

The History of Bulgarian Jewry during the Holocaust

1. *Introduction*

Centropa was created to provide a platform for Holocaust survivors in fifteen European countries to tell us about their lives, and mostly through their family pictures.

Since these are personal stories, they are not meant to provide our readers with an historical overview. One could say, these stories are not about 20 history per se, they are about what the 20 interviewed.

Generally speaking, we know less about the [Sephardic Jewish communities](#) of southeast Europe than we do about the Jewish communities of, for instance, Germany and Poland.

During the Second World War, Turkey remained neutral and lies outside the scope of our topic.

The Nazis invaded Yugoslavia and Greece in March 1941. Their Jewish communities were horribly decimated.

The story of Bulgaria and the Holocaust is a complex one, and although not well known, remains a point of controversy to this day.

In the online study guide for our Bulgarian films, you will find links to various books and essays that espouse one view or the other.

Our three personal stories—all of which will take you back into the Sephardic world of the prewar Balkans—are from [Larry and Rosa Anzhel](#), [Leontina Arditi](#) and [Matilda Albuhaire](#).

Here is what we begin with. When the Second World War started, around 48,000 Jews lived in Bulgaria. When the war ended, nearly all of them were still alive.

They had not been deported to the Nazi death camps in Poland. The government had refused to comply.

Was this a rescue? Some say yes. Others say emphatically not.

As Angel Wagenstein, a Bulgarian Jew said, “we were raped, not murdered. But you don’t thank someone for raping you.”

2. *Historical background*

Here is some background to the story.

The Jews of Bulgaria were nearly all [Sephardic Jews](#). Many traced their roots back to the Spanish expulsion in 1492. A few even earlier.

For nearly 500 years, Bulgaria itself was under [Ottoman occupation](#), and the Ottomans were, compared to the Catholic rulers to the north, far more tolerant toward their Jewish subjects.

Bulgarian Jews made up only a tiny minority of the country—less than even one percent. There were very few wealthy Jews. Most were as poor as their neighbors in this relatively poor country.

As we hear in all three of our stories, these Bulgarian Jews said they felt little anti-Semitism while growing up in Bulgaria, which also had a large percentage of Muslims, Armenian Christians, Bulgarian Orthodox, Roma, and Tatars.

We also learn that Larry was taken into forced labor during the war, Rosa and her family were deported from Sofia to a small village, and Matilda tells us the remarkable story that she and her father, in March 1943, waited in their town of Bourgas to be deported, and for some reason, the deportation order was canceled.

Matilda does not provide us with a context, since as an elderly woman recounting her childhood, she would not have known what was going on.

So now let us unwrap this complex story.

3. The Holocaust

Bulgaria under King Boris III was not a totalitarian state, as was, for example, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

Although Boris ruled as a dictator in 1935, historians Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue tell us in their book, *The Jews of the Balkans*, that parliament continued to function, as did its political parties.

Further, Bulgaria was not occupied by the Germans. [Bulgaria was an ally](#), and Germany was Bulgaria's most important trading partner.

Germany put pressure on Bulgaria to pass laws against its Jews. In October 1940, the Law for the Protection of the Nation was brought before Parliament.

Intellectuals and the Bulgarian orthodox church were vigorously against it, as were the bar association and the medical association.

The law did pass in February 1941. In January 1942, after [the Wannsee Conference](#) in Berlin, the Germans began pressuring the Bulgarians to deport their Jews to the death camps they had set up in Nazi-occupied Poland.

June 1942, saw the passing of laws in Bulgaria that forced Jews to wear [yellow stars](#), which Leontina Arditì and Matilda Albuhaire tell us about.

Economic restrictions against Jews began, and many families became destitute.

In the fall of 1942, the Germans exerted yet more pressure for deportation and in February 1943, Alexander Belev of the Bulgarian interior ministry agreed to deport 20,000 Jews. He knew what their fate would be.

As we have seen, two years before this, Nazi Germany had invaded Yugoslavia, then [Greece](#). Because Bulgaria had been an ally of Germany, it received [Macedonia](#) from Yugoslavia, and Thrace from Greece.

Around 12,000 Jews lived in these territories occupied by Bulgaria and they were marked for destruction.

The Bulgarian government, through its police, rounded up and [deported around 7,300 Jews of Macedonia](#) and deported them to the [Nazi death camp of Treblinka](#), in occupied Poland. Almost none returned.

In Larry Anzhel's film, he tells us that while he was in forced labor, he watched a train of Greek Jews being taken through Bulgaria by train. Those would have been the ones from Thrace.

Around 4,000 Jews were on these transports, which were also headed for Treblinka. Not one person from these transports survived.

Belev had now deported 12,000 of his promised 20,000 Jews. He needed another 8,000, and he turned to [the Jews of historic Bulgaria](#).

<p>The historian Michael Bar Zohar tells us that Belev's own secretary was secreting out information to Jewish friends about what was about to happen. And we know that a small contingent of Jews from the town of Kuistindil went to visit Ditimar Peshev, a member of Parliament.</p>
<p>Peshev, according to Benbassa and Rodriga, as well as historian Tzetan Todorov, worked with 42 other members of parliament who signed a protest against the deportation. But the deportations were slated to go ahead on 9 March anyway.</p>
<p>On this day, Jews did gather in the town squares in several cities, but in several cities, there were protests against the deportations.</p>
<p>In Plovdiv, for instance, the metropolitan of the Orthodox Church stormed into the square where the Jews had been gathered and demanded the order be rescinded.</p>
<p>In Bourgas, Matilda Albuhaire remembers waiting with all their goods to be taken away. But the mayor himself protested to the government in Sofia.</p>
<p>And then, by late afternoon, the message came from Sofia: the deportation order was rescinded. So far, this does sound like a rescue.</p>
<p>But our story does not end there, as two months later, in May 1943, the Bulgarian interior ministry, still under pressure from Germany to deport the Jews to the Nazi death camps, presented King Boris with a plan: to either deport 20,000 Jews from Sofia out of the country—or to the provinces of Bulgaria.</p>
<p>Boris signed the second option -- and the Jews of Sofia were sent out to the provinces. They lived in incredibly crowded conditions—and Rosa Anzhel tells us about them.</p>
<p>During this time, around 7,000 Jewish men were conscripted into forced labor. Some of their Bulgarian overseers acted like beasts and Leontina Arditi tells us of how her father had been beaten mercilessly.</p>
<p>Other overseers acted more humanely.</p>
<p>But this was <i>forced</i> labor and for the most part, it was brutal, although the Anzhels tell us that Larry was allowed to leave his brigade to go and marry Rosa. And Rosa's father received permission from his overseer to attend the wedding—so the record seems to be mixed.</p>
<p>By September 1944, the Soviet Army swept down through Romania and liberated Bulgaria. The Bulgarian army changed sides, declared war on Germany, and then fought alongside the Soviet Army until the war ended in May 1945.</p>
<p>Yes, Bulgaria's Jews had survived the war. But the anti Jewish laws had ruined them—so much so that nearly half of all the Jews were dependent on soup kitchens, just to stay alive.</p>
<p>Little wonder then, that when a new Jewish state was declared in the Middle East—Israel—well more than 90% of Bulgaria's Jews emigrated in search of a better life.</p>
<p><i>Epilogue</i></p>
<p>That story lies outside the scope of this one, and let us now return to Dr Albena Taneva Holocaust specialist in Bulgaria today.</p>

As we now know, the Bulgarian government had no compunction about sending the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia to their deaths. And this same government was willing to deport its own Jewish citizens.

Historians continue to discuss just who was responsible for halting the deportations: most agree it was a combination of decisions that were interlinked with each other.

But when Albena Taneva stands in a classroom of young Bulgarians she presents a different view: It was your grandparents who saved Bulgaria's Jews from deportation, she tells them.

Ordinary people had come out on to the street and protested. Ordinary people said it was wrong. Religious people and communists too. And they all went out on the streets to say so.

So whether the story of Bulgaria's Jews during the Holocaust was a rescue or not is almost secondary in this case—what is important is the role that civil society played in this multi ethnic society, not so very long ago.