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FAITH, ACTION AND INACTION DURING THE HOLOCAUST

Suzanne Brown Fleming

Dr. Suzanne Brown-Fleming is Senior Program Officer of the University Programs Division, Center For Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. She was a respondent to the panel at the annual AAR convention in Philadelphia, November 2005, at which Dr. Pana and Dr. Stefanov made their presentations and these are excerpts of her comments.

How did religion influence the decision-making of the actors involved? If, in the case of Bulgaria, little to no Antisemitism, religious or otherwise, existed, what drove the actions of Bulgarian government officials and policemen who enacted legislation ranging from expropriation to extermination? To what extent, in the case of Romania, did theological Antisemitism drive the murder process there?

In his memoirs, Joseph Berger, a Holocaust survivor born in the then-Polish city of Lemberg, records the following story, as he remembers hearing it, about a “fourteen year old boy who escaped from a pit [filled] with massacred Jews.”¹

The youth was stark naked covered with the blood of his fellow Jews, who were dead in a mass grave. When this Jewish boy came to some peasant women begging for help, they chased him away yelling ‘Jew go back to the graves where you belong.’ Later the boy was so desperate he returned to the house of the same peasant women, knocked on the door telling them ‘I am your Lord Jesus Christ, I come down from the cross—look at me full of blood, pain and suffering of an innocent young man.’ The woman crossed herself[,] knelt down on her knees[,] and ushered the boy into her house, fed him and gave him shelter for 3 days.²

Joseph Berger’s testimony is a perfect illustration of why we need to discuss the relationship between Christians, Jews, and the Holocaust, in the context of Central and Eastern Europe. How did religion influence the decision-making of the actors involved?

Let us begin with the example of Bulgaria, where, claims Professor Georgiev³, “Bulgarians never showed any lasting or deeply embedded chauvinism and racism” toward its Jewish population (Stefanov, p. 1). In Bulgaria, there existed a tradition of toleration, he writes (Stefanov, p. 1). Indeed, those who study the Holocaust might be tempted to take

¹ I thank Professor Michael Berkowitz (University College London), 2002-2003 Charles H. Revson Fellow, Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, USHMM, for bringing this document to my attention,

² Record Group 02*123: “My Life Story,” by Joseph Berger. Archives, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C., p.8. We do not have the name of the boy, nor the location where this incident took place.

³ References to Georgiev by Suzanne Brown Fleming are directed to the author identified as Pavel Stefanov.

comfort in the fact that the Bulgarian Jewish community survived World War II intact, while nearly all other eastern European Jewish communities perished. The work of Shlomo She'al'tiel, Director of the Yad Yaari Documentation and Research Center of Hashomer Hatzair in Israel, and the paper by Professor Georgiev, shows us that the survival of Bulgarian Jewry during the World War II era, while a fact, is not the whole story. An interesting topic for discussion might be the discrepancy between Professor Georgiev's claim - that no Christian-Jewish polemic existed in Bulgaria (Stefanov, p.10) - and the historical facts of the Holocaust in Bulgaria. Professor Georgiev has rightly referenced much of this history, but, for the purpose of this discussion, it bears repeating in linear fashion and at some length. The first wartime anti-Jewish legal measure was enacted in September 1939, under no pressure from Germany, when the Bulgarian cabinet under King Boris III expelled 4,000 Jews who were foreign nationals. Other anti-Jewish measures followed, again prior to Bulgaria's formalized relationship with Germany as part of the Axis. In January 1941, the Law for the Protection of the Nation, already referenced by Professor Georgiev, stripped Bulgarian Jews of basic individual and communal rights and required that Jews, Jewish homes, and Jewish businesses be marked with the Star of David.

On the first of March 1941, Bulgaria enlisted with the Axis powers. In August 1942, the Commissariat for Jewish Questions was established, responsible for overseeing all Jewish affairs and for implementing anti-Jewish policy. The records of the Commissariat for Jewish Questions are now available at the U.S.Holocaust Memorial Museum. Under directorship of antisemite Aleksander Belev, the Commissariat issued to Jews special identity cards and required them to change any "non-Jewish sounding" names. Jews were stripped of the right to belong to unions, to hold public office, and to attend institutions of higher learning; they were barred from private employment as well as barred from serving in any public, municipal, or governmental capacity. Jewish organizations, schools, theaters, cinemas, publishing houses, restaurants, and hotels were forcibly disbanded. Jews were restricted to shopping in "special" stores, intermarriage as well as Jewish employment of Bulgarian workers was outlawed, and movement without police permission banned. Jews had to formally declare all property and submit all of their financial holdings, to be placed in sealed accounts. Jewish males between the ages of 20 and 40 were released from army service but sent instead to forced labor camps, where they paved roads and built bridges under guard and without pay.

The Commissariat for Jewish Questions also engaged in secret negotiations with Germany to transport Bulgarian Jews to Polish extermination camps, signing an agreement to this effect in February 1943. Initially Bulgaria was to deliver 20,000 Jews into German hands. These 20,000 were to consist of approximately 11,000 Jews from the Bulgarian-occupied territories of Thrace and Macedonia, in addition to 9,000 Jews from Bulgaria itself. Bulgarian officials saw to it that non-national Jews were murdered first. In March 1943, Bulgarian police rounded up the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia. It would appear that not all Bulgarians decried such radical anti-Jewish measures. Enough did not that sealed trains carried 11,384 Jews caught in Thrace and Macedonia to death camps in Poland. While the 9 March deportation order affecting Jews in Bulgaria proper was not ultimately enacted, punitive measure against Bulgarian Jews did not stop. In May 1943, Bulgarian Jewish leadership was incarcerated in the Somovit concentration camp. Later in May, Sofia's 25,000 Jews were "resettled" in the provinces under poor conditions. The Bulgarian government imposed complete ghettoization in late 1943.

Harsher measures never came to pass, and for this Professor Georgiev rightly credits the intervention of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, which, as he suggests, was an important (though not the only) factor. When World War Two began, Bulgaria's mainly Sefardim Jewish population numbered roughly 48,000. On the eve of the collapse of the regime in September 1944, approximately 50,000 Jews remained alive in Bulgaria. As I'm sure Professor Georgiev would echo, the survival of Bulgarian Jewry should not deter scholars from making a thorough study of the conditions, prejudices, legal measures, and institutions that made possible intense discrimination against Jews by significant sectors of the Bulgarian population and government. Thorough study of the Commissariat for Jewish Questions and other key ministries involved in implementing anti-Jewish legislation must be undertaken. I would further caution Professor Georgiev against generalizations concerning Jews as part of the Communist movement and government in Bulgaria. In light of Bulgaria's history of discrimination against its Jews between 1939 and 1944, statements like "many of the interrogators and executioners were of Jewish extraction" should be made with extreme care. The Communist movement in Bulgaria was a partisan movement, and, taken as a whole, the percentage of Jews remained very low, at close to 5%. Even this figure is difficult to substantiate, in that no overall roster of partisans contains a breakdown by ethnicity. Those partisan unit membership roles available in the archives of the United States Holocaust

Memorial Museum, for example, show virtually all ethnic-Bulgarian names.⁴ A third and final point worth making regarding Professor Georgiev's paper regards the clerical concern of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church for Christians of Jewish ethnic origin - a group that was, not surprisingly, of the greatest concern to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, a pattern mirrored across Europe and in the Vatican as well.

We turn to Romania. "During World War II, no country except Germany was involved on such a scale in the massacre of its Jews as was Romania," writes renowned historian and my colleague Radu Ioanid.⁵ Only 375,000, or roughly half of the prewar Jewish population in Romania, survived. In mid-2002, statements by Romanian President Ion Iliescu and other government officials claimed that there had been no Holocaust in Romania, by suggesting that political opponents of the Nazis had been treated similarly to Jews, and by suggesting that Antonescu could not be viewed only in negative terms. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum led the international outcry and played a leading role in discussions that led Iliescu to appoint an independent commission, chaired by Nobel Laureate and Founding Museum Chairman Elie Wiesel, to produce a definitive history of Romania's role during the Holocaust, which presented its final report in November 2004. It is striking, given this history, that the Triod cited by Ms. Pana, with a publication date of 2002, would still print the statement, "and give them, Lord, what they deserve because they killed you" (Pana, p.11). As was the case in Poland, told so vividly in Joseph Berger's memoirs, the deicide charge is still a determining factor in attitudes of Christians toward Jews.

⁴ I thank CAHS Fellow Steven F. Sage for this reference.

⁵ "Romania," *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, Walter Laquer, editor (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 580.