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IMPORTANT MILESTONES FOR BULGARIA

Statement by:

The Honourable Yonah Martin

Thursday, May 24, 2018

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Hon. Yonah Martin (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, I rise today as the founding co-chair of the Canada-Bulgaria Inter-Parliamentary Friendship Group, which is set to hold our Fourth Annual General Meeting this evening at 5 p.m. in Room 256-S. I hope my honourable colleagues may consider becoming a member of the group and, after we rise, join the reception to meet the Bulgarian community and enjoy wonderful Bulgarian entertainment, food and wine.

There is much to celebrate. May 24, today, is Bulgaria's national holiday, "Day of the Bulgarian Education and Culture and Slavonic Alphabet." This national day recognizes the work of Saints Cyril and Methodius, the two missionaries who are credited with founding the Slavonic alphabet in the 9th century.

During their mission in Great Moravia, they translated the Bible in the Old Church Slavonic language and created the Glagolitic alphabet, which later served as the basis of the Cyrillic alphabet. Their disciples went to the South Slavic regions of the first Bulgarian empire and further developed and formalized Cyrillic. Today the alphabet is used by some 300 million people in 12 countries in Eastern Europe and Northern and Central Asia.

In 2007, Bulgaria joined the European Union and Cyrillic became the third official alphabet of the EU. In 2018, Bulgaria proudly assumed the Presidency of the Council of the European Union for the first time since joining the EU.

This year is a significant year for a very special Bulgarian legacy that remained hidden from public records until after the fall of the Iron Curtain. We commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of

the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews from the Holocaust and remember the thousands who had been deported from Macedonia and Thrace during World War II.

Bulgaria was the first Eastern European country that prevented nearly 50,000 Jews from being deported because of the heroic and courageous Bulgarians who stood up in the face of tyranny and bravely defended human life.

In March of 1943, when the trains from the extermination camps in Treblinka rolled into Bulgaria to transport all the Bulgarian Jews, the entire populace of Bulgaria stood together as a human shield to protect their Jewish neighbours. Bakers hid Jews in their ovens. The farmers in the countryside threatened to lie on the tracks so that trains could not pass. Citizens risked their lives printing thousands of forged baptismal certificates, and the churches opened their doors to provide shelter.

Strategic interventions were made by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Bishops Stephan and Kiril, who pleaded with the Tsar, and Deputy Speaker Dimitar Peshev, who mobilized 43 members of Parliament to sign a petition letter to the government. Finally, it was Tsar Boris who ultimately did not surrender the Bulgarian Jews to Hitler, citing labour shortages.

Today we remember and honour all the Bulgarians who did not remain silent in the face of evil and whose courage and love of humanity saved nearly 50,000 Bulgarian Jews from death. An exhibition was held in March at the inaugural "Bulgaria Day on the Hill" and will be again displayed in Vancouver on May 27 in commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary.

Honourable senators, please join me in applauding the Bulgarian people for their proud legacy of compassion and bravery.
