

Robert, Valley Beth Shalom is planning an extraordinary evening celebrating the rescue behavior of Bulgaria during the Holocaust on Friday, April 12 at 8:00 PM.

Present will be the Metropolitan Galactyon of Stara Zagora and the daughter of King Boris III, Princess Maria Louisa.

The following are remarks I will be making and I would like to have them published in your Journal. My secretary will be faxing you a copy of the flier.

Thank you for your consideration.

Harold M. Schulweis

BULGARIA: APRIL 12, 2002

by Harold M. Schulweis

We need this evening.

We need this event.

We need this memory.

We need it for our sanity.

We need it for our consolation.

We need it for our faith.

The heart grows heavy. The trauma of destruction, the language of genocide, the atmosphere of Holocaust, which we all thought was over, has risen again and we are overwhelmed by the globalization of Holocaust.

We need a new heart to overcome the anthrax of cynicism, the toxins of disillusionment and despair.

We need to search the past for a glimmer of hope. Paradoxically, you find the spark in the ashes of crematoria.

This Sabbath we celebrate Bulgaria? Why Bulgaria? What has the synagogue to do with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church? What does the Jewish people have to do with the Sobranie, the Bulgarian Parliament?

To quote Professor Ed Gaffney, Bulgaria is the only country in Eastern Europe with more Jews living within its borders at the end of the Holocaust than at the beginning of the Holocaust.

Bulgaria is the only case where a country (with the exception of Denmark and Finland) allied or occupied by Germany saved the entirety of its Jewish population. Fifty thousand Jewish lives – fifty thousand Jewish souls were saved because of the Bulgarian people.

We single out the Bulgarian people, those who came from different faiths, different religions, Orthodox Christians, Catholics, and Moslems and unbelievers, people from every walk of life who would not pretend deafness, who would not feign aphasia, the fateful silence that in history is so often tantamount to consent to murder.

We single out the heroism of priests: the metropolitan Stefan of Sophia, the metropolitan Kiril Plovdiv, the metropolitan Neofit of Vidin. Those important bishops who sent telegrams to King Boris III relentlessly pressured by the Nazis, demanding that the trains some of which were already loaded with Jews, "packed like Sardines in cattle cars" be halted. Those bishops, who sent word to the king that they would lie down on the railroad tracks in front of any train carrying Jews to the death camp. We remember religious leaders who convened the Synod of the Bulgarian Church that not only condemned the racial anti-semitic policy of the deputies of the Sobranie but issued mass baptism certificates to Jews as a safeguard against the racist purity laws and deportation. When the government tried to stop the church by threats and intimidation, the bishops spoke out clearly. They answered "No". That "no" is the voice of conscience. That "no" reverberated throughout the nation. To say "no" to evil is the deepest affirmation of the existence of God.

Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk once said "All my life I have struggled in vain to know what man is. Now I know, man is the language of God." How we speak, what we say, to whom we say is the language of God. God speaks through our voice. God is silenced through our muteness. To say "no" to the killers is to say "yes" to life.

This evening we bless the peasants and the priests, the young and the old, the poor and the rich, the populace of Bulgaria who followed the mandate of the prophet Isaiah and who "turned themselves into hiding places from the wind and shelters from the tempests and rivers of waters in dry places, as shadows of great rocks in a weary land." How many Christians or Jews know of that Catholic apostolic delegate to Turkey and Greece, Angelo Roncalli, who contrary to the Vatican's wishes, issued false baptismal certificates providing safe housing for Jews under Papal protection and issued Vatican passports to enable Jews to travel safely to Italy or Palestine. Roncalli knew the Bulgarian royal family personally, especially the Italian Queen Giovanna, the mother of Princess Marie Louise. The Queen pressured the Italian Ambassador to Bulgaria to issue passports enabling Jews to escape. Incidentally, Angelo Roncalli was later to become the deeply beloved Pope John, the twenty-third.

We are here to publicly recognize goodness. Goodness must not be buried in anonymity. Goodness is evidence of Godliness. We owe it to our children. Our children must be taught Godliness. Our children must know the true celebrities, the true heroes of our times, the celebrity of conscience, the heroism of defiance against

brute power, the nobility of the altruistic spirit. Why should children only know the names of evil, the name of Himmler, and Heydrich and Hitler? Why should they not know of Demeter Peshev, the former deputy speaker of the Bulgaria Sobranie who turned away from his early support of an anti-semitic law and when he learned of the plan to deport Jews to their death, he gathered the support of forty-two other parliamentarians to resist the stain that would have fallen upon Bulgaria's dignity. For this he lost his political power, he lost his office, but he gained immortality. The altruism of Bulgaria is a piece of history that must not be forgotten. It has taught us and should teach our children that there was, is and always will be an alternative to complicity with evil.

It has taught us that there is a moment, an ultimate moment when to say "no" can save the world and can sustain civilization.

Who are these people to us; King Boris III, Demeter Peshev, the bishops, they with different catechism, dogmas and doctrines from our own? They understood intuitively and existentially that religion is debased when it cannot transcend the insularity of its own ecclesiastical circle. Religion is glorified when it extends itself with compassion to others of a different faith and a different doctrine and a different way. What is Bulgaria to us? It is the hand of friendship, loyalty, decency and hope.

Goodness must not be orphaned. Goodness cries out for immortality. Goodness must have its remembrancers, those who recite Kaddish, the prayer that sanctifies the memory of goodness.