

The Fate of the Jewish Communities of Kazanlık and Eski-Zağra in the 1877/8 War¹

Introduction

Wars cause pain, destruction and loss of life. Political struggles between States, whether over dominion, territory, or power, are merely one aspect of war. The fate of the individual is another aspect, one that has led historians to emphasize the suffering of the individual, of the victors and vanquished, and through them to depict the atrocities these bloody wars have brought upon mankind. The 1877/8 war between the Russian and Ottoman Empires, which caused suffering to thousands of people on both sides, is no exception. People were uprooted and killed, and their property stolen or burnt. The purpose of this presentation is to shed light on one of the darker episodes of Jewish history, namely the pogrom against the Jews of Kazanlık and Stara-Zagora (in those days, Eski-Zağra) in present-day Bulgaria. The tragic story of these Jews, who fell victim to hatred and prejudice, has virtually remained untold: These two cities were the scenes of cruel battles and witnessed the transfer of power from the Russian Army to the Ottoman Army, that did all it could to repulse the Russian aggressors. The course of these battles has been described at length in many publications and is beyond the scope of this presentation. Rather, I wish to focus here on the

¹ The paper was presented in Ankara Conference: "The Russian-Ottoman War, 877/78", December 2005. My thanks to AIU Archive and Library in Paris, for the important materials I found there and for their assistance. As well was published in: Ö. Turan (edit.), *The Ottoman-Russian War of 1878-78*, pp.113-130, Ankara 2007.

respective fates of these two communities in the early days of the war.

In June, the Russian forces crossed the Danube near the city of Svištov, about 90 kilometers southeast of Rusçuk. The choice of this place was unusual, and the Ottoman defenders, caught unawares, offered only minor resistance.

Attacks against the non-Christian population (Muslims and Jews) began already in the early days of the war. In Svištov² and Karlovo³, the Jews were humiliated and their property looted, and Jewish women were raped. In a letter sent after the war to the authorities in Plovdiv (Philippopoli in those days), several Jewish notables among the refugees of Karlovo who had taken shelter with their brothers in Plovdiv, appealed to the Bulgarian authorities, the new lords of the land, for help. Their flight, and the hostility of the local Bulgarians, which prevented them from returning home, had impoverished the entire Karlovo Jewish community, which numbered 347 Jews. In his reply, the Russian Police Commander P. A. Stolipin told them to address all complaints to the Turkish Government in Istanbul, since the

² See below, the attitude to Jewish women in Svištov.

³ Димитров, Г., *Страданията на Българите и освобождението на България през 1877-78 год.*, София, 1899, [Dimitrov, G., *The Suffering of the Bulgarians and the Liberation of Bulgaria in 1877/78*] Sofia 1899, pp. 200, 206, 208-210. Dimitrov's book presents the Jews in a more negative light, as collaborating with the Ottoman Army and with the Muslim population of Karlovo. It describes how the Jews looted and informed on the Christian residents of the city and how the latter took revenge when the Russian Army entered the city. Most of these incidents have been refuted by later researchers, both Jewish and non-Jewish, who ascribed these accounts to Dimitrov's nationalistic and anti-Jewish attitude. See also: Унджиев, И., *Карлово-История на града до Освобождението*, С. 1968 [Undjiev, I., *Karlovo - History of the Town until Independence*], Sofia 1968, pp. 202, 212. In any case, the Jewish community of Karlovo never recovered, and after the 1877/78 war, almost no Jews were left in the city. Many of them moved to Plovdiv and even built a synagogue there, known as "The Carlovi" (see below). The anti-Jewish mood of the Bulgarian press, particularly after the Berlin Treaty at the end of the war, whereby large parts of Bulgaria were lopped off under pressure by the Western Powers (chiefly Britain), was channeled into anger at the British Prime Minister Lord Beaconsfield - Disraeli, who was held responsible, as a Jew (a fact that was repeatedly emphasized), for the loss of parts of their only recently liberated land: Maritza, I/35, 24.11.1878, pp. 4 -5.

Bulgarians were not responsible for their former plight, or for their current predicament in Plovdiv (the Jews of Eski-Zağra and Kazanlık, as well as of other communities mentioned below, suffered a similar fate, as we shall see below).⁴ The Muslims - Turks, Circassians, and Tatars - in the various towns and villages suffered an even worse fate. The reports of the local consuls and foreign ministers of the Western states clearly testify to discrimination against, and persecution of these citizens, until recently rulers of the land, who were humiliated by the new Bulgarian-Christian rulers of the State. The soldiers of the Russian Army, particularly the Cossacks garrisoned in the various cities,⁵ frequently participated in the humiliation of Muslims and Jews. At the height of the war, the Ottoman Commander of Şumla sent a telegram to London, relaying the complaints of the refugees who had reached the city concerning the Bulgarians' cruelty toward the Muslim and Jewish citizens of Sviştov: "The honor of Jewish women has been defiled and many Muslim women have been drowned in the river."⁶

The above was an ominous intimation of the fate that awaited the Jews of Kazanlık and Eski-Zağra, as General Gurko's forces advanced toward them.

⁴ Archives Israélites XXXIX/14 (15.7.1878), p. 428; AIU - Alliance Israélite Universelle, Paris, *Bulletin Mensuel*, 1877/8, p. 135; PRO F.O. - Public Record Office, Foreign Office, London, 78/2915, No. 51, 5.10.1878; PRO FO, 78/ 2915, No. 93, Philippopolis, 5.11.1878; PRO FO, 78/2917, No. 45, 7.11.1878. For a description of a similar fate - when Jews were prevented from returning to their homes by the Bulgarian population - see Almoznino's letter: AIU (Bulgarie), I C1, 15.3.1878 and the evasive answer of the Russian Governor, Dondukov-Korsakov, on the subject: AIU, *Bulletin Mensuel*, 1877/8, p. 135. The governor's letter was addressed to S. Fernandez, the deputy-president of the "Alliance" in Istanbul, and transmitted the refusal of the new Bulgarian authorities to allow the Jewish refugees to return to their cities, such as Karlovo, Kazanlık, and Eski-Zağra, and the hope that the problem would soon be resolved...

⁵ Şimşir B.N., (hazırlayan), *Rumeli'den Türk Gölçleri, Belgeler, Doksanüç Muhacereti I*, Ankara 1968 (hereafter - Şimşir B.N).

⁶ Şimşir B.N, p. 130, document 20 (5.7.1877).

1. The Jews of Kazanlık

On the evening of 17/18 July 1877 (all dates are according to the Gregorian calendar), the Russians and several units of Bulgarian volunteers (Opalçenzi) conducted a three-pronged attack on Kazanlık and captured it. The Bulgarians turned out en masse to welcome the soldiers with bunches of flowers.⁷ Even before the entry of the Russian forces, the local Bulgarians began to raid Muslim and Jewish houses. When the Russian Army arrived in the afternoon, the general expectation was that the pogroms would stop. The very next day, however, this hope was dashed, and the pogrom continued unabated.

The pogrom against the Jews of Kazanlık was described by M. Veneziani, the senior representative of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) in Istanbul, based on a report by one of its survivors:⁸

On the 7th of Av (18 July), the Russians reached Kazanlık. The following day, on 19 July, the Commander of the troops gave permission to the army and the Bulgarian citizens to loot the homes of Muslims and Jews. The rationale was that they had to search all Jewish homes and confiscate weapons within 24 hours. However, even after the raid and confiscation of much property from the houses, the Bulgarian citizens continued to rob and abuse the population for many more days with impunity.

⁷ *Kazanlık, v Minalo i Dnes* [Kazanlık, Past and Present], Sofia, 1923, pp. 345-346; idem, 1928, pp. 48-50.

⁸ AIU, *Bulletin Mensuel* 1877/12, pp. 229-238.

A further testimony is brought in the annual *Kazanlık, Past and Present* from which I'll quote here:⁹

...In *Kazanlık*, too, during, and even after the battles, there were riots and pogroms, but the Russian Command restored order. A number of Muslim stores were razed, although rumor had it that they had been deliberately torched by their owners, in order to prevent their stock from falling into the hands of the reviled Christian Bulgarians....¹⁰

...After the initial shock, before the liberating armies arrived, we heard shouts from the street: 'Brother Bulgarians, take to the streets, long live Bulgaaaria...' It soon transpired that these were the cries of hooligans, local Bulgarian crooks and peasants, whose sole desire was to break into the houses vacated by the citizens who were out celebrating, and rob them of their silver, gold and valuables...¹¹

The testimony of the Jewish refugee from *Kazanlık* continues as follows:

On 20 July, four Bulgarian citizens accompanied by a Russian soldier made their way to the home of Avraham Canetti [the community's head] who, realizing what awaited him, quickly hid. Although the hooligans ransacked his home they found nothing of value and moved on to the neighboring house, belonging to Yitzhaq

⁹ *Kaznlık, v Minalo i Dnes* [*Kazanlık, Past and Present*], Sofia, 1923, pp. 345-346; idem, 1928, pp. 48-50

¹⁰ *Kaznlık, Past and Present*, 1923, pp. 349-350.

¹¹ *Kaznlık, Past and Present*, 1923, p. 355; 358.

and Yehudah Assa. The latter, fearing for their lives, were forced to reveal where Abraham Canetti had hidden his money. The community head was tortured and forced to hand over his property, but the assailants did not let the matter rest there, and smashed Yehuda Assa's skull. His brother, Yitzhaq, managed to escape.

The survivor continues to describe how, for over ten days, the women, children, and elderly Jews of Kazanlık were robbed, beaten, murdered and raped, despite an appeal by the community's notables to the Russian Commander of the city, and despite the latter's promise to protect them.

The pogrom peaked on 5 August, a Saturday, when a large number of Jews were gathered in the synagogue for prayer. The unusually large number of Jews was also due to the fact that the previous day, the Jews had been ordered to leave their houses and most had been confined to the synagogue and school. The survivor depicts the events of the Saturday as follows:

The Bulgarian citizens, accompanied by Cossack soldiers, burst into the synagogue courtyard. They were led by Simion, who guarded Jewish vineyards and also performed odd jobs for Jews on the Sabbath. Since he was acquainted with the local Jews and familiar with the layout of their homes, he was able to instruct the hooligans where to search and whom to torture into handing over property. Although many tried to escape and hide, the hooligans would have none of it, and under Simion's supervision, looted the homes and stores of

wealthy Jews. Avraham Canetti was killed at the synagogue entrance, and his body ripped to pieces by dogs. The hooligans, upset with their scant takings, forced the remaining worshippers to drink the blood of some dogs they slaughtered on the spot. While searching for silver, gold and valuables, the hooligans kidnapped Shmuel Canetti, Avraham's brother, and asked his family for a large ransom in exchange for his safe return. Thanks to the local Jewish women who donated their jewelry and valuables, the family managed to raise the requisite sum. However, once the kidnappers received the ransom, they refused to return the hostage to his family. [His body was subsequently found on the city outskirts].

(The Ottoman foreign minister sent a telegram to his representatives in Europe (9/21.8.1877) informing them of the riots against the Jews of Kazanlık, so that they could disseminate the news of the atrocities perpetrated by the Czar's soldiers and their Bulgarian accomplices).¹²

The following day, on 6 August, they continued raiding Jewish homes, whose occupants were mostly being held in the synagogue without water or food. On the 8th of August the situation took a turn for the worse. The Jews, who had been held for over forty-eight hours in the burning August heat without water or food, cried out for help, but their cries fell on deaf ears.

¹² *The Jewish Chronicle*, 31.8.1877, p. 6; BOA, HR.SYS - Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Hariciye Nazâreti Siyasî Kısım, İstanbul No. 1208/3_155, 21.8.1877.

Our refugee continues:

Thus far, fourteen men and women had been killed [a list of names is provided]. On 8 August, they broke into the home of Chief Rabbi Aharon Assa, kidnapped his daughter Mazaltov, and demanded a ransom for her. As with Shmuel Canetti, they received the ransom, but failed to release the 16-year old girl.” [Later, during the journey we shall describe below, they returned the girl to her parents, after first having raped her.] The detainees’ suffering came to an end when Russian officers, upon hearing their cries, arrived on the scene and freed them.

The approaching Ottoman Army and the danger of Kazanlık’s reconquest prompted the Christian population to pack their meager belongings and join the Russian Army that was retreating to the **Shipka-Pass**. The injured, dispirited and destitute Jews who survived the almost two week-long pogroms were forced to join the fugitives. The vicissitudes of the journey to the Balkans highlands, via Gabrovo, Târnovo and Sviştov, and on to Bucharest and Trieste, from which the fugitives sailed to Istanbul, is beyond the scope of this paper. I wish merely to point out that, in addition to the fourteen Jews who were murdered in the streets and synagogue of Kazanlık, a further eighty or so died or went missing and five women and girls were raped during the journey,¹³ which ended on 28 November -about three months after it began - in the Ottoman capital.¹⁴

¹³ The list of dead and injured in Kazanlık was as follows: 38 killed; 38 reported missing; 5 raped; 112 refugees who fled to Edirne and 368 forcibly taken to the Shipka Pass. The Jewish population before the pogrom numbered almost 600 individuals. Archives Israélites,

Although the Kazanlık Jewish community numbered some 600 souls none of the non-Jewish sources on the city's history that I examined mentions the Jews. The only time Jews are mentioned is in a description of the execution of two Jews during the journey to the Shipka Pass, on the grounds that they were spying for the Ottoman authorities in the city.¹⁵ Dushmanov's contemporary book on the military campaign against Kazanlık (covering the short period of Russian rule, the retreat to Shipka and the vicissitudes of the journey, until his return to the city that was already under Bulgarian rule in January 1878) fails to mention the Jews of Kazanlık, either in a favorable or unfavorable light.¹⁶ It is interesting to note that even the contemporary Jewish press, which gave a detailed account of the progress of the war throughout Bulgaria from a pro-Czarist standpoint,¹⁷ failed to mention the pogroms in these two cities, or in any other city. It did, however, quote from the series of abortive telegrams sent by British Foreign Secretary Lord Derby to his Russian counterpart in St. Petersburg, condemning the injustice their army was causing to the Muslim population. No source refers to the plight of Bulgarian Jews in general, or of the

XXXVIII/19, 1.10.1877, p. 587; *The Jewish Chronicle*, 21.9.1877, p. 10; *The Weekly Dispatch*, 2. 9.1877.

¹⁴ AIU, *Bulletin Mensuel*, 1877/12, pp. 238; *L'Univers Israélite* XXXIII/1, 1.9.1877, 157-158.

¹⁵ "... At the top of the mountain, the Jews were tied in chains and removed from the convoy, on the grounds that they had collaborated with the Turks..." F. M. de Preradović, *Spomeni za Rusko-Turskata Voina, 1877-1878* [Memoirs of the Russian-Turkish War, 1877-1878] Sofia 1977, pp. 96-97. The author, a senior officer in the Czar's army, described how the two Jews, a youngster and adult, were hanged for spying, at the start of the withdrawal to Shipka. Their executioners quartered their bodies before handing them over to their relatives for burial.

¹⁶ D. Dushmanov, *Spomeni* [Memoirs], Sofia 1989, pp. 90-141.

¹⁷ The newspapers were all published throughout the Czarist Empire and the strict censorship laws explain the tendentious pro-Russian descriptions.

Jewish communities of Karlovo, Svištov, Kazanlık and Eski-Zağra in particular.¹⁸

Jewish historiography, too, barely refers to the events of Kazanlık or of Eski-Zağra. Kashales' book, and Mezan and Arditi's articles,¹⁹ however, do bring a few facts taken from the documents of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU). More recently, the pogroms were mentioned in Minna Rozen's book, *The Last Ottoman Century and Beyond - The Jews in Turkey and the Balkans, 1800-1945*.²⁰ An article that appeared in the Annual of Bulgarian Jewry in Sofia in 1968, on the other hand, spoke at length of the Jews' contribution in that war, and of the close ties between them and their Bulgarian-Christian neighbors, as well as of the sympathy the Jews felt toward the victorious Russian Army! But for a brief mention of the expulsion of the Jews from Karlovo, the article failed to mention anti-Semitism or the persecutions of Jews during and after the war in the Jewish communities of Bulgaria.²¹ (From 1945-1989, a number of articles

¹⁸ *Hamagid*, 21/30, 1.8.1877, p. 277; *Halevanon* 14/1, 3.8.1877, p. 2; *Halevanon*, 14/5, 31.8.1877, p. 36. The first newspaper (*Hamagid* of 1.8.1877) brings the Western journalists' condemnation of the Russian Army's barbaric behavior, while defending similar acts, "mostly perpetrated by the Bulgarians, in their righteous anger at centuries of suffering that was their lot at the time! Clearly, however, these actions, too, were against the wishes of the Czar, who was an upright person, and his generals. To the best of our knowledge, the Emperor ordered the matter to be investigated and the culprits punished". Both the *Halevanon* issues quote a telegram by Lord Derby: In the first, Lord Derby complains of the Russians' behavior toward the Muslims, and in the second, written about a month later, he apologizes for the fact that the information on which he based his first telegram was inaccurate: "The new information shows that most of the attacks, torching of houses and lootings perpetrated against the Muslims, as well as acts of murder and rape, were carried out by Bulgarian citizens and "volunteers", who had joined the Russian Army".

¹⁹ H. Kashales, *Qorot Yehudei Bulgaria* (in Hebrew) [The History of Bulgarian Jewry], vol. 1, Tel Aviv 1970, pp. 399-400; 410-411; B. Arditi, "The Truth about the Anti-Jewish Pogrom in Kazanlık" (in Bulgarian), *Phar*, 25.4.1969, pp. 12-13; Sh. Mezan, "The Jews in Bulgaria" (in Bulgarian) in: Anthology marking the 2nd Maccabi Conference, Sofia 1930, pp. 41-42.

²⁰ M. Rozen, *The Last Ottoman Century and Beyond - The Jews in Turkey and the Balkans, 1800-1945*, I, Tel Aviv 2005, pp. 131-136, especially 135-136.

²¹ Y. Mordekhai, "The Liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman Rule and the Bulgarian Jews" (in Bulgarian), Annual - Social Cultural and Educational Annual, Sofia, 1968/III, 9-29, especially 16-21.

were written about the anti-Semitic trends that prevailed during the 30 years following the Russian-Turkish War (1878-1908). The vast majority of these articles minimized the scale of these trends, and ascribed them to the burgeoning bourgeoisie, in contrast to the tolerant line adopted by the Socialists. An article of this sort worth reading is the one by Benvenisti, the Annual's editor. The hatred that characterized the anti-Semitic articles with which Bulgaria was inundated in that period had its roots in the phenomena described in this paper. It was further fueled by the nationalist awakening that began in the small isolated cities of the Balkans and which, after Bulgaria's independence, spread to the large cities, where the economic struggle against the minorities, particularly the Jews, began).²²

After their exhausting journey, the Jews of Kazanlık reached Istanbul where they were put up by Jewish families and institutions for many months, even after the end of the War in March 1878. The 1893 census of Kazanlık counted 267 Jews - all that remained of the prewar community of 600 Jews.²³ One may assume that upon their return, there were even fewer Jews, but unfortunately I found no data to confirm this assumption.

It is worth mentioning a letter written by Fernandez, head of the Jewish community of Istanbul, cited in the report drawn up by Sir Henry Drummond Wolff, the British consul of Philippopoli. In this letter, Fernandez appealed to the consul to ask The Commission for Eastern Rumelia, (La Commission pour la Roumélie Orientale) to arrange forthwith the return of the 900 or so destitute Jewish

²² See: D. Benvenisti, "The Unfavourable Conditions for the Dissemination of Antisemitic Propaganda in Bulgaria (1891-1903)," *Annual* 1980/15, pp. 177-220, which has a wealth of footnotes and references. My thanks to Professor Minna Rozen who drew my attention to this article.

²³ Sh. Mezan, *Les Juifs espagnols en Bulgarie*, vol. I, Sofia 1925, p. 76.

refugees who were staying in Istanbul or Edirne, to their homes in Karlovo, Kazanlık and Eski-Zağra. Fernandez attached a detailed list of the names of the refugees and their looted property.²⁴ The consul replied to these complaints and to those of Baron Henry de Worms, president of the Anglo-Jewish Association (see note 23 below) by saying that he was powerless to do anything, since the Russians had complete authority over the areas under their control, and were not interested in allowing the refugees (whether Jewish or Muslim) to return home. The above notwithstanding, he agreed to raise the issue before the Commission for Eastern Rumelia in Philippopoli.²⁵

The Standard's correspondent sent a long article entitled "Horrible Atrocities upon the Jew of Bulgaria" to *The Jewish Chronicle*, with a lengthy and detailed description of the atrocities suffered by the Jew of Kazanlık from the entry of the Russians and Bulgarian volunteers until the Jewish refugees reached the Shipka Pass, including attacks by Bulgarians, and the rape of their womenfolk. The description does not spare us details of the atrocities the Jews suffered at the hands of their torturers.

The article was sent to London from Bucharest on 23 September 1877.²⁶

²⁴ PRO FO, 78/ 2915, No. 91, Philippopolis, 4.11.1878. The consul, Drummond Wolff, submitted a letter he received from Baron Henry de Worms, President of The Anglo-Jewish Association, in which the latter deplored the refugees' situation in Istanbul, and the attacks perpetrated by the Bulgarian residents of Kazanlık and Eski-Zağra, which prevented the refugees from returning: PRO FO 78/2915, No. 93, 5.11.1878.

²⁵ PRO FO 78/2915, No. 93, 5.11.1878.

²⁶ *The Jewish Chronicle*, 5.10.1877, p. 7, pp. 9-10. (In the editorial of the same date, the paper blames the Russians for their traditional anti-Jewish approach, which had infused the Bulgarians, their lackeys, with hatred toward the hapless Jews, and presented this as a reprisal for their 'collaboration' with the Ottoman Empire. The newspaper condemned the

In time, the historical memory of the trauma experienced by the city's Jews receded into a distant nightmare. Of the many natives of Kazanlık I interviewed, only a few had any inkling of the horrors of the war, or of the fate their ancestors had suffered. Likewise, almost none of the many historians in Israel, Bulgaria and the West were aware of this tragic chapter of Bulgarian Jewish history, as exemplified by the pogroms in Kazanlık and Eski-Zağra.

2. The Jewish community of Eski-Zağra

On 22 July, a company of Cossack horsemen entered the city, followed by several units of Russian Dragoons accompanied by units of Opalçenzi (volunteers).²⁷ Total anarchy reigned in the city. The Ottoman authority lost control and local hooligans from the city and from nearby villages went on a rampage, unchecked. I quote:

The Muslim and Jewish citizens were herded into their prayer houses and not allowed to leave. During the first few days of the pogrom, the number of victims - both Muslims and Jews - totaled some 600. Most of them were women and children. The Cossacks went from one abandoned house to the other looting everything they could lay their hands on. The Jewish community

way the Bulgarians exploited their national liberation to persecute Jews, with whom they had been on good terms for generations).

²⁷ D. Ilkov, *Prinos kum Istoriyata na Grad Stara-Zagora* (Bulgarian) [The History of Stara-Zagora], Stara-Zagora 2004 (a phototype publication of the 1908 edition), p. 216 ff.

numbered approximately 3,000 individuals. About 38 were murdered, and hundreds were wounded.²⁸

The local Jewish community, which was larger and older than the Kazanlık community, had two synagogues, a number of neighborhood prayer houses and two schools. The various available descriptions of the event emphasize the cruelty of the Cossack soldiers, who withheld food and water from the detainees, and went from house to house robbing everything in sight. “The Bulgarians were no idle spectators, but eagerly participated in the plunder.”²⁹ The testimony of two Jewish merchants from Italy, who were in the city during its short-lived conquest by the Russians, corroborates the above: “Two Italian merchants, Avraham and Sabatino Mozes [wrote the French consul Boysset from Philippopoli to the French Foreign Minister], informed me of what had happened to them and their Jewish brothers.” After quoting the merchants’ description of the Russians’ entry into the city on 22 July, and the ensuing chaos, he continues: “... After they incarcerated the Muslims and Jews, they began looting the city, including the houses of foreigners. Under penalty of death, Avraham was forced to hand over his property to the mob. The following day, he went to the Russian commander of the city, presented his Italian passport, and received most of his property back...”³⁰

²⁸ *L'Univers Israélite* XXXIII/1, 1.9.1877, 19-20 (according to various data, the community at the time numbered slightly over 2,000 individuals). For a description of those days of anarchy, see also: *The Jewish Chronicle*, 14.9.1877, p.13; idem, 21.9.1877, p. 10.

²⁹ Archives Israélites, XXXVIII/17, 1.9.1877, pp. 526-527.

³⁰ M.A.E/C.C.C - Ministère des Affaires Etrangères/Correspondance Consulaire et Commerciale, Paris, Turquie, Philippopolis, vol. 1, pp. 418-419 verso - No. 24

The looting and persecution continued for nine days. Neither the Cossacks nor Bulgarians “...who brandish weapons in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other...”³¹ spared the holy artifacts in the synagogues. After finding nothing of value in the Torah scrolls, they discarded them.³²

As well as acts of murder, the wealthy Jews in the city were subjected to acts of extortion and theft. Thus, for example, one of the pillars of the community was forced to waive a promissory note in the amount of 30,000 pounds sterling to a Bulgarian who owed him for a farm he had bought from Bechor Assa. The defaulter threatened that unless he waived the debt, he and his family would pay with their lives. Bechor Assa was forced to cancel the promissory note, to save his and his family life. Such acts were commonplace among the Bulgarian inhabitants of Eski-Zağra.³³

When Süleyman Paşa’s army was about to reconquer the city, the Russian soldiers and their Bulgarian allies, including most of the Christian population, withdrew.

Shelling and torching razed the city and its neighborhoods. While the Muslim population welcomed Süleyman’s army with shouts of joy, the few Bulgarians who remained after the majority took to the open fields or fled to the Russian lines, feared for their lives. Indeed, many of them - men women and children - were murdered by the Muslims and the Başibozuks (irregular soldiers).³⁴

³¹ Archives Israélites, XXXVIII/18, 5.9.1877, p.558

³² Archives Israélites, XXXVIII/17, 1.9.1877, p. 527

³³ *The Weekly Dispatch*, 31.8.1877, p. 6.

³⁴ D. Ilkov, p. 230.

Ilkov, the author of the history of Stara-Zagora, continues his graphic description thus:

..It was the Jews who remained unharmed. They paid the invaders to spare them or delivered their wives and daughters into their hands for them to do with them as they pleased. As collaborators with the Turks, they offered them all possible help in the defeat and destruction of the city.³⁵

In a lengthy footnote on the Jews, Ilkov briefly reviews the history of the Jews of Stara-Zagora. He emphasizes the large number of Jews there - almost 6,000 - prior to the war.³⁶ He ascribes the Jews' traditional hostility to the Bulgarians, to economic competition between them and local Christian-Bulgarian merchants.³⁷ He attributes the Jews' love of, and dependence on, the Ottoman Authorities in the city to common interests. Finally, Ilkov blames the Jews for the death of many Bulgarians in and around the city, "for delivering them to the Ottoman Army, who hanged them in the city's main roads and squares."³⁸

³⁵ D. Ilkov, p. 230. The Museum of National Revival in Plovdiv has a certificate of appreciation to Daviçon Saranga, a Jew from Stara-Zagora who moved to Istanbul, for saving a large number of Bulgarian rebels, whom the authorities were searching for in Istanbul, from the gallows, by hiding them in his house in Istanbul. On other acts of heroism and assistance to the Bulgarians in their struggle for liberation from Ottoman rule, see Y. Mordekhai's article: "The Liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman Rule and the Bulgarian Jews".

³⁶ According to the populations' censuses available to us, the Stara-Zagora Jewish community numbered around 2,000 individuals before the war: Sh. Mezan, *Les Juifs Espagnols en Bulgarie*, vol. I, Sofia 1925, p. 77.

³⁷ The Orthodox Church was also instrumental in spreading anti-Jewish propaganda. See my book:

Z. Keren, *Qehilat Yehudei Rusçuk* [The Jewish Community of Rusçuk] (in Hebrew), Jerusalem 2005, pp. 196-201: "Discrimination against Jews in Bulgaria" - and relevant literature. See also Appendix 9 in the book, pp. 283-286.

³⁸ D. Ilkov, 230-231, note 167.

In early August, after the city fell into the hands of the Ottoman Army, the Muslims and Jews were ordered to leave the city. The convoy of impoverished refugees walked to Karabunar, where they boarded a train for Edirne.³⁹

The 2000 or so Jewish refugees from Eski-Zağra were welcomed by the Jews of Edirne with an enthusiasm tempered by misgivings, since they did not have the means to support them. As the leader of the community, M. de Toledo, wrote: “...Our brothers arrived starving and in rags. Thanks to the Imperial Army, only a few died or were injured or sick. Those who had formerly enjoyed a high standard of living were now a pitiable sight....I hope we will be able to raise the sums necessary to provide these wretched people with food, clothing and shelter.”⁴⁰ On the same subject, the Hebrew-language newspaper *Hamagid* of 22 August 1877, reported:

A calamity has befallen Adrianopol [Edirne]... About 450 Jewish families in Zağra went to meet the approaching enemy to appease them... but the latter, far from being appeased... with drawn swords looted and devastated the town and its inhabitants... This went on for twelve days [until] salvation arrived in the form of Süleyman Paşa who delivered them from the enemy and sent them away from the city. [After a journey of] three days they arrived on the fourth day in our city [Edirne] starving and parched. And [our citizens] went to meet them with bread and

³⁹ D. Ilkov, 233. Karabunar, today known as Gâlabovo, is situated some 50 km south of Stara-Zagora, and was on the route of the Istanbul-Edirne-Sofia railroad built in 1869 and financed by Baron Hirsh. During the war, the Russians bombed the tracks 12 km north of Karabunar, thereby preventing the advance of Süleyman’s troops. (On the refugees’ march to Karabunar, see also: *The Jewish Chronicle*, 31.8.1877, p. 6.)

⁴⁰ AIU, *Bulletin Mensuel*, 1877/8, p. 122

water and clothes to cover their nakedness... The city is currently suffering from great shortages.... Wealthy people have fled to other places [with] their households... only the most destitute continue to arrive daily.⁴¹

Minev's book on the history of Gâlabovo ends with a folksong describing the atmosphere of chaos that prevailed in the city when the refugees left for Karabunar, and telling the story of four-year-old Bulgarian refugees, who was separated from his parents in the commotion, and taken with the captives to Edirne. Several decades later, he returned to the city as a Turkish officer captured in the Balkan War, and with the help of a resourceful Bulgarian, was reunited with his parents. At the end of the ballad the mother asks the son to stay, to which he replies that he hopes to provide his children with a better life than he had as a child, separated from his parents and environment:

“... I am sorry, mother, I cannot say yes,
For I have a wife and children at home
I do not wish to abandon them
But shall return to them, upon my word!
And shall be pleased to acquaint you, dear mother,
With the members of my family.”⁴²

Everyone - whether Christian, Muslim or Jew - was affected by the Russian-Turkish war. However, while the history and heroic exploits of the Christians and Muslims have been recorded from

⁴¹ *Hamagid*, 21/33, 22.8.1877, pp. 301-302

⁴² M. D. Minev, *Stranizi na Grad Gâlabovo* [Pages about the City Gâlabovo] (Bulgarian), Sofia 1995, pp. 90-93.

generation to generation, the fate of the Jews of Stara-Zagora,⁴³ Kazanlık and other cities of Bulgaria has remained cloaked in silence.

(As stated above, the British consul, Drummond Wolff, promised to raise the matter of the fate of the Jewish refugees who had been ousted from their homes in Kazanlık and Eski-Zağra. He reported to Foreign Secretary Salisbury, whose efforts were abortive, largely due to opposition by the Russian representatives of the Commission - Colonel Schepelw and Prince Tzeretelew. Despite the help he received from the Ottoman representative, the Minister of Justice - Sadık Paşa, the most the Russians would agree to was to allow the consul to write a petition..., an ineffective measure, and in practice, no decision was taken on this issue.)⁴⁴

If the Jews were at all alluded to, it is mainly as traitors, collaborators, or materialists who exploited the suffering and property of their fellow citizens. Under the heading: “The Jews and the War,” *The Jewish Chronicle* brought hair-raising details of the pogrom against the Jews of Eski-Zağra, with data on the dead and wounded, women and girls who were raped, people who were injured or went missing, as well as thefts of property perpetrated by the Cossacks and their Bulgarian accomplices. The newspaper based its information on reports in *The Standard* and *The Daily Telegraph*. The article also describes fund-raising

⁴³ The Stara-Zagora archives contain almost no documents relating to the Russian-Turkish war. In later lists (1898-1900) of children, mainly girls, who were lost or captured and taken to Edirne, I found the names of 25 children from the entire region that included Kazanlık and Eski-Zağra. Not even one Jewish name appeared on these lists: F.784 No.1, a.e. 70, 1898; a.e.71, 1898/90. The list of Opalçenzi who fell in the battles on the Shipka Pass contains the names of 41 men: F. 407K No.1, a.e. 82, 1934. Leon Krudov, a Jew from Samokov, who is commemorated at the actual site, is not even mentioned (see Mordekhai's article, p. 20).

⁴⁴ PRO FO. 78/2915, No. 100, 7.11.1878.

efforts in and outside the Ottoman Empire, on behalf of the thousands of destitute Jewish refugees from Bulgaria who were currently staying in Edirne and Istanbul.⁴⁵ Rabbi Almoznino who, at the end of the war, was elected representative of the Bulgarian founding conference in Târnovo (Velikoto Sabranie the Sublime Parliament), and later served as Chief Rabbi of Bulgarian Jewry, summed up the suffering of several Bulgarian Jewish communities in his appeal to the AIU in Paris for help.⁴⁶ His list included: Sofia, a rather dismal town despite its large Jewish population, where Bulgarian peasants conspired with Russian soldiers to loot Jewish stores and houses in the city; Berkovitsa, where the local citizens prevented the Jews from returning home, forcing them to move to Sofia; Vratsa, where the Russians' entry was followed by the looting of Jewish homes, the destruction of the synagogue, and the expulsion of the Jews to nearby Berkovitsa, where they suffered a fate similar to that of their brethren there; Kjustendil, where the Bulgarians murdered two brothers and their servant; and nearby Dupnitsa, where persecution was still rampant, and whose Jews constantly asked us [in Sofia] for help.

Rabbi Almoznino went on to list even the communities of Lom, Pirot, Nikopol and Plevna as communities that needed help. He asked the leaders of the "Alliance" in Paris to send over money and equipment, since the weather was still cold, and the Jewish institutions in Bulgaria were unable to meet the refugees' needs.

⁴⁵ *The Jewish Chronicle*, 10.8.1877, p.11; idem, 24.8.1877, p. 6.

⁴⁶ AIU (Bulgarie), I C1, 15.3.1878. The letter was sent 12 days after the signing of the San-Stefano Treaty.

3. Sources

It is not by chance that the story of these two communities has, so far, been shrouded in mystery. Most of the material on which my study is based comes from the AIU Archives in Paris, and the remainder, from the literature cited above. The “Alliance” Archives include articles, survivors’ testimonies, reports by journalists and correspondence between the heads of the Jewish establishment in Europe, and between them and politicians in the West and in Istanbul, and with the leaders of the Russian Army in Bulgaria. I also consulted the British Public Records Office and *The Jewish Chronicle*, as well as the aforementioned Hebrew-language newspapers, and the European Press, including: *Les Temps*, *La Turquie*, *The Times*, *The Standard*, *The Weekly Dispatch*, *Neue Freie Presse*, *Golos*, *Indépendance Belge*, *Journal des Débats*, as well as to other newspapers published in Berlin and Vienna which, although not mentioned specifically by name, reported issues relevant to our topic. It follows that the “Alliance” sources are reliable. Among the personalities who corresponded about the situation of the Jews of Kazanlık and Stara-Zagora were:

M. Veneziani, F. Bloch, S. Fernandez, M. de Toledo, V. Misrahi, Baron J. de Wertheimer, J. Delmedico, Ajiman, le Comte de Commodo, Baron M. de Hirsch, Baron H. de Worms and Prince Dondukov-Korsakov,⁴⁷ among others.

This list comprises the crème de la crème of European and Ottoman Jewry, including even Prince Dondukov-Korsakov, the

⁴⁷ AIU, *Bulletin Mensuel*, 1877/8, p. 135. The governor’s letter was addressed to S. Fernandez, the deputy-president of the “Alliance” in Istanbul, and transmitted the refusal of the new Bulgarian authorities to allow the Jewish refugees to return to their cities, such as Karlovo, Kazanlık, and Eski-Zağra, and the hope that the problem would soon be resolved...

Russian Governor of Bulgaria after the war. The above Jews sent their letters and petitions to the foreign ministers of England, France or Austria, as relevant.

Through these letters and reports that were sent to Paris, Edirne and Istanbul, I was able to reconstruct the tragic history of the two communities that form the subject of this paper.

Several Bulgarian Jews who experienced the horrors of war wrote poems describing their experiences. The most important of these poems was an early Ladino ballad written by the Bulgaria Jew Yosef Haim ben Reii, from Karnobat.⁴⁸ The ballad, which is part poem and part prose divided into three parts, describes the suffering of the local Jews, in particular their flight from the Russian Army, fearing the consequences of its entry into the city. Another ballad (Koplas), one of many of that period, is brought below:⁴⁹

**Poem on the 1878 war, as dictated by Oruçá, Yohanan's
governess**

Russia, Russia, what is your fantasy?
Turkey is small and Bulgaria even smaller.
It is 4 o'clock on a Thursday
They are fleeing, naked and barefoot,
Even women in labor
Giving birth in the open fields
We have nothing to say, only to bless the L—d:

⁴⁸ *Istoria Kompoesta de Yosef Haim ben Reii de Karnabat*, Plovdiv 1893.

⁴⁹ *Kantika de la guerra, 1878*, courtesy of Dr. Peretz, who translated the poem for me into Hebrew. The poem is part of an anthology of folksongs belonging to the Arieħ family from Samokov, which contains over a 100 ballads and folksongs.

Come my brothers, let us hold hands,
For the children that are being murdered.
The price of bread has soared to six and a half
The survivors wring their hands in despair
Listen to the ballads of battle and slaughter
Both old and young die of sorrow and pain
Seven kingdoms have risen up against her
Turkey has no strength left.

Summary

The Bulgarian Christians' attitude toward Bulgarian Jewry varied from place to place. While persecution - attacks on Jewish lives and property - existed in the small, remote cities of the Balkans, sometimes with the Church's encouragement, in the large cities such as Plovdiv, Varna or Rusçuk, it was rare. The historiography - whether Bulgarian or otherwise - has hardly related to the persecution of Jews in these places, whether such persecution was inspired by religion, nationalism, or the perception of Jews as traitors for collaborating with the Ottoman Empire. This persecution, which came to a head with the Russian Army's entry into Bulgaria, has been glossed over in the historiography. No doubt, the silence on this topic was partly due to the marginality of these events as against the existential suffering of the Bulgarian and Turkish nations, which fueled the pens of journalists and war correspondents. In the context of the unfolding drama, the Jews were often perceived as a non-entity. They were not considered a significant minority, both because of their small size and their isolation from their Christian and

Muslim neighbors. It is not therefore surprising that the European press chose to focus on the suffering of the Christian Bulgarians or even of the Muslims, who formed a large minority in Bulgaria - the main arena of war - rather than on the Jews. I felt it was only right, therefore, to open up this tragic and neglected chapter of Bulgarian Jewish history, in which local citizens and soldiers of the victorious army were jointly implicated. Although all those involved in the war - Christians and Muslims, the warring armies, and the Bulgarians who fought to liberate their homeland - suffered the traumas of the war, they at least, unlike the Jews, had records of the acts of heroism or of the atrocities they experienced. I felt it only right, therefore, to expose the trauma experienced by some Bulgarian Jews in remote and hostile localities during the Russian-Turkish War, resulting in the death and pauperization of many, and in their expulsion from cities where they had lived for many generations. This elegy is a tribute to those Jews whom history not only wronged, but almost overlooked, too.

Thank you for your attention,

Dr. Zvi Keren

(Translated into English by Yaffah Murciano)