

DIMITER PESHEV, THE VICEPRESIDENT OF THE BULGARIAN PARLIAMENT, WHO MADE A WHOLE NATION FEEL ASHAMED

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Can the feeling of shame prevent genocide and make even the accomplices of a radical evil doubt their own creed at the last moment? Can a qualm of conscience remain hidden in their hearts and then come to the surface thanks to the actions of a single individual or 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 who, like many others, had been dazzled by Germany, to the extent that he did not actively oppose the racial laws. However, when faced with the actual deportation of the Jews not only did he feel ashamed for having supported the laws, but he succeeded through his political actions 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 who had previously not had the courage to take responsibility and who were even becoming accomplices in the Final Solution: he made them the craftsmen of the rescue of all the Jews in his country. He succeeded in transforming important politicians who until then had turned their eyes away and had opportunistically fallen in with the Germans into men with a conscience and a mind of their own. No other man in any other country with a pro-Nazi government had ever used his political power to make a moral crisis explode among the accomplices of the Final Solution. This is the key to understanding the mechanism of the rescue of Bulgarian Jews 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, there was no antisemitic tradition in Sofia, and radical antisemitic groups did not have much influence on the rest of the population. Therefore, when the government passed the racial laws, it did not find support among the people.

Secondly, the antisemitism of the political class was essentially opportunistic: in other words, it did not have a real ideological basis. The German Nazis were thoroughly 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 the sociologist Zygmund Bauman has observed. [1] The Bulgarian political class, on the other hand, 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' with which to achieve their national goals. When, for instance, deputy Nikolaiev, during the voting on the racial laws, expressed his perplexities to Popov, minister of foreign affairs, the latter replied: 'I do not agree with many things either, but I try to tolerate 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?', asked Nikolaiev.

Don't you see? To 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 war. Isn't this the most important thing? [2]

Clearly the Jews were less important than territory.

The third peculiarity of the Bulgarian situation was that the Jews were not separated from the rest of the population, even in the worst period. Therefore, the process of the victims' 'dehumanisation', erasing all feelings of pity, which took place, for instance, in Poland, did not really happen in Bulgaria. It is not by accident that from that historical period the majority of Bulgarian Jews have memories of acts of solidarity and altruism 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, the reluctance of the population in regard to 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 explodes.

Bulgarian politicians tried not to appear real antisemites 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 executing 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 thousands of excuses were found in order to justify themselves and put the blame on the Germans or on their superiors for the anti-Jewish policies. Philosopher Immanuel Kant has acutely analysed this mechanism of repression. There is only one way, he said, through which men can escape that anxious state of mind arising 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 Lulcev his own uneasiness 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 of introducing them in the country. But since Romania, Hungary, and even France had approved them, I preferred to promulgate them myself directly than have them imposed by someone else. [3]

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 personally he did not agree. He had even reassured Rabbi Hananel, explaining to him that the Jews would be protected as long as he was head of the country. [4] Even more significant was the behaviour of the minister of the interior Gabrovski, who, after being employed as a lawyer in a Jewish enterprise, [5] became an antisemite for the sake of his career and actually directed the bureaucratic mechanism that led to the approval and application of the racial laws. Even Gabrovski, however, who, together with prime minister Belev, was mainly responsible for the antisemitic policies and who was considered a reliable man in Berlin, did not want to ruin his reputation completely and appear a committed accomplice of the Nazis.

In September 1942 he explained to a delegation of Jews demonstrating outside his Ministry that 'the worst was over' [6] and they did not have to fear for their lives. When the German ambassador, Bekerle, suggested that he stage an anti-Jewish exhibition right in the centre of Sofia to explain the evil role of the 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 to 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 population. [7] He did not say so explicitly but he was afraid that too strong a position could provoke resentment in part of the Bulgarian political class. [8]

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 be 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 antisemitic 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 parliament [10] 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 for 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 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 'undesirable individuals' and 'subverters', who were dangerous to the nation's security. Everything would have worked out fine if it had not been for the mechanism of shame. Gabrovski might never have thought so, but in spite of himself one day he was overwhelmed by this mechanism of shame.

PESHEV'S INITIATIVE

Dimitar Peshev was also overwhelmed by collective opportunism and the climate of self-deception which characterised the whole nation at that time, and particularly the political leadership. Peshev had become involved in politics because he 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 direction. [11] He thought that a government without parties would help to regenerate the country and stop corruption. As minister of justice, however, he soon showed that he was extremely sensitive to the value of human life. While the army, influenced by the minister of defence, wanted a death sentence for Damjan Velcev, a republican who had failed in his anti-monarchic *coup d'état*, Peshev used all his power to avoid the death sentence and obtain the King's pardon for Velchev. [12] This attitude cost him his position as minister of justice, since his was a lonely battle fought against the government majority. Yet his sensitivity was 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 special international position of the country. Many decisions seem to have been 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. 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 because of the loss of our beloved Bulgarian territories', he wrote, 'for the first time the country was again finding hope for its future'. [13] Secondly, Peshev saw the Ribbentrop–Molotov Agreement of August 1939 as the 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 for more details . . . I could see the sheer joy on their faces. [14]

Stalin's Russia supported Germany's policies 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 on 1 March 1941 they signed the Tripartite Pact, 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 Pact inevitable, since it was the only way for Bulgaria to avoid the worst, that is, becoming the 'scene' of war manoeuvres, occupied by Germany, and overwhelmed by the conflict.' [15]

Peshev's love of his country led him to see Hitler from the point of view of Bulgaria's national interests, without asking himself how much evil the German dictator was bringing to the nearby 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 territories. [16] Even more incredible was Peshev's silence as regards the antisemitic politics of the government since he, a celebrated lawyer, came from a small town called Kjustendil, where his family had excellent relations with their 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 at 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 would be found in the entire Bulgarian nation that would vote for 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 law.' [17] During the debate in parliament Peshev, as chairman, let the opponents Nikola Musanov and Pekto Stainov express their doubts [18] about a law that represented a radical break with the traditions 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' good 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 Germany. [19]

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 in Peshev's passive attitude: the racial laws were the price to be paid to the Germans for giving back to the Bulgarians of Thrace and Macedonia their homes. This is why Peshev tried to play down discrimination against the Jews and found excuses to hide his troubled conscience.

The first crisis came when the Bulgarian parliament approved the declaration of war against the United States after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941. The vice-chairman of the 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 talking. [20] 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 the 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 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 through 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 hometown friends. However, when he did understand it, he decided to act, not only out of love for his friends, but also 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 one's ego could not live together with 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 the 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 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 details, 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. That day he saw Peshev twice, while prime minister Belev slammed the door when the delegation went to him. Gabrovski never agreed to consult with Belev, who had actually drawn up the secret plan and was the most fanatical antisemite in Bulgaria. He knew that Belev would have used all his power to block the order of suspension. In other words, thanks to the obstinacy of the vice-chairman of the parliament, the order of deportation was revoked in the cabinet of the minister of the interior – a unique case in Europe.

Peshev was not satisfied with a 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 the conspiracy of silence and hypocrisy concerning the fate of the Jews was not broken. Prime minister Filov tried to persuade him to give up 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 bloc to sign a document [23] in which the King and the government were asked not to stain the honour of the country with such a crime.

Peshev succeeded in conveying a fundamental concept that Hitler's supporters in Germany, Mussolini's supporters in Italy, Hungarian deputies in the Horthy era, and Romanian 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 on 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 had an enormous stone on their conscience until then. 'I remember the words of a deputy from Brezник, Alexander Simov Givov, who after signing it exclaimed with great joy: "the dignity of Bulgaria has been saved".' [24]

Peshev made evil visible, and, going against the attempt to commit it in secret, he broke the mechanism of opportunism that almost made the Bulgarian leaders hand over the Jews without really being convinced of its propriety. Up to that moment the powers-that-be had 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 at a meeting on 31 March 1943. The Bulgarian government moved the Jews into labour camps but did not hand them over to the Nazis, despite 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 Allies. [25]. The bombing he was talking about was in fact 'the bombing of shame' that a man like Peshev had roused.

Was Boris III actually a 'victim' of this bombing? 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 only the mobilisation of the Jews in the labour camps, but refused to hand them over to the Nazis, as the leader of the Kev, the Commissariat for the Jewish Question, Alexander Belev, was demanding. The King's shame, however, was only partial; it was always uncertain and never fully conscious. This can be clearly seen in the King's personal reaction to Peshev's deed. The dramatic denunciation of the vice-chairman of the 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 Filov, [26] 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 not 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 on those 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, on Bulgarian soldiers. The King did not prevent this deportation because there were no strong protests from Bulgarian society, and thus Boris did not feel under threat. His shame stopped halfway, it did not really become a crisis of conscience, as it was clear in the document presented by Peshev in parliament. The extraordinary story of the vice-chairman of the Bulgarian parliament could 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 shot the Germans literally, he was their greatest enemy, the most dangerous partisan in Bulgaria.

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. This cost him very dear: he was brought to trial with the charge of being antisemitic and anti-Soviet. During the trial the prosecutor even hinted that Peshev had only acted in favour of the Jews out of greed for money. In reality his only fault was that he did not adhere 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 pure luck that he escaped the death sentence. Only the extraordinary capabilities of his Jewish lawyer, Joseph Nissim Jasharoff, saved his life. And Peshev's defence 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 labour. 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 the court sentencing to death 20 out of the 43 deputies who had signed the letter of protest against the genocide. [27] Six of them were sentenced to life imprisonment, eight were condemned to 15 years of imprisonment, four 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 taken to labour camps. He was stunned because during the years of Nazism some people had felt ashamed because of 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:

It was a tragedy that surpassed anything 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 that they do not attempt similar acts of political fanaticism. [28]

Luckily Peshev escaped the Gulag thanks to the help of a neighbour of his, Boris Cokin, a professed communist who was nevertheless grateful to him for helping him in the past. Although alive, Peshev experimented, however, with a particular kind of death: the assassination of memory. He lost his house, his books, his job. 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 followers' 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.

In Bulgaria, the only Eastern European country in which the Jews were saved, a particular event took place. The leaders of the Jewish community in Sofia (conditioned by the totalitarian power) 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, promised by the communists, in which there would be no discrimination and persecution, they interpreted their past by taking as a starting point the ideology with 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 recognised officially by the Bulgarian Jews.

They deserved a monument in Sofia, as a token of gratitude, since there were no such men in any other country of Eastern Europe where the Jews had been annihilated. Someone in the Jewish milieu should have had the courage to say the truth aloud and publicly denounce the lies of the regime. Unfortunately, this did not happen. While carrying on his research, the author happened to have a discussion with some influential members of the Jewish community in Sofia and he 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 label, and not as a human being. The ideological explanation that the communist leaders of the Jewish community gave of the Peshev's act was that Peshev had taken sides against deportation because he was frightened by the arrival of the Red Army. In the mythic exaltation of the Red Army as the strength of the History they did not understand that the decision whether or not 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 the interior that the highest value in politics was the prevention of genocide under all circumstances.

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Notes

1. Zygmund Bauman, *Modernity & Olocausto* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992), p. 161.
2. Nikolaj Petrov Nikolaiev, *Fragmenti ot memoari* [Fragments of memories] (Sofia: Dialog, 1994), p. 228.
3. Lyubomir Kh. Lulchev, *Dvenik*, CHSA, f. 95, Vol. 1, p. 118.
4. Cfr. Stephane Groueff, *Crown of Thorns* (Lanham, USA: Madison Books, 1987), p. 320.
5. Todor Kuljumov, King Boris's 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 antisemitism 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 fermo Hitler* (Milan, 1998), p. 80.
6. Quoted in Nissim, *L'uomo che fermo Hitler*, p. 107.
7. Nissim, *L'uomo che fermo Hitler*, p. 107.
8. Gabrovski's behaviour shocked the German ambassador Beckerle who was trying to stir up Bulgaria's antisemitic campaign. Beckerle suggested that the minister of interior organise an antisemitic 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 behaviour 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 antisemitism. Gabrovski explained to the German ambassador that it was better to act than to issue antisemitic 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 organising not an antisemitic 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. 207555/6.
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 antisemitic actions. Various members strongly opposed conceding such powers, but Peshev never officially expressed his objection. He did not suspect that such a 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 criticise 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.
11. Peshev entered politics with the idea that Bulgaria should experiment with new methods of political reform. When Lenin and Trotsky returned to a 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 ruin 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.
13. Peshev, *Memoirs on My Activity*, u.a. 163.
14. Peshev, *Memoirs on My Activity*, u.a. 163.
15. Peshev, *Memoirs on My Activity*, 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.
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 one rule that dictates the rights and duties of the members of this assembly. Equal rights and duties for all. I ask therefore 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. Hand-written minutes of the 25th National Assembly, second session, Vol. 1, pp. 235–42, 19 November 1940.

19. Peshev, *Memoirs on My Activity*, u.a. 157.

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 Pact did not oblige us to make 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’s 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 the line for 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.

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

23. Quoted in Nissim, *L’uomo che fermo Hitler*, p. 307.

24. Peshev, *Memoirs on My Activity*, u.a. 157.

25. ‘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. . . .’ Bekerle, Telegram to the Foreign Ministry in Berlin, 25 May 1943.

26. On 20 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 on Peshev’s dismissal from vice-chairmanship, and the resignation by 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 neutralise him once and for all.’

27. 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 pointed to the handcuffs and said, ‘One of those will probably be for 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”.’

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. Aleksandar Simov 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

Kyryl Konstantinov 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 Dunov, condemned to death

Lawyer Ivan Vasilev 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

Lawyer Marin Ivanov Tjutjundziev, condemned to death

Nikola Ivanov Vasilev, condemned to death

Nikola Ivanov Gradev, condemned to death

Nikolaj Petrov Nikolaev, 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 defended the Jews, he did it for money!)

Spas Marinov Popovski, condemned to death

Lawyer Stefan Hadzivasilev Karaivanov, 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 Zeljazkov 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 Kotzev 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.
28. In Peshev, *Memories on the Trial of the People's Court*.
29. Gabrielle Nissim, *Ebrei Invisibili* (Milan: Mondadori, 1995).