

B U L G A R I A

BULGARIAN CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA CONFERENCE RESULTS

As we reported earlier this year, in May our team took an initiative to participate in the annual conference of the Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance – an organization uniting all Bulgarian American Evangelical congregations.

The conference, which took place at the Bulgarian Evangelical Church in Minneapolis, gathered over two hundred pastors, lay ministers and members of Bulgarian American churches and gave opportunity for presentation and discussion of key statistical data, analyses on particular cases in ministry and revisiting the Bulgarian evangelical theology.

In August, the film from the conference was presented in several cities in Bulgaria. Its approach and especially the discussions and analyses are being used as a model for dialogue not only among protestant denominations but also between the Bulgarian government and protestant churches.

The Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews

In 1943, Hitler ordered the arrest and mass execution of Jews all across Europe. Claiming the creation of a renewed Aryan race. History would later call this experiment the Holocaust, a historical mass murder which today claims the lives of over six million Jewish people. Despite of Hitler's pressure, one European country refused to give up its citizens from Jewish origin thus saving the lives of approximately 50,000 souls from certain death. This country was Bulgaria and this is the story of the Bulgarian Jews.

In March-May 1943 - a period when Jews across Europe were subjected to persecution, imprisonment and death in the Nazi camps - the Bulgarian people, politicians and civic leaders through a series of resolute actions succeeded in protecting their 50,000 Jewish compatriots from deportation to the death camps. Bulgaria was the only country in Europe to increase its Jewish population during WW-II. This happened despite Nazi pressure and the fact that Bulgaria was officially an ally of Hitler Germany from March 1941 until September 1944.

Despite the anti-Jewish legislation and the heavy restrictions of the rights of the Jewish population adopted by the Bulgarian government and Parliament in 1941-1942, anti-Semitism was never morally accepted by the Bulgarian society. King Boris III and the majority of the Members of Parliament only reluctantly followed Hitler's official policy, resisting the implementation of the anti-Jewish legislation and regulations in their entirety. As a result of Nazi pressure, in February 1943 a secret agreement on the deportation of 20,000 Jews to Germany from Aegean Thrace and Macedonia territories administered by Bulgaria at that time and eventually also up to 8,000 Jews from the old Bulgarian territories, was signed between Hitler's special envoy Theodor Dannecker and the Bulgarian Commissar on Jewish Affairs Alexander Belev. The plan was to start the secret deportation of Jews by cargo trains in the first days of March 1943.

Due to the prompt public reaction and the resolute intervention of a group of active citizens, church leaders and politicians, led by the Deputy Speaker of the Bulgarian

National Assembly Dimitar Peshev, the Minister of Interior Nikola Gabrovski was forced on March 9, 1943 to cancel the deportation orders for the Jews from several Bulgarian cities. The trains, which had been waiting to be loaded with Bulgarian Jews and sent to the concentration camps in Poland, did not depart.

Unfortunately, about 12,000 Jews from Aegean Thrace and Macedonia, who did not have at that time Bulgarian citizenship and had been already driven out of their homes by the special forces of the Jewish Commissariat, could not be saved and were deported through Bulgarian territory to Germany. The horrible sight of train compositions packed with Jews from Thrace and Macedonia crossing Bulgarian territory had a tremendous impact on public opinion in Bulgaria and strengthened even more the popular resistance against deportation.

Later in March 1943, 43 members of the Bulgarian Parliament from the ruling majority, led by the Deputy Speaker Dimitar Peshev, addressed a bold and decisive letter to

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THE FIRE BIBLE IN BULGARIAN

Bulgaria, a former Communist country in Eastern Europe, is the focus for Bible Sunday 2003 purposing to provide the "Fire Bible" (also known as the "Life in the Spirit Study Bible," formerly the "Full Life Study Bible") in the Bulgarian language for pastors and lay workers in that nation of eight million people. For the past decade a Pentecostal revival has swept Bulgaria.

Since 1989, when the Communist era ended, the Pentecostal Assemblies of Bulgaria has grown from 35 churches to more than 600. Combined with the Church of God and other Pentecostal formations, the Pentecostals are the largest Protestant group in the nation. This growth has created a critical shortage of trained leaders since during the Communist era only a few were able to obtain religious education.

Today the ratio between churches and ministers in the Pentecostal movement is 5:1. Therefore, deacons and lay workers who have little or no training are serving as pastors. "There are few books available to the Bulgarians to help them become better pastors," says Kevin Beery, A/G missionary in Bulgaria. "The 'Fire Bible' with its Pentecostal study notes, commentary, concordance and many study helps is an all-in-one tool for the pastor who is doing his best to pastor a church without much training." Kevin and his wife, Wendy, are managing editors for the Bulgarian "Fire Bible" project and have served nearly a decade in Bulgaria.

THE RESCUE OF THE BULGARIAN JEWS

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the then Prime Minister Bogdan Filov, in which they called a possible deportation of the Jews an "inadmissible act" with "grave moral and political consequences" for the country. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church played a crucial part in mobilizing public support against the deportation and exerting its influence on the government. Metropolitans Stefan in Sofia and Kiril in Plovdiv actively contributed to the campaign against state discrimination of the Jews. The broad popular and civil movement in defense of the Bulgarian Jews culminated in May 1943 when the plan of deportation was finally aborted. King Boris III played a decisive role in this decision by not complying to Hitler's increasing pressure and not allowing the deportation to happen. The King resisted Hitler's demands with the argument that the Bulgarian Jews were needed as a workforce in Bulgaria. At the end of May 1943, about 20,000 Jews from the capital Sofia, were sent to work-camps in the countryside, where they were assigned heavy labor duties and lived in miserable conditions, but still survived. Many other political and professional organizations and groups of intellectuals joined actively in this national effort. The credit as a whole belongs to the Bulgarian people who showed courage and strength in defending their Jewish fellow countrymen. Bulgarians today feel proud of the courage of their predecessors to save from deportation and death nearly 50,000 Bulgarian Jews.

RESEARCH: 100,000 BULGARIAN PROTESTANTS

Fifteen years after the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the Bulgarian Protestant movement claims over 100,000 members. Although the Bulgarian National Statistical Institute counted only 42,000 Protestant believers in Bulgaria for the 2002-2003 National Census, Pentecostal denominations report a much larger number. As early as 2001, the Church of God presented documentation for 32,000 members with 250 ministers in close to 400 congregations nationwide. In 2003 the Bulgarian Assemblies of God reported the following statistics: 550 churches and outstations, over 50,000 members and adherents, 150 national pastors, one Bible school with 23 enrolled students and an extension program training 150 students. Combined with the membership of the remaining Protestant denominations in Bulgaria this statistics give a figure of over 100,000 Bulgarian Protestant believers in a nation of eight million.

A conformation to these statistics was published in connection with the resent crisis in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church by Dr. Stephen Penov, a professor at the Sofia University and a member of the Bulgarian Academy of Science. Dr. Penov, who has served as a Parliament expert of human rights and faith confessions, claimed that the members of classical Protestant churches in Bulgarian exceeded 60,000 while new Protestant denominations have a membership of approximately 50,000. The Catholics in Bulgaria are approximately 70,000, the Muslims 750,000 and Eastern Orthodox 6,000,000. The growth of Bulgarian Protestant movement to over 100,000 members is colossal compared to the 1975 statistics found in Klaus-Detlev Grothusen, *Bulgarien*, (Guttingen: 1990, p. 564):

Denominations	Membership	Clergy	Parishes
Pentecostal	5,000-6,000	36	43
Adventist	3,500	40	20
Congregationalist	2,600	24	26
Methodist	1,000	15	13
Baptist	700	7	10
Total	12,800-13,800	122	7,112