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Bulgaria and the Jews

Keynote address by Solomon Passy
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria

Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The European community – and definitely, the American community as well – are manifesting a well-grounded interest in the Jewish tragedy in Europe during World War II. We have an important case in point when this interest is focused on Bulgaria. Because my country is among the few European states that have no reason to look back ashamed to the times of the Holocaust, but – quite on the contrary – it can be proud of its conduct.

To put it in just a few words, during World War II Bulgaria was *the only European state* that saved its Jews while keeping them in their own native land. It is also noteworthy that Bulgaria is the only European country that could register an increase in its Jewish population in the years of World War II.

It is a pity that there is a lack of awareness of these facts. This means that Europe still knows little about Bulgaria, and hence about itself.

I am convinced that this distinguished audience furnishes a rewarding occasion for me to reveal some details about the conduct of the Bulgarian State and of the Bulgarian nation to the Jews. I can say immediately that this conduct was not accidental, it was not a fortuitous coincidence of circumstances, but the result of ethnic and religious tolerance cultivated among the Bulgarians for centuries. And since it is much more important for all of us to look into the future, my next words will help you sense better the moral qualities with which the Bulgarian nation is entering re-united Europe.

Let me start with the fact that Bulgaria is among the oldest states on the European continent. It is more than 1,300 years old. Christianity has been its state religion for more than 1,100 years. Located at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, Bulgaria has been repeatedly the arena of the interference of various ethnicities, religions and cultures. In spite of this, or maybe precisely on account of this, Christianity, Islam and Judaism in all their varieties have always coexisted peacefully in Bulgaria. There have never been religious wars in the Bulgarian lands and this is clearly an exception for the otherwise turbulent Balkans. A visible expression of the religious tolerance can be seen in the very centre of Sofia where within a radius of about 100 m a major Orthodox Church, the Synagogue and the Mosque demonstrate peaceful and tolerant cohabitation.

Furthermore, dozens of nationalities have coexisted for centuries in the Bulgarian lands, but Bulgaria does not know the phenomenon of genocide. A very eloquent fact is that when the Jews were exiled from Spain 500 years ago, many of them found refuge on the territory of today's Bulgaria. I would like to stress that the traditional ethnic and religious tolerance of the Bulgarians is not accidental or temporary. During different periods in their history we have given refuge to Armenians, to Russians and Ukrainians, to Greeks, Serbs, Kurds and many more exiled people. At present Bulgaria is also the native land of hundreds of thousands of Turks and of tens of thousands of ethnic Bulgarians confessing Islam.

When we are talking specifically about the saving of the 50 thousand Bulgarian Jews, we should know that this was indeed done by the entire nation. Radically opposed political movements were involved in this: from the underground communists to representatives of the government majority sharing some anti-Semitic views. Politicians from different parliamentary groups took a strong position against the deportation. The Deputy Speaker of the Parliament Mr. Dimitar Peshev displayed remarkable courage and leadership. The Bulgarian intellectuals and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, through its Holy Synod, also played a leading role in the effort. A part of the closest circle of King Boris III was also involved, as well as his wife Queen Giovanna. Apparently the King demonstrated great ingeniousness in his tough talks with Nazi Germany to be able to replace the deportation with internal administrative and police measures. Such a serious state act as the revoking of the deportation, for which the "green light" had already been given, could not have been made without the decisive support of the head of state.

The real sentiments of Bulgaria to the Jews can be sensed convincingly from the following information sent by the Ambassador of the Third Reich to Sofia. Adolf-Heinz Beckerle admitted that all his attempts to convince the Bulgarian government of the need to deport the Jews failed, and he advised Berlin to take into account the Bulgarian mentality and its “lack of ideological strength.” “Bulgarians,” he wrote, “grew up with Armenians, Greeks and Gypsies, and they have no inborn prejudice against the Jews, as the people from Northern Europe.”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My compatriots at that time tried hard but regretfully, failed to rescue also eleven thousand Jews – non-Bulgarian citizens from Macedonia and Aegean Thrace where irrespective of the Bulgarian military presence the ultimate authority was in the hands of the Nazis. You can rest assured that I am a convinced supporter of the liberal philosophy and for me there is nothing more valuable than the individual. Every person is God’s creation, whose value is absolute and incomparable to the remaining personalities. Human life is unique and hence not subject to any statistics. Therefore, I shall request you not to accept as cynicism the proportion that I shall present to you, but the truth is that if all European states had the policy and the degree of success of Bulgaria’s effort to save the Jews, then five of the six million Jews that perished would have survived.

Dear friends,

All historic lessons including the bitterest ones, should remain firmly anchored in our memories and in the memories of the future generations. This is especially valid for the painful legacy of the Holocaust. But even in these black pages of the history of mankind we can recognize the presence of human bravery and high morale. Part of it we discover in the merit of all those who made the survival of 50 thousand Bulgarian Jews possible.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

With this hind look to history I would like to conclude by stressing that we understand the “zero tolerance” to any form of non-tolerance including anti-Semitism as a key part of our role in the international relations and of our share in the integration processes. The year of 2004 will be of key importance for Bulgaria. While ending our mandate as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council we will take up the Chairmanship in Office of the OSCE and we will also join NATO and conclude our accession negotiations with the EU. A common denominator of all these organizations is that they have emerged as an incarnation of the strong common will of Mankind to bring to an end

once and for all the tragic and painful legacy of the Second World War and also of the Cold War. The key link was the drive to guarantee that peace and security, democracy, freedom and tolerance gain the upper hand. This common commitment is the basis of integration in the Euro-Atlantic area and its only possible future. Anti-Semitism is not a part of this future. This Is why this Conference is so important and I believe it will have a strong follow-up.

Thank you for your attention.