



# The TUQAY

ESSAYS FROM BEYOND THE WELL-PROTECTED DOMAINS.

## The Bukharian Jews: The Story of a Mizrahi Community

by George Itzhak - 21.01.2013

Even at first glance, Aron Aronov has a demanding presence you can't forget. He doesn't stand very tall and he dresses in plain dark clothing, but there is something about the way he looks at you that is captivating. His gaze drills into your eyes, and he speaks rapidly, his furrowed brows moving in tune with the rhythm of his speech. As soon as he opened the door to his Museum, I was glad I brought my camera with me. I had spent the day filming an interview with my grandfather and his brother, and wasn't expecting to shoot much more. It is curious how these moments of serendipity can lead you into situations that have the power to actually change your life and the direction of your creative work.

Aron began to give us a tour of his Museum, the Bukharian Jewish Museum. As he readily points out, this is not a typical Museum. There are no white walls, no objects locked away behind glass cases. It feels like entering the attic of an eccentric hoarder. To be fair, this description is not totally incorrect. Every item, from the smallest war pin to the large traditional wagon used to carry brides away, has passed through Aronov's hands as he has spent a significant part of his life accumulating objects from Central Asia to paint an interactive picture of Bukharian Jewish life and culture.

To be clear, I am not a historian or a scholar. I am a Bukharian-American filmmaker and artist interested in telling the stories of my own people. When it comes to the origins and history of the Bukharian Jews, I reference Robert Pinkhasov, the doctor and writer who published the simply titled Bukharian Jews in both Russian and English.

The origin of Bukharian Jews can be traced back to the destruction of the Northern Israelite and Judean kingdoms. Exiled Jews left in droves, mostly northern and western, but a smaller number settled in the east, in what was then the Persian Empire. Many of them made the city of Bukhara their home, hence the name "Bukharian" Jews. In the 600s, the Arab conquest of Central Asia began and Islam became the dominant religion of the region. It was already evident here that the Bukharian Jews were taking steps to protect themselves from assimilation. They strove to live together in Jewish neighborhoods, and lived under their own rule with a community chief, called a kalontar. Despite varying levels of self-imposed segregation, cultural exchange did take place, and one can see many similarities in music, dance, food, and dress between Bukharian Jews and other Central Asian populations.

Starting in the 18th century, the Bukharian Jews could not escape the economic, cultural, and linguistic influence of the expanding Russian Empire on the Central Asian region. And in the 19th century, about 1,500 Bukharian Jews made their way to Palestine, but the installation of the Soviet Union cut ties between Central Asia and Jerusalem. It was in the Soviet period that Bukharian Jews faced significant challenges of assimilation as more and more Russians and Ashkenazi Jews settled in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and religion was de-emphasized in Soviet civic life. The Bukharian Jewish community also felt the effects of anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist campaigns in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. Despite these pressures, Bukharian-Jews found ways to practice their religion and traditions discreetly.

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Robert Pinkhasov writes that “[b]y the end of the 20th century, 74 communities of Bukharian Jews in 13 post-Soviet states ceased to exist.” The period of perestroika, and then the collapse of the Soviet Union saw Bukharian Jews take the opportunity to immigrate to the United States, Israel, and other countries like Austria, Australia, Germany, and Argentina.

The Bukharian Jews of New York today - who number between 40,000 and 50,000 according to most estimates - face the challenge of living in a country with no cultural or religious ties to their own heritage. But many of these Bukharians in New York live in geographically tight communities, as they have for generations in Uzbekistan. 108th Street, running through central Queens, is jokingly referred to as the “Bukharian Broadway.” The Bukharian Jews have their own community center and Congress, and there is a Russian-language newspaper targeted at Bukharians. The food, music, and dance are being kept alive.

Language, however, seems to be falling victim to the times. Bukhori, the Persian dialect originally spoken by Bukharian Jews, is rare to hear amongst young Bukharians, although there is an effort to revive the language. This puts the new generations of Bukharians at an important crossroads: of deciding how much assimilation will permeate the community, of writing the next chapter of the history of this tiny group of Mizrahim, Jews from the East. ❀

