How Did the Jews Spread over Asia

Jews are Asians. They have their roots in Asia, they flourished in Asia, and they dispersed mostly in Asia.

It is possible that already in the 1st century B.C. the number of Jews outside Palestine was greater than the number in it. No reliable figures exist, and the estimates vary greatly. It is probable, however, that there were between two to three million Jews in Palestine and a somewhat larger number in the different lands of their dispersion.

There are direct links between Babylonian Jewry, Persian Jewry and the Jews of Central Asia. With regard to the Jews of Babylon, two facts are of outstanding importance. First, they made up the most numerous Jewish community of the Diaspora; second, while the others were exposed to Hellenistic influences, Babylonian Jews were not or almost not. The Babylonian Jews lived in a country which was not part of the Roman Empire and when, later, a Roman emperor attempted to conquer it, he met the most desperate resistance from the Jews. The Jews participated in the rebellions against Trajan in Mesopotamia in 116 A.D.¹ The community had grown enormously since the days of Cyrus when part of it had left to launch the second Jewish state. First the Jews lived in compact masses in a fertile region between the Tigris and Euphrates. Later, when Mesopotamia became a province of the huge Persian Empire, Jews were able to travel and to settle down practically everywhere within its borders. There is, for example, an ancient Jewish cemetery said to date from the second century A.D. not far from Shiraz in modern Iran. For our topic it is important that the Persian Jews took an active part in organizing the silk trade, an advantage they owed to the evident support of the local kings.²

The question of the first Jewish appearance in Central Asia is itself divided into two separate questions. First, when did the first Jew visit this part of the world? Second, when did a sizable Jewish community settle down in the region?

Alas, we have no definite historical sources to help us in answering these questions. We may speculate that the first Jews visited Central Asia before the time of Alexander the Great. Most probably it had happened during the existence of the ancient Achaemenid Persian Empire in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. Being in its Zenith, the Achaemenid dynasty ruled all the lands from Egypt to Khorezm. It means that 99 percent of the Jews were its subjects at that time. Being within the borders of a huge state and having no restrictions in wandering some Jews could penetrate Central Asia up to Khorezm. We have, in fact, definite facts about people moving in opposite directions. For example, Khorezmann troopers took part in the great Greek-Persian war of 480 B.C. The Khorezmian soldier Dargman carried his military duties in the Jewish garrison of the Elephantine Island in upper Egypt.³ Therefore it is possible that some brave Jewish merchant moved to Central Asian terra incognita instead.

It was a time of the Persian kingdom of Sassanid dynasty. In addition to the semi-legendary Esther, Jewish wife of biblical Achashverosh (could be Xerxes I (486-465 B.C.) or Artaxerxes II (404-361 B.C.)), Sassanian Persia, being a state with several religions practiced, presented Jewish history with another, absolutely real, Jewish queen, Shushan-Dukht, wife of the Sassanian king, Yazdigird I (399-420 A.D.).⁴
This fact does not mean, of course, that Persian Jews lived without any troubles. From time to time, but not too frequently, there were anti-Jewish riots. One of these riots, for example, took place in Isphahan under king Peroz (459-484 A.D.). The riot was sparked by uncontrolled rumors of the murder of two Zoroastrian priests by Jews.\(^5\) This was the main problem for Jews, for pre-Islamic Persia was a state with numerous cults which fought each other. In addition to Christians and Jews there were Zoroastrians, Manichaens and Mazdaikes.

In general the Jews were very loyal to the Persian rulers. At the beginning of the 7th century, the Jews watched Persian attacks against Orthodox Christian Byzantine Empire with great expectancy and joyfully welcomed the conquest of Jerusalem in 614 A.D. Jews learned Persian dari language. There are evidences that at a very early date the Jews were writing dari in Hebrew characters.\(^6\)

Although the Jews were less irksome than Manichaens to the Zoroastrians, they antagonized the Christians all the more. Being however dependents on fluctuating religious preferences of Persian kings, Jews did not resist Arabs too much when the Islamic armies came.

Arab conquest of Persia and Central Asia gave historians more reliable facts on Jewish history in the region. Naturally, these facts can be found in historical books of Arab scholars of the time. In general, the Arab conquest was a convenient event for the Asian Jews. Baron wrote:

“...the Jews gained in strength under Islam. Not only in Babylon, their national and religious center during the last pre-Islamic centuries, but in Persia and in Palestine, in Egypt and all the rest of North Africa, in Spain and in many adjacent countries, the Jews increased in number and influence, duplicating in a way the experience of the Second Commonwealth.”\(^7\)

Wherever the Arabs went in Asia the Jews were not foreigners to them. They lived among the Arabs in Arabia for ages. The anti-Jewish suras of the Koran contained dangerous tinder for fanaticism, but for a long time that tinder seldom kindled. Having achieved the status of a world power, Islam proved to be tolerant. Muslim civilization developed a high culture, and it is very well known that the children of Israel made notable contributions to it.

However, the Arab Empire had erected a mighty barrier around all Christian lands and Central Europe had been cut off from Egypt, Near East and other Asian territories. The Jews alone were still in a position to mediate between the Christian West and the Muslim East. This position gave the Jews some advantages in trade.\(^8\)

When Arabs conquered Persia in the middle of the 7th century, people who in accordance with the precepts of the Koran were recognized as “People of the Book,” that is to say the Jews and Christians, could continue in their former faith as dhimmis. This term applied to followers of recognized religions. All the other religions were counted as pagan and a Muslim was obliged to fight against their followers in the holy war of jihad. Dhimmis however were obliged to pay the special additional poll-tax for non-Islamic citizens of Islamic countries—djizya. In case if a non-Muslim was a landowner, he was also obliged to pay the tax of kharaj for his land.

That is why the Islamic rule in Persia, especially in the early days of the conquest, sat more lightly upon Christians and Jews than had the rule of the previous Zoroastrian state. At first only Christians and Jews were counted as dhimmi as those specifically mentioned in the Koran. However later Zoroastrians were also counted in the ranks of “People of the Book.”\(^9\) And these Zoroastrians were spread in Central Asia too. In Bukhara Zoroastrians sacrificed a rooster each day of Nauruz (a New Year) at the tomb of legendary king and hero Siyavush. These Bukharian Zoroastrians lived with their Jewish neighbors and Nestorian Christians in the same city. Later Muslim treatment of the Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians in Persia and Central Asia varied in accordance with the policies of the caliphs and attitudes of different local governors.

Zoroastrians did not stop fighting other religions, including Judaism and Islam, after the Arab conquest. The treatise *Skand-Gumanik Vicar* became their last ideological book to set a true faith. This book tried to prove superiority of Zoroastrianism over Judaism, Christianity, Manichaem and Islam.\(^10\) In these circumstances it was natural for Muslims to cooperate with Jews. When the Arabs defeated the Sassanian dynasty, they found in Persia an intact system of Jewish self-government led by the exilarch, a truly political official and rich landowner. This self-government became even more important under the
Having conquered Persia, the Arabs moved to Central Asia in the 8th century. Much less is known about Jews in Central Asia compared with Persian Jews. Modern books on the history of Diaspora or on Jews in Muslim countries just skipped the subject. A book dedicated to the subject of Central Asia Jews was published in Russia in 1995. This book also skipped the subject of early Jewish presence in the region being mostly concentrated on the last 200 years of Jewish history in Asia.

However there are some indicators of Jewish presence in Transoxania. In 1937-1947 the Russian archeologist and historian S. Tolstov had spent years of field work in the northern part of Central Asia called Khorezm. Khorezm was an independent state before the Arab conquest. Using his archeological evidence and analyzing historical sources, mainly Arab history of Tabari, Tolstov became aware of Jewish presence in Khorezm during pre-Islamic period. He discovered that Khorezm religious leaders of the early 8th century were called in Arabic habr (pl. ahbar) which means “a Jewish scholar” or “learned rabbi.” Tolstov excavated coins of the time which had inscriptions in Khorezmian language written with Hebrew square alphabet. There was also a trefoil at the coins similar to the trefoil on current Israeli Shekel. All that permitted Tolstov to name the Khorezmian religion of the early 8th century as “syncretic Judaism.”

The conquest of Central Asia by Arab general Qutaybah was the last Arab move toward the east. The war was important for the Arabs and very bloody. P. Hitti wrote on the subject: “The crossing of the Jaxartes (Syr Darya river.—M.Sh.) was an epoch-making event, as this river, rather than the Oxus (Amu Darya river.—M.Sh.), formed a natural political and racial frontier between Iranians and Turks. Its crossing constituted the first direct challenge by Arabs to Mongoloids and by Islam to Buddhism. Bukhara, Balkh and Samarqand had Buddhist monasteries. In Samarqand Qutaybah fell upon a number of idols to which he set fire by his own hand… In Bukhara fire temple was likewise demolished.”

Jews, being “People of the Book”, were in a favorable position during these religious complications. However, Tolstov realized that Khorezmian Jewish religious leaders fled north from Arab armies and met… Khazars.

We will not dwell upon the history of Khazaria here. There are some works on the subject of this state with Judaism as a state religion. I want only to mention the fact that Khazars, who themselves accepted Judaism in about 750 A.D., were not the only Asian nation of this religion. We know from the Franciscan traveler of the 13th century, Plano Carpini, that there was at least one more Asian tribe, called Brutachi, which was of Judaic faith. These Brutachi, or Burtashi, by the way, took part in a great Mongol-Russian battle at Kulikovo Pole in 1380 fighting in the Mongol army.

It is usually said that Judaism came to Khazar steppes of modern Volga river area by way of Byzantine Empire and the Crimean peninsula of the Black Sea. Personally I can accept Tolstov’s idea of Judaization of Khazaria through Central Asia. However some additional research should be performed in this direction. Tolstov published some of his materials in English and therefore found a Western advocate for his ideas, V. Altman, who also wrote that there are reasons to believe that Judaism “was brought to Khazaria in the 8th century (the century of Arab conquest!—M.Sh.) through Khorezm.”

True or not, two facts are certain: first, Jews lived in Central Asia before Arab conquest; second, Khorezm was immediate southern neighbor of Khazaria. The last statement has its support in the famous letter of Joseph the king of Khazaria to a Spanish Jew, “the head of the Assembly, Hasdai, the son of Isaac, son of Ezra,” in which the king described the southern borders of his kingdom. An Arab genealogist of the beginning of the 9th century Ibn al-Kalbi (d. 819 A.D.) made both Khazars and Khorezmians descendants of Biblical Isaac.

In case of Central Asia it is important to learn about a possible indirect Jewish influence on Turks through Khazars. This idea was expressed by D. Dunlop in his History of the Jewish Khazars. He paid attention to the fact that the Turkish tribe of Oghuz (Ghuzz) was closely related to the Khazars. These Turks had a chief called Seljuk (history had Seljuk Turks afterwards). The sons of Seljuk were called Mika’il, Yunus, Musa, and Isra’il. Dunlop assumed that these names, especially Isra’il, indicate Jewish Khazar influence on Turks. However, there is also an opinion about the Muslim origin of these names. In any case
there were tight connections between Khazars and Turks. Seljuk himself was in great favor at the court of Khazars’ king until troubles occurred with the queen.22

In general, Jews and Judaism were not something strange and unknown for nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes of Inner and Central Asia. Judaism, so much oppressed in Medieval Europe and Byzantine Empire, was one of the recognized religions, equal in rights with any other faith in Asia. That goes for Jewish presence in India too. In Muslim Central Asia its great scholar al-Biruni (973-1048), himself native of Khorezm, wrote on Comparative Religion in two of his main books, India and Chronology. He wrote on all known religions, including Judaism and even the religion of the Samaritans. It is obvious from reading his works that he had some Jewish informants. Biruni himself mentioned his contact with Jewish teachers in Chronology. He quoted the Old Testament frequently. He knew Jewish festivals such as Yom Kippur, Hanukkah, Purim, Pesah and others. He even mentioned Jewish sects of the time other than Rabbinical Jews and Karaites, such as Miladites, Maghribis, and Alfaniyya.23 Another great Central Asian scholar of that period, Abu Ali Ibn Sina (Avicenna), physician and “the Aristotle of the East,” was said to have been of Jewish origin himself,24 but this is a pure speculation.

Before Benjamin of Tudela’s famous travel to the East in the 12th century, an Arab historian and traveler of the 10th century Abu-Abdallah al-Mukaddasi (al-Makdisi) mentioned Persian Jews in his book The Best Division to Know Countries, written in 985 A.D. This scholar was born in Jerusalem and knew Palestine well. That is why he mentioned that the town of Marv (Merv, now in Turkmenistan) “resembles Palestinian Ramla more than other cities.”25 In a subchapter on “General Description of Khorasan” he wrote that in Khorasan “there are many Jews and only a few Christians.”26

We have no such clear indications from historians about the Jews in Central Asia. However a local tradition had been written about the first synagogue built in Bukhara in the 8th century.27 There is no such an evidence of Jewish presence in Central Asia like a cemetery tomb of 898 A.D. from the Jewish settlement Chufuth-Kale in Crimea.

Up to the time of Benjamin of Tudela, the Jews in Muslim Persia and Central Asia were members of the “protected” communities, dhimmi, living in their own quarters. They enjoyed freedom of religion and appointed their own religious officials, subject probably to the confirmation of the sultan and his officials. Their usual limitation, such as wearing of distinguishing marks on their clothing (usually yellow) and restriction to bear arms and ride horses, are well known. At the same time Jews were largely occupied in trade and commerce, as well as in medicine. The prominent philosopher and physician of this age, Abu’l-Barakat Hibat Allah al-Baghdadi (d. 1152) was known, for example, to Umar Khayyam, a poet, whose “Rubayat” is famous all over the world.28 There was also the Jewish tax-farmer in Basra, Ibn Allan, in 1079-1080, who prior to this had farmed some of the private domains of the caliph.29 Unfortunately he was killed. In Central Asia Muslim rulers of the 11th century had a slogan “to keep agreements with dhimmi,” and Jews lived peacefully. I need to mention here that at the early stage of the Arab conquest of Central Asia, the local nation of Sogds was obliged to pay poll-tax djizya and land-tax kharaj too until Sogds became Muslims.30

When Benjamin of Tudela started his journey, the Jews, moving by way of a Great Silk Road, already explored Asia from the Near East up to China. Benjamin of Tudela traveled through our area in about 1170 A.D. We have two English translations of his diary, that of A. Asher of 1840 and of M.N. Adler of 1907.31 Therefore the paragraph of our interest has two versions. The Asher’s version is as follows:

“Five days from thence, on the frontiers of the kingdom (Persia.—M.Sh.) stands Samarkand, a city of considerable magnitude, which contains about fifty thousand Jews. The Prince Rabbi Obadiah is the governor of the community, which includes many wise and learned men.”32

The Adler’s version states:

“Thence it is five days to Samarkand, which is the great city on the confines of Persia. In it live some 50,000 Israelites, and R. Obadiah the Nasi is their appointed head. Among them are wise and very rich men.”33

Bukhara is not mentioned. It is obvious from the text that Benjamin did not visit Samarkand himself, as no real description of the city is present. Therefore the number of 50,000 Jews
seems to be exaggerated. Indeed, the city of Isphahan, a well-known large city with numerous Jewish inhabitants, had, according to Benjamin, 15,000 Jews (both Asher and Adler agree on that) and the huge community of Baghdad had 40,000 Jewish inhabitants.\textsuperscript{34} Samarkand could have 50,000 Jews, or could have 15,000, or 5,000, but one fact is certain: there was a sizable Jewish community in the largest city of Central Asia fifty years before the Mongol conquest.

Benjamin’s statements have confirmation in an oral local tradition. According to the tradition Jews took part in constructing the aqueduct to supply Samarkand with water in the 12th century.\textsuperscript{35}

Then the 13th century came and Mongols appeared.

\textbf{Jews and Mongols}

The spiritual, social and economic climate of the Muslim world, generally favorable for the Jews, underwent a profound transformation during the course of the 13th century. In addition to Spanish Reconquista, the Mongol hordes swept across Asia into the Muslim East, leaving a path of devastation in its wake. In 1219-1221 Genghis Khan defeated the Khorezm state and conquered Central Asia. On 10 February, 1258, Hulagu Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan, took Baghdad after a brief siege, executed the local caliph along with many members of his family, and put an end to the Muslim power. Damascus fell in 1259.\textsuperscript{36}

First of all, Jews were not complete strangers for the Mongols. Moving eastward by the Great Silk Road Jews settled in China between the 7th and the 13th century.\textsuperscript{37} The first synagogue was erected in 1163 in Kaifeng (before Genghis Khan’s conquest of Northern China) and it was rebuilt in 1279 during the reign of the Mongol ruler of China Kublai Khan.\textsuperscript{38} Mongols knew Jews before the great Genghis Khan’s expedition toward west. These Chinese Jews were silk traders with Persian roots.

In addition to the synagogue which was rebuilt in China during Kublai’s reign, we have a testimony from Marco Polo about Kublai’s religious tolerance.\textsuperscript{39}

We have no evidences that the Mongols persecuted Jews in any part of their domains. And the domains were vast indeed: from the Far East up to the German borders. A significant number of Jews became the citizens of the Mongol empire. William of Rubruck saw Jews in many cities of Caucasian region and Persia in 1254. Brother Andrew of Perugia of the Order of Friars Minor mentioned Jews in China in his letter of 1321.\textsuperscript{40}

Marco Polo also mentioned a small Jewish community in Tiflis (modern Tbilisi in Georgia). There were also Jews, mainly merchants, in Russia and in Crimea at the time of the Mongol conquest.\textsuperscript{41}

And how about Central Asia? Alas, after Benjamin of Tudela’s brief notice the Jewish historical sources for several centuries mention neither Bukhara and Samarkand nor the other cities of Central Asia. However there was a Jewish scholar in Urgench (Gurganj, the city in Khorezm), Solomon ben Samuel. He wrote the Hebrew-Persian dictionary in 1338. This dictionary survived\textsuperscript{42} and we know that Jews, even learned Jews, had been living in the region under Mongol rule at the time of Timur’s (Tamerlane, 1336-1405) childhood.

The most curious medieval travel book, \textit{Mandeville’s Travels} of 1357, being a mixture of new geographical facts with fables, mentioned Jews only once and in connection with Bukhara. The unknown author of the \textit{Travels} wrote on Jews in the 29th chapter of his book dedicated to the countries “that ben beyonde the land of Cathay.” In this chapter he placed Jews to live between Bukhara (“Bacharye” in the book) and some mountains near the Caspian Sea at a Tartar province of Caldihe. The Jews were identified as the Ten Lost Tribes who, however, still speak only Hebrew.\textsuperscript{43} “People were then on the whole more drawn to fabulous tales than to factual narrations,” was said on the book of “Sir John Mandeville.”\textsuperscript{44} However Khorasan, Khorezm, Samarkand, Turkmenia and Turkestan are mentioned in the book in addition to Bukhara. Also the question arises why did the author place Jews in Central Asia and not in India, China or Siberia?

Medieval Muslim historians did not speak about the Jews of Central Asia under Mongol rule. Abu Omar al-Jauzjani (1193-?) told a story about a religious struggle in Samarkand under Mongols in his historical book \textit{Tabakat-i Nasiri} (1260). According to this story
Christians and Muslims of Samarkand, being involved in religious strife, tried to gain Mongol support against each other. The Mongol Berke Khan accepted Islam himself and then helped Muslims against Christians in 1259.

We have no similar stories about Jews and perhaps Samarkand Jews were not involved in religious complications.

During the Mongol wars people of all nations died indiscriminately. After the war Jews probably had no problems with the Mongols. Some of the Jews made a career at the Mongol court in Persia. Indeed, for the Jews of Persia the second half of the 13th century was a period of unusual freedom and opportunity. The early Mongol Il-Khans, who ruled Persia since the 1250s, were pagans, Shamanists. They did not recognize the distinction between Jews, Christians and Muslims. They were hostile to Sunni Islam for political reasons and openly showed favor to Jews especially during the reign of Arghun Khan (1284-1291). Judaeo-Persian literature also flourished under the Mongols. The Torah was translated into Persian language. The Jewish writers all used the Hebrew script exclusively.

It does not mean however that there were no riots at that time. Syriac Christian historian and religious leader Bar Hebraeus (1225-1286), the son of Jewish physician Aaron, wrote in his *Chronography* about an attack of some bandits in 1286:

“And they put to the torture not only the Christians but the Arabs also, and they made a mock of their women, and sons, and daughters in the mosques before their eyes.

“And when they had made an end there they went to the quarter of the Jews, and they looted their houses and plundered all their community.”  

We see from this description that this was a usual bandits’ attack and not anti-Jewish pogrom. Also the bandits were “robbers and brigands, Kurds, Turkmans, and Arabs,” and not at all Mongols. Bar Hebraeus even mentioned that Mongols and Kurds were in strife.

The first real anti-Jewish pogroms had happened in Tabriz and Baghdad in 1291. Once again the native population of the cities was involved but Mongols. Then, in 1295, the Ilkhanid dynasty became Muslim under the rule of Ghazan Khan. Another pogrom followed in 1296 under command of Ghazan and Emir Nauruz. Ghazan ordered to destroy all Christian churches, Jewish synagogues, fire temples, and Buddhist pagodas. Bar Hebraeus mentioned:

“Now this persecution had not dominion over our people alone (Christians.—*M.Sh*.), but also over the Jews, and it was twice as fierce, many times over, on the priests who were worshippers of idols.”

Once again the persecution was not entirely anti-Jewish. Anyway, this second coming of Islam made once again the Jews dhimmis with djizya, kharaj and humiliation. “Christians were not to appear in public without having a zonar, or peculiar girdle, about their waist, nor Jews unless they wore a special head-dress.”

As it was written in the Persian *Divan of Sana’i* in the 12th century:

“For the Jew in this arena fearless casts himself amain,

And the Brahmin in this temple burns his idol at the shrine.”

Such was the Jewish situation at the time of Timur’s arrival.

**Jews in Asia after the Mongols**

Timur, the mighty ruler of Asia from 1370 till 1405, never persecuted the Jews because they were dhimmis. Starting from Central Asia he conquered all the lands of modern Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Caucasian states, Jordan, Syria, Northern India and Southern Turkey. The number of his Jewish citizens was impressive. His mentally unstable son Miranshah, however, ordered the tomb of the great historian Rashid ad-Din in Tabriz to be destroyed and his bones buried in the Jewish cemetery. When Timur learned about Miranshah’s behavior, the prince was punished by his father’s displeasure. Miranshah was deposed and his counselors and the companions of his dissolute life executed. The authority he had misused was transferred to his son Abu Bakr.

In general, Timur’s attitude to the Jews was not dangerous to them. Timur, who grew up
with a mixture of Islamic, Mongol and nomadic values of life and behavior, was very remote from any religious fanaticism and intolerance. He probably even could not, for example, understand the idea of Spanish Inquisition. This attitude undoubtedly benefited the Jews in Persia, Central Asia and other domains of the World conqueror.

The Timurids persecuted Jews neither in Persia nor in Central Asia. The situation in Persia changed in the 17th century during the Safavid period. The religious policy of that time was designed to impose Shi'i Islam as the sole confession in Persia. Naturally this situation created a good deal of bad blood because of the forcible conversion of Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians. All kinds of coercive measures and underhand practices were then employed to convert the Jews to Islam. At this time the religious situation in Bukhara was more tolerant and many Jews moved from Persia to Central Asia. In March of 1839, Shi'ite fanatics attacked the Jewish quarter in Meshed, Iran, and the entire Jewish community was forcibly converted to Islam. In the years immediately following, many of these oppressed Jews from Meshed sought refuge in Central Asia.

The long coexistence of the Jews and the nations of Central and Inner Asia produced an anthropological “Mongoloid type of Jews.” In 1911, when anthropological studies were in fashion, Maurice Fishberg published his book *The Jews: A Study of Race and Environment*. He wrote about the Mongoloid Jews:

“The most curious is the Mongoloid type of Jews, often seen in Russia, Poland, and Germany, especially among women and children. Their chief characteristics are long, smooth, black hair, which is very thick. It grows very long on the head, but only sparingly on the body and face. In fact the Mongolian beard is often seen among Jews. The most distinguished trait, however, is the Mongolian eye... In general the face of these people is square or lozenge-shaped, and the nose small, short, slightly depressed at its upper half, while broad at its lower half. Many Jewesses of this type are easily taken for Japanese, and in Russia for Tartars.”

Fishberg placed several convincing photographic pictures to illustrate the subject. Indeed, in Poland and Lithuania the Jews, mainly the Karaimi (Karaites), were called “Tatars” from the 14th century onward.

**The Russians Came to Central Asia**

The Jewish communities survived in Central Asia till the present times. They were in the miserable semi-isolated state in the 19th century until the Russians occupied the whole area in the 1860s and 1870s. Under the Russian rule these “Bukharian Jews,” called so because they were citizens of the Bukhara Emirate, proved their abilities as traders. They monopolized the cotton trade with Russia. Once again, as it was five hundred centuries earlier, they were able to travel abroad through Russia. Even the famous French neurologist Jean Martin Charcot was curious to meet a Bukharian Jew as a patient.

Although the Russian Empire took control of Tashkent in 1865, Bukhara remained under the nominal rule of an Uzbek emir for another half-century till 1920. Nevertheless, the building of the Trans-Caspian railroad through Samarkand, Bukhara and Tashkent between 1880 and 1905 opened communications between the Bukharian Jews and the Jews of Europe for the first time in over a millennium. Rich Bukharian Jews went to see Europe and some Jews moved from Bukhara to Jerusalem.

The Jews from Russia went to the opposite direction. They settled in the Russian Turkestan, met the local Jews, and formed that unique mixed European-Oriental community, which was formed in Israel after a half of a century on a much broader scale.

The Jews from Europe were able to visit Central Asia for the scientific purposes. The most famous of them was Aurel Stein from Budapest, the “pioneer of the Silk Road.” The West hailed Stein as the first and greatest of Silk Road archeologists.

Previous to the time of the Russian conquest, the Uzbek states of Central Asia were in economical, political, and military crisis after a long-lasting semi-isolation. This unfavorable condition stimulated religious extremism and pushed local rulers toward an attempt to convert the Jews into Islam. They did not succeed too much and the majority of the local Jews did not change their religion. However, some Jews converted into Islam and became chala, or “converted Jews.” Very soon this new community found itself even more isolated than before. They became outcasts for both Jews and Mohammedans. Khans tried to help these new converts. We have in our possession two written orders of the officials of the
The Soviet and Post-Soviet Years

After the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 we can trace continued inflow of the European Jews to Uzbekistan. They came like specialists during first five-year plans or like government officials. During the 1930s, the Stalinist government exiled dissident Russian Jews to Uzbekistan. They did not mix with local Bukharian Jews completely. In Tashkent, for example, there were two separate synagogues for the European “Ashkenazim” and for the local “Bukharim.” The language of the Central Asian Jews was derived from Persian and with some Hebrew and Uzbek components. They spoke also Uzbek and Tajik. All of them learned Russian during the Soviet period.

Following the revolution of 1917, the nationalistic cult of the Soviet state gradually replaced traditional religious observance throughout the U.S.S.R. The Bukharian Jews were far more eager to take advantage of the new educational and economic opportunities available under communist rule than they were to immediately reclaim their religious heritage. By the 1930s, only one synagogue was still in use in Bukhara. Another one was in Samarkand.

The last major wave of Jews came to Uzbekistan at the beginning of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945, when the country absorbed more than 180,000 Jewish refugees from Russia, Ukraine, Byelorussia, and Moldavia. By 1959, the old Jewish community in Bukhara had declined to about 5,000 while the Jewish population of Tashkent had risen to 50,440. Samarkand had a sizable Jewish community also.

With the advent of Gorbachev’s glasnost’ in the second half of the 1980s, travel restrictions to the Soviet citizens eased. Jewish congregations in the United States sent representatives to assure Jews in the Central Asian republics that a warm welcome awaited them in the West, should they decide to emigrate. By the time the U.S.S.R. finally collapsed, a mass exodus of Jews from Uzbekistan to Israel, Canada and the United States was already underway.

The ultimate fate of the historic Jewish communities of Uzbek cities rested with the new government of Uzbekistan. The government proved to be very religiously tolerant. Uzbek are largely Sunni Muslims and as a group have no use for Muslim fundamentalism. In the 1990s thousands of mosques, as well as some new synagogues and churches have been erected. President Karimov was even awarded the St. Vladimir Order of the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1999 the Uzbek nation was awarded with special honor by the B’nai B’rith organization in respect to the refuge role of Uzbekistan during World War II.

Israel and Uzbekistan

Officially the Soviet Union broke up in December 1991. Uzbekistan proclaimed its independence a few months earlier. The official Independence Day of Uzbekistan is 1 September. Very soon positive changes let the Jews of Uzbekistan feel free.

The Jews, both Bukharian and European, were free to emigrate and many of them went to the U.S.A. or to Israel. Those who remained surprisingly realized that they have the possibility to learn Hebrew in Jewish centers in Tashkent and Samarkand as well as in Tel-Aviv.

Despite its geographical remoteness, Israel has established extensive relations with Uzbekistan offering technical assistance in agriculture and aviation and political assistance in Uzbek resistance to Islamic fundamentalism. Israel was the third country to recognize the new state of Uzbekistan, following the U.S. and Turkey, in 1992. Uzbek leaders realized that Israel is valuable as a conduit to the West. They have viewed good relations with Israel as important to their ability to develop ties with the Western world, especially the United States. In addition, the Uzbekistan president Islam Karimov shared Israel’s concerns about Islamic radicalism. During his visit to Tashkent in 1994, Israel’s foreign minister of the Rabin government Shimon Peres warned him about Iran and its regional intentions. Meanwhile, beginning in 1988, more than 200,000 Central Asian Jews, from both Ashkenazi and Bukharan backgrounds, arrived in Israel. The newly erected Tashkent monument of Timur waved them good-bye with its extended arm.

This continuous flow of Uzbek Jews to Israel made the Israeli Embassy in Tashkent and the Uzbekistan consulate in Tel-Aviv quite busy. Israelis from all walks of life—journalists,
specialists in Islamic art, photographers and tourists—visited the new country. Slowly but steadily, business relationships between the two countries grew. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, returning from a visit to China, made a short visit to Tashkent in early 1998. Then the Trade Minister of Netanyahu’s government Natan Shcharansky, a native Russian speaker, visited Tashkent in June 1998, further securing the ties between the countries.

“Let the spirit of creation and co-operation, which was inherited so brightly from the Amir Temur’s times, serve us the good example today,” Karimov said and went himself to Israel in September 1998.56

The visit to Israel was heavily packed with meetings and negotiations. Dripping irrigation, new sorts of cotton, usage of an aviation plant in Tashkent and a dozen other questions were on the list. He found time to visit the Jerusalem Al-Aksa mosque to pray, to get information about the Wailing Wall, to turn the local Uzbek consulate into an Embassy, to meet the members of the community of Bukharian Jews. At his meeting with the Israeli businessmen in the King David Hotel Karimov spoke not only about “trade turnover” and “mutually beneficial cooperation” but also about 28 thousand Jewish citizens of Uzbekistan, 16 synagogues, Chief Rabbinate in Tashkent and the Central Asian Theological Seminary Ahei Tmimim.57

When Karimov returned to Tashkent an interesting official document appeared. It was entitled The Measures for Further Development of Cooperation with the State of Israel. It was absolutely impossible for such a document to appear in Uzbekistan 10 years earlier. It was indeed a very brave document for a Muslim country. The Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan decided to try dairy mini-factories packed with Israeli technologies, new Israeli sorts of cotton and turkey breeding, and also “to investigate the historical aspects of relationships between the Uzbek and the Jewish people and their states, and to consider the pilgrimage to Jerusalem.”58

Political results of the visit were more important but less spoken about. Karimov always kept in mind not only the Israeli but also the American Jewry. However his main point was to find a partner to resist Islamic radicalism. Upon his arrival back to Tashkent he intensified his struggle against local partisans of fundamentalism and partially succeeded. This struggle reached its acme in February 1999. One sunny early spring day six blasts shook Tashkent. Six cars exploded on the route of the presidential cortège and 16 people were killed. Karimov was not hurt. The arrested terrorists appeared to be Islamic fundamentalists. For some time after that Tashkent looked like Tel-Aviv: the security personnel were searching private bags at the entrances of public buildings. The necessities of political life made Israeli-Uzbek relations tighter.

Today the relations between the two countries, the Muslim and the Jewish, are warm. History repeated itself. Timur was very remote from the Medieval European anti-Semitism. Modern Uzbeks feel the same way with their “Father of the Nation.”

I wrote above how Biruni studied the basics of Judaism. Central Asian philosophers, being known among the Eastern Arab-speaking Jewish thinkers, contributed also to Jewish philosophy. There is a rare article on that subject, written by Erwin Rosenthal.59 He traced the development of Avicenna’s philosophical ideas up to Maimonides’ writings. Influence is always mutual. For today’s Jewish-Uzbek relations this is true as it was true for the times of Ibn Sina (called Avicenna in Europe) and Timur (called Tamerlane in the same Europe).

---


7 S.W. Baron, op. cit., p. 99.


16 See: J.P. Carpini, “History of the Mongols,” in: C. Dawson, ed., *Mission to Asia*, Harper & Row, New York, 1966, p. 41: “The names of the countries and races they [Mongols] have conquered are the follows:... Brutachi who are Jews,...”; p. 58: “...the Brutachi who are said to be Jews and shave their heads...”


26 Ibid., p. 201; W.J. Fischel, op. cit., p. 35.


34 The same number of 40,000 Jews is given also in: D.S. Sassoon, A History of the Jews in Baghdad, S.D. Sassoon Publ., Letchworth, 1949, p. 89, but it seems that David Solomon Sassoon used nothing else but Benjamin’s writings.


39 See: Marco Polo, The Travels of Marco Polo, the Venetian ed. by M. Komroff, Horace Liveright, New York, 1926, pp. 120-121.


45 Bar Hebraeus, op. cit., pp. 475-476.

46 See: J.A. Boyle, op. cit.


Bukharan Jews are Jews from Central Asia who speak Bukhori, a dialect of the Tajik-Persian lang. Even more significantly, the role of the Klontar, the president of the secular community, was a key position in the past, when there were few wealthy members and the connections of the president, like those of R. Pinhas Ha-Katan, with the Emir were of the essence. Now there were many positions of Klontar among the numerous communities throughout Central Asia and the despotic power of the various Emirs of Bukhara declined. The service's non-Jewish reference populations from east-central and eastern Europe are Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Slovaks, and Lithuanians. Peter B. Golden told me he has a "Volga Finnic-Udmurt" trace in his AncestryDNA results. Undocumented relationships in the past between Jews and Poles are revealed by 23andMe's use of autosomal samples to find genetic relatives of individuals. In some cases it's because of a distant common Polish ancestor, in other cases because of a distant common Ashkenazic ancestor. From Asia/the Middle East. This is reinforced by David Wesolowski's September 2016 experiments with autosomal DNA data from populations collected by the Estonian Biocentre Human Genome Diversity Panel for Pagani et al's 2016 paper. Examining Central Asia from the perspective of everyday life offers important new insights on the region. In the past decade-plus almost the only facets of Central Asia exposed to the Western public at large came in terms of building democracy, religious extremism and terrorism, natural resource holdings, and the war in Afghanistan. Occasionally, there has appeared the odd human interest or features story in newspapers or on radio, such as textile-making traditions, bride kidnapping in Kazakhstan, the reinvention of the Silk Road, or the continued semi-nomadic existence of Chinggis Khan's moun