arrival of the Red Army.

In the mythic exaltation of the Red Army like the driving force of History, however, they did not understand that the decision whether to hand over the Jews did not depend on the state of the war but on the humanitarian choice of particular persons. We should not forget that in Hungary, one year after Peshev's deed, when the Red Army was already approaching and the Germans had decisively lost the War, the Horthy government did not hesitate to hand over the Jews to the Germans. More than half-a-million Hungarian Jews were taken to concentration camps because there was no Peshev to say 'no' to Hitler.

How can we honour Peshev's memory today, after more than half-a-century of silence? Peshev saved the Jews but he would have done the same for anybody else who was being persecuted. He wrote in his letter to the minister of interior that the highest value in politics was the prevention of genocide under all circumstances