

This life – what is it? In the end, we only exist in the minds, memories, and recollections of others, don't we?
Mordekhay Bachayev¹

Introduction

This book is about the Soviet past of Central Asian Jews. It is an attempt to shed some light on the lives of those Central Asian Jews who, in the second half of the 19th century, came under Russian and then, in the 1920s, Soviet rule and are commonly known as Bukharan Jews. More precisely this book explores how individuals who regard themselves as Bukharan Jews perceived and experienced their life in the Soviet Union, and how they told me about it. I am approaching this Soviet past through autobiographical narrations told to me by Bukharan Jews between 2004 and 2010.

I prefer to use the term “autobiographical narration” rather than “life story” because none of my interlocutors limited their narrations to their own, individual experiences, but delved into their family histories extensively. They started their autobiographical narrations with stories of their parents, grandparents or great-grandparents, or dedicated a large amount of time to them. The term “autobiographical narration” also better relates to “autobiographical memory,” which has been described as a “relay function” to “safeguard coherence” and bind the individual to a social group or society.² I read these autobiographical narrations as cultural artefacts of a particular time and place and my aim is to put them in relation to one another and to society as a whole. With the help of other kinds of sources (such as memoirs, encyclopaedias, literature, photographs, statistics) and secondary literature, these autobiographical narrations have been contextualised, interpreted, and compared in this study. Concomitantly, these narrations extend the existing knowledge of Bukharan Jews and shed new light on publications and materials hitherto available on them. David B. Edwards, whose inspirational books on Afghan history I read at the final stage of work on my thesis, rightfully states that “we can learn much that would otherwise be obscure by looking at individual lives and trying to understand their connection to larger historical and cultural processes”.³ In this sense, the ultimate objective of this book is an oral history of Bukharan Jews and their recollections of life in Central Asia at a time that Yuri Slezkine has termed as “the Jewish century”.⁴

At the end of the 20th century, and especially after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, an exodus of Bukharan Jews from Central Asia came to pass. Since then Bukharan Jewish life has almost vanished in the former Soviet republics of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Today Bukharan Jewish communities are spread all over the world, with large communities living in Israel and the United States, and smaller ones in some European cities (primarily Vienna). Thus it was clear from the beginning of my research that I would be better off doing a piece of multi-sited ethnography than conducting a traditional ethnographic study of one particular place.

¹ “In zindagi, chi zinda? Mo aknun az khotir-i inho ba yoddoshto mumkin boshem, dar yoddosht, ki falonu misol haminkhel budand guftagi-i yoddosht” Interview with Mordekhay ben Hiyo Bachayev (2006, 09:35–09:46)

² Welzer [2008, 292–293]

³ Edwards [2002, xviii] See also Edwards [1996]

⁴ Slezkine [2004]

I recorded Bukharan Jewish autobiographical narrations in Central Asia (Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), Europe (Austria, Germany and Russia), and Israel, and I also interviewed Bukharan Jews who live in the United States of America today.⁵

When I began my research on Bukharan Jews, my knowledge on them was mainly drawn from 19th- and early 20th-century travel literature, and some academic publications on *the* Bukharan Jews before, during, and after the Soviet period. Since the 1990s a wealth of material on Bukharan Jewish culture, history, and identity has been published, yet there were and still are only very few publications dealing with this group from the late 1930s until the breakup of the Soviet Union.⁶ In academic and popular discourse the community of Bukharan Jews is often shown as static, monolithic, and cut off from the rest of the world.⁷ The Soviet era in particular is seen as a period in which Central Asia's Jews struggled to preserve their identity and "had little incentive to leave their home villages and towns in search of employment, education, or high culture. Geographic mobility ... remained low and social boundaries remained high."⁸ So far little attention has been paid to individuals, let alone the lives or memories of "ordinary people", or to the ways the culture, history and identity of Bukharan Jews in the Soviet Union were perceived "from below". In contrast, central to my study is the proposition that Bukharan Jews are not now, nor have they ever been, a homogenous group. In order to get a more dynamic, nuanced, and complex understanding of Bukharan Jewish culture, history, and identity, I seek to explore the ways in which Bukharan Jews themselves represent the cultural, religious, and social patterns and conditions of their group, and their lives in the Soviet Union. Social and spatial mobility play a decisive role in all autobiographical narrations I have listened to and collected from Bukharan Jews: Stories of migration and flight to, within and from Central Asia were part of the personal or family history of almost all of my interlocutors. In Tsarist and in Soviet Central Asia new Bukharan Jewish communities were founded. Individuals and families occupied emerging cultural, economic, and social spheres. Many Bukharan Jews left their home towns in search of education and employment, or because of political pressure and instability. What I term 'multi-locality' shaped and influenced the self-perception and identity of Jews in Central Asia in Soviet times and before. For Bukharan Jews "looking out for one's identity" did not start "in the wake of communism", as the title of one of Alanna Cooper's inspiring articles suggests.⁹ It was rather an ongoing process that reacted, adjusted to or subverted boundaries and definitions designated by the prevailing political and social setting. Questions concerning identity and belonging and self-assurance as to their own community, culture, and history are the starting point for many of the popular encyclopaedias and books that have been published by Bukharan Jews in the past decades, and which provide genealogical and biographical information of successful immigrants

⁵ Interviewing and recording were part of the oral-history project "Bukharan Jews: Making meaning of memories and identity" This project was financed by the German Israeli Foundation (GIF) and conducted by the Department of Middle Eastern and African History at Tel Aviv University and the Central Asian Seminar of Humboldt University, Berlin

⁶ Tolmas [2004] provides a rich (yet incomplete) bibliography on Bukharan Jews in Hebrew, Russian, Tajik, English and some other European languages

⁷ There are some exceptions here, viz the excellent ethnographic works by Z.L. Amitin-Shapiro ([1931], [1933a], [1933b]); the post-Soviet publications on music by Theodore Levin (Levin [1996, 260–287]); on language by Lutz Rzehak (Rzehak [2001, 259–290] and [2008]); on identity by Alanna Cooper (Cooper [2003b], [2004], [2008] and [2012]); and on early Soviet history by Zeev Levin (Levin [2006], [2008a], [2008b], and [2012], whose translation to English is eagerly anticipated

⁸ Cooper [2012, 21]

⁹ Cooper [2003c]

to the new Bukharan Jewish diasporas.¹⁰ These publications, as well as family histories and memoirs, were frequently printed in small private editions and were only distributed within the Bukharan Jewish communities. This is also true for the many family histories and memoirs which were mostly published by men of letters writing about themselves or about others on the occasion of their birthday or death.¹¹ In the introduction to one of the encyclopaedias mentioned above, Yosif Mosheev asks the most fundamental questions and directly addresses his compatriots:

“There comes the time when each of us, representative of the multi-faceted but united Jewish nation asks oneself and others the same sacred questions: Who are we? Where are we from? Why are we so different? For many of us these questions remain without a clear and unequivocal answer.”¹²

Bukharan Jewish memoirs and autobiographical narrations also tackle these questions. They inform us about the complexity of their history and draw a bright and sometimes sombre picture of Bukharan Jewish life in Central Asia. This book tackles these questions, too. It hopefully will contribute to a better understanding of the complexities and ambiguities of Bukharan Jewish past and demonstrate how mobile, diverse, and interconnected Bukharan Jewish communities and culture in fact are and were, especially in Soviet times.

Who are the “Bukharan Jews”

While the history of Jewish communities in Central Asia dates back well into the pre-Islamic period, the use of the term “Bukharan Jews” to denote all Jews of Transoxania¹³ is relatively new. Initially the term was adopted by Russian and European travellers to Central Asia in the late 18th and early 19th century, who spread the news of Persian (Fārsi) speaking Jews living in the realm of the Bukharan Emir. Apparently, these Jews called themselves *yabudi*, *israel* or *ban-i Isroel* that is “Jew” or “Israelite”. Likewise, the Central Asian Muslims called (and still call) their Jewish neighbours *yabudi* or *jubud*.¹⁴ Within both groups the main pattern of self-identification apart from religion would have been the town or region where one was born or living in. Community mattered, and therefore it was important whether one or one’s family was from Bukhara, Kokand, Samarkand, Shahrīsabz or Tashkent, to name but a few Central Asian towns with significant Jewish population in the late 19th and early 20th century.

The official usage of the term “Bukharan Jews” (*bukharskie evrei*) is directly connected to Russian colonial rule and the attempts to classify the Central Asian population and incorporate it into the Empire. This colonial project of detecting and “inventing” ethnic groups and nations was

¹⁰ See Mosheev [1995], [1997] and [1999] on Israel, Kandinov [1996] on the United States, and Galibov [2001] on Vienna. For details of Bukharan Jewish genealogies (including some of my interview partners), see Griniv [2008].

¹¹ For a list of published Bukharan Jewish family histories, see Tolmas [2004, 115–119]. Bukharan Jewish memoirs which I have at hand are Gulkarov [2004], Shalamaev [2000] (about themselves) and Shalamūyev [1996] and Mahvashev [2005] (about others). Mosheev [2004] presents more than 100 short biographies of deceased Bukharan Jews. On the memoirs of Mordekhay Bachayev [1988/1989], see the chapter on Mordekhay Bachayev.

¹² Mosheev [1999, 5].

¹³ *Transoxania* (the Greek translation of the Arab term *Maʿvarāʾ al-nahr* “Beyond the river [Oxus/Amudarya]”) is a current designation for the area between the Amudarya and the Syrdarya. I use the term for all those territories of Central Asia that were incorporated into the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.

¹⁴ Cf. Rzehak [2001, 259–260], Sukhareva [1966, 167], and Zand [1989a, 530–531].

continued with even greater eagerness and completed in the early Soviet era.¹⁵ When the Governorate-General of Turkestan was established in 1867, Russian legislation and administration distinguished between Central Asian Jews who had lived on the territory of Russian Turkestan before the conquest, the so called “native Jews” (*tuzemnye evrei*), and those who immigrated only later and who were called “foreign Jews” (*inostrannye evrei*).¹⁶ Attracted by the favourable economic and political conditions under Russian rule, Jews from adjacent regions came to Russian Turkestan to trade or settled down there with their families. Jewish migrants and refugees from the Emirate of Bukhara, but also from Northern Afghanistan, Herat, and Mashhad arrived in Tsarist Central Asia and the number of Jews in the towns of Russian Turkestan increased greatly. According to Albert Kaganovich, between 1873 and 1914 the numbers of Jewish residents in Samarkand grew from 2,000 to more than 12,000, in Tashkent from 500 to nearly 3,000 and in the Ferghana province from 500 to 4,000.¹⁷ While the Russian administration recognised “native Jews” as Russian citizens, the Jewish newcomers to Turkestan were regarded as resident foreigners. Part of these groups merged into the local Jewish communities, others merely settled in quarters of their own. From the Emirate of Bukhara, yet another group of Jews moved to Russian Turkestan: the so called Chala – Jews or the offspring of Jews who had been forced to abandon Judaism against their will, but continued practicing their religion secretly. The Russian authorities regarded Chala as Jews and allowed them to stay. After immigration, these Chala openly returned to Judaism.¹⁸ Only those Jews who continued to live within the borders of the Bukharan Emirate, which existed until 1920, were called “Bukharan Jews” (*bukharskie evrei*) by the colonial authorities.¹⁹

With the 1917 revolutions, the state’s attitude towards the Central Asian Jews changed once again.²⁰ In the 1920s and 1930s, they were considered a “national minority group” (Russ. *natsional’noe men’shinstvo*, Tajik *mayda millat*) and therefore received special attention and support from the state.²¹ In the first few years of Soviet rule, the term *bukharskii* disappeared from official usage, and the term *tuzemnyi* (native) was replaced by *mestnyi* (local). In the language of the Bukharan Jews, *mestnye evrei* (local Jews) was translated as *yahudiyon-i mahalli*. By the early 1930s, *sredneaziatskie evrei* (“Central Asian Jews” or *yahudiyon-i osiyo-i miyona* in Tajik) became most widely

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of Russian and Soviet approaches, policies and techniques to classify and rule the Central Asian population and its consequences cf. Abashin [2007, esp. 1–8], Hirsch [2000] and [2005], and Slezkine [1994]. Compare also Baldauf [1991] (on the Uzbeks), Edgar [2006] (on the Turkmen), Rzehak [2001] and [2004] (on the Tajiks), and Zand [1991a] (on the Jews).

¹⁶ Ashkenazi (i.e. European or “Russian”) Jews who had come to Central Asia as conquerors or settled there after the Russian conquest were a third category of Jews. On Ashkenazi Jews in Turkestan, see Rabich [1995b].

¹⁷ Cf. Levin [2015, 11]. On the smaller groups of Mashhadi and Herati Jews in Central Asia, see Kupovetskii [1992], Kaganovich [2007] and the chapter on Arkadi Il’yasov. Emelyanenko [2009] also mentioned Jews from Kashgar who had come to Russian Turkestan in the 19th century.

¹⁸ The Jewish law (*halakha*) calls these groups of forced converts “anusim” (the “forced ones”). In Central Asia they were commonly known as *chala*. On the Chala, see Kaganovich [1997] and [2003], Kurbanov/Al’meev [2005], and the chapter on Boris Yunusov.

¹⁹ From the mid-1860s to the late 1910s the Russian rulers’ attitude towards their Jewish subjects underwent several changes. On the different categories and the legal situation of Central Asian Jews in Russian Turkestan, see Levinskii [1928], Amitin-Shapiro [1931], Emelyanenko [2009], Gubaeva [1995], Kaganovich [2003a], Rabich [1995], and Yakubov [2008].

²⁰ On the “Declaration of Rights of Native Jews” and the “(Bukharan) Jewish Question”, see Yakubov [2008].

²¹ Amitin-Shapiro [1933] and [1935, esp. 126–135]. In summer 1926 Fayzullo Khojayev, then chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars (Sovnarkom) of Uzbekistan, had held a famous speech at the Bukharan Jewish quarter of Samarkand that according to Levin [2015, 83–85] marked a “turning point” in the relation of the state towards the Bukharan Jews. Only then Bukharan Jews were officially regarded to be part of the native population and received special treatment and support as a “national minority group”.

used in Soviet publications.²² At the same time *yabudibo-i bukhori* appeared as a self-designation within that sphere.²³

By the late 1930s efforts to develop a secular Bukharan Jewish culture and identity were halted by the Soviet authorities, and so were publications in the Bukharan Jewish language. Consequently these terms, which had come to be used in Soviet media and scientific publications as well as in official documents and statistics, vanished from official discourse and from the spoken language.²⁴ From that time on, all Jewish communities under Soviet rule, Ashkenazi (European Jews) and non-Ashkenazi Jews such as Krymchaks, Mountain Jews, Georgian Jews, and Bukharan Jews were grouped together under the ethnic/national label of *evrei*, “Jew”.²⁵

Interestingly the matter of self-designation developed in the opposite direction. As a means of distinguishing themselves from Ashkenazim, other non-Ashkenazi Jewish communities in the Soviet Union, and also from local Muslims, the most common self-denomination used by Bukharan Jews in the second half of the 20th century was (and still is) *bukhori*, *bukhoroï* or *yabudiyon-i bukhori* (‘Bukharans’ or ‘Bukharan Jews’). As Alanna Cooper has shown, “Bukhara” as the marker of self-designation for all Jews from Central Asia emerged at the turn of the 20th century among Jewish emigrants from Central Asia in Palestine, in order to “define themselves as separate and distinct from both the Ashkenazi community and the Sephardi community in Jerusalem” and to call upon all the Jews still living in the towns of Central Asia. “In 1890” Cooper continues, “the society founded by the Jews from Central Asia was named ‘The Society of Lovers of Zion to build houses for people of Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent and their outskirts.’ In 1904 ... the name of the society ... had become shorter and simpler: ‘The Society of Bukhara and its outskirts’”.²⁶ From then on, one could argue, the term “Bukharan Jews” gradually became the main self-designation of Persian speaking Jews from and in Russian, and latterly Soviet and Post-Soviet, Central Asia. Even though pre-modern markers of Bukharan Jewish identity – place of origin and residence – have at all times remained important, I will retain to that designation, too.²⁷

Mobility, Continuity and Change

Due to a lack of sources, very little is known about the Central Asian Jews before the 19th century, and Walter J. Fischel’s observation that “the history of Jewish settlements in the different parts of Central Asia since the Islamic conquest is still shrouded in great obscurity” holds true even today.²⁸ Nevertheless, quite a few scholars have attempted to reconstruct the pre-Islamic and medieval past of Jews in Central Asia.²⁹ References to Jewish communities of Transoxania in the Book of Esther and in the Babylonian Talmud, as well as excavations of

²² Bachayev [1988, 356–357]

²³ Rzehak [2001, 260]

²⁴ It is not clear whether any of these official terms actually entered into people’s everyday speech. On the promotion and development of the Bukharan Jewish language in the Soviet Union, see further below (“Culture and Language”)

²⁵ For details on the non-Ashkenazi Jewish communities in the Soviet Union, see Zand [1991a]

²⁶ Cooper [2003a, 198] For details on this and subsequent waves of Jewish emigration from Central Asia to Palestine and Israel, see further below (“Waves of emigration”)

²⁷ Even today, with the Bukharan Jewish community scattered over several continents and a host of countries the regional pattern of identification plays a major role in financial care and family interactions. See for example Cooper [2008]

²⁸ Fischel [1945, 29]

²⁹ Cf. Ya’ari [1942], Fischel [1945], [1964] and [1982]; Tajer [1970]; Zand [1989a], Levy [1999], and Ochildiev [2004]

ancient Jewish inscriptions near the ancient city of Marv (in today's Turkmenistan) prove a long presence of Jews and the Jewish faith in Central Asia.³⁰ Bukharan Jewish oral tradition about their origin refer to the end of the Babylonian exile, more than two thousand years ago, while others link the arrival of Jews in the towns along the Silk Roads to Amir Timur.³¹ These oral traditions show that “the ethnic group of the Central Asian Jews emerged from various immigrations that took place at different times, not directly from their homeland – Palestine – but rather from the adjacent regions of Central Asia...”³² My interlocutors all knew these stories. In their autobiographical narrations, though, these oral traditions of ancient migrations are often told in conjunction with the experience of more recent ones. Many of the Bukharan Jews I have met traced the arrival of their ancestors to Central Asia back to the late 18th, 19th or early 20th century.³³

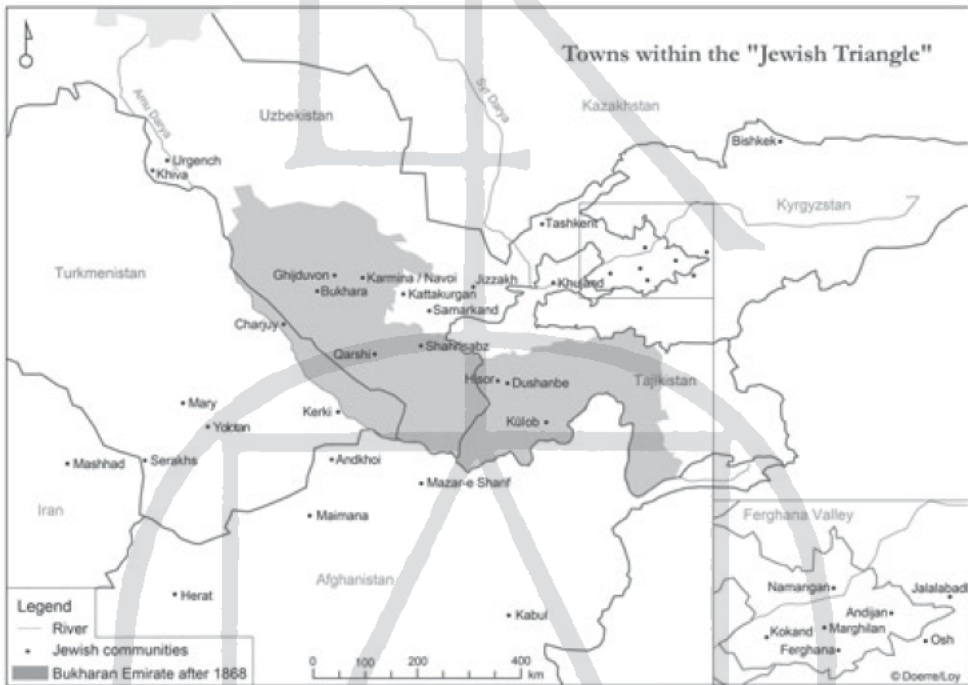


Figure 1: Towns with Jewish population within the “Jewish Triangle”

³⁰ Zand [1989a, 531–532]

³¹ On Bukharan Jewish oral traditions regarding the group's origins, cf. Sukhareva [1966, 166–167], Burton [1997, 45–46] and Galibov [2001, 17–18]. Landsdell [1903, 624–627] came across several stories of origin and migration and the “lost-tribe theory” recounted by Bukharan Jewish informants during his journey to Samarkand and Bukhara in 1882.

³² Sukhareva [1966, 167]. Sometimes the origin of a person or family is indicated by their family names or nicknames (*laqab*) such as Balkhi, Ironi, Kobuli, Arabov and the like; see *Narody...* [1963, 611] and Tolmas [2005, 66].

³³ See the chapters on Arkadii I'yasov and Rafael Yodgorov.

Iran, Afghanistan and Transoxania: “The Jewish Triangle”

Scholars usually rely on Benjamin of Tudela, the 12th-century Jewish traveller, for the oldest testimony of the Central Asian Jewish diaspora, which “at an early date spread all over Khorasan, Trans-Oxania, Khwarizm and other Central Asiatic territories”.³⁴ Traditionally, these territories south and north of the Amudarya and its major urban centres (Balkh, Bukhara, Herat, Mashhad, Marv and Samarkand) were culturally highly integrated and became known as Khorasan and Khwarizm (Khiva, Urgench).³⁵ Today these territories of the medieval Muslim East are part of North-Afghanistan, North-Eastern Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. According to Nisim Tager, until the 20th century the local Jews used to call these lands “the Jewish triangle”.³⁶

As was the case everywhere in the Islamic world, the Jews of the “Jewish triangle” had the status of *ahl al-dhimma* (‘the People of the Pact’). The pact known as the *Covenant of Omar* aimed at “setting the Muslim and non-Muslim communities apart” and “was based on three essential benefits: security of life and property, freedom of religion and internal communal autonomy.”³⁷ It also stipulated that Jews had to pay the *jizya* tax to the local Muslim ruler, accept the conditions of the pact, and follow certain restrictive rules regarding clothing, occupation, dwelling, houses of worship and behaviour in public space.³⁸ The Jews in Muslim lands were always heavily dependent on the ruling elites and the prevailing political situation. In scholarly literature dealing with the Jews of Central Asia, it is widely accepted that between the 16th and the 18th century the ongoing inner Islamic schism and dynastic rivalries led to “the separation of the Bukharan Jews from their Iranian and Afghan counterparts”. However, the same authors must concede that this separation “has not been completed,” as indicated by the similarities between Jewish ritual art and practices from Afghanistan, Iran, and Transoxania.³⁹

It is one aim of this study to show that the Jewish communities of Afghanistan, Northern Iran, and Transoxania remained connected well into Soviet times. Until the mid-1930s, when the Soviet state managed to seal its southern borders, flows and shifts of Jewish population within the Central Asian “triangle” occurred frequently and were motivated and shaped by changing political constellations and economic conditions. Time and again, individuals, families and larger groups abandoned their places of residence, crossed borders and moved on to neighbouring or distant towns where they joined local groups or founded new communities.⁴⁰

³⁴ Fischel [1964, 535] The author also mentions the Arab chronicler of the 13th century, Ibn al-Fūti, who provided information about the Jewish community of Bukhara, which was not mentioned by Benjamin of Tudela. See *ibid*

³⁵ On Khorasan and its limitations in pre-modern times and today, see Nölle-Karimi [2008]

³⁶ Tager [1970] I would like to thank Alanna Cooper for kindly letting me use her English summary of this work. On Judeo-Persian communities from medieval to the late 18th century, see Moreen [2009]. On the Qajar period (1786–1925), see Tsadik [2009] and Amanat [2009]. On Jewish communities in Afghanistan, see Brauer [1942], Bezael [1998], Koplik [2015], and Yehoshua-Raz [2010]. On Jews in Central Asia, see Zand [1989a]

³⁷ For a general introduction to the pact of the Umayyad Caliph ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Azīz, see Gilbert [2011, 27–38, citation 31]

³⁸ On the special restrictions imposed on Jews in the Emirate of Bukhara, see Abramov [1993, 6–7] and Amitin-Shapiro [1931, 9–12] and the observations made by Landsdell [1903, 623]. On the self-government of Bukharan Jews, see Amitin-Shapiro [1931, 12–14] and Zand [1989a, 535–536]

³⁹ Dymshits [1998a, 63]

⁴⁰ The story of Ya’kūv Samandar, a Sephardic Jew from Izmir who allegedly settled in Bukhara in the late 18th century was told by Bachayev [1988, 373–407] and translated into French by Catherine Poujol [1992]. On Yakov Papulya, a Sephardic rabbi and emissary, who came to Kokand from Palestine in 1911 to open a yeshiva, see Kandinov [1996, 10–16 and 366]

On the eve of the Tsarist conquest, Jews were not living exclusively in the towns of the Bukharan Emirate.⁴¹ As of the first half of the 19th century, Jews from all across the “triangle” began to settle in the prospering urban centres of the Khanate of Kokand.⁴² Like other groups of “internal strangers”, Central Asian Jews were “allowed or forced to specialize in certain jobs” that their Muslim neighbours “were unable or unwilling to perform” and therefore mainly occupied these economic niches.⁴³ They were also flexible and quick in adapting to social and economic transformation that came in the wake of the Russian annexation. While the majority of Central Asian Jews worked as craftsmen (most prominently as weavers and dyers) and retail traders, Jewish merchants and entrepreneurs from towns in the “Jewish triangle” were engaged in wholesale trade between Iran, Central Asia, the Russian Empire and even Europe. Along with cotton, karakul was the most important good traded by Central Asian Jews, “who were experts in preparing the lambskins, and finding markets throughout the world”. Karakul trade brought some of them as far as London and Leipzig (Germany), which used to be a centre of the European fur market until the early 1930s. This mobility heavily influenced and shaped the Bukharan Jewish communities during the time of Russian and Soviet rule, at least until the mid-1930s, when the Soviet borders to Afghanistan and Iran were finally closed and old patterns in cross-border trade and commerce within “the Jewish Triangle” were broken.⁴⁴ Even though they are (and always have been) a rather small urban diaspora group, Central Asian Jewish communities are far from being homogenous, and comprise various subgroups with specific cultural and linguistic peculiarities.⁴⁵

Culture and Language

Depending on their place of residence, Central Asian Jews differed in their clothing, cooking, housing and other cultural features.⁴⁶ Deeply influenced by their Muslim cultural environment, they even shared the cultural tastes of their Muslim neighbours.⁴⁷ In return, Central Asian Jews were (and still are) recognised by their Muslim neighbours as being outstanding musicians, dancers, actors, and craftsmen.⁴⁸

⁴¹ A list of Central Asian towns with a Jewish population on the eve of the Russian conquest is provided by Zand [1989a, 536]

⁴² On Bukharan Jews in the Ferghana Valley, see Poujol [1993] and the chapter on Raya Pinkhasova

⁴³ Slezkine [2004, 4]

⁴⁴ On pre-Soviet occupations and trade of Bukharan Jews, see *Narody...* [1963, 614–616], Abramov [1993, 23–27], Rabich [1995], and Vekselman [1995]. For more details about Jewish traders from Mashhad and Herat, who came to Central Asia after the Russian conquest, see Fischel [1964], Kupovetski [1992], Patai [1997] and the chapter on Arkadi Il'yasov. On Jews and karakul trade in Afghanistan and Central Asia, see Koplik [2015, citation 184] and the chapters on Arkadi Il'yasov (“The Soviet Experience”) and Rafael Yodgorov, who was himself a karakul trader

⁴⁵ See Abramov [1993] and *Gody, ljudi, fakty...* (on the Jews of Samarkand), Sukhareva [1966, 165–178] (on Bukhara), Gubaeva [1995] and Poujol [1993] (on the Ferghana Valley). On numbers, see also further below (“A Few Words on Numbers”)

⁴⁶ For illustrations of sacred and everyday objects, see the catalogues Bar'am-Ben Yossef [1998], Dymshits [1998a] and Sabar [2013]. On the clothing worn by Bukharan Jews, see *Narody...* [1963, 619–622] and Emelyanenko [1998] and on food, see *Narody...* [1963, 622–623] and Kimiagarov [2005]

⁴⁷ Lutz Rzehak told me about his experiences with a group of Bukharan Jewish musicians from New York who were his guests in Berlin in the late 1990s. They prepared Central Asian *plav* and started their meal – just like their former Muslim neighbours – by saying the *bismillah* prayer

⁴⁸ On famous Bukharan Jewish artists and musicians and their contribution to Central Asian cultural production, see for example Haimov [1993], Levin [1999, 89–130 and 260–287], Mahvashev [1985, 85–109] and Pinkhasov [2005a, vol 2, 178–297]. On Bukharan Jewish craftsmen and their professions, see the chapter on Mikhail Davidov

The Jewish communities of Iran, Afghanistan and Transoxania spoke local varieties of New Persian, which they wrote in the Hebrew script – the so-called Judeo-Persian. Texts written in Judeo-Persian are documented as far back as the 8th century. Translations and adaptations of religious literature from Hebrew into Judeo-Persian, as well as poetry in Judeo-Persian, can be traced back to the 14th century.⁴⁹ Various forms of poetry make up the largest part of the literary heritage of the Bukharan Jews. Bukharan Jewish poetry and folklore (tales *afsona*, riddles *chiston* or *qissayobak*, jokes *latifa*, tongue-twisters *tezgʻiyak*, proverbs *zarbu'l-masal*, etc.) and storytelling (*qissagʻū*) share many features with the corresponding Tajik and Uzbek genres, albeit with some differences in religious motifs and biblical subject-matter.⁵⁰

Just like the Persian variants spoken by Muslims, the Judeo-Persian dialects of the “Jewish triangle” varied greatly from one region to another and even from town to town, and were close to the prevailing dialects in their speakers’ respective places of residence. Dan Shapira has stated that “there has never been a variety of spoken JP [Judeo-Persian] common to all Persian-speaking Jews. The Jews spoke their local dialect, with some “Jewish” traits, just as their Muslim, Christian, or Zoroastrian neighbors spoke basically the same dialect, with their own communal, professional, or caste-based traits.”⁵¹ Like their Muslim neighbours many Central Asian Jews were bilingual (Persian/Turki)⁵². Hebrew was taught in religious schools (*kehmla*) and was used primarily as a liturgical language. The Bukharan Jewish vernacular comprised only very few Hebrew words, depending on the knowledge and the wishes of its speaker at a given moment. The same can be said of Russian, which gained influence among wealthier Jewish families after the Russian conquest but had little impact on the broader Jewish population until the early 20th century.⁵³

In the course of early Soviet language reforms in the late 1920s and early 1930s much effort was expended on distinguishing and separating the vernaculars of different Persian-speaking communities in Soviet Central Asia. From 1925 to 1940, alongside newspapers, poetry, prose and plays, textbooks and political brochures, many of which were translations from Russian, were published in the language of the Bukharan Jews.⁵⁴ Motivated by the Unionwide Latinisation campaign, Bukharan Jewish intellectuals invented a special alphabet based on the Latin script for their language. This Latin script was slightly different from the one developed for Tajik and

⁴⁹ For a comprehensive overview on Judeo-Persian literature, see Netzer [2009]. For Bukharan Jewish literature from the 19th to the 20th century, see Shalamūev/Tolmas [1998].

⁵⁰ A thorough study of the peculiarities of Bukharan Jewish folklore has yet to be undertaken. See Uvaydov [1994] and Bachayev [2007, vol. v, 273–350] for collections of Bukharan Jewish folklore. A list of further similar literature is to be found in Tolmas [2004, 124–133]. Soroudi [2008] presents a small corpus of folktales that bear testimony to the oral tradition of Jewish immigrants from Afghanistan, Central Asia and Iran. They were manually recorded in Israel between 1957 and 1994 (there are 1,458 texts altogether). Unfortunately, all these texts reached the Archives as translations into modern Hebrew and only transmitted the “bare bones” of the stories; see Soroudi’s introduction to the folktales; *ibid* [32–33]. For Jewish and Persian folktales tradition in Iran, see Ulrich Marzolph’s short introduction; *ibid* [33–39].

⁵¹ (<http://www.jewish-languages.org/judeo-persian.html> – accessed on 31.3.2010). For a historical overview on language use among Jewish communities speaking Iranian languages, cf. the introduction by Heda Jason and Benzion D. Yehoshua in Soroudi [2008, 13–31].

⁵² Since the 1920s these languages of Central Asia are known as Tajik and Uzbek respectively.

⁵³ On the spoken language of the Jews of Herat and Samarkand, cf. Zarubin [1924] and [1928]. On the vernacular of Jews in Bukhara, cf. Babaev [1991].

⁵⁴ In the 1920s and 30s the most common terms to denote this language were *zabon-i yahudiho-i bukbori* (the language of the Bukharan Jews) and *zabon-i yahudiho-i mahali* (the language of the local Jews).

remained in use until the late-1930s, when the language of Bukharan Jews was no longer regarded a language in its own right, but as a dialect of Tajik. Education and publishing in their language was stopped, and “the Bukharan Jews became part of the overall Tajik-speaking community by state order.”⁵⁵

From the 1930s onwards, Russian became *the* Soviet language and relegated all tongues that were not the native tongue of the titular nationality of the respective union or autonomous republic (including Tajik in the Uzbek SSR) into the private sphere. For the generations of Bukharan Jews born in the 1930s and later, Russian replaced “Tajik” as the main language of communication. While Bukharan Jews use *zabon-i bukhori* (the ‘Bukharan language’) or simply *bukhori* (‘Bukharan’) to denote their language and differentiate it from official Tajik, the term *Judeo-Tajik* can be found in recent publications, too.⁵⁶ Efforts to re-establish Bukharan Jewish culture “ex nihilo” in the Soviet Union of the late 1980s – that is, half a century after its destruction – were doomed to failure, since the last generation of writers and intellectuals who had access to the pre-Soviet cultural Jewish heritage was no longer alive or had left the Soviet Union way earlier.⁵⁷

Remote and Unconnected?

Until recently, Bukharan Jews have by and large been portrayed as an isolated diaspora, virtually forgotten and on “...the brink of complete religious dissolution. Cut off from the rest of Jewish world, in the heart of Asia, they would have suffered the fate of the Jews in China had Providence not led to their re-discovery through a ‘Messenger from Zion’”.⁵⁸ There are three main reasons for this ahistoric perception of the Jews of Central Asia, which still prevails in modern scholarship on Bukharan Jews.

First, the Eurocentric perspective: From the 16th to the 18th century, only very few foreigners reached the khanates of Bukhara, Khiva and Kokand or the regions south of the Amudarya. This situation changed during the 19th century. European travellers, scholars, administrators and Jewish emissaries joined the diplomatic and military race for new colonies. In their reports they conveyed a colourful and sometimes distorted picture of the “unknown” region and its “backward” Muslim population, contributing also to the Western knowledge about Central Asia’s Jewish communities.⁵⁹ Regrettably, this increase of information was often combined with a narrow-minded colonial world view, conveyed through its authors’ and readers’ fashionable love of exoticism and orientalism. Cultural encounters most often led to a negative, sombre perception of Central Asia, its culture and its population. Furthermore, the imperial perspective of the so-called “Great Game” produced an enormous selectivity, which still permeates modern

⁵⁵ Rzehak [2008, 37] On the development of the Bukharan Jewish language in Soviet times, see Rzehak [2001, 259–290] and [2008] On the creation and demolition of a Bukharan Jewish Soviet literature and other culture activities, see the chapter on Mordekhay Bachayev and Loy [2015]

⁵⁶ See for example Tolmas [2010] and Zand [1991a, 400–408]

⁵⁷ Zand [1991a, 408] On Bukharan Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union, see further below (“Waves of Emigration”)

⁵⁸ Fischel [1964, 538] On this “Messenger from Zion”, or “redeemer of Bokharian Jews from ignorance, isolation and disappearance” (ibid), see further below (note 63)

⁵⁹ First-hand accounts by travellers are provided by Adler [1905], Landsdell [1903], Olufson [1911] and Schuyler [1966] For a list of early travel diaries and literature dealing with Central Asian Jews like the works of D’Beth Hillel 1828, Eversmann 1823, Gens 1839, Lehmann 1852, Meyendorff 1826, Savel’yev 1836, Vambery 1865 and Wolff 1835 and 1846, see Zand [1989, 540–545]