



Haim's parents Avraham and Virginy Assa

But wait... **THERE'S MORE**

The incredible story of the salvation of Bulgaria's Jews during World War II continues, this time from a more personal perspective | BY ILAN PRESKOVSKY

IN THE AUGUST ISSUE OF *JEWISH LIFE*, WE FEATURED one of the most astounding, but far too little-known story of how Tsar Boris III of Bulgaria saved 48 000 Jews from certain death during the Holocaust. But, as we quickly found out, there was much more to the story. While there is a lot to recommend about the more objective, purely historical view of the heroic deeds of Boris III (and indeed a great number of other Bulgarian gentiles) to save Bulgaria's Jews, arguably nothing beats a more personal view of the same story.

Shortly after the publication of last month's article on Boris III, we received word from Michele Asa (see the Letters section for this month) that there was more to the story, and suggested that we be in touch with her mother-in-law, Elaine Asa, the widow of Rabbi Haim

Asa, a prominent Rabbi in Fullerton, California, who, before passing away in May 2014, spent years of his own life trying to get the true story of Bulgaria's Jewry out there. She noted that what was written in the article echoed, almost exactly, what her husband had been saying for decades – often in stark contrast to the official story presented by the communist regime that had taken over Bulgaria immediately after World War II and which did everything it could to erase anything positive about the monarchy they had displaced. She noted that her husband and his family had a unique viewpoint on these incredible historical events that would provide extra colour to what we already knew. She rather under-sold just how much this was the case.

Rabbi Asa was, in fact, one of those very Jews that were saved by Boris III and whose father, Avraham Assa (Rabbi Asa altered the spelling of his surname for sim-

plicity's sake when he arrived in the United States in 1954) was the president of the Jewish Community of Burgas (the second largest city in Bulgaria, sometimes transliterated as Bourgas or Bourgaz) at the time and was himself instrumental in ensuring the safety of the country's Jews. Despite these events playing out when Rabbi Asa was still a child, he has provided, through what must be dozens of interviews, a fully-rounded, personal picture of what Bulgaria was like for Jews, both before and during the war, which is simply impossible to find in a more impersonal history book.

2000 YEARS OF BULGARIAN JEWRY

Before getting to Rabbi Asa's personal story and that of the Bulgarian Jews in the years shortly before and during the Second World War, it's worth understanding a bit of the history of Bulgaria's Jews and just why they enjoyed such a

“ JEWS WOULD REMAIN A LARGELY WELCOMED AND INFLUENTIAL PRESENCE IN BULGARIA THROUGHOUT THE NEXT FOURTEEN CENTURIES. ”



Haim with his second mother Viza who really raised him after his biological mother died when he was 7.



Haim as a small child.

fine relationship with the wider and much larger gentile population. It's a history that Rabbi Asa himself recounts in his marathon interview with the USC Shoah Foundation (the interview, incidentally, that most informed this article) in the mid-1990s.

This is a history that, unlike most places in the Diaspora where Jews seldom enjoyed a long, unbroken run before being expelled or nearly eradicated, stretches right back to the end of the first century CE when, after the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews were relocated, both by force and by choice, to the area to the east of the Mediterranean Sea. Joined over the years by fellow Jews fleeing persecution in neighbouring countries, these Romaniote Jewish communities would flourish in the land that would go on to be known as Bulgaria.

When the First Bulgarian Empire was established in 681 CE, the Jews of the land weren't seen as late-comers or interlopers, but as brothers-in-arms who had also suffered at the hands of the Roman and Byzantine Empires and who played a major, constructive part in building the nascent country. Jews would remain a largely welcomed and influential presence in Bulgaria through-

out the next fourteen centuries, which would see Bulgaria fall under different empires and even the Romaniote Jewish population itself altered by incoming Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews fleeing persecution in other parts of Europe. None of this changed the good standing of Jews in Bulgarian society.

It would take Hitler for that to happen.

BULGARIA BEFORE THE WAR

Rabbi Asa was born Haim Avraham Assa on 1 May 1931 in the city of Burgas to an illustrious Sephardic family with deep roots in Bulgaria. His father, Avraham Haim Assa, was president of the Jewish community in the city and, though Haim's mother died of heart disease when he was seven, forcing he and his father to move into his maternal grandmother's house, the Assa's enjoyed a good life in Burgas. Since helping Bulgaria fight off the Turks and declare independence in 1877, Jews had enjoyed fully equal rights in Bulgaria and Avraham had made the most of those years of prosperity and, after losing both his parents at a young age and, as was typical for Bulgarian Jews, fighting for Bulgaria during World War I, built a thriving and successful department store

One of the most intriguing things about Bulgarian Jewry at this time was that, though they were particularly treated well in Bulgaria and they were often prosperous there, they were passionately Zionistic and had been since even before Zionism was a word. It wasn't exactly the case that they wanted to move to Palestine, as it was still then known (though Avraham's own grandparents had actually moved to Jerusalem later in their life), but they believed strongly in investing in what would become Israel, with many Bulgarian Jews visiting the Holy Land quite regularly.

It's perhaps not surprising, then, that the school that young Haim attended was "more Zionist than Jewish", but what was perhaps more surprising was how supportive the gentile population of Bulgaria was of the country's Jews investing in and fighting to free Palestine of first the Turks and then the British. As Rabbi Asa explains, though, it makes sense when you consider that

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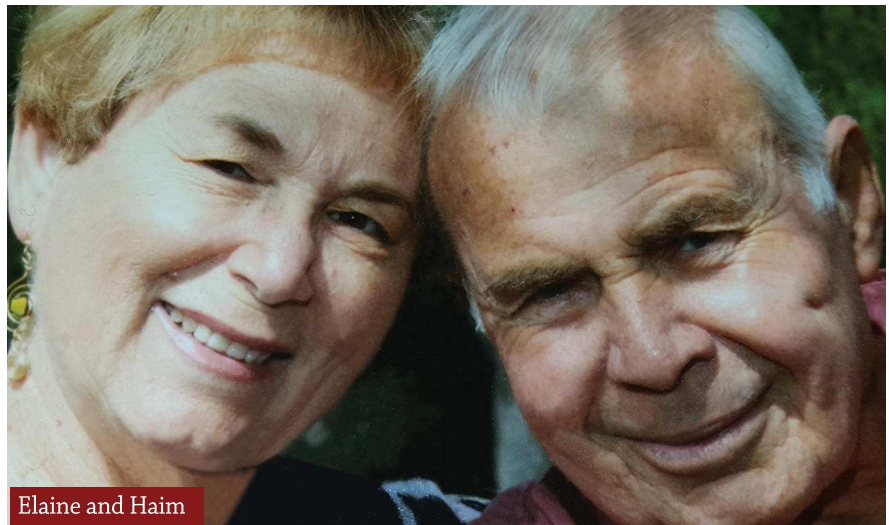
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the Bulgarians had just gained independence from the very same Turkish Empire and understood the importance of fighting for your homeland against colonial powers. Incredibly, what could easily have led to the usual anti-Semitic claims of Jews having “dual loyalty”, their Zionism only strengthened the bond between Bulgarian Jews and the wider gentile population.

Sadly, this bond would be tested with the outbreak of World War II.

LIFE DURING WARTIME

Tsar Boris III signed onto the tripartite pact with the Axis of Germany, Italy, and Japan in 1939 and set off a sequence of events that would introduce far more anti-Semitic legislation in Bulgaria and a gigantic increase in anti-Jewish sentiment. As a particularly poignant example of the change that German anti-Semitism wrought on even the most innocent Bulgarian youth, Rabbi Asa remembers how, in 1941, when he was a boy of ten or eleven and Nazi forces started to make their presence known in the country, one of his best friends at school, a gentile child of the same age, slapped him unexpectedly across the face and called him a “dirty Jew”. Haim was, understandably, shaken to his core, and when he asked a fellow student why his friend had done that, the student replied cryptically that his friend had gone to one of the first fascist youth league meetings in the city the night before and had been told that slapping these



Elaine and Haim

“WHAT WAS PERHAPS MORE SURPRISING WAS HOW SUPPORTIVE THE GENTILE POPULATION OF BULGARIA WAS OF THE COUNTRY’S JEWS INVESTING IN AND FIGHTING TO FREE PALESTINE OF FIRST THE TURKS AND THEN THE BRITISH.”

“dirty Jews” was the correct and moral thing to do. Who was an impressionable ten-year-old boy to argue?

Boris’ apparent betrayal of Bulgarian Jews and of Bulgaria itself, however, proved to be a particularly savvy move on his part and would, amazingly, prove to be the first step in the salvation of 48 000 Bulgarian Jewish lives. While the Jews of Greece were almost entirely wiped out by Nazi forces when Germany conquered the country, Bulgaria’s status as a military protectorate with autonomy in its own internal affairs meant that not only would the country be safe from a far superior military, the Nazis would have to rely on the Bulgarian people to betray their own countrymen.

A MIRACULOUS SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

It was under these particularly trying circumstances that Haim’s father, Avraham, would experience his own “little miracle” that would set off a sequence of events that would lead to Boris making that fateful decision not to transport Bulgaria’s Jews out of the country to certain death. As president of Burgas’ Jewish community and a friend of the postmaster, Avraham would receive all mail relat-

ing to the Jewish community in his department store.

One day, in early 1943, he came across a piece of mail from the country’s head commissar that was supposed to be delivered to the pro-Nazi commissar of Jewish affairs, telling all commissars in the country to ready the Jews of their districts for deportation to Nazi death camps in March 1943. Rabbi Asa admits that his father never exactly knew how this happened; whether it was a providential mistake or if the commissar who, despite being a fascist and anti-Semite, liked Avraham and may have himself ensured that Avraham received the communication.

Either way, understanding what this meant, Avraham returned the letter to the postmaster and – thanks to his being one of the few Jews with a pass to ride the railways all across the land due to a close friendship with a Bulgarian General who was the captain of Avraham’s battalion – boarded a train and headed for Sofia that very night, where he would meet with a “consistory” of other Jewish leaders and businessmen. So strong was the bond between Jewish and non-Jewish Bulgarians that when this “council of presidents” met, they simply refused to believe that



Avraham when he was older

such a thing would happen in Bulgaria until one of its members admitted that he had heard vague rumblings from his own “sources” and convinced the others to heed Avraham’s message.

These Jewish leaders then took to campaigning for their people and drummed up serious support from many eminent Bulgarian gentiles, including the leading members of the Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox Church who posed a simple ultimatum: if the government tries to deport Bulgaria’s Jews, they will block them by lying down on the railroad tracks, literally throwing their bodies against this great injustice. And, as we now know, Boris III refused this “evil decree” (as Rabbi Asa poetically puts it) at the last minute and was, almost certainly, murdered for his actions.

ESCAPE!

Boris III’s official excuse for not deporting Bulgaria’s Jews was that the less-developed, interior parts of Bulgaria needed major work done to its roads and bridges and that he would be using the Jews to work in this area instead. There was no such work, but he did need the Jews to relocate to the less populated small towns of Bulgaria’s interior. Avraham and his family were shipped off to the small town of Targovishte (it has grown considerably since then) where Avraham was once again president of the town’s Jewish community.

Times were tough in Targovishte until the end of the war, but it was doubly so for Avraham Assa, who became an increasingly bothersome person of interest to the fascist authorities. In December 1943, Avraham was arrested on bogus charges and was officially to be transported to a nearby “military camp”, but what that actually meant was certain death in transit long before reaching the camp. Miraculously (in a story full of miracles) an ordinary gentile cop who knew and admired Avraham saw what was going on and, in a last ditch effort to save his Jewish friend, called the camp in hopes of reaching someone in authority. Despite it being a Sunday, he was put through to the very general who had been Avraham’s captain and “guardian angel” (the Asa’s were moved to Targovishte on the general’s orders because he was stationed nearby and would be in a better position to help) and the general was able to save an already severely beaten Avraham moments before his fascist guards were to kill him.

Understanding that it was no longer safe in Bulgaria – which became even truer when the communists took over and started to hunt down influential Bulgarians of Boris III’s reign – he secured visas for himself, his second wife, and his son in May 1944 and was able to secure passage for the entire family and many of their possessions to Palestine and, aside for the week-long interrogation by the British in Turkey who were gathering information about the state of Bulgaria at the time, they all arrived safely in Haifa some six weeks later to begin their new, and no doubt no less storied, life there. **■**

Special thanks to the USC Shoah foundation for making public Rabbi Asa’s invaluable testimony and to Elaine Asa for bringing her husband’s story to our attention.



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