

Report on Campaign 2009 in Bulgaria

Remember So It Won't Happen Again

25 January 2009 – International Holocaust Remembrance Day

Dear Friends,

We believe that even though this report about what is happening in Bulgaria comes to you with a bit of delay, it will encourage you to know that our labor in the Lord is not in vain.

This year, for a third time in a row, Protestant churches in Bulgaria commemorated the International Holocaust Remembrance Day. This coordinated effort came as a result of an all-European campaign initiated by European Coalition for Israel (ECI) – an organization that unites different Protestant and Catholic Christian ministries in Europe working together against the rising new anti-Semitism in Europe as well as promoting cooperation and strengthening of the relations between the European Union and the State of Israel.

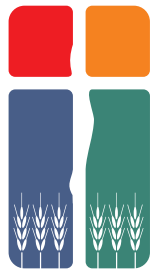
Over the last few months, from the beginning of November, 2008 till the end of January 2009, we had a very intensive and eventful season full of Israel-related initiatives. Those of you who were at the ECI annual conference held in Brussels in the beginning of November, 2008, would prob-

ably remember that at that time we were preparing for the Songs of Life International Festival, an initiative dedicated to the 65th anniversary of the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews during the Holocaust.

The festival included a series of concerts in Bulgaria and Israel. An important part of the festival was the giving out of 49,000 flowers symbolizing 49,000 saved Jewish lives in Bulgaria 65 years ago. The flowers were given out to thousands of people in the streets of six major cities as a token of gratitude to our nation. Each flower was accompanied with a card, explaining the significance of this symbolic event.

Flowers were also given to the members of the Bulgarian government. Six cabinet ministers personally received a flower and a card expressing gratitude for what was done 65 years ago by the Bulgarian people, the Bulgar-





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ian church, the Bulgarian politicians and the Bulgarian civil society. All the major national media covered the event as the 49,000 Flowers Campaign took off.

This large scale project was realized with the joint efforts of the Protestant churches and the Jewish communities in the cities of Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Bourgas, Yambol, Stara Zagora. People from all generations participated in the giving out of flowers, including teenagers and children with their parents. As we already mentioned, the festival received significant media coverage, both at the national and regional level, which contributed to the wider publicity of the event.

We have received a lot of encouraging reports from different places in the country about many people being touched through the concerts and the flower project. There have been many moving encounters and meaningful conversations as a result of this outreach effort.

We have been able to give the message of gratitude to people from all generations – from elderly people who were direct witnesses of the 1943 events to teenagers who knew almost nothing about those events. Literally in hundreds of cases, parents would spontaneously start explaining to their young children why

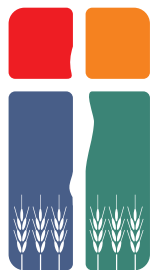
those flowers were given to them and that was a very special experience for all who were involved. Elderly people who have witnessed the 1943 events were so deeply moved that many of them had tears in their eyes thanking us for the flower they have received. Some of them simply stood by and watched as the flowers were given out, so taken by it all that they just couldn't leave.

It is our prayer that this important project will help us appreciate our good national heritage in respect to the Jewish people and will renew our resolve as a society to guard and protect this heritage by opposing any form of anti-Semitism and supporting the nation of Israel.

In the beginning of December 2008, we started the preparation for the Learn From History Campaign 2009, leading to the commemoration of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day during the last week of January, 2009. The campaign was officially endorsed by the leaders of almost all Evangelical denominations and church movements in Bulgaria. They signed their names under the letter that was sent to more than 700 pastors and leaders of churches in Bulgaria. It is a great

blessing to see that working in support of Israel and the Jewish people is one of the greatest unifying factors among Christians in Bulgaria.





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The success of Campaign 2009 had a lot to do with the exceptional support that we received from the leaders of the main Evangelical denominations in Bulgaria and also thanks to the renewed internet website of the campaign. The website that we had created especially for the purposes of the campaign last year was fully renewed with multiple new and updated materials. About 70 % of the site had completely new content. The files with sermons and teachings that were done in a ready-to-print format made it easier for the larger churches to print out those materials and distribute them to the pastors and leaders of the smaller churches in their regions, together with all the necessary materials for conducting commemoration services and events.

As a result, this year 451 Bulgarian churches participated in the campaign. This is twice more than last year and more than one third of all registered Evangelical churches in Bulgaria.

Translated in absolute numbers, that would mean that on January 25, 2009, around 50, 000 – 60, 000 people have directly or indirectly been involved in the commemoration events and have been exposed to some kind of educational initiative related to the Holocaust. This is going to have a very

significant impact in the Church and, ultimately, in our society as a whole because people who know the truth are the most effective weapon for fighting anti-Semitism!

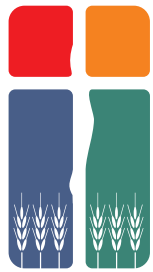
According to statistical data, nowadays less than 7 million people live in Bulgaria. That would mean that by commemorating the International Holocaust Remembrance Day and by giving away 49,000 flowers as a token of gratitude to the Bulgarian people, we have touched the lives of around 15% of the Bulgarian citizens currently residing in the country.

We have touched these people with the message of love for the Jewish people – love that opposes any form of anti-Semitism.

As you know, the focus of this year's

“Learn from History” European campaign was on the 1938 events – the Evian Conference, the Munich Agreement and Kristallnacht. We educated the Bulgarian churches about





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those events out of our deep conviction that Christians in today's Europe need to repent and ask forgiveness from the Jewish people for the terrifying passivity of the Church at that time in regards to these tragic events that led to the Holocaust. Christians must know and remember these events so that they don't repeat the mistakes of history but rather apply the lessons of 1938, and namely – that the Church should not keep silent and that it should actively oppose any form of anti-Semitism in today's societies.



Another very important objective of our national campaign was to educate the Bulgarian churches about the tragic fate of the 11, 343 Jews from Aegean Thrace and Vardar Macedonia who were sent to the death camps in 1943, to recognize our national responsibility for this horrible tragedy – as these territories were occupied by Bulgaria at that time – and to repent for it on behalf of our nation. As Christians, we are morally obligated to speak about these dark pages of our national history, just as we must remember the great example of the Bulgarian people who saved the lives of 49, 000 Jews living in Bulgaria's old territories in 1943. This is why we also presented

the facts related to the rescue of the Jews in Bulgaria proper – we believe that the noble actions of the Bulgarian civil society, including the Church and certain political leaders, holds great educational value as well. We prepared diverse materials equipping Bulgarian teachers for making presentations about the Holocaust in their schools. One of the new featured articles gave a special focus on the persecution and genocide of Roma (Gypsy) people by the Nazis during the time of the Holocaust. We believe that this is important, especially in view of the fact that the Roma people are a significant part of our nation and of the Church in Bulgaria. All these materials can be viewed at the following address:

<http://www.remember-holocaust.info/>



On January 25, 2009, at Victory Christian Center in Sofia, we held a commemoration service on the occasion of the International Holocaust Remem-

brance Day, together with thousands of churches in Europe where such services were held on the same day. At our service, we were honored to have as our official guests, leaders from the Jewish community

in Sofia, as well as elderly Jewish people who have lived through the events of 1943, when the Bulgarian Jews were threatened with deportation to the death camps but were rescued by the Bulgarian people. Mr. Robert Jerasi, the Chairman of the Central Israelite Spiritual Council in Bulgaria was

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our guest speaker. In his address, he expressed his heartfelt support for the Bulgarian campaign and for our commemoration event. Mr. Jerasi shared his sincere desire for joining hands with us in future initiatives aimed at opposing anti-Semitism in Bulgaria and Europe.

The service continued with the sermon of Pastor Andrey Avramov who in his message gave answers to three main questions: Why exactly the Jews? How was it at all possible for the Holocaust to happen? And what must we do in order for such a tragedy to never happen again?

A special guest at the event was Mrs. Becca Lazarova, Director for Bulgaria of the R.S. Lauder Foundation – and international organization supporting the Hebrew Language School in Sofia. After the sermon, Mrs. Lazarova invited Pastor Avramov to give a lecture on the nature and origin of anti-Semitism at the Hebrew Language School.

For us, this is only the beginning of a very long marathon. The work of ECI in Bulgaria has only started and it is yet to grow and expand.

Today in Bulgaria neo-Nazi seeds are being sown with intensity unprecedented since



World War II. On the Bulgarian political scene new nationalist formations based on chauvinism and xenophobia are emerging. Together with the radicalizing Islam, these developments of recent years certainly do not promise anything good for Bulgaria.

In conclusion, we would like to say that Bulgarian younger generations today do not know enough about the Holocaust and this is why they need to be protected by knowing the truth about this horrendous tragedy. The murder of six million Jews was a horrible crime but what is even more horrible is the arrogant lie that this has never happened. And it is hard to believe but it is a fact that today there are those that want another Holocaust for the Jews.

All this comes to show that we live in a very sick world that continues to be in a desperate need of salt and light!

“I know that when I stand before the Lord on the Day of Judgment, I will not be asked the same

question Cain was asked. Where were you when your brother's blood cried out from the ground?”

Imre Bathory
A Righteous Among The Nations

On behalf of the Coordination Team for the Bulgarian campaign,

Pastor Andrey Avramov

