

JEWES IN AZERBAIJAN



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AZERBAIJAN HAS ATTRACTED VARIOUS TRIBES AND PEOPLES SINCE ANCIENT TIMES. SOME PASSED THROUGH ITS TERRITORY, WHILE OTHERS SETTLED HERE. THUS, MORE THAN 20 NATIONAL MINORITIES SETTLED AND STILL LIVE IN PEACE AND HARMONY ON AZERBAIJANI SOIL. AMONG THEM ARE JEWS WHO HAVE MAINTAINED THEIR OWN MATERIAL AND SPIRITUAL CULTURE, INCLUDING RELIGION, LANGUAGE, MENTALITY AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS, AND HAVE SEVERAL SYNAGOGUES IN THE AZERBAIJAN REPUBLIC - IN BAKU AND KRASNAYA SLOBODA (JEWISH SETTLEMENT IN THE CITY OF GUBA).



Jews appeared in the South Caucasus, on the territory of present-day Azerbaijan and southern Dagestan, which formed part of the Albanian state, in the early Middle Ages. **During this period, the Great Silk Route passed through the Caucasus, and it was used by Jewish merchants to lead caravans from China, where there were Jewish trading posts.** This is confirmed by archaeological artefacts. For example, an employee of the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan, doctor of historical sciences, R.B. Goyushov, discovered the ruins of a 7th-century synagogue during excavations in the medieval Azerbaijani city of Shabran, which



was on the international Caspian trade and transit path. In his book "History of Albans", the local Albanian historian Moses Kalankatuatsi presents data on the existence in the 7th century of a community of "Christians, Jews and pagans" in the capital of the Albanian state – Barda. According to the famous medieval Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela, "there were 1,000 synagogues in Azerbaijan in the 12th century". One of the fragments of the famous Cairo Geniza (repository of manuscripts) states that Rabbi Barukh Israel from the Azerbaijani city of Maraga relied in his work on the work of Rabbi Saadia Gaon, who lived in another Azerbaijani city - Urmiya. At the end of the 12th century, Samaw'al Ben Yahya, who was a court scholar for the Azerbaijani Eldegizid Atabays (1136-1225), moved from Baghdad to Maraga. In the 13th-14th centu-

ries, many Jews migrated from Asia Minor to the Hulaguid State (1256-1353), the central region of which was Azerbaijan, where there were already numerous Jewish communities. The best minds from the East and West - from China to Spain - also rushed here. The major 13th century religious leader, scholar and lexicographer, Bar Ebrey, spent almost all his life in the Azerbaijani city of Maraga.

Azerbaijan is still home to three sub-ethnic groups of Jews: Mountain Jews, Ashkenazi and Ebraelis. We should also note the unique village of Privolnoye in Jalilabad, whose Russian population professes Judaism.

Mountain Jews

The ancestors of the Mountain Jews appeared in Azerbaijan in the 6th century A.D. These were Jews from Mesopotamia, who were de-

ported to Azerbaijan and southern Dagestan, a historically whole territory in the Middle Ages, for their attempt to secede from the Sassanid Empire (224-651). Here, communities of Mountain Jews settled in Baku, Vartashen, Goychay, Guba, Gusar, Ganja, Derbent, Ismayilli, Maraga, Miyandob, Jewish Muji and Muji-Aftaran, Salmas, Sovujbulag, Tabriz, Urmiya, Khoy, Shabran, Shamakhi and Sheki.

The Mountain Jews (who call themselves Juur) speak the Tati-Jewish language (middle dialect of Farsi), which has many borrowings from the Iranian family of languages, Hebrew, Azerbaijani and Russian. They use Azerbaijani as a second language.

The rulers of the strong and vast Azerbaijani Guba Khanate (1747-1806 years), Huseynali Khan (1722-1758) and Fatali



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Khan (1758-1789), who invited the Juurs to move to their possessions, played an important role in the fate of the Mountain Jews in the Caucasus, especially in Azerbaijan and southern Dagestan. It was at that point that Jewish (from 1926 - Krasnaya) Sloboda appeared in the capital of the Khanate – the city of Guba.

The first significant settlement of Mountain Jews thus appeared in the Caucasus. Residents of Sloboda were engaged in crafts, including carpet weaving, leather business,

trade, agriculture, tobacco, horticulture and madder growing. The population of Sloboda in 1856 was 3,000 and in 1916 – 8,400. Jewish Sloboda is one of the fastest growing Jewish centers and the world's largest settlement of Mountain Jews. It is a beautiful, landscaped and big lush settlement with three-story mansions, the Princess home of celebrations, schools, yeshivas and all the attributes of civilized life. It is no accident that Sloboda is called Guflyerushalaim - "Little Jerusalem". Another center of Mountain Jews

in Azerbaijan was Vartashen (now Oguz). In 1885, there were 2,282 people here. Today, many have emigrated to Russia and Israel.

In Jewish Sloboda, there were 11 synagogues and now – there are six of them. There are two synagogues in Baku and Vartashen each. Preparatory work is now under way in Baku for the construction of a new synagogue for the Mountain Jews.

In the early 20th century, a Jewish Sephardi gymnasium was opened in Baku, where Mountain and Georgian Jews studied. In 1908, the first Jewish-Russian school for Mountain Jews, where teaching was in Russian, was opened in Guba. There was a yeshiva to study religion and traditions. An important center of Jewish culture was the Ilyayev club in Baku. Jewish girls were educated at private women's gymnasiums, colleges, music schools and charities.

Speaking of the historical tradition of relations between Jews and Azerbaijanis, the leadership of the community of Mountain Jews in Guba emphasizes that ***"between Jews and Azerbaijanis, there have never been conflicts on ethnic or religious grounds. Krasnaya Slo-***



Bella Davidovich



Lev Landau



Gavriil Ilizarov

boda is now the only place in the world densely populated by Mountain Jews (over 4,500)." And today Azerbaijanis and Jews still maintain good and warm relations.

The Mountain Jews in Azerbaijan do not have problems in maintaining their national and religious traditions and ethnicity in general. Their community maintains multilateral relations with the influential Jewish community in Russia, Israel and the U.S.. Many of them have received higher education. G. Ilizarov, an academician, orthopaedic surgeon, inventor of the compression-distraction device, the founder of the Center for Restorative Traumatology and Orthopaedics and creator of a trauma center that bears his name in Kurgan (Russia), who was born in the Azerbaijani city of Gushar, has gained international fame. Now there are sponsors promoting cultural and educational activities and the preservation of the historical heritage of the Mountain Jews. These are Mountain Jews from Azerbaijan - G. Nisanov, T. Ismayilov, Z. Iliyev, A. Gilalov and G. Zakharyayev.

Ashkenazi
The first European Jews – Ashkenazi – appeared in Azerbaijan in 1810, and their community was formed in 1832. They all settled in Baku, where they numbered about 10,000 in 1913. Many of them were lawyers and doctors. Primary and secondary Jewish schools, gymnasiums, libraries, yeshivas and private music schools appeared in the city. The Jews also went to Russian schools. A club was opened, while charity organizations maintained their own schools and libraries and supplied clothes, shoes and textbooks to children from poor families. Literacy among the Jewish population of Baku was 83 per cent at the time.

In addition to the existing synagogues, the Central Choral Synagogue was built in Baku in 1910.

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Among the donors for its construction were the well-known Azerbaijani oil magnates and millionaire oilmen, Z. Tagiyev and M. Nagiyev.

Today there is a newly constructed synagogue for European and Georgian Jews in Baku.

Along with the publication of their newspapers and magazines, the Jews created political parties. In 1905-1906, there was a party called "Poale Zion" ("Workers of Zion") in Baku. It aimed to resettle Jews to Palestine in order to restore the Jewish state on their ancestors' land.

Proclaimed on 28 May 1918, the independent Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) represented a clear example of genuine democracy. The new state's Declaration of Independence granted equal rights to all the peoples of the country for the first time in the history of the East. Two members of the Jewish community were represented in the government and parliament of the ADR. In court, the Jews were al-

lowed to take the oath in Hebrew. The publication of the Russian-language newspaper "Kavkazskiy Yevreyskiy Vestnik" also resumed at

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the time, and the newspaper "Palestina" and the magazine "Molodezh Siona" were launched. In 1921, two Jewish clubs were opened Baku - Bezalel and Borokhov. After the closure of the Central Choral Synagogue in 1934, the same building housed the State Jewish Theatre, which was widely popular both in Azerbaijan and abroad.

In 1989, 31,000 Ashkenazi Jews lived in Azerbaijan. They lived mostly in the cities of Baku, Sumgayit and Ganja, and some of them - in Lankaran and Shirvan.

The main spoken language of Ashkenazi Jews for more than a millennium was **Yiddish**, which is based on the German language. Currently, most of them use the language of their country of residence. The Ashkenazi profess Orthodox Judaism.

With the proclamation of the independent Azerbaijan Republic in 1991, there appeared Jewish youth clubs, women's and veterans' organizations, music and dance ensembles in the country. It was at that point that the Hatikva chorus,

which is well-known outside Azerbaijan, emerged. **Back in 1990, the Azerbaijan-Israel friendship society was created on the initiative of representatives of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia.** Since 1993, the embassy of the State of Israel has been working in Baku. One of the Azerbaijani universities has a special course on the "language of the Tanakh". A Hebrew department was

IN 1995, A JEWISH SECTOR WAS OPENED AT SECONDARY SCHOOL № 46 FOR THE STUDY OF HEBREW AND THE HISTORY AND TRADITIONS OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE.

opened at the Faculty of Oriental Studies in Baku State University. **In 1995, a Jewish sector was opened at secondary school № 46 for the study of Hebrew and the history and traditions of the Jewish people.** In 2002, the Jewish charity Ohr Avner Chabad opened a secondary school.

In 2003, the Eurasian Jewish Congress participated in the opening of a new synagogue of European and Georgian Jews in Baku. In 2009, Azerbaijan celebrated the 150th

anniversary of the famous Jewish writer Sholem Aleichem. An exhibition devoted to his life and career was held. His well-known novel "Tevye the Dairyman" was published in Azerbaijani. In October 2010, a new school complex, which will operate a Jewish kindergarten, high school and yeshiva, was officially opened in Baku. The opening ceremony was attended by President Ilham Aliyev, the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel Shlomo Amar, the Chief Rabbi of Russia Berl Lazar, prominent businessmen G. Nisanov and L. Levayev, the president of the American Jewish Committee, David Rosen, representatives of the diplomatic corps in Baku and guests from Russia, the United States and Israel.

Ebraelis

Georgian Jews also refer to themselves as Kartli Ebraeli, or emphasizing their Jewish origins - Israeli. The Georgian historical tradition is dominated by the view that the first Jews arrived in Georgia after the conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the First Temple by

the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II in 586 B.C. The second wave of Jews came to Georgia nearly 700 years after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70.

The Ebraelis live in Akhaltsikh, Batumi, Gagra, Gori, Kutaisi, Kulashi, Oni and Tbilisi. Caught in a foreign and alien ethnic environment, they lost their native language and adopted Georgian. They use the Georgian alphabet and speak Russian. Among merchants, there is jargon



Drama theater cast of mountain Jews

called **kivruli**, a mixture of Georgian and Hebrew vocabulary. **The Ebraelis have adapted the Georgian alphabet to the Jewish tradition of writing.** The prominent Israeli scholar and social activist, Ben-Zvi, wrote in this connection: "We are particularly struck by the fact that the Jews of Georgia use the Georgian alphabet from left to right, unlike many Jewish communities in the diaspora."

The Ebraelis feel part of the Georgian people, but do not forget their Jewish origin. Hebrew remains the language of the Torah, having spe-

cial historical status as the sacred language of "Lashon Hakodesh", which all men should know. The Ebraelis zealously observe the faith of their fathers, still remaining committed to Orthodox Judaism.

The linguistic assimilation of the Ebraelis in Georgia naturally also led

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to cultural assimilation. They use Georgian songs, dances and music. The Ebraelis have also embraced some elements of Georgian cuisine,

with the exception of those which are contrary to the rules of **Kashrut**.

At the turn of the **18th-19th centuries, the Ebraelis began to move to Azerbaijan**, where they settled in central Baku. Here, they engaged in trade and crafts and were partners of large Russian-Caucasian trading

houses, stock exchanges, commercial banks and joint stock companies. They did not forget the basic precept of Judaism and were active-

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ly engaged in charity work. In Baku, there was a shelter for the poor built by the philanthropist Elikashvili.

Until the 20th century, the Ebraelis had almost no opportunities to get higher and even secondary special education. Therefore, until 1920, in Baku there was a Society for the Promotion of Enlightenment among Georgian Jews. When there appeared schools for the Mountain Jews, the Ebraelis got the opportunity to study together with the Ashkenazi. Currently, the Ebraeli community in Baku has about 300 members.

Judaizers still exist in Azerbaijan. These are Russians, about 200 people, who have converted to Judaism. They are all residents of the village of Privolnoye in Jalilabad District.

Azerbaijan is one of the few countries where the attitude toward Jews, as well as other local ethnic minorities, is loyal and tolerant. Azerbaijani-Jewish marriages are common. Isaac David specifically noted in his book "History of the Jews in the Caucasus": **"Anti-Semitism in Baku was considered an odious phenomenon, and the Azerbaijani intelligentsia did not accept it. And even the local administration, which received instructions of definitely anti-Semitic character from the center, stayed pretty reserved."** The positive attitude of the Azerbaijani people to the Jews is demonstrated by this fact. In 1919, a delegation of Jews arrived in Baku from Yelizavetgrad (Ukraine), asking for help to the victims of the Petlyura pogroms. In this regard, the organ of Azerbaijani Jews, the Jewish National Council, published a special issue of the newspaper with an appeal to help their brothers. The delegation returned to Ukraine with

donations and lists of contributors. To the astonishment of the Jews who lived there, the list contained people with unusual names. The delegates explained that these were local Azerbaijanis. No-one expected this! Thus, they learnt in Ukraine that somewhere in Azerbaijan, there are people who not only do not kill the Jews, but also help them.

An intensive process is underway in Azerbaijan to revive the culture and religion of the Jewish people. Synagogues are being



Mountain Jews

built and restored, and schools are being opened for the study of the language, history and traditions of the Jewish people. Great work to revive Jewish values is being carried out by the education centers Ohr Avner Chabad and Vaad Hatzala. In Azerbaijan, there is the Hesed Gershon Jewish welfare center, the JCC Jewish cultural center and the Hava women's charity organization. The local branch of Joint - the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee – provides material and moral assistance to Jews who wish to remain in their country of residence. The

representative office of the Sokhnut Jewish agency is engaged in the repatriation of Jews from Azerbaijan to Israel and organizes fact-finding tours to Israel for local Jews.

A large galaxy of intellectuals has originated from the Jewish environment of Azerbaijan. Among them are:

- Rashid al-Din - a medieval historian and statesman, author of the multivolume work "Jami al-Tawarikh" ("World History").
- Ilya Anisimov - the first Juur scientist and author of the study "Caucasian Mountain Jews", which retains its value today.
- Lev Landau - an academician, one of the giants of the 20th century in theoretical physics, founder of a scientific school and Nobel laureate.
- Bella Davidovich - the winner of the International Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw in 1947.
- Leonid Zorin - one of the best writers and playwrights of the USSR and Russia.
- Faina Ranevskaya - people's artist of the USSR and an outstanding actress of Soviet and Russian cinema and theater.
- Gavriil Ilizarov - an academician, founder and leader of a new trend in orthopaedics and traumatology, a global giant in his profession, whose name was given to his medical center in the city of Kurgan, Russian Federation.
- Tankho Izrailov - a choreographer, people's artist of USSR and founder and leader of the world famous dance ensemble Lezginka. 🌟