



UZBEKISTAN

## THE LAST JEWS OF BUKHARA

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A tomb in the Jewish cemetery of Bukhara.

- ▶ The Jewish community of Bukhara is one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world
- ▶ Tradition, supported by archaeological finds in present-day Turkmenistan, dates its presence in the area to at least the VI century BCE
- ▶ The city's Jewish quarter, Lyab-i Khauz, contains a number of precious points of interest, including the ancient synagogue, built in the 16th century and a UNESCO world heritage site
- ▶ Today the number of Jews living in Bukhara continues to decline and the community itself is at risk of disappearing
- ▶ There is only one rabbi left in Bukhara, and he is the only one hoping for the return of those who have left for Israel or the United States



Isaak Davidovich, caretaker of the oldest synagogue in Bukhara, built in the XVI century and a UNESCO world heritage site, raises pigeons at his home in the ancient Jewish quarter of Bukhara.



The family of Raphael Mikaelovic, an important member of the Jewish community and president of the NGO Jewish Family Welfare Center, at his home in the ancient Jewish quarter of Bukhara, with his wife Mazol Avizova, a teacher of Hebrew at the Jewish school of Bukhara, and their children Odaya, Dina, and Ariel.



Morning prayer, which includes the reading of the Torah, at Bukhara's 2<sup>o</sup> synagogue, created out of a private home built in the XIX century.



Entrance to the Jewish cemetery of Bukhara.

## An ancient community at risk of disappearing

Bukhara, that stunning caravan city located along the Silk Road in central Uzbekistan, former centre of a great empire, and possessor of architectural treasures, has a vast Jewish quarter, two synagogues, a Jewish school, a Jewish cultural association, and a Jewish cemetery containing thousands of tombs. The only thing missing in large numbers are the Jews.

Tradition, supported by 2200-year-old archaeological finds of the ruins of a synagogue in present-day Turkmenistan, dates the first settlement of Jews in Bukhara to the diaspora following deportation to Babylon in the VI century BCE. Another theory holds that the Jewish presence in the city is even older. It is said to date back to the lost tribes of Israel, exiled from their homeland in the VIII century BCE.

Whatever the truth may be it seems certain that Bukhara was the first Jewish establishment in Central Asia. From here, members of the community moved on to other cities like Samarkand, Tashkent, and the valley of Fergana, but they remained 'Jews of Bukhara', a term which, in reality, was coined by European travellers in the eighteenth century to define all of those Jews who lived in the territories belonging to the emirate of Bukhara.

The Jews who live in Bukhara today are conscious of this primordial role and of being seen as isolated from the other communities scattered throughout the world for centuries, and want to make sure that their history and traditions do not get lost. "Without history, you have no future," Abram Ishakov, the current rabbi and president of the Jewish community of Bukhara—aside from being a fan of Celentano, Sophia Loren, and Sandro Mazzola—says. "Finding a way to preserve our history, our language, and our traditions is a great victory."



Sator Berdinev (on the right) prepares the clothes that the Jews of Bukhara wear for weddings. Among his clients are many Jews of Bukhara who today live in Israel or in the United States. Here he is wearing one of his creations while Johnny (on the left) wears the suit he wore for his wedding.

# ברכרא זקבי בעיל סמרקנד



Photographs of the succession of rabbis in the Jewish community of Bukhara.



Bako Yashaev, his wife Janna Yagudaeva and Zulayxo, one of their two daughters, photographed in their home in the ancient Jewish quarter of Bukhara.



Abram Ishakov, rabbi of Bukhara's oldest synagogue, built in the XVI century and a UNESCO world heritage site, reading the Torah.



The ancient mosque of Mahoki Atori, today a museum, where they say at one time both Jews and Muslims prayed together.



Blessing the bread before dinner at the home of Raphael Mikaelovic, an important member of the community and president of the NGO Jewish Family Welfare Center.



Odaya, the daughter of the Hebrew teacher at the Jewish school of Bukhara.



A glimpse of Lyab-i Khauz, the ancient Jewish quarter of Bukhara.



Doniel Matatov and his wife Luba Matatova, members of the Jewish community of Bukhara, photographed in their home in the ancient Jewish quarter of Bukhara.



Morning prayer, which includes the reading of the Torah, at Bukhara's 2<sup>o</sup> synagogue, created out of a private home built in the XIX century.



Dinner of kosher meat at the home of Doniel Matatov and Luba Matatova, Jewish citizens of Bukhara.



Bako Yashaev, a member of Bukhara's Jewish community, embroiderer and sewing-machine repairman, in his workshop.



A class of the Jewish school of Bukhara. Today, Jewish students make up no more than 10% of the student body, but at the school they continue to teach Hebrew, Jewish culture, and Jewish history.



Isaak Davidovich, caretaker of the oldest synagogue in Bukhara, built in the XVI century and a UNESCO world heritage site, at the door to his home in the ancient Jewish quarter of Bukhara.



The market in the ancient Jewish quarter of Bukhara was once completely Jewish; today, the merchants are all Muslims.



The son of Isaak Davidovich, caretaker of Bukhara's oldest synagogue, built in the XVI century and a UNESCO world heritage site, lives in Israel, but now and again returns to visit his parents.



Old photographs of members of Bukhara's Jewish community.



Doniel Matatov, the clockmaker of Bukhara's Jewish community, in his shop.



Students from the Jewish school of Bukhara prepare for the dances to celebrate Navroz, the Persian New Year, which is of Zoroastrian origins, also celebrated in Uzbekistan.



Reading the Torah in the 2<sup>o</sup> synagogue of Bukhara, created out of a private house built in the XIX century.



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