

Joint Project on Bukharan Jews

A factory worker in Tajikistan, a businessman in Israel, a taxi driver in Germany, a ballet dancer in Uzbekistan, a surgeon in Austria, a teacher in Kyrgyzstan – they all share the experience of being Bukharan Jews who lived in the Soviet Union. They are, therefore, at the centre of the joint German-Israeli project “Bukharan Jews: Making Meaning of Memories and Identity. A Study in the Oral History and Narrative Traditions of an Endangered Species” conducted under the auspices of GIF by teams from Humboldt University Berlin and Tel Aviv University.

The Bukharan Jewish communities of Central Asia, who have lived in the region for many centuries, have rapidly been decreasing after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Following several waves of emigration from Central Asia the largest Bukharan (Central Asian) Jewish communities can now be found outside the region -- in Israel (app. 100,000 persons), the USA (60,000), Vienna (2,000), Moscow (500) and in several cities in Germany (1,000). In Central Asia itself, the once large communities of Bukhara, Samarkand and Tashkent have now been reduced to small remnants of their past numbers while in many other places the history of the Bukharan Jews has already come to its end. Henceforth, in a generation or two their memories of their lives -- as individuals and as a community -- in Soviet Central Asia will be lost. The project is, therefore, also an effort to save, record and study this reservoir of memories before it disappears.

The many scholarly and other publications of the recent years provide valuable information on Bukharan Jewish individuals and groups, their hardships and successes. Their authentic voices, however, have rarely been made public. The present project, therefore, focuses on personal views, perceptions, evaluations and the making of meaning by individuals. The life-histories approach allows one a deep study of the various ways of understanding what “Bukharan Jewish culture” means today.

The project is headed by Prof. Dr. Ingeborg Baldauf and Dr Moshe Gammer, but the main burden of work has been shouldered by Thomas Loy, a PhD Student in Humboldt University and Yochai Primak, an MA student in Tel Aviv University, who for over two years travelled extensively in Central Asia, Israel and Europe and recorded more than two dozen life-histories of Bukharan Jewish men and women of various backgrounds, strata and (past and present) locations. The result of these efforts will include a volume analysing these interviews and a volume containing some of the interviews – text and English translation.

On 15-16 February 2006 the Israeli and German teams organised a joint workshop in Humboldt University on “Stories and Histories – The Bukharan Jews and the Soviet Union”. The members of the project were joined by scholars from various disciplines -- cultural studies, linguistics, history and Central Asian regional studies. Papers were presented on “How it all Began: the Soviets Meet the Bukharan Jews; the Bukharan Jews Meet the Soviets” (Zeev Levin, Tel Aviv University) and on “Bukharan Jews: Did they Have a Language of their own?” (Prof. Dr. Lutz Rzehak, Humboldt University). Thomas Loy and Yochai Primak presented their study in progress, its empirical findings and methodological issues. The presentation was followed by a lengthy and lively discussion.

A follow-up international workshop to conclude the project is scheduled for December 2006 at Tel Aviv University. Scholars from Israel, Europe and the USA studying Bukharan Jews will be invited. The proceedings of both workshops will also be published.