

*Public Invited to Hear Former Ambassador Speak Friday Night at Beth El Congregation. Robyn Taylor. The Winchester Star, January 16, 2018*

WINCHESTER — During World War II, when Jews across Europe were being rounded up and sent off to Nazi concentration camps where nearly 6 million of them would die, one eastern European country was able to save much of its Jewish population.

Bulgaria, a Balkan nation along the Black Sea with 7 million people, saved nearly 50,000 Jews from the Nazis — a remarkable feat that is not well-known.

“It’s a moment when this little country did the right thing,” said H. Kenneth Hill, a former ambassador to Bulgaria who now lives in the Orchard Ridge retirement community in Frederick County. “And it’s not well-known by Jews in this country.”

On Friday night, Hill will tell the story of how Bulgaria saved its Jewish people at Beth El Congregation during services, which begin at 7:30 p.m. The public is invited to hear Hill speak. Beth El is located at 520 Fairmont Ave.

Hill, 80, began serving in the U.S. Foreign Service in 1964 and was assigned twice to Bulgaria during his time in the diplomatic corps — the first time in the 1980s when the country was under Communist rule. He returned to serve as ambassador from 1990 to 1993, appointed by President H.W. Bush.

Hill’s talk will focus on early 1943 when the Gestapo told Bulgaria to round up its Jewish population so they could be sent to concentration camps, Hill said.

But the deputy secretary of the Bulgarian parliament, Dimitar Peshev, refused. “He said, ‘These people are our neighbors and our fellow countrymen,’” Hill said.

“By that time the [Bulgarians] knew they were death camps,” Hill said of the Nazi camps.

Bulgaria was aligned with Germany during the war, so Hill believes the Nazis were inclined to accept their government's proposal. "The government said to the Gestapo, 'We have work for these people, we have projects we need done,'" Hill said.

Many of the Jews were taken from the capital city of Sofia and dispersed around the Bulgaria countryside to work camps. Other Bulgarians stepped forward to hide Jews in their houses, he said.

But this act of defiance is not the subject of many books or Hollywood movies.

Years later, a diplomatic crisis arose when Hill was scheduled to accompany the president of Bulgaria to the opening of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1993. The organizers of the event didn't thoroughly research Bulgaria's history during the war, Hill said, and did not plan to seat the Bulgarian president at the table with the other Righteous Gentile (the leader from Denmark). Righteous Gentile is the term given to non-Jews who risked their own safety to save Jews during the Holocaust.

The oversight got back to Bulgaria where the citizens were reading in the newspapers that their president was not being given proper honors. Hill asked then-Vice President Al Gore to reach out to the Bulgarian president and personally invite him to the opening.

"It was kind of a diplomatic crisis that was overcome," Hill said.

Hill said he will take questions after he speaks.

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