

THE “UN-AMERICAN” ACTIVITIES OF VIKTOR SHARENKOV

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While Viktor Sharenkov (1892-1963) is recognized as the first Bulgarian specialist in American literature appointed at the English Department of Sofia University in the late 1940s, his contribution to the local “inception” of the subject area, i.e. American Studies, within the institutional spaces of English Studies and in terms of an appointment and course in the History of American Literature has been scarcely discussed apart from signposting his administrative appointment and documenting his scholarly background as a Columbia PhD graduate. This paper aims at addressing this area of neglect by adopting a biographical approach and tracing the trajectory of Sharenkov’s life in the USA until his quite possible deportation and subsequent above-mentioned appointment. In doing so, I will be exploring the complex set of relations between biography and history with a view to the institutional history of AS locally and also propose the terms in which Sharenkov’s position may be articulated rather than ignored.

Key words: American studies, historiography, biography, heterodoxy, Committee of Un-American Activities, Second Red Scare, Cold War

Institutional histories: scarce biographical presence

Based on Vesselinov’s account (2008: 168), faculty institutional history describes Sharenkov in terms of benchmark achievements pertinent to this level of institutional grids. Besides stating the customary date and place of birth and death, it signposts the completed levels of tertiary education in the respective field, the institutional appointments held in his life-time and the broad area of his scholarly academic interests. Within the logic of institutional history through documented appointments, completed degrees and area of academic scholarly interests at the level of Faculty, one of the largest at SU and enjoying a historical development of 120 years, one could hardly expect any further detail.

The first comprehensive institutional history written with a view to the development of English Studies in Bulgaria, Shurbanov and Stamenov’s chapter ‘Bulgaria’ in the *European English Studies: Contribu-*

tions towards the *History of a Discipline* (Engler and Haas, eds. 2000: 267-92), focused in detail on the developments of the discipline and its “institutional carrier” the Department of English Studies at SU. The subsections in this historical narrative are indicative of the approach chosen. They build along the axis “Pioneers-Patriarch-Specialists-Practitioners-Crisis” and suggest that this historical narrative is structured in terms of patriarchal lineage rendered through the prism of the contribution and position of notable individuals against the background of socio-historical changes or grids of political economy. In this the salient tropes are of individuals¹ (Stefanov, Roussev, Mincoff, Sharenkov, Molhova, Rankova, Filipov, Spasov, Danchev), “firsts” (“pioneers”, “patriarch”, first specialized appointments) or first courses and first local scholarly books, and the stable presence of gauging the “worth” of those to the continuous historical development of institutional ES in Bulgaria. Sharenkov’s place in this continuity is immediately after the “Patriarch” and as a “first” among the specialists. Following four pages on the individual place of Mincoff in this narrative and preceding several “first specialists” in different constituent “aspects” of the Philology degree, each meriting about a page of space allocated to individual biography and contribution to the local history of ES as a discipline, the three-sentence framing of another “first”, introducing the first course in the history of American literature, which do not enrich the macro-institutional (faculty level) historical perspective does come saliently marked against the rest. It is a difference of *scarcity of detail* and also difference of *suspended evaluation* and *lack of chartered continuity* as to the *before* and *after* be that in *biographical terms* or *vis-à-vis the narrative of institutional history*. There is a possible explanation as to the scarcity of Sharenkov’s biographical presence here. Within the dynamics of a degree in English Philology (and the departmental institutional expression thereof), following a Europe-wide German philological project and model, American literature is a “marginal concern” by dint of its later day development as well as by virtue of space allocation² within English Philology in the context of Bulgaria across time. Therefore, an individual embodiment of a

¹ Disciplinary practices are sometimes understood as interventions of key figures/individuals instead of or often at odds with consecutive phases of intellectual subscription to ideational grids. With regard to subject area historiography, cf. Graff 1987 (2007).

² In terms of number of courses, their duration, respective professional appointments, etc.

“beginning” (Sharenkov) occupies little space within the historical narrative of ES institutional development.

Almost a decade before this chapter, another local scholar, an Americanist, turned her gaze upon local developments that have a bearing on disciplinary institutional history. In her contribution “One More Window to the World: American Literature in Bulgaria” (Gutman, ed. 1991: 34 – 48), Natalia Klissurska presented a detailed account of the dynamics of American literature in Bulgarian translation from mid-19th century till the end of the 1980s. The focus of this critical essay is the translation and reception of American literature in the Bulgarian language. Still, it usefully relates the discussion on the emergence and consolidation of the “reading canon” of American literature in this context to the institutional developments in the scholarly academic address of American literary historiography by local academics. The name of Sharenkov features in this essay on one occasion. On another, it is implied.

“The only seminal book-length work, which originally appeared in two separate collections of essays and was later published in one volume, is Pauline Pirinska’s *A History of American Literature. XIX and XX c.* (1979) [...]. Despite its rather misleading title, the book is a major contribution to American scholarship in Bulgaria and an indispensable bibliographical aid. It was preceded by Viktor Sharenkov’s *An Outline History of American Literature*, which is no longer in use” (Klissurska 1991: 46).

“Nor was its [American literature] teaching savaged by the Cold War atmosphere. On the contrary, American literature was actually introduced during this politically most unpropitious period (when diplomatic relations between the countries were severed), by a Bulgarian-American professor who has been deported from the United States for his leftist views” (Klissurska 1991: 43).

The evaluative paragraph on American literature historiography written by local scholars above clearly puts value on Pauline Pirinska’s work. While acknowledging the “preceding” status, it does not venture into a pronouncement of any sort on Sharenkov’s work but dismisses it with a seemingly factual statement. In the second paragraph quoted above, while making a rather strong claim with regard to the American literature pedagogical practice in Bulgarian universities, perhaps countering assumed readers’ expectations with regard to the historical moment of the Cold War, it is very unlikely that the intended international audience would connect the name of Sharenkov with the proposed description. Neither is

such a connection provided within the text of the essay. On the contrary, the two references stand apart.

Since the focus of Klissurska’s chapter is the reception of American literature in Bulgaria within the grids of production and circulation of historicized discourses on American literature, including those of academic pedagogy and scholarship, the above-positing hypothesis of “marginality” can hardly hold. That which comes across as marginal or negligible, however, is the positioning of Sharenkov in the narrative of local institutional developments. Klissurska’s and Shurbanov and Stamenov’s texts share resonant features as far as he is concerned – that *scarcity of detail* and *suspended evaluation* and *lack of chartered continuity*. Whether it is a matter of scarcity of knowledge as to “who Sharenkov was” while living in the USA and from 1948 onwards in Bulgaria, or a choice not to articulate what is known on behalf of local Anglicists or Americanists who have focused on subject area developments in a historical vein, I cannot be sure. If it is the latter, it begs the question why. If it is the former, then it is interesting to see what *may be known* about Viktor Sharenkov who was the *first* local specialist in American literature introducing the *first* survey course in it; the author of the *first* locally produced *American literature* book, published in English in 1953, while his 1961 *Amerikanska literatura* remains to this day *the only* rendition of American literature in the Bulgarian language written by a local academic. Since Sharenkov is indeed related to developments in institutional history with regard to the academic spaces of American literature (by extension American studies), it is also worth projecting connections between his personal “life story” and this institutional history. To address these issues within the limited scope of the present paper, I will focus only on his life in the USA.

Columbia University years and first book

Relying on the ample data provided by *Columbia University Catalogues*³ (CUC), it is fairly easy to ascertain that Victor N. Sharenkoff⁴ became an AM student registered with the Faculties of Philosophy, Political Science and Pure Science in 1921 at the age of 29. In 1922 he was voted member of the *American Oriental Society*⁵ and resided at Princeton Av. Jersey City, NY⁶. From 1923 until 1926 he was PhD student registered with the same faculties, working on a topic which appeared as a book

³ In the volumes spanning from 1921/1922 through to 1929/1930.

⁴ Standard at the time variant of his names’ transliteration.

⁵ *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 42, 1922, 377.

⁶ CUC, *Directory of Officers and Students*, 1921/1922, 299.

entitled *A Study of Manichaeism in Bulgaria: with Special Reference to the Bogomils* in 1927. One of the lecturers with whom Sharenkov worked in the course of writing his PhD was A. V. Williams Jackson, professor of Indo-Iranian Languages in Columbia, director of the *American Oriental Society*, and author of a number of volumes on history and literature of the Orient. In his “The ‘Second Evocation’ in the Manichaean System of Cosmology” (Jackson 1924: 137-155), Williams Jackson acknowledged his student for some perceptive contribution to his argument. These are early indications that Sharenkov “the student” was performing up to the academic standards of Columbia; still, it is expedient to pause very briefly on his first published book.

Sharenkov’s study of Manichaeism, focusing on the Bogomils, is among earliest scholarly publications in the field in English at the beginning of the 20th century and has been a durable presence in bibliographies on the subject, among most popularly cited early commentaries in English and has informed a number of subsequent studies. These are too numerous to exhaust here, suffice to mention three examples from the past decade – Veinsten (ed. 2001), Taylor (2005), and Drakopoulos (2010). The PhD thesis of the last one refers to Sharenkov’s book as an early exploration of the etymology of the movement and its apparatus. It also posits Sharenkov’s argument, based on the testimony of Cosma that two different schools of Bogomilism had already existed in the 10th century (Drakopoulos 2010: 45, 64, 207). These examples show that Sharenkov’s PhD research has contributed to an international academic audience’s subsequent analytical engagements with heterodoxy and dualisms across Europe and has become a convention in background scholarly material in the field over many decades.

The years at Columbia do not cast Sharenkov solely as a student and scholar in comparative philosophy. From 1925 onwards, he is also listed among “the officers of instruction” to the founded Slavonic Extension, which at the time underwent leadership change in Clarence A. Manning’s first term as acting executive and his subsequent de facto appointment to the leading position of the Slavonic Extension to become the Department of Slavic Languages, marking the beginnings of Slavic Studies institutional history in the USA. Over the summer of 1928, for instance, Sharenkov taught one of the first formally documented courses in Bulgarian at the Extension, “a course worth 6 points” (*CUC* 1928/1929: 116) and did so for several years. Even without concrete evidence to back this, it is safe to assume that in his capacity of one of the early instructors working at the onset of Slavic Studies in the USA through language and literature

teaching, Sharenkov was involved in personal contact with Manning, a former WW1 sergeant in the translation section of the Military Intelligence Division, a Columbia PhD, author of numerous books on Ukrainian literature and history, Russian literature and influence in Early America, editor of anthologies of Slavic poetry and translator.

New York Public Library years and Bulgarian literature in English translation

Sharenkov’s “disappearance” from the archive of *CUC* at one point naturally poses the question of where he went to after Columbia and the possible answer is to be found in a useful footnote to a scholarly article published in the *American Historical Review* in 1942. Stavrinou thankfully acknowledged “V. Sharenkoff of the New York Public Library” (Stavrinou 1942: 30) for providing translations and assistance in the work on his paper. There is a gap here of close to ten years,⁷ but it is fairly clear that at least from the beginning of WW2 in 1939, Sharenkov was employed at NYPL and was included among staff members who would be contributors to the grand-scale research and writing project of compiling *The Guide to Comparative Literature and International Relations*, in its volume “East-European and Slavonic Literatures”, led by Arthur P. Coleman. The Report on the project published in *Comparative Literature Newsletter* (1942 – 1946) listed Sharenkov as responsible for the section on Bulgarian literature and framed the undertaking within *Times Literary Supplement*’s articulation of the importance of translation for the intellectual recovery of Europe in the following terms:

“The most potent weapon in forging European unity is, of course, the written word. Translations, with few exceptions, have hitherto been treated as the Cinderella of modern literature. Some great books, some celebrated texts, and a few that were both great and celebrated, were translated into most European languages, but the vast majority of worth-while modern books have remained inaccessible to the public of any but their own country. [...] Translations – and good translations – not restricted to the superficial, haphazard choice that has hitherto prevailed, should be fostered and encouraged, and the existing kindred and literary associations ought to consider this encouragement as one of their special post-war tasks” (*TLS*, March 25, 1944).

⁷ Worth pursuing further, since a memoir book, *Poznatite-nepoznati*, contains a section on Sharenkov alluding without documentary evidence to his visit to Bulgaria before WW2, when he reportedly struck acquaintances with Bulgarian intellectuals such as Ilia Beshkov, Ilia Petrov, Anna Kamenova, Maria Grubeshlieva, Lyudmil Stoyanov, etc. (Valov 2013: 301).

The importance of knowledge of and understanding between diverse linguistic and cultural communities across Europe and across the Atlantic peaked in the post-WW2 milieu, yet the build-up to it spanned the inter-war period as well, not least in terms of newly opening academic spaces (such as the Slavic Extension) and intellectual engagement with the translation of literary works. Sharenkov took part in this process by making available to English-speaking readers texts of Bulgarian literature and by presenting surveys of Bulgarian literature and history in English. One such published example is his introductory essay on Bulgaria in *Heart of Europe: an Anthology of Creative Writing in Europe* (1920-1940) (Mann and Kesten, eds. 1943: 318-20), accompanied by three translated texts of short prose: Elin Pelin's "Guest", translated by Stoyan Christowe (325-29); Karaliichev's "The Stone Bridge of Rossitsa" (320-25) and Minkov's "The Man Who Came From America" (329-40), translated by Sharenkov himself. There are a number of other first time translations of Bulgarian literature into English done by Sharenkov and often signed with initials only that can be traced in mixed anthologies and collections of Bulgarian literature published in the 1930s and 1940s.

However, there are also those translations, which even if unpublished and in all likelihood "lost", take a more pronounced cultural activism stance within the political moment of the times. An example along such lines may be found in three letters of Sharenkov's personal correspondence in his professional capacity as NYPL employee, preserved in the archive collection of "Joseph L. Baron Papers (1910-1960)" in the *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Milwaukee Libraries.⁸ These letters are evidence of exchanges⁹ between March 1944 and February 1945 between Sharenkov and Joseph L. Baron, a Reform rabbi whose Milwaukee rabbinical career at Temple Emanu-El B'ne Jeshurun spanned the years from 1926 to 1960. Previously, Baron received his education at Columbia University, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and Hebrew Union College from 1910 to 1920. Their contents reveal that both men met in person in New York sometime before March 1944 and discussed Bulgarian literature in relation to Bulgarian writers of Jewish origin and the "presence" of Jews in Bulgarian literary texts. Sharenkov's subsequent reply suggests that he had undertaken prose renditions in English of Yavorov's poem "Yevrei"¹⁰

⁸ One of these letters is reproduced publicly for the first time at the end of this paper with the permission of these institutions.

⁹ While there are only three preserved, their content suggests a longer correspondence and exchange of materials.

¹⁰ From *Bezsanitsi* (1907).

and compiled a list of other works by Bulgarian writers and poets which had representations of Bulgarian Jews. At a later date, he also sent rabbi Baron some materials from the *Bulgarian American Congress*, including Jacques Assenoff's report "How the Jews of Bulgaria were saved".¹¹ It is hardly necessary to explicate the importance of this exchange, given the historical background underpinning them in the immediate aftermath of the events in 1943 when Bulgaria partially saved its Jewish population from deportation to Nazi Germany camps. These documents speak of Sharenkov's intellectual, cultural and political engagement with his "present" and the important "issues of the day" that would also acquire historical significance and value.

The American Slav Congress and Sharenkov the communist

It is rather obvious from the biographical outline thus far that Viktor Sharenkov was a *scholar, translator and cultural activist* of some standing. His position and "doings" in the USA were also underpinned by his more straightforwardly political views and activities. In this respect, the institutional narratives quoted above suggested several things: Sharenkov's citizenship status, his "leftist views", and his possible deportation from the USA.¹² The specifics of his political activities and their prominence come across from the extensive report on the activities of the *American Slav Congress, Report N 1951* (Wood 1949), which offers a detailed rendition of the setting up of the organization, documents its four national congresses (1942, 1944, 1946 and 1948), and outlines the network of its related organizations.¹³ Written within the milieu of the Second Red Scare period in American history, the primary focus of the report was establishing *communist and foreign* connections between the *American Slav Congress* and its related organizations, as well as identifying the individuals most notably implicated in its activities. The fourth Congress therefore bore the designation "Anti-American" and the report was produced on behalf of the Committee of Un-American Activities.

The positioning of Sharenkov here revolved around his rise in the ranks of the *Bulgarian-American Committee* (1943), *Bulgarian-American People's League* (1946), and *Bulgarian-American People's Union* (1947) within the *American Slav Congress*. These three associated organizations

¹¹ I have not been able to find this report thus far.

¹² Maybe in 1948, even if the fact of deportation itself has not been ascertained through a document and he could have been recalled.

¹³ Available online at <<https://archive.org/details/reportonamerican00unit>> (30 Jan 2014).

were in principle “the same”, yet undergoing “name change” and new legal registration following citations by Attorney General Tom C. Clark as “communist” during the 1940s. These organizations and their members engaged in numerous and varied activities, locally, nationally and internationally. Among these activities were: protecting the rights of foreign-born Americans; defending workers’ interests, including pronouncements against the *Taft-Hartley Act* of 1947; undertaking anti-fascist propaganda during the course of the war; advocating for support to the partisan army of Tito and urging the UN to cooperate with the *National Anti-fascist Liberation Council of Yugoslavia* (1943); publicly endorsing Bulgarian-Macedonian cooperation and unification; organizing aid to the “places of origin” of their members¹⁴; addressing publicly the *Marshall Plan* and *Truman Doctrine*, urging for revision on their envisaged “target territories”. Sharenkov was implicated in all these.¹⁵ Further, he was specifically associated with publicly honoring Georgi Dimitrov, in 1943 and 1947, through congratulatory addresses on the occasion of his birthday, printed in the *New York Times* and *Narodna Volya*; as member of the *National Committee of the American-Slav Congress* in 1944 and President of the *Bulgarian-American People’s League* in 1946; Board member of the *NY Committee for Protection of Foreign Born* and Secretary of the *Bulgarian-Macedonian Victory Congress*. There was also evidence that in 1947 he publicly endorsed *The Michigan Herald*, identified as the major print edition of the *US Communist Party* of which he was a member since 1933. Since 1947 Sharenkov also became editor of *Narodna Volya*.

The capacities in which Sharenkov appears above are listed in a suggestive rather than an exhaustive manner for the sake of space. In all likelihood, he was also present at the “Win the Peace” rally in Madison Square Garden in NYC on September 22, 1946 where among the speakers was Tsola Dragoicheva. Additionally, a photograph in the *Souvenir Journal* from the rally (1946: 11) placed him among the leaders of the various organizations within the *American Slav Congress*. In it Sharenkov was surrounded by his close associates, such as Zarko M. Nuncick, Leo Karzycki, Daniel Kasustchik, and Georgi Pirinsky, among others. Bearing in mind the more widely known biographical path of the last one, sentenced to 10 years imprisonment for un-American activities and

¹⁴ For the period July 1, 1947 to June 30, 1948, the value in dollars of parcels sent to Soviet dominated Slavic countries was as follows: Albania 268,000; Bulgaria 3,474,000; Czechoslovakia 4,081,000; Poland 14,794,000; USSR 774,000; Yugoslavia 4,427,000 (Wood 1949: 77).

¹⁵ See, for instance, Sharenkov 1948.

deported from the USA in 1951 or 1953,¹⁶ subsequently rising in the ranks of the Bulgarian Communist Party, it is very likely that Sharenkov's position in the USA was determined by Recommendation 6 of the Report that "the citizenship of alien Communists should be revoked and they should be deported" (Wood 1949: 99) and at the self-same moment by Pirinsky's arrest and trial.

Sharenkov the communist was prominent enough in his position and activities to appear in documents after his departure for Bulgaria too. His name was mentioned several times in the testimony of Matthew Cvetic at a public hearing before the Committee of Un-American Activities of the US House of Representatives in 1950. One of those instances is particularly interesting.

"Mr. VELDE. Going back to Victor Sharenkoff, what was his position?

Mr. CVETIC. I knew him as a leader of the Bulgarian section of the Communist Party. U.S.A.

Mr. VELDE. Did he have any official connection with the United States Government?

Mr. CVETIC. While I have never had absolute knowledge of it, I have been informed he either was employed by the State Department or had some status with the State Department at one time, but I never of my own knowledge knew that, except I recollect in my meetings with Dr. Sharenkoff he stated or somebody stated he worked for the State Department. The reason I placed stress on Dr. Sharenkoff is because he does meet with Sam Milgrom, and Sam Milgrom, as I have reported to the FBI, is head of the Communist Party in the United States and has to a large extent replaced Peters" (*Expose* 1950: 1349).

On the one hand, the testimony of Cvetic in his capacity of undercover agent, whose assignment involved intelligence gathering on the *US Communist Party*, leaves no doubt as to Sharenkov the communist and his circle of associates. On the other, it is not quite categorical with regard to Sharenkov's association with the State Department. There is doubt here. Not only doubt as to whether he "was employed" or not by the State Department, but beyond that, there emerges doubt as to the nature and duration of this "employment". It is a curious ambiguity and an ambiguity which continues to hover if one thinks of Pirinsky and Sharenkov *after* their departure from the USA and return to Bulgaria within five years from each other.

¹⁶ Date varies in different sources.

In a sense, there's well-documented public certainty¹⁷ as to the biography and historical positioning of the former in relation to the government and diplomatic structures of Bulgaria in the Communist period; in relation to his son's, Georgi Pirinsky Jr., political career prior to 1989 and after regime change; and in connection with his wife, Pauline Pirinska, who joined the English Department at SU in 1953 and whose historical contribution to the academic and institutional American literature discourse Klussurska acknowledged. At the same time, there is this vacuity and lack of certainty with regard to Sharenkov both in biographical terms and in relation to history. Chartering in some detail his life in the USA, as I did above, marks only the beginning of a process of addressing this issue.

Concluding remarks

Up to this point there arise several possibilities for framing, to varying degrees of porosity, Sharenkov with a view to a historical process *and vis-à-vis* the local disciplinary history of American studies, as anchored in a department of English Philology. Aspects of the above narrative suggest he could be cast in terms of *heterodoxy*. Such a view does not resonate only with the topic of his PhD and first book, but it carries over to the heterodoxic dimensions of his political stance and activities against the background of the build-up to WW2, during its course, and in the subsequent Second Red Scare period in the USA. In a way, this dimension will remain in place in political terms within the historical moment of Sharenkov's return to Bulgaria because of his past activities related to "pan-Slavism", among other considerations. It will perhaps be even more pronounced from the perspective of the established and consolidated by that point academic institutional spaces of English Philology, whereby the introduction of a course in American literature and his appointment as an Associate professor in it could be seen as heterodoxic at the time. Secondly, in the process of researching "the story" of this paper, I could not refrain from associating its unfolding with the dimensions of "*a man caught in a historic irony*". Sharenkov left the USA at the age of 56 for his "un-American activities" and became the first to introduce the study of "America" in the context of Bulgaria in 1949, continuing his "un-American activities" by writing lecture courses and books on American literary historiography. Yet, bearing in mind American Studies institutional developments internationally, it is only befitting that the origins of academic practice in "matters American" in this context

¹⁷ Albeit often framed by opposed ideological discourses.

would also conform to the historical imperative spurring their development, i.e. the Cold War. Finally, in view of Sharenkov's background at Columbia, role in contributing to the beginnings of Slavic Studies across the Atlantic, involvement in translation across cultural and linguistic communities, personal contacts and exchanges with prominent cultural and political figures of the times at both sides of the "trenches", and subsequent role in Bulgaria, I am tempted to call him a *member of the "Republic of Letters,"*¹⁸ thus emphasizing the role of individuals in the flow and circulation of ideas forming communities across borders.

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¹⁸ Associating it with "The Republic of Letters" in the Age of Enlightenment.

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295 West 11 Street,
New York 14, N.Y.,
June 15, 1944.

Rabbi Joseph L. Baron,
2419 East Kenwood Boulevard,
Milwaukee 11, Wisconsin.

Dear Dr. Baron:

It is a long time since I received your letter. Due to illness and absence my answer was delayed so much. I am sorry.

Herewith I am sending you a literal translation, word for word of Yavorov's "Hebrews". I hope you can use it.

I would like to inform you that I found a few more pieces in verse and prose written by Bulgarian poets and writers on Jews. Some of them are really good. For instance there is a short story "Stones", by Petko Todorov, a novel "Khoru", by Anton Strashimirov, a poem "Hebrews," by Emanuel P. Dimitrov, a poem "Asakhfer", by Nikolai Liliev, etc. These are the most prominent Bulgarian authors. The novel "Khoru" draws its topic from the big Bulgarian uprising of 1923 ; one of the leaders is a young Jew.

In a short time I am going to send you translations of two or three statements of prominent Bulgarians on the Jews.

If you are interested in more material please let me know.

Sincerely yours,

Viktor Sharenkov