

Remembering Old Bukhara

Brief History

Bukharian Jews stem from Central Asia and speak a dialect of the Tajik language. Their name comes from the Uzbek city of Bukhara, which once had a large Jewish community. These Jews trace their ancestry to the Israelites who never returned from the Babylonian captivity after exile in the 7th century BCE. The community was essentially cut off from the rest of the Jewish world for more than 2,000 years and managed to survive in the face of countless odds. They are considered one of the oldest ethno-religious groups of Central Asia where they developed their own distinct culture.

During the spread of Islam in the 7th and 8th centuries, control of Bukhara was transferred between many different Islamic administrations. In 1219, the Mongols, led by Genghis Khan, conquered Bukhara, pillaging and burning the city to the ground, destroying the Bukhara Jewish community. In the beginning of the 16th century, Central Asia was invaded and conquered by nomadic Uzbek tribes who established strict observance of Islam and religious fundamentalism. During this period many Jews were forced to convert to Islam. The town of Bukhara eventually became a center of Jewish life in Central Asia, absorbing Jews fleeing cities located in the midst of battles between warring Islamic parties. More Jews relocated to Bukhara when the city of Samarkand was destroyed by an earthquake in the 16th century.

Because of their ability to speak numerous languages, Bukharian Jews often acted as liaisons between various groups of foreign traders. Some Jews were financiers, others were known for their crafts, especially the dyeing of cloth, and silk weaving. Wealthier Jews invested in caravans which traveled the Great Silk Road.

In 1793, Hakham Yosef Mammon, a Sephardic Jew from Safed came to Bukhara to collect funds for yeshivot (rabbinical colleges) in the holy land. Hakham Maman was born in Morocco, and history remembers him as the man who revitalized the declining Jewish community in Bukhara. Not only did he settle there, but he soon became a community leader and changed the Persian nusakh (religious tradition) to the Sephardic tradition.

In the 19th century, Bukharian Jews were joined by Jews from other parts of what would become part of the Soviet Union. These new arrivals noticed the distinctive splendor of the costumes and customs of the Bukharian Jews. The woman's costume included a loose-fitting ikat silk gown in shades of rose or violet, over which was worn an elaborately-embroidered coat with kimono sleeves, called a kaltshak. Head-covering was either an embroidered cap or tulle scarf with a jeweled forehead ornament. Other jewelry included bracelets, earrings and coin necklaces. Until modern times, Bukharian Jewish men wore a caftan-like garment called a djoma, secured at the waist by a cord girdle. Over the djoma was worn a long, loose-fitting flared coat. The usual head-covering was made of Astrakhan, short curled lamb hair, or a handsomely embroidered kippah. While Jewish men were forbidden to wear the turban, the rest of their clothing did not differ from Bukharian Muslim dress of the period.

In the middle of the 19th century, many Bukharian Jews began to move to Palestine, and there they established the well known Bukharian Quarter (Sh'hunat Buhori), that still exists today in Jerusalem. They had arrived by railroad and on animals, many bought land in Jerusalem either to live in, or to visit; some desired to hold onto the land in the event of a pogrom or persecution from which they would have to flee from their native land. At this time, many Jews began to support many of the Russian influences on Central Asia as a way to escape the persecution they had faced under the Muslim governments. This compliance with the Russian influence put them at odds with the Islamic majority, and there were riots against the Jews for most of the time between 1918 and 1920.

Despite Russian anti-Semitism and intermittent persecution, Soviet society allowed many Bukharian Jews to obtain higher education and enter professions. Some Jews attained prominent status in the sciences, medicine, education, engineering, and the performing arts. But, an individual's elevation in the Soviet social and occupational system depended on suppressing public evidence of religious practice. Russian became the primary language of the educated class of Bukharian Jews. Outside Tashkent and Dushanbe, Bukharian Jews also spoke Uzbek (Turkic) and Tajiki (Persian), the languages of the Muslim majority.

During WWII, many Jews from Europe and the Soviet Union went to Bukhara to seek refuge there. Not until 1948, when the State of Israel was formed, did the Jews turn to the Soviet government for protection. Such protection was granted until the Six Day War of 1967, after which the Soviet Union cut ties with Israel. From then on, the Soviet government repressed all freedoms of religious expression and blocked emigration to Israel.

With the final disintegration of the Soviet Union and foundation of the independent Republic of Uzbekistan in 1991, there was an abrupt growth of nationalism, chauvinism, and xenophobia in Uzbek public consciousness; because of this, over the next two decades, over 100,000 Bukharian Jews immigrated to Israel, another 50,000 to the United States and about 2,000 still remain in Uzbekistan; there are several synagogues, schools and communities remaining in Uzbekistan today. Today, no matter where they dwell, the Bukharian Jews maintain many of their unique customs and celebrate their proud traditions.