BUKHARAN JEWS IN QUEENS: LIVING, RELIVING, AND NARRATING A COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

by

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Dr. Carol Silverman

New York City's Bukharan Jewish Community (population 50,000) has settled largely in the borough of Queens. Bukharan Jews have a rich culture, which they attempt to preserve as a diasporic community. They are a tightly knit group, organizing themselves by neighborhoods, synagogues, cultural clubs, and music ensembles.

This paper explores how the Bukharan Jews present themselves as a community, and whether they identify with other Russian, Jewish or Central Asian communities in New York. It examines the history of the Bukharan Jews in Central Asia and how they related to and were perceived by other ethnic groups and how this past affects the present.

The paper examines the role of narrative, memory, and history in perpetuating contemporary cultural identity and explores the complex web of community ties in contemporary New York City.

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To the Bukharans and their home in New York and the home in their hearts.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Bukharan Jews are an ethnically distinct group of Persian Jews who migrated along the Silk Road and settled throughout Central Asia beginning in about 100 A.D. From the 1970s to the 1990s, nearly all of the 100,000 Bukharan Jews in Central Asia emigrated to other countries. About 50,000 settled in Israel and about 50,000 settled in the United States, almost all of them in Queens, New York. Small communities also developed in Atlanta and Los Angeles. Today, only a few hundred Bukharans remain in Central Asia. The majority of Bukharan Jews in the United States live in the central Queens neighborhoods of Forest Hills, Briarwood and Rego Park. They have vastly altered the cultural and economic demographics of these neighborhoods. The Queens Bukharan community has defined and redefined itself in the United States; historically, this is nothing new for the Bukharans, as they were scattered along the Silk Road in Central Asia as a diaspora community, away from their proverbial home, Israel, and other Jews, since 800 C.E. Now, for the first time, they claim they are free to express themselves as a community, especially as a Jewish community, after enduring persistent anti-Semitic policy and attitudes among both the Muslim Uzbeks and the Soviets. They are maintaining and, arguably, reinventing themselves through media and performance narrative. This thesis will argue the importance of geography, history, and self-perception in the process of successful immigration. With integration comes assimilation, which is central to the Bukharan Jewish experience. Bukharan Jews are engaged in finding a way to maintain a sense of their past, while becoming a contemporary immigrant community.

The generation of children born after 1990 will reveal whether this experiment in assimilation and integration worked. This thesis looks at how a community holds itself together through historical narrative, media, and the arts. Because of their historical homelessness, this community highly values documentation because they know that having a record of their past will provide them with a future.

Because Bukharan Jews have no historical roots in New York, and because there are nearly none left in Central Asia, where they do have historical roots, they depend on community presentation, collective memory, and self-recording for their survival. The logic is that if there is a permanent record of their existence, they will survive as a community. Community presentation, however, is problematic because it depends upon who from the Bukharan community is presenting, to whom they present, and for what outcome. This thesis explores how a community reestablishes itself in New York City in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and the approaches taken by this particular group of people with a perceived common history, ultimately with the survival of the group in mind.

Jews have always struggled with identity and voice, and the question of a united Jewish people has always been problematic. Historically homeless since leaving Israel, Jews have found it nearly impossible to construct a central narrative that has room for all Jews, not just those of Israel (Boyarin & Boyarin 88). In her dissertation, *Negotiating Identity in the Context of Diaspora, Dispersion and Reunion: The Bukharan Jews and Jewish Peoplehood (2000)*, Alanna Cooper argues that that Jewish identity has repeatedly been negotiated due to the widespread dispersion of Jews for the past 2,500 years (4). Only since the Jews returned, both physically and emotionally, to Israel after World War

II, was it necessary to construct a central, unifying narrative. This has proven a complex task that highlights differences among Jewish groups, and a single, unifying narrative proves impossible. Thus, Jewish narratives came to resemble the narratives of postmodernity -- different voices, different cultures and histories all dispersing their own stories among the many stories of Jewishness.

An understanding of life in New York City, itself a geographic hub of disparate narratives, hinges on conceptions of postmodernity. The meaning of the word postmodernism is central to the experience of the Bukharan Jews, and perhaps all immigrant groups in New York City. One feature of postmodernism is the breaking free from a centralized, often colonial or imperial grand narrative of community historiography. "It is an expression of a general skepticism towards previous distinctions and certainties, not only in artistic or media culture, but in intellectual, political and everyday life" (Brooker 203). Postmodernism is full of irony and is suspicious of historical assumptions and hierarchies. Jean-Francios Lyotard, in the *Postmodern Condition*, asserts that "the 'grand narratives' of human progress and liberation, rooted in Enlightenment thought, have lost credibility as they have run aground in their opposites: totalitarian regimes and the arrogance of an assumed universal knowledge" (19).

New York City in the early twenty-first century is a place where time and space are broken down, where the only narrative is a postmodern one, a tale of dispersion, of decentralization, regression, made more symbolically relevant after September 11, 2001, with the physical loss of two symbols of American modernity. As the city lives on, without a central narrative of prosperity and privilege, voices emerge from the outer edges of the city, from places like Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx. Lyotard describes

postmodernism as the ultimate urban landscape. He calls it "degree zero of contemporary general culture," where, "one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner" (76). Furthermore, New York is the epitome of postnationalism, as defined by Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large* (1996). Appadurai defines postnationalism as "the strong alternative forms for the organization of global traffic in resources, images, and ideas — forms that either contest the nation-state actively or constitute peaceful alternatives for large-scale political loyalties" (169). In the case of the Bukharan Jews in New York, the large-scale loyalties Appadurai describes are *cultural* in addition to *political*. New York City defies the nation-state model and has outgrown it. More than a part of a larger nation-state, it exists as an island of migrants, immigrants and the wandering. Despite the ubiquitous show of American patriotism in New York City, with the usual smattering of American flags and bald eagles, New York City is a gathering place of immigrants, of people who have left their homelands for many reasons, to create a new life, a new existence. It is a home for the homeless. Most Bukharan Jews also seem to feel no allegiance to their former homelands, with Tajiks freely mingling with Uzbeks. However, if appropriate, they will refer and define themselves to outsiders as Tajik or Uzbek. I often heard Bukharans say, "I am from Dushanbe" or "I am from Tashkent." I hardly ever heard reference to the countries in which these cities are located.

The contemporary Bukharan Jewish narrative, in the midst of such a postmodern, postnational setting, shows nothing less than the lingering power of the modernist, and arguably nationalist narrative; the nationalism described here is ethnic-based nationalism and not geographic nationalism. Walker Connor writes in his collection of essays

Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding that "The most fundamental error involved in scholarly approaches to nationalism has been a tendency to equate nationalism with a feeling of loyalty to the state rather than with loyalty to the nation" (91). Strikingly, the Bukharan Jews in Queens almost never referred to themselves as being attached to any geographic place. They spoke of participating and even feeling accepted in Uzbekistan or Tajikistan, but their pride did not come from a perceived place; in fact, their pride came from the fact that they had survived and thrived without one.

Bukharan identity is a modernist approach to their past, and their present. A grand narrative that they never told, because they could not tell it, under the Soviets, has emerged with an ethno-nationalist flair, as they clutch to the past through the stories they tell themselves. *In Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai calls these narratives *diasporic public spheres* (22). Appadurai defines these spheres as the imagined world of a community. These are the engines for expressing an imagined past, and future. They are the expression of a perceived shared experience. Mass media and human movement are the life force of Appadurai's diasporic public sphere. This is the crux of postnationalism, this "unofficial" communication. The Bukharan brand of "diasporic public spheres" is expressed through their writings, both electronic and print based, about themselves in New York, through their creative performances, and through their interaction with a perceived American culture. There are numerous public spheres where this community is expressing itself: among other Jews in New York, among philanthropic organizations and among all New Yorkers. Appadurai writes that the "imagination has become a collective, social fact" (5). The imagined world of Bukharan Jews in New York is one

that exists in a shifting space, one that is fluid and emerging, and one that is firmly based in a sense of the past.

Regarding public image, it is extremely important to the Bukharan Jewish intellectuals that they are the voice that represents the community. I was often told that I needed to meet with the scientists and scholars to get a real understanding of life in Central Asia, as it is commonly perceived that they were the keepers of the historical narrative of the Bukharans. When I asked about everyday life in Queens, more often than not, I was rebuffed.

A nineteen-year-old man I interviewed, Igor Rybakov, who was quite interested in Bukharan history and had founded the website *Bukharianjews.com*, told me about a group of Bukharan scholars:

> Now, here in New York, there is a Bukharan Jewish club, [The] Russian League, which unites the professors and intelligentsia of the Bukharan Jewish community. The president of the club is Robert Pinkhasov. [The] club [has been] working at least ten years, and during the ten years, the club published many books, in Russian and English, that members of the club writes many books, and last year was published a book by David Achildiev, called *History of Bukharan Jews in Two Volumes...* Right now the club is going to publish, at the end of the year, another two volumes of *History of the Bukharan Jews.* The books talk about Jews came from Persia, and how they came to Persia, and from Jerusalem, many many years ago, two thousand ago, and then from Persia to Uzbekistan, Central Asia. (Rybakov 2003)

The words *Russian* and *Bukharan* were often used interchangeably when Bukharan Jews spoke about themselves. When I would question this, the speaker would always correct him or herself and clarify that indeed, he or she had meant Bukharan. Later in this same conversation with Rybakov, I spoke with a 12-year old boy who told

me that his family was Russian. He was immediately interrupted by Rybakov, and corrected himself by telling me his family was from Dushanbe, Tajikistan. This boy attempted what Appadurai calls an "experiment with self-making" (3). He attempted to read the situation and answer, with the background of his previous experiences, the way he thought would be best received. He told me that most Americans don't know what Tajikistan is, so he assumed that I, an American, would be the same way. Only after he understood that the purpose of my visit was to understand specifically Bukharan culture, did he change his answer to the one that fit the context. This anecdote points to a shifting perception of self for Bukharan Jews. They are not defined by national identity, which leads to a fluid existence.

The Bukharan Jewish intellectuals were not, by any means, in agreement about the details of a common historical narrative. Differing visions of Bukharan culture among community leaders are problematic for the community because they are divisive. This does not bode well as these leaders are actively attempting to shape their present and historical identity and, thus, unify the community. These revisions are in part a result of the cultural freedom they so longed for back in Central Asia. While they feel they are free to express themselves now, both about the present and the past, they are also free to disagree with each other in a more public way than they were in Tashkent or Dushanbe.

That very notion of freedom has been challenged and redefined in ways they may never have imagined. Community leader Aron Aronov said of the association of freedom with America:

> As long as we can observe all our traditions, we feel lucky because it is a culture of freedom and you can express yourself like

> that…and we don't have any problems, and now here for the first time in our life, we openly and very loudly say to the world that we are, we don't conceal anymore our ethnic identity, we say with pride, "We are Bukharan Jews!" (Aronov 2003)

Appadurai writes that "freedom is an illusive commodity" (7). The notion of freedom exists in the realm of fantasy. It is not easily defined, or achieved for that matter. Often, because of the rhetorical power of the very word itself, freedom is used in place of the less interesting, and ultimately more realistic term of agency. Freedom and agency are separate entities. Agency signals the ability to act on one's own behalf, whereas freedom is an imagined state, and arguably one that does not truly exist. The difference between freedom and agency is a question central to Bukharan representation in the United States, as the term freedom, so essential in an American narrative, has cleverly been employed by the Bukharans in their descriptions of their American experience. This is a way to bond and show solidarity with other Americans, and to emphasize that America, for now, is home.

At the same time Bukharan Jews are also threatened with cultural assimilation. They are quickly becoming Americanized, especially the younger generation, and that this is happening at exactly the time that they are free to express themselves as uniquely Bukharan. This is not as a coincidence but is a result of the American experience. Existing side by side with a cultural renaissance, it is possible to have cultural loss. The younger community members with whom I spoke, told me about a generation gap, especially between the children who were born in New York and the elderly Bukharans who still speak Bukhori. The older generation has also become much more religious since arriving in the United States. For the elderly, religion provides community and

ritual in often alienated and lonely lives. Thus, arguments about Jewishness have arisen within the community and amongst other Jewish communities in New York.

There are two arguments regarding the "Jewishness" of the Bukharans. The first argument is leveled against the Bukharans by Ashkenazic Jews, and it is one with which I had personal experience. Some Ashkenazic Jews have argued that Bukharan Jews are not proper Jews, as they evolved away from the perceived center of Jewish culture and history, Israel. I met a young Ukrainian Jewish woman who had grown up in Forest Hills, and when I explained that I was interested in the Bukharan Jews from that neighborhood, she sneered and asked why I would waste my time with people who were not really Jews? I asked her to explain herself and she claimed that they were really Muslims who called themselves Jews, that they didn't really understand how to be Jewish.

The other argument is that Bukharan Jews practice a more pure form of Judaism, because of the fact that they evolved and existed away from the perceived center. They are "untouched" by outside influences. Either argument unfortunately does nothing to help Bukharan Jews integrate and adapt. It divides Jews and begs the question of what "pure" Judaism is. Ken Blady writes that "members of exotic Jewish communities challenge our concept of who is a Jew and raise basic questions about Jewish identity" (xxii).

There has always been a culture of resistance and compliance, an intricate existence among the Uzbeks, Tajiks and Russians. Bukharan Jews are shaped by their resistance, or perceived resistance, to the Soviet system, though they navigated the bureaucratic system and in many ways seem very Soviet in their mentality and language.

For example, when I encountered Bukharans on the streets of Queens, or in shops, the unmistakable "Soviet" coldness pervaded the interaction, until the moment they learned I was not a complete outsider. Often I would ask a few questions of someone, and once they realized I knew something about their culture and spoke Russian, their demeanor changed completely and they became warm and welcoming. This demeanor also stems from the fact that they've always perceived themselves in opposition to their oppressors, first the Muslims and then the Soviets, all the while having to become like the oppressor in order to survive as a culture. In other words, they have used assimilation to survive. It sounds like an oxymoron, yet they have managed to keep their sense of their identity by adding to it aspects of the groups they have lived amongst; it happened with the Central Asians, the Russians, and now with American culture. This can be an advantage for the Bukharans, as they are well-versed in balancing their indigenous culture with aspects of their adopted culture in order to survive. Alanna Cooper writes that now they have to prove themselves to other Jews amidst prejudices and stereotypes. Not only do they have to prove their success as an immigrant group in New York, but they also have to prove themselves and their beliefs to other groups of Jews (53).

Cooper's dissertation examines Bukharan Jewish identity, both contemporary and historical, and how it has changed as the Bukharans gained wider exposure to other Jewish communities in both Israel and the United States. She argues that there are two models, or *edah paradigms*, for Jewish identity. One celebrates the diversity of multiple cultures within Judaism, thus, "legitimizing the unique history and traditions of each diaspora group (*edah*)" (vii). The second *edah paradigm* is the center/periphery, which supports the premise that there is a pure version of Judaism, or orthodoxy, and that

"deviations are attributed to heresy, ignorance, or to the influence of rival centers competing for dominance" (viii). Cooper's thesis is that Bukharan Jews accept the second premise, knowing that they have developed a different form of Judaism, at the same time that they defend their uniqueness. The Bukharan Jews, then, live in the midst of this contradiction, and it is around this very contradiction that their community is shaped (viii). Cooper argues that this group of Jews has been sealed off from the rest of Jews, and thus, did not learn how to become "proper" Jews. She writes that "the idea that the Bukharan Jews have been 'cut-off' from other Jewish groups has not generally been promulgated by Bukharan Jews themselves or by the Jews who lived nearby (Persia and Afghanistan). It is, rather, Western writers who have presented them as such" (15). This is clearly no longer the case, as most Bukharan Jews are living in the two Jewish centers of the world, Israel and New York. Bukharan Jews are attempting to shake this notion of improper Jewishness. It is not proving easy, and it certainly has shaped and reshaped the ways the Bukharans see themselves, now that they are living with other groups of Jews. As Cooper writes, the Bukharan Jews have a "long history of identity negotiation. As a diaspora group, they have been part of an ongoing conversation about identity that has stretched over centuries and across vast territory" (4).

The situation of the Bukharan Jews among European Jews was compared to the relationship between blacks and whites in the United States by a social worker at the New York Association for New Americans (NYANA), a Jewish philanthropic organization that helps recent Jewish immigrants settle in New York.

> [Bukharan Jews] were repressed by the Soviets and they were looked down upon. They are still looked down upon; I mean by other Jews from the Soviet Union. They treat them as Muslims.

> Or Jews in Muslim clothing; and they are. Just in the same way that a lot of the Bukharans see the European, Russian speaking émigrés like heathens. Although they still look up to them. Sort of like the things that go on in black and white culture. You know, there's this effort to think black or be black, but on another level, whites look down on them. (Blumenthal 2003)

According to Cooper's premise, the Bukharans' situation in New York is a continuation of their previous situation in Central Asia, meaning that they feel responsible for presenting themselves as Jews and former Soviets to other Jews and to former Soviets, and to groups that are neither Jewish nor Soviet. Yet, to most New Yorkers and Americans, Bukharan Jews are simply from the former Soviet Union, equalized through American historical and geographical ignorance. Because of their higher visibility within the Jewish demographic and the New York community, they now feel a strong sense of wanting to control their community's public image.

In 2003, *The New York Times* printed an article about high instances of domestic violence in the Bukharan Jewish community. Community leaders were outraged. While they want people to learn about their culture, they want to have control over what is published. The deep importance of print communication and literacy will be discussed further in a later section of this paper. After the *Times* article was published, dialogue emerged within the community about the potential results of their history of repression and discrimination in Central Asia. Members of the Bukharan Jewish community saw the article as an attempt by the larger Jewish community of New York to discredit or sabotage the Bukharans. Social Worker Gloria Blumenthal said:

> There was a whole big to-do because in *The New York Times*, Joe Berger talked about domestic violence, and that really started a whole big to-do in the community, saying that you know, there

> wasn't any domestic violence, or only a few cases, and it was far exaggerated. This is another attempt of the Jewish community to show that Bukharans are terrible people (2003).

Clearly, the Bukharans hope to have more control over their image than they felt they had in the Soviet Union. Negative representation of the Bukharan community is particularly sensitive because of past repression and discrimination. The Bukharans have pegged the media as a valuable tool for their community, both for member-to-member communication and for providing publicity and visibility to outsiders. At least once a year, *The New York Times* runs an article on the Bukharan Jews (Celestine Bohlen, "A Little Russia On the Hudson," March 8, 2002. Harry Hurt, "Executive Pursuits; The Kind of Shave You Can't Get at Home," November 5, 2005). The domestic violence article, however, was the first that was political and that was perceived by the community as a clear sign of discrimination in print. The article also illustrates the Bukharans' distrust of outsiders, including other Jews. To understand the strong reaction of community members, it is essential to have an understanding of a perceived shared history of repression and discrimination. Bukharan Jews fear attacks to their image more than anything because for them, the most important gain they have made by coming to New York is the ability to start over, in many senses, and they cherish the perceived control they have over how they are seen.

Methodology

I became interested in the Bukharan Jewish community during my first course in graduate school, "Jewish Folklore and Ethnography." The first assignment was to interview someone Jewish about a tradition. I wanted to talk to someone from the former

Soviet Union, and while researching the prospect, I learned about the New York based Bukharan Jewish community. I developed a much stronger interest when I discovered how little scholarly work there is on this community. My goal was to travel to New York for the summer of 2003 to conduct what I thought would be original and important fieldwork with the Bukharan Jews. Spending time in New York was essential to this particular project because there is so little scholarly work available outside of New York and Israel. The only American scholar who has worked with this community is Alanna Cooper, whose dissertation focuses on the religious history and origins of the community, and current religious politics, especially as the Bukharans relate to other Jewish groups in Israel. She conducted in-depth fieldwork in both Central Asia and Israel. She does not focus upon New York as a backdrop for the Bukharan Jews, nor does she look at their media and communication methods, like newspapers, books, and websites, which are essential to understanding the contemporary Bukharan community in New York.

Through a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, I was able to visit the community on numerous occasions, to interview community members, to attend cultural events, to and immerse myself in the general feeling of life in Bukharan Queens. This research would not have been possible without that opportunity. I spent the summer pursuing this project and also working part time on collecting data for a popular tourist brochure documenting the different ethnic communities living along the Number Seven line train in Queens. I spent many days walking around in the sultry summer, trying different foods and absorbing the multiculturalism of Queens.

The Bukharan community is primarily based in three neighborhoods in central Queens: Forest Hills, Rego Park, and Briarwood. After arriving in New York in mid-

June, I quickly set to finding out as much as possible about the community. My first task was gaining a firm understanding of the historical background of these people whose lives are so shaped by their perception of their history. I found people struggling and surviving in a complex and chaotic city.

Because I had such severe time restraints, I had to use the few interactions I had with the community to try to understand the bigger picture. This project begs for further investigation and time spent actually living and working within the community. I acknowledge that this project does not give the depth of political and religious issues that the community ultimately deserves.

When I arrived in New York I had no contacts within the community, so I had to establish contacts with community members, in hopes that my initial contacts would lead me further into the community. I found out that the Queens Council on the Arts had given a small grant to the Bukharan Jewish theater company *Vozrozhdeniye* and one of my co-workers suggested I watch one of the company's rehearsals. I thought this would be an interesting approach to the community, so I called the stage manager and was invited to attend rehearsal the next day. *Vozrozhdeniye* became a focal point of this thesis and provided enormously interesting and telling material about the community. I also contacted the Webmaster of the Bukharan Jewish Portal (bukharaianjews.com) web site, Peter Pinkhasov, and he agreed to meet me and introduce me to a more politically active section of the community. He took me to the World Bucharian [sic] Congress building in Queens. It was here that I met several people, including Aron Aronov, who had recently moved his cultural museum to the sixth floor from his basement in Forest Hills. I also met Boris Kandov, who is a wealthy jeweler, working in Manhattan. He was quite eager

to show me the Bukharan Jewish Community Center under construction in Central Queens. He was excited about showing me the site and asked if I wouldn't mind photographing him in front of the skeleton of the building. As I took the photograph, he turned away from the camera and looked to the highest point of the building. The image has an almost religious feel of a pilgrim arriving at a holy site. He told me that he and his wife had contributed $200,000 of their personal funds to build the Center. Now, he said, the community is polarized because some of the people who don't have much money are angry that others were able to give so much, and there are also Bukharans who have lived in Queens for many more years (Kandov arrived in 1987) and want credit for the building.

Next, I met Tavriz Aronova, who greeted me with a cake bought for my arrival. Bukharan Jews, I was to learn, are incredibly hospitable. I was always fed and given an endless supply of black tea. Tavriz was a lively woman with wild red hair who talked simultaneously on her office phone, cell phone, and to me throughout the afternoon. Tavriz was enthusiastic about my project and told me that she would introduce me to many people in the Bukharan community. Unfortunately, after our first meeting, I never heard back from her and if the pace of her life that I saw that day was normal, I understand why. Tavriz also referred to the different factions of the community. It seems that the wealthy jewelers of 47th Street are often at odds with the intellectuals, the latter coming to the United States during the 1970s. Because of their wealth, the newer arrivals have tried to make many changes within the community, and many of the intellectuals have felt resentful. I also met Avram Yagudaev, an elderly man with whom I spent several afternoons.

I often found myself "whisked around" but ultimately found it very difficult to get people to open up to me. This was, in part, due to the fact that I had arrived out of nowhere, showing up at their proverbial doorstep, asking about their lives. As an outsider, often I got put off, not called back, stood up. However, I also got a few short glimpses into the community that provides the basis of this thesis.

I have done my best to honestly and ethically represent and understand this community. It is not hard to imagine why the Bukharan community may tend to be more closed than other diasporic groups, yet they know that they must open up, at least somewhat, in order to survive as a group. I was welcomed into the community with open arms, but it was on their terms. It was their idea of who they are that I was allowed to see in the short time I spent in Queens. I immediately realized that that idea was largely based upon who they historically have been.

Historiography

Historical background on the Bukharan Jews is essential to understanding their present day situation. They highly value their perceived history as a group because this is evidence of their collective identity. Because Bukharan Jews were an oppressed and non-recognized group under the Soviets, it is essential to them to have a collective history that is documented and official.

Central Asia has always been a junction of many cultures. And even today, it is more a region of many ethnic groups, than of distinct nation-states. In 1868 the Russians annexed Central Asia, mainly to aid in their imperial aspirations in the region, and they imposed the nation-state model. According to Ken Blady "beginning in the early

nineteenth century, Central Asia became the locus of the 'Great Game', an imperial conflict of immense magnitude fought between Victorian England and Czarist Russia, each frantically scurrying to control the riches of Asia and its biggest prize, India" (Blady 176). By this time the Jewish community was referred to as Bukharan Jews because most of them lived in the Khanate of Bukhara. The Bukharan Jews referred to themselves as "Isroel" or "Yehudi" (Blady 177). By the time they left Central Asia in the 1990s, the Bukharan Jews could be found in all metropolitan areas of Central Asia, most highly concentrated in Tashkent, Uzbekistan and Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

The Bukharan Jewish community has always played an essential role in Central Asian history. Their origin has long been debated, and some Bukharans still claim they are descendants of the Sephardic Jews who traded along the Silk Road. It is, however, most commonly accepted that the Bukharan Jews were Babylonian Jews who migrated east after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE (Blady 177). There is a Central Asian legend dating from the ninth century C.E. that acknowledges a Jewish community. It tells of a khan who summoned a Jewish doctor to help his wife conceive a child. After other doctors failed to find a cure for her infertility, the Jewish doctor successfully aided the couple (Blady 176).

Because of their perpetual diasporic status, the Bukharan Jewish community has a history rich with not only their own traditions and customs, but also those of the regions in which they have lived for the past 2,000 years: the Central Asian countries of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Their language, Bukharan or Bukhori, a dialect of Tajik, is closely related to ancient Farsi, with many Hebrew words mixed in. While it is still spoken by older Bukharans, it seems to be in its linguistic twilight, as most of the

Bukharan children no longer speak it. A prominent Bukharan community leader in Queens, Aron Aronov described the hybridism of Bukharan culture in an interview:

> Bukharan Jews scattered all over Central Asia. We came to Bukhara, say, two thousand years ago. Then little by little we moved toward Samarkand, which is eastward, then to Tashkent, Ferghana valley, to Tajikistan, Dushanbe, Kazakhstan, and Almaty. It's also not far from Kabul, Afghanistan and Iran. Some went to India and settled mostly in Bombay. So we speak our mother tongue – Bukharan. It is sort of a dialect of Farsi, so once we are in Iran and Afghanistan we don't need any translator, we can very easily get along with those people who live there because it's almost the same language. Of course, on our way to Bukhara, we picked up many of the traditions from the people who lived in Iran and Afghanistan, so our clothing, our food, to a greater extent reminds me of those people living in Central Asia, like Uzbeks, Tajiks. So, the only thing which makes us different from all those people is our religion. (2003)

Initially Soviet rule was a welcome relief from the Khanate system, which had imposed many regulations on the Bukharan community, including relegating them to live in their own separate neighborhood, which served as a ghetto. They were not allowed to enter the city after sunset, and they were forced to pay higher taxes than the Muslim population (Blady 179). Despite the discrimination, Bukharan Jews excelled in business, and prospered from trade with travelers along the Silk Road (Blady 180). The Bolshevik revolution freed the Bukharans from many of the discriminatory practices of the emirate. During the early years of the Soviet Union, Central Asia was transformed from a center of commerce into a vast land of cotton fields and collective farms. The Bukharans were not able to adapt to agricultural life and finally lost most of the material gains they had achieved during the Khanate period. The Soviets also discriminated against them for

being kulaks, or upper-middle class merchants. Thus, after an initial reprieve, their hardships continued under the Soviets (Blady 183).

Until 1991, the region of Central Asia was comprised of five Islamic Soviet Socialist Republics: Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. After 1991, four of the republics have formed the Commonwealth of Independent States. There are about 20 million people in Uzbekistan. Nearly sixty-five percent of them are ethnic Uzbeks, a Turkic-based group that speaks Uzbek, a Turkic language. Under Communism, Russian was the dominant language, used in all government agencies and schools. But since 1991, Uzbek again gained dominant status as the national language. In *Nationalism in Uzbekistan,* James Critchlow writes,

> According to the 1989 census, some six million residents of Uzbekistan are not Uzbeks. More than one hundred nationalities were listed. Minorities include nearly two million Slavs (Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians), almost a million each of Tajiks and Kazakhs, half a million each of Karakalpaks (residents of their own autonomous republic in the northwest of Uzbekistan) and Volga Tatars, and sizeable numbers of Kirghiz and Turkmens. The rest of the population includes remnants of non-indigenous nationalities deported [to Central Asia] under Stalin: Crimean Tatars, Chechens and Ingush, Kabardinians and Balkars, Koreans, Kalmyks, and the ill-starred Meskhetian Turks. The Uzbek census also listed four categories of Jews, mainly Ashkenazim and the indigenous Bukharan Jewish community, totaling about 85,000 (Critchlow, 198).

When the Soviets "created" Uzbekistan, they followed their standard model of nationalities policy, which consisted of reprogramming, in a sense, language, history and territory of the people of the outlying republics. It was an attempt to eventually create a national Soviet identity shared by all citizens of the Soviet Union. This meant learning a new language, Russian, and learning Russian history, and relearning their own histories

with a Socialist slant. The radical nationalities policy, discussed by historian Terry Martin in *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (2001), initially supported the idea of nation-building and ethnic expression in the outlying republics. However, the ultimate goal was to create one state -- the Soviet Union -- with the overarching goal of achieving a modern socialist empire for all citizens (10).

In 1924, The Soviets drew borders in Central Asia, which had been essentially borderless territory until then. This was part of the short-term goal of dividing and conquering it. This brought a new social classification – ethnicity. This new division further reified the Jews from the non-Jews of the Soviet Union (Martin 23). Thus, the Bukharan Jews now faced a double set of identities to negotiate. However, the sense that at one time the Jews and the Muslims of Central Asia were the same ethnically is still present in conversations I had with Bukharan Jews. While they did not always agree with their Muslim neighbors, Bukharan Jews felt a shared history with Muslims, much more so than with the Russians. The long-term plan was to *russify* all the people of Uzbekistan in the name of socialism (Roy 51). It is clear among the Bukharans that this plan succeeded, and still works in many ways, even in present-day New York. Bukharans even frequently refer to themselves as "Russian Jews." They almost always speak Russian with each other, at the expense of Bukhori, their own language. Ultimately, this widespread *russification,* or forced cultural assimilation helped the Bukharans in that it made them a part of a much bigger community: Jews of the former Soviet Union.

The first aspect of the Soviet nationalities policy was promoting Soviet Ethnography. Soviet Ethnography was a hybrid social science, a combination of

nineteenth century nationalism and Marxism. The state required that ethnographers, academicians from Moscow or St. Petersburg, prove the people of Central Asia were distinct ethnic groups all striving for a new stage of socialist development. In fact, if Soviet ethnographers did not come to these conclusions, they could be killed for defying the doctrine of the state (Martin 25). Soviet ethnographers encouraged the Uzbekistanis to recognize their ethnic differences. At the beginning of the Soviet period, it seemed that with this freedom of expression, Bukharan Jews would have an easier time within a Soviet Uzbekistan.

Usually, the Bukharan Jews were considered a sort of hybrid Jewish-Muslim group, as they had adopted so many traits from the Islamic culture within which they lived. Their food, consisting of *plov*, a spicy rice dish, and *shashlik*, a dish like *shishkebab*, are staples for all Central Asian Muslims. Their music is indisputably Central Asian, with the *tanbur*, a long-necked instrument like a small guitar featured in *Shashmaqam*, a long musical piece based on Persian poetry. In fact the most prominent Bukharan Jewish music group, which has preformed around the United States, including at the Smithsonian Institue, is called Shashmaqam.

By the nineteenth century, the Bukharan Jews had mostly forgotten Jewish religious laws (Blady 181). It was not until the Bukharans came into contact with other Jewish groups in the United States that they regained their Jewish religious identity. Many Bukharan community members have become devoutly religious since arriving in New York. This is a result of feeling more comfortable expressing their Jewish identity and having much more direct contact with other Jewish groups, including the Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn.

Historically, people in Uzbekistan identified in terms of their communities, or in Arabic, *mahallas*. These neighborhood communities, writes Victoria Koroteyeva, are an Islamic institution that "determines a whole range of social relations of an individual in daily life" (138). The *mahalla* is a clan-based social structure that makes one's immediate community into a family. The Bukharan Jews lived in such mahallas. There are many stories told within the New York City community about how the neighborhood looked and felt and about major events such as the building of the synagogue. The community demands complete loyalty and participation in all communal activities such as weddings and street cleanings. The Soviet policy on *mahallas* was to leave them alone, as long as they were based on a Soviet (non-religious) model and not an Islamic one. The Soviet assumption was that eventually ethnic identification would lead to the *russification* of the masses and *mahallas* would become obsolete as ethnic identities merged into greater Soviet identification.

Language issues also affected Bukharan Jews. The Soviet system mandated that all citizens of the Soviet Union have access to free public education. Thus, in a matter of fifty years, between 1920 and 1970, the population of greater Uzbekistan went from an almost zero percent literacy rate to one hundred percent (Roy 75). The first results of this were the attempted changes in the Uzbekistani indigenous languages, including the Turkic based Uzbek and the Farsi-based Bukhori and Tajik. All of these languages were written in the Arabic script from 1923-29; Lenin then decided that they should be written in the Latin script (1929-40). In 1940, it was decided that the indigenous languages should be written in the Cyrillic alphabet, further russifying all the people of Uzbekistan.

Today, when Bukhori is written it is in the Hebrew alphabet, while Uzbek has returned to the Latin script.

A second aspect of the language policy was the widespread enforcement of Russian as the language of the state; all Uzbekistani citizens were forced to learn Russian, and thus speak and read the language of the colonialists. In his book, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson writes of "print-capitalism" (1991). Mass printing, in the form of books and newspapers, unite citizens who share a perceived past with one another through the "mass consumption" of news and history. Anderson writes that "the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbors, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life" (35). In the name of socialism, this is exactly what happened in Uzbekistan with the Russian language. It is also happening in New York with numerous newspapers and books, specifically published by and for the Bukharan community. With the widespread knowledge of Russian, all citizens of Uzbekistan could read (and ultimately internalize) the state propaganda. They were fed their history in Russian, and all Uzbekistani children, Muslims and Jews, learned about their progress toward becoming civilized Soviets. This history consisted of the Russian version of the *Imagined Uzbekistani Community*. Critchlow writes, "Generations of Uzbeks [and Bukharan Jews] had been brought up on a *Russocentric* Stalinist version of history, which portrayed the non-Russian nationalities as backward peoples who had received support and enlightenment from the Russian 'elder brother'" (Critchlow 119).

Any citizen of Uzbekistan, including Bukharan Jews, who wanted to go to university had to speak fluent Russian, and the Russian language was the standard

language of communication language between ethnic groups. All media were produced in Russian including newspapers, radio and later, television. According to the 1989 census, only 4.5 percent of the ethnic Russians living in Uzbekistan spoke Uzbek. This aspect of imperialism still remains, with most Bukharan communication in Queens taking place in Russian, as noted previously.

One of the most enduring legacies of the Soviet nationalities policy was the sharp rise in literacy rates among all Soviet citizens. Literacy was highly valued among the Soviets for their nation-building project, but it inadvertently provided the Bukharan Jews with a sense of pride in their intellectual contribution to the history of Central Asia and the Soviet Union. The Bukharans learned to blend. They've learned how to maneuver in many worlds that were not their own, and they are proud of this. It often meant their survival.

I spent an afternoon interviewing Aron Aronov, community activist and founder of the Bukharan Jewish Museum, in his office at the New York Association for New Americans (NYANA). We spoke for several hours in English and he had this to say about his life in Tashkent during the Soviet Union:

> Russians had some problems [with the Bukharan Jews]. They looked upon us like we were one of them. Though [the Uzbeks], were Islamists and Muslims we didn't have problems. We spoke almost the same language; we had the same traditions, the same food, and the same dress. We were living in the same neighborhoods.
>
> Russians were considered to be outsiders. We didn't represent any threat to [the Uzbeks'] existence, but the Russians did. They wanted to "russify" Uzbekistan. We didn't have any problems, but when they wanted to give someone a promotion, they said, "Aron, we love you. We respect you. But you are Jewish so we cannot give you this position, because there is the general line of the Communist party. Maybe there were some messages

> from Moscow, whatever I don't know. But Aron, you should understand we cannot give you this, that, because you are Jewish. We love you, but what can we do?"
>
> And we understood that. We put up with the situation; we never claimed to be leaders. You know, we were aware, we were not only Jews, we were Bukharian Jews, which is considered to be lower level of Jewish, because the Russian or East European Jews were educated, well educated, many famous musicians, many physicians, scientists, scholars. And we were what was positive about the Soviets, only that we began to study, the doors of colleges and universities were open. Many of us had become lawyers, musicians, physicians, engineers, and scientists.
>
> It is unfair if you show only the negative part of the Soviets. The negative was that they did not allow us to practice religion, they destroyed all our Shules, synagogues, you know, they risked going to synagogues because they could lose their jobs. But the point of it was, that we became more educated. (Aronov 2003)

Aronov again illustrates the fluid identity of the Bukharans. Depending upon the context of the situation, they were sometimes considered Russians, and sometimes considered Uzbeks. Aronov was able to maneuver these shifting identities and this trait has helped him to successfully transition into American life. He now helps other Bukharans navigate between cultures and Queens and Central Asia, and it seems this role as cultural ambassador is one he has always thrived on.

Contemporary Life in Queens

From Manhattan, one takes the F or E trains to get to Forest Hills. It's midway between Herald Square in Manhattan and Jamaica in Queens. After a few nondescript underground stops, one emerges onto the infamously dangerous Queens Boulevard. Cars whip past at about 45 mph and people scramble through crosswalks to get across the street. Pedestrians are terrified of the street, but it's their livelihood, the commercial

center of this stretch of Queens, running east to west for about ten miles, right through central Queens. Many Bukharans will tell of their "brushes with death" trying to cross the street. Many community members have been killed crossing the street. Often there are makeshift memorials to the unlucky pedestrians who lost their lives simply trying to cross the street. Off of Queens Boulevard in either direction is a rather beautiful neighborhood with tree-lined streets with brick co-op buildings. In Forest Hills there is a sprawling country club, and a Tutor-style tower from the 1920s still stands over Austin Street; these are signs of times past, when this was a neighborhood for wealthy Americans looking for the quiet life, away from the bustle of Manhattan. Now lined with *Starbucks* and *Barnes and Noble*, the neighborhood has a certain middle-class feeling, different from more northern central areas of Queens, where they are more working class and immigrant neighborhoods. Forest Hills is surprisingly "American" looking, although nested between American chain stores are shish kabob stands, Russian groceries and restaurants with names like *Beautiful Bukhara*. One could mistake it for yet another Russian neighborhood, and there are many Russians here, but looking a little closer, one sees that there is a certain Middle Eastern feel, something Russian, but slightly different. Passersby intermingle English and Russian languages and an occasional yarmulke with intricate embroidery patterns makes it clear that the neighborhood is Jewish.

I had a difficult time finding Forest Hills. I missed it the first few times I took the subway there. I would come up from underground and not see what I had thought would be a "Russian-looking" neighborhood, like Brighton Beach, for example. Forest Hills has been called "Bukharan Broadway," but that is not what I saw, until I really started looking, and then I noticed the names of doctors, dentists and eye doctors' signs on the

first floor of many of the brick co-ops. They were Russian-Jewish-Bukharan names, and it seemed that many of them were professionals. Many Bukharans are business-owners, running their shops selling specialty foods and useful household items. There are many kosher bakeries that sell *nan,* a bagel-like bread with black sesame seeds baked on top. There are Bukharan barbers, who perform traditional, almost artistic, shaves with straight razors and patchouli-scented steam. There are shoemakers with tiny shops near the subway.

Yet, somehow the Bukharan Jews blend right in. I was used to neighborhoods like Jackson Heights and Corona, where the ethic groups, such as South Asians and Colombians, have put a visible stamp on the place. I began to realize that this is the Bukharan way, that they have made the place their own, but historically they have always been in someone else's place, so they find their home in nooks and crannies, not in plain sight. I passed by these places for several weeks, until an underlying world began to emerge.

Emigration laws were strict against anyone who wanted to leave the Soviet Union during 1960s until the 1990s, and they were especially harsh on the Jewish population. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, emigration laws changed, allowing the Bukharans to easily receive exit visas. This began the mass exodus to the United States and Israel (Blady 185). Often when Bukharans arrived in New York, they would settle in with relatives who had already been in Queens for several months or years. This means that there were several families living in a very cramped space. I heard of nineteen people living in a one-bedroom apartment in Rego Park in the 1990s. This flow of immigrants has now slowed considerably, as most Bukharans have settled in

and even sent for their elderly family members from Central Asia. During the day, the streets of Forest Hills are full of these elderly community members taking daily walks to the market and chatting with acquaintances on the street. When I met the elderly community member, Avram Yagudaev, he was making his rounds to visit everyone he knew. He later invited me to his apartment that he shared with his wife, and we spoke at length about life in Central Asia. He was adamant that his life had stopped when he arrived in the United States. He told me that he had left everything behind, including his personal identity and sense of worth. I found him so fascinating that I conducted several interviews with him that I will examine later in the thesis.

Bukharans have had success in the jewelry business and many are diamond traders on 47th street in Manhattan. One of the world's richest men, Lev Leviev, a Bukharan Jew living in Israel, controls diamond mines in Russia and Africa. His company, Lev Leviev Group, is a major competitor of the largest diamond trading company in the world, De Beers of South Africa. Many Bukharans who work with Leviev have become extremely wealthy since immigrating to the United States. With this extravagant wealth, organized crime and even murder have made their inroads into the tight-knit community. In 2002, a prominent diamond trader was shot and killed as he left work in midtown Manhattan. Such wealth is a source of tension within the community, as community members who are not involved feel that the jewelry trade brings corruption and crime into the community. Despite recent dark moments for the community, the Bukharans cherish ritual and festivity.

Bukharans love to celebrate and they are good at it. Most weddings are held at one of the many Bukharan restaurants in Forest Hills. These events last well into the

night and consist of Jewish traditions, such as the ceremonial breaking of a glass. The live music is an eclectic mix of traditional Bukharan music, Russian pop music and western rock and roll. Often there will be an abundance of *sozani*, which are hand-woven and embroidered ornamental works that are made by both Jews and Muslims of Central Asia for gifts. The bridal gowns are intricately sequined white cotton tulle made only by Bukharan Jews and not by Muslims in Central Asia. In New York, these dresses are often substituted for the cheaper and more readily available western style wedding dress. Many of the men still wear intricately embroidered yarmulkes. However, most men do not wear yarmulkes on a daily basis. Their crafts and traditional clothing reflect their adaptability and cultural hybridism, while also maintaining their uniqueness as a community.

Because New York is such a diverse environment, the Bukharan's sense of tradition is challenged, especially with the dramatic rise in marriages between Bukharan and non-Bukharan Jews, which were strictly prohibited in the past. Most people with whom I spoke were resigned to the fact that intermarriages were happening. However, most were still adamantly opposed to Bukharans marrying non-Jews. However, most Bukharan Jews in New York still marry within the group. It seems that even if a non-Bukharan Jew marries into the community, they may not share the Bukhrans' perception of the past, but as a Jew there are unifying factors of an original shared history in Palestine, and possibly the shared vision of a future for all Jews together in Israel. Gender roles within the community are also shifting. Many men are unable to find work, due to language barriers and pride. The woman often finds work, cleaning or cooking, before the man of the family, and this has created tension and frustration. The woman is

also expected to run the household, in addition to working full time, while often the husband, if unemployed, will spend the day on social visitations or chatting in a Bukharan café with friends. The community leaders have reluctantly recognized these problems and several synagogues have created classes in family training to help families through a sometimes rocky transition to a more American way of life. The goal is to help the male head of the household feel more at home in Queens and to work towards feeling more comfortable with American culture.

Because of its historical displacement, Bukharan culture has not been place-focused; meaning the home of origin does not provide the geographic stage for traditional identity. Bukharan culture is not geographically fixed. It's a "suitcase culture," to play on the Russian idiom, a "suitcase mood," meaning the feeling one has when traveling, that nothing is fixed in time or space. Bukharan culture is constantly being negotiated, transformed and amended, wherever it lives.

Community leader Aron Aronov commented about Bukharan life in New York:

> I think that the assimilation here, here in the United States of America takes place at a much faster pace, rather than it took place [in Central Asia], because we lost our environment. That environment kept us afloat for the ethnical point of view. I understand that here Manhattan is not the environment for the Bukharan Jews. Skyscrapers, and Mercedes. We have donkeys, camels, deserts, and bazaars. Here you have malls, supermarkets. It's different. We, you know, like to go to bazaars, bargain. You know it is a special life there. It's not only to do shopping. It's also getting some information, socializing. You meet some people, you have teahouses. It's a completely different environment here. And so we make desperate attempts to keep our identity, by let's say food is still Bukharan, almost all families. But some families have McDonald's hamburgers, or whatever, I don't know, but we try. We opened many restaurants to keep our kosher kitchen and food, tandoori, and bread, as you see. All that, and little by little we speak

> our language; we publish our newspapers in Bukharan language and in Russian. (Aronov 2003)

Aronov speaks eloquently of the paradoxes, the collision of two ways of life faced by the Bukharans in New York. What he describes is a community in constant flux, one that is changing, that faces assimilation and rejuvenation at the same moment.

A Place Called Home

This section explores how Bukharan Jews perceive space, place and home. Because of their historical *homelessness* they have the ability and burden to remake themselves with little physical, geographic trace of their former lives; they depend on memory and imagination in creating the future. Their past is shaped by Soviet culture: language, style, and mentality. During Soviet times, much of the business world existed on the black market, where business deals were secured off the record, by handshake. It has been difficult for people from the former Soviet Union to adjust to all the legal and social norms of business in the United States. When I questioned the notion of Soviet mentality this was the answer I got from an American social worker:

> A lot of the Bukharans have done very well. But they do business, I mean look, I know that there's a whole Soviet mentality on how you do business, and it's different than the American. And there's a lot of discussion about how the Soviets do business here. There have been lots of articles on their methods or how they [Soviet Jews] behave or whatever, and their view of feeling entitled, and that comes from the Soviet mentality, and the Bukharans are not different in that way, they've inherited that. But on top of that, they have a sort of bazaar mentality; they did business in the bazaar. (Blumenthal 2003)

With their perpetual diaspora status, Bukharan Jews do not tend to long for a historic

nostalgic homeland; if they long for anything it is the idea of Israel, where most of the Bukharans in Queens have never lived. Community activist, Aronov, speaks about Bukharans' ideas of homeland:

> For most Bukharan Jews, Israel is their homeland. Because with this we sucked with our mother's milk. Mother never mentioned America or any European country. Only Israel. Israel. So if we watch TV, first of all we want to know what's going on there in Israel. We take it very close to heart. And in my opinion, America is a great country, beautiful country. It gives us many chances, but if there is peace in Israel if there will be any trend of going back to Israel, I think Bukharan Jews will go there without hesitation. (Aronov 2003)

Bukharans in New York desire a place of their own. The community is split between the people who long to settle in Israel, the few elderly who long to return to Central Asia and those who are firmly rooted in the United States. In other words, there is not a shared common vision and there are potential problems because of this. With no united vision of the future, maintaining community in the present becomes difficult.

Perhaps the Bukharan community is especially tied to the terms place, space and home, simply because they have never had a homeland of their own. This is doubly important due to the question of Jewish diasporic identity. In her article, "Judaism and Exile: The Ethics of Otherness," Elizabeth Grosz discusses how Jewish identity is shaped by perpetual historic displacement (1993). Bukharan Jews argue that they represent a more pure form of Judaism, that they are relics of a forgotten past. This, in their argument, makes them essential, as a sort of "living museum" to all Jews with an interest in their history and culture.

The notion of place is often defined by "a sense of"; this is what place means in relationship to culture because place is always viewed through human perception. "Place

is an inevitable cultural condition, "the presumed certainties of cultural identity, firmly located in a particular place, which housed stable cohesive communities of shared tradition and perspective" (Carter vii). I asked one community member if Uzbekistan was the perceived homeland of the Bukharan Jews and he had this to say:

> They never think of going back to Uzbekistan. They want to go back to Uzbekistan just to visit the graves of their parents, we do go there, to visit our parents' graves, and I go there as executive director of the museum, to bring more materials. Parents are there, at least once a year or every few years to visit their graves. (Aronov 2003)

The homeland, or homelands, then, becomes a kind of fantasy, a vision of the future, or the far distant past. Globalization changes geography, and it changes time. Flows of information and images travel outside of human perception; thus, the notion of a geographically based *place* is seriously challenged. In "The Condition of Postmodernity" David Harvey claims that growing mobility and internationalization have all but destroyed the notion of place as a settled and tangible something. As a result of this, "places" have become very unstable, and especially in times like these, people long for the stable notion of place (299). This certainly fits the Bukharan Jewish community in Queens.

I saw this in one of my first experiences with the community. Early in the summer, as I was introduced to community leaders, I was immediately taken to the new Bukharan Jewish Community Center in Forest Hills. As we drove towards the center I was told of the importance of the building to the community, of how it was a symbol of its independence. They no longer wanted to have to borrow facilities like the Forest Hills Community Center or the YMCA to hold their community events. This was a place

where all Bukharans could gather, where they could worship, hold classes and have their museum. Community leaders had planned for this center for years; it was a central part of their identity in New York; this was clear to me because it was the first place they wanted to take me. It was also clear that there was something going on under the surface that was not a part of the narrative. There were legal problems with the center, I learned later.

We pulled into the very heart of Forest Hills, not far from the *Starbucks,* and there was a fenced-off construction site. The padlock was removed and the doors of the property swung open to reveal a large skeleton of a structure, certainly on its way to becoming a building, but not any time soon. When I asked about the state of the project, I was told that there had been some stalling in the building process, but everything was back on track and in fact, we had just missed the workmen. Honestly, at this point, I felt a little skeptical. Immediately upon entering the compound, Kandov asked me to photograph him in front of the structure, which is shown in figure 1.

Later in the summer Gloria Blumenthal, the social worker at NYANA, answered my questions about the building:

> The thing is they have this vision of having one grand Center. Maybe they were thinking about the Temple in Jerusalem where all the Jews will gather. Let's say there's 50,000, or what ever number you're not going to have a building that's big enough to put everybody. But it's sort of the like they have this idea that they will be able to provide, you know you can provide services to a large community but you also have to invest a lot of money. There's a Central Queens Y [MCA], which serves the general community of Forest Hills Rego Park and the environs, serves tens of thousands of Jews but we never thought that at one moment in time it would bring every Jew that lived in Queens together. They don't have that. Maybe they want to have many programs, to appeal to as many people as possible, but there's just no way that it would ever... So they embarked on this endeavor then they tried to do it in the Bukharan way

like "Don't ask, don't tell," and they didn't file the correct papers. They worked with one of their own engineers. He may have been a wonderful engineer, but they just didn't think about to what effect they might have, and they also didn't really have enough money in the bank. At that time what may have been at 10 million dollar building, you don't need all 10 million dollars right away, but you do need half of million, or a million, but they only had a few tens of thousands of dollars and then also when they started building, they touched the foundation of the synagogue next door and they sued them and the building stopped.

Hillary: So it's not being worked out?

Gloria: Now it is. And it's taken like seven or eight years for the situation to be resolved. So, in the meantime, people need a place to go, and, this would have happened any way. I talked with them about why they wanted to have this community center and I said, "You know, not everybody can come to a community center. People live far away, like in Briarwood. Maybe they'll come there if there's some kind of class or something, or some kind of event or something, but they need something close to home that serves their every day religious needs and social needs. And old people are not necessarily going to be able, and young people will come home and you want to have something that's close to home." This just a way it is. And in Flushing there are lot of synagogues that have come into being and sort of see themselves as synagogues are, in America: not just a place where people pray. They act as a mini community center. They might not have a swimming pool or they might not have dance lessons, but they might have lectures and they might have socialization programs for the elderly and socialization programs for the young.

Clearly, for the Bukharan Jews, having a physical presence in the midst of this neighborhood is important. Having a physical structure that is "like the Temple in Jerusalem" gives them history, it records their presence in New York and makes them appear organized and influential as a community. Having a community center provides a geographic core to a community that is dispersed throughout several neighborhoods. It provides a clearinghouse of culture while at the same time presenting an image of the Bukharans, as they want to be seen: influential and respected as a community. The structure is symbolic for both the Bukharans and the larger community of Forest Hills.

The skeleton of the building juts out from the ground, making the statement that the Bukharan community has invested in the geography of New York.

Figure 1. Boris Kandov standing in front of the construction site of the Bukharan Jewish Community Center in Forest Hills, July 2003.

CHAPTER 2: THE POWER AND PERFORMANCE OF THE WRITTEN WORD

"To arrange one's life in terms of the Book, the Scroll, is, in a sense, the millennial hope of the Jew. It is the wish of the homeless people of the book to be assimilated into a secular culture, to speak its language, yet also to retain the history and the *scripture* [author's emphasis] of the text that marks their inassimilable history, their perennial difference" (66), writes Elizabeth Grosz. The Bukharan Jews live with two enduring traditions stressing the importance of literacy and language, Judaic and Soviet. Bukharan Jews are most adjustable in relation to language; while they have no one homeland they have plenty of languages. All of them are bilingual; many are tri- and quadri-lingual, speaking Russian, English, Hebrew, and less so, Bukhori. These languages are chosen to express themselves to each other, to both young and old community members, and to other Jewish groups. According to Grosz, the written word historically replaces the homeland for the Jew (66). Jews have carried their sacred text wherever they have gone since they originally left Israel, and this text, the Torah, has bound all Jews no matter their locale. Because of this, the written word, to Jews, is sacred. The Bukharan Jews are a very text oriented community. The elderly man with whom I spoke, gave me his life history in written form because he felt that it would be more permanent and legitimate on paper rather than tell it to me orally.

As previously noted, I met Avram unexpectedly during another interview I was conducting. In 2003 Avram was 78 years old and had friendly, intelligent eyes. He'd been in the United States for two years and spent about five minutes trying to tell me in

English his name and address. Finally, he sighed and told me in Russian, that he was very excited about my project with the Bukharan Jews and hoped that I would like to interview him, so that he could tell me about the community and his life. We agreed to meet the following week at his house in Forest Hills, which was in one of the simple, yet somehow cheerful brick walkups so prevalent in Queens. He greeted me at the door and welcomed me into his small but tidy apartment. His wife served us cola and returned to the kitchen, where she silently waited in the darkened room. Avram did not invite her to participate in the interview, even though I asked if she would like to participate. She politely declined.

I immediately noticed that every piece of furniture in the living room/dining room was covered in plastic, except for Avram's little corner where he kept his desk covered with Russian language newspapers and books [See figure 2]. There was something eerie about all the plastic because it seemed that nothing in the room was being used for the present; it seemed more like preservation of the past. As the interview commenced, the plastic covered furniture in the room began to make more sense. Whenever I would ask Avram about his life here in Queens, he would tell me that he wanted only to talk about the past. He had nothing to say about his current life. He had come to New York to die. This place, he told me, was for his children and grandchildren.

Avram had prepared his autobiography on paper before my arrival and insisted on reciting it to me as written. I was reminded of Barbara Myerhoff's work with the elderly Jews of Venice Beach in *Number Our Days* (1978). Myerhoff writes about one man's autobiographical works, "Reminiscence is no mere escapist desire to live in the past, as some claim; rather it should be regarded as a major developmental task for the elderly,

resulting in the integration that will allow them to age well and die well" (222). When we spoke about his life story, it was clear that, to him, the line between self and community was blurred. At least that is how he wanted to present the story to me; he wanted me to understand the past of the entire community through his story. Avram was very careful about what he would say on tape and what I was allowed to write down. He stopped me several times and said that what he was telling me was only his opinion and should not be used in my thesis. He recommended that I talk with the real Bukharan historians, who were trained scholars, to hear the official story of the community. He did disclose one personal detail: that he had always remained true to his beliefs, despite living in an environment where that was not easy to do. He told me that he had never joined the Communist Party, yet he was such a diligent worker that he worked his way up to a prestigious position, with access to all the "secrets" of the aviation factory in which he worked. He defined himself and his community in constant opposition, as the perpetual underdog. Every story he told was a story about struggle, both personal and political. It was important for me to understand this struggle in order to understand the Bukharans. Grosz writes that "the Jew has functioned as a figure or trope of *alterity,* occupying the position of perennial other for millennia" (61). It was clear that this was Avram's paradigm, and part of the reason why he did not feel that he belonged in New York.

It is important to have "reflecting surfaces" such as, religious ceremonies, for understanding oneself, Myerhoff writes. "Rituals often provide them [reflecting surfaces], especially those that define the Self through changes in social station and life phases" (222). As new immigrants to New York City, Avram and the Bukharan community are

in the midst of a significant change that will determine whether the community lives or dies. They are creating their own reflecting surfaces through ritual and narrative, both written and preformed.

Avram was a pious and religious man. I would see him on the street from time to time, in his brightly colored *yarmulke,* on his way to Synagogue or making his daily social rounds. He wanted to show me his antique *Torah* scroll. When I reached out to touch it, he told me I was not allowed as a non-Jew. He also said, that in spite of all the hardships, his people have always had it (meaning the *Torah*), and that is what keeps him going in this country, where he is a foreigner, an outsider, and a Jew.

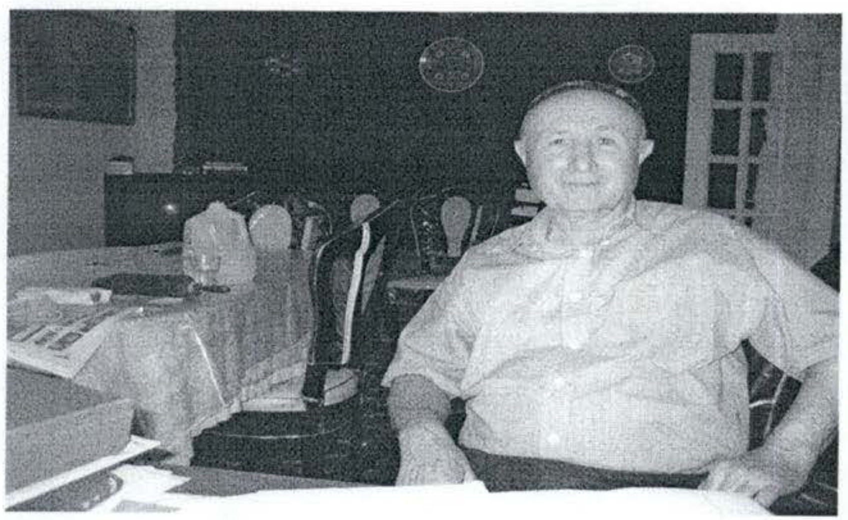

Figure 2. Avram Yagudaev during our interview in Forest Hills in July 2003.

CHAPTER 3: PRESENTATION OF A COMMUNITY: A PLETHORA OF PUBLICATIONS, A MUSEUM, AND A THEATER

In New York the Bukharan Jews are in a position to express themselves more freely than ever before. The crux of their identity is based on how they choose to represent themselves and how others see them. The following sections focus on three different types of cultural expression and presentation: 1) Bukharan Jewish publications, including a website, which appeals to computer savvy, and mostly younger Bukharans in both the United States and Israel; 2) a community leader who is attempting to save Bukharan culture from assimilation; and 3) the popular Bukharan Theater *Vozrozhdeniye* and its attempt to connect with another former Soviet Jewish group—the Georgian Jews, by performing a popular Georgian play in the summer of 2003.

Self-Preservation Through Self-Recording

The Bukharans are masters at self-recording. Everywhere I went it seemed that a Bukharan journalist had gotten there first. This obsession with self-publication, including websites, books, magazines and newspapers, reflects the high status of literacy within the community. I encountered endless stories of professors and scientists of Bukharan heritage both in interviews and in publications; in fact, as with Avram, I often found it difficult to glean personal narratives from the numerous stories told to me of great Bukharans throughout history. Every Bukharan that I interviewed told me how important it is for someone to conduct scholarly research into their community because, as one informant put it, "When you write this down, it will stay for of years in a library and it will show that we are here."

Figure 3. Front page of the website "Bukharianjews.com."

While in Queens I met several men who are active leaders of the younger Bukharans. They are passionate about their history and identity, and one of the most visible ways they express this is through the very comprehensive website—The Bukharian Jewish Portal (http://www.bukharianjews.com) [See figure 3], created in 1998. The site serves as a clearinghouse of Bukharan culture, history, and current events. There are primarily three people working on the website, two men and one woman. Their mission statement is clearly displayed on the front page (alongside an Uncle Sam pointing at the viewer with the text, "Have you registered at Bjews.com?"), "This site was created in order to promote and provide information about Bukharian-Jewish history, culture, ethnicity and achievements, and unite Bukharian-Jews throughout the world!"

Unlike Avram, the younger generation has seized upon technology to give their lives in New York more meaning and vitality. The activists felt that the younger people, who are computer literate, wanted a contemporary medium to make their community more accessible. The result is the website, which is richly interactive. Since 1998 it has become a centerpiece of the community, where young people keep in touch with each other and look for possible friends in the United States and Israel. The website is quite complex and provides comprehensive information on the Bukharan community for the visitor. The website is available in two versions: English and Russian. Bukharianjews.com is an interesting mix of popular culture, such as dating, classifieds, and the "Ask a Rabbi" service, something similar to Dear Abby, together with scholarly articles about Bukharan history and literature. The website also advertised "Off Broadway's Longest Running Smash Hit Comedy – Jewtopia", and the phrase "Just Jew

it!" for encouragement. Advertisements like these help and encourage Bukharans to follow events in the wider New York Jewish Community.

One of the most interesting aspects of the website is the popular, "Bukharian Beauty and Hunk Contest." Visitors to the website can look at pictures that Bukharans posted from around the world and vote for the best-looking. The long anticipated winners of the best looking Bukharan Jews of 2004 contest were finally announced in winter 2005 with Yair and Zina taking home the distinguished title. What is interesting about this contest and the dating section of the website is that the web has now replaced, or works alongside, rather, the ancient Jewish role of the matchmaker. Young Bukharans from around the world can type in what they are looking for in a partner and potentially find matches amongst widespread community members. This is a perfect example of blending old and new traditions to keep a culture alive and vibrant.

The website also serves as an online archive of the community. Currently, there are message boards in response to the conflict between Lebanon and Israel so that Bukharans can keep track of their relatives who are living in Israel. There are sections featuring old photographs of community life in Central Asia, and also current photos of community events, for example the recent "Talk Show 'American Etiquette.'" This was an event hosted by the Association of Bukharian [sic] Youth (ACHDUT) together with the New York Association for New Americans (NYANA) on May 28, 2006. Attendees were advised by a panel consisting of a prominent Rabbi, who spoke about etiquette and Judaism, and a representative from NYANA who spoke about contemporary relations between men and women in the United States. The event was a "how-to" guide to dating in the United States, and was attended by young Bukharan Jews trying to navigate the

dating scene within their own community and in the broader context of American culture. They discussed how men and women should behave when on a first date, and that a man should always try to make his female companion smile and laugh. The newspaper of ACHDUT, called *ACHDUT Unity,* published bilingually in Russian and English (no Bukhori to be found), ran a front-page article outlining the event. The website features a link to the newspaper, where the reader can download the latest issue.

Besides many publications geared toward the younger generation, there are numerous publications reporting on the worldwide Bukharan community. One such publication is called *Menorah.* The newspaper features lively articles about the community, and even more colorful advertisements for various Bukharan-run businesses, like "Or Avner" a preparation course for young boys to learn the Torah and ultimately become independent adults. *Menorah* is published in Russian and in Bukori, which is written with the Hebrew alphabet. There is also a large obituary section, which features color half-page obituaries. This is one of the only ways to communicate community deaths, because many people who lived in one *mahalla* in Central Asia are now scattered over two continents.

The Russian language, *Bukharan Newspaper* (*Bukharskaya Gazeta*) is a more historically focused publication. This is the newspaper that Avram recommended I read. One issue featured an article "How the Jews Came to Central Asia" and discusses the controversial topic of the origin of Bukharan Jews, as many community members still believe that they are Sephardic Jews. The newspaper also features a large obituary section, with elaborate graphics and dramatic poetry lamenting the dead. For example "You went from us in the prime of life; you are loved, dear, unique Constantine; your

beautiful way we will never forget!" (23). Next to the poem is a photograph of Constantine that resembles a passport photo. As is standard in all of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the family and friends pay to announce the death of a loved one.

Besides the numerous newspapers, there are several books published within the Bukharan community. One of the books, *Bukharian Jews* by Meyer Benyaminov, can be found either in its English or Russian version in libraries around the United States. Published in 1992, it is a general chronicle of Bukharan Jewish life in Central Asia, providing a written record of a life that no longer exists. There are chapters on education and culture, traditions and trades. The second half of the book illustrates the significant contributions Bukharan Jews have made in the Soviet Union, with scientific and scholarly pursuits highlighted. There are pages of prominent community members' photographs displayed in eerie rows. There are pages of war heroes, scientists, and performers. The book resembles a high school yearbook of Bukharan Jews. The final chapter chronicles the lives of prominent immigrants to the United States and Israel. Clearly this book was produced to document the importance of the community and the contribution its members have made to the culture of the nation they have lived, be it the Soviet Union, Israel or the United States.

The second book, by Veliyam Kandinov, *"Russian" Immigration: Bukharan Jews in America,* is not a scholarly work, but a record or update of immigrants' lives in New York. The title of the book suggests the fluid identity I often witnessed within the community. The word Russian is in quotations, and it not only appears to be a tongue in cheek reference to mistaken identity, but also suggests that Bukharan Jews do refer to themselves as Russian immigrants when the setting allows. The book has an interesting

dedication: "Dedicated to the 'Concord' Limousine Company, New York." The book delves deeper into the lives and trades of Bukharan immigrants in New York. It has a theme of business and livelihood, of wealth and prosperity. The book also chronicles the reunification of entire families in Queens, who were divided between two continents for many years. It has a jubilant and celebratory feel of a community getting a fresh start and learning a new language. The author stresses that for proper assimilation; Bukharan Jews need to learn English. The book was written in Russian, but has English translation on each page.

All Bukharan publications point to a community in flux that is adamant on retaining a sense of who they are, and who they were. In *The Culture Industry,* Theodor Adorno writes "The culture industry fuses the old and familiar into a new quality. In all its branches, products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and to which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured, more or less according to plan" (98). As Adorno points out, the "culture industry" fuses old and new. This is exactly how the Bukharans reproduce themselves via media in the United States. Their past experiences in Central Asia have been with Soviet propaganda, teaching them about the merits of the socialist state and its citizens. It is better to highlight the positive aspects of the community, and not focus upon aspects that need improvement. Negativity is discouraged. They have embraced the tools and techniques of the culture industry of American popular culture, while also maintaining the Soviet propaganda approach of the past. When they did receive negative press, like the *Times* article on domestic violence, there was outrage. They want control over how they represent themselves. I experienced this in interviews with community members like Avram.

A Central Asian Courtyard in Queens

Billionaire diamond trader Lev Leviyev founded The World Bukharan Congress. He established the foundation in order to unite all Bukharan Jews worldwide and provide a philanthropic platform for donations from his billion-dollar fortune. The Congress supports community religious activities. On Queens Boulevard, the Foundation building serves as a *yeshiva* on the first floors and above houses the offices of prominent members of the Bukharan community. Community activist Aron Aronov has located his personal museum that includes an "authentic" Bukharan courtyard. Bukharan life in Central Asia was centered on the courtyard; this was the place where food was prepared and people spent their days and evenings in social communion. For the past twenty years, Aronov has collected over 2000 artesian and utilitarian artifacts and photographs depicting the daily life and intellectual contribution of Bukharan Jews in Central Asia. The mission of this museum is to teach the younger generation of Bukharan Jews what life was like in Central Asia. It hopes to show that Bukharans had a positive impact on Central Asian and Soviet society. Many children and young adults in the community were born in the United States, so these places exist only in stories passed down by elders. The museum, and courtyard represent a bygone era; a time based largely on memory and re-creation.

While the courtyard is filled with authentic items, one cannot help notice the ironic placement of the museum itself. Located on the sixth floor of, essentially, an office building, the lighting is fluorescent and just to the left of the courtyard simulation is a window that looks out onto Queens Boulevard. This view of a very busy street, distracts, but at the same time, is fitting. This window is a symbol of the current world of

the Bukharan Jews. The window, like a portal through time and space looking out onto the busy boulevard, puts the museum into context. According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett who has written extensively on cultural displays, the courtyard is a form of display she calls *In situ.* In the In situ mode objects are displayed out of its original context, and thus, its original meaning is changed (20). Since the display is a projection of reality, the viewer may become lost in the spectacle, in the make-believe. The window near the exhibit actually breaks down the In situ mode, so the viewer can never forget, no matter how hard he or she tries, that the museum and the courtyard now sit above one of the busiest streets in New York City. Jean Baudrillard writes in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994) that "When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning" (6). For the Bukharans, the real is completely gone because both the time and geography have changed. This has left Aronov and the Bukharans with a chance to reproduce themselves, in fact, in order to survive, they must do this.

Aronov's narrative is also about himself within Bukharan culture. Social worker (and co-worker of Aronov) Blumenthal said of Aronov's passion to save Bukharan culture:

> That's why Aron wants to create the museum. He's a total Bukharian cultural chauvinist. He lives and breathes Bukharian culture, so he did an interview with our local outlet of National Public Radio, and he told them that he's never had any other food except pizza. You know, he only eats Bukharian food, so when he travels he always carries his own food. I don't know if that's one hundred percent true, but that's something that he wants. When I went to Uzbekistan with him, he ate food prepared by Uzbeks, I mean they weren't necessarily Bukharians, but he knows that, who knows where the border between Bukharian and the rest of Central Asian culture, who knows where that is, but I know that there are special foods and special spices that Bukharians in particular eat at certain times, and I can't believe that the Muslims don't have similar things, but he feels that the culture is going to become dissipated. It's certainly going to

> become injected with American culture; the kids are going to be American, with some Bukharian cultural influences, as opposed to the opposite. And that's why he wants to have a museum where people can come see the culture. He knows that his chauvinism and he's also reinvented himself. He had to function in Soviet society as a Bukharian, and he had to suppress a lot of his Bukharian, in order to work at the University as an instructor. So now he is resurrecting his own Bukharian background and trying to teach and transmit these things to his daughter and granddaughters. But he knows he's fighting a losing battle.

Because Aronov is sole curator of the Bukharan Heritage Museum, he decides how culture should be displayed. He has devoted much of his time and money to establishing the museum, which is filled with framed pictures and paintings of important community members and with artifacts, such as textiles and clothing that were produced in Central Asia. He is a community leader with enough clout to tell the story. Aronov's high status dates back to Central Asia: he worked as a translator of English and French for the United Nations and was fluent in English long before he came to the United States. "In 1989 when I came here, I was lucky, I was a translator and teacher in Uzbekistan, so I didn't lose my social status. I was a translator for those refugees who came from Iran and from Russia because I spoke both languages" (Aronov 2003).

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes of Jews on display at the World's Fairs of the nineteenth century (81), who discovered the power of display; they created an image of who they wanted to be and how they wanted to be viewed by the world. With his museum, Aronov has the power and agency to chose how the Bukharan community is viewed. Because he came to the United States speaking English he was able to establish himself much easier than many people his age. This gave him authority to interpret American culture as well as represent Bukharan culture. He thrives on both helping

Bukharans navigate their new home culture, while also reminding them of their past. He is not a relic of the past, but an individual who has successfully bridged both culture and geography. He represents how the Bukharans would like to see themselves, as a bridge between a successful present and a rich past; the axis of the community. When the Bukharan Jews want something they usually talk to him. He is a social worker at NYANA, so he is in a position of provider, not receiver. He is a kind of go-between, and one senses that he is well aware of being a highly visible person representing Bukharan culture.

As noted, Aron Aronov is on a self-proclaimed "one-man mission" to save Bukharan culture. He is the teacher for the scores of Bukharan youngsters he encounters, both on the street and at the museum. While Bukharan scholars have been writing and debating their history since arriving in the United States, Aronov has been "performing" that history. Aronov is the storyteller. When he leads tours of his museum, he slips out of his western style jacket and into an ornamental Central Asian jacket. He leads by example, stopping children on the street and speaking to them in Bukhori. If they do not understand, he lectures them on the importance of learning the language of their grandparents. He tells them they are responsible for saving Bukharan culture from ruin. He teaches by word of mouth and by creating his museum. He is the quintessential storyteller that Walter Benjamin referred to in his essay, "The Storyteller," Benjamin's who conveys lived experience to his audience, and through the sharing of experience comes transformation. Benjamin writes, "The Storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale"(87). Aron is a living document to the past, and he

has chosen to be a publicly accessible document. He says he never turns down appointments or interviews, even when he does not feel like meeting. He is driven to save Bukharan culture one child at a time.

The stories we tell make us who we are; they let others in on our lives through our own creation. Nineteen-year-old Igor Rybakov commented:

"Bukharan Jews are very talented. Here in Queens, you can see that the Bukharan Jews came here to America and in quite little time, opened Bukharan restaurants, opened three Bukharan Jewish theaters, and a school of dance" (Rybakov 2003). Interestingly, Rybakov, while on the forefront of postmodernity with his website, was also a strict modernist. Cultural producers, such as Rybakov, have learned to use new technologies in cultural production. In "The Condition of Postmodernity" Harvey writes that "The effect, however, has been to re-emphasize the fleeting qualities of modern life and even to celebrate them" (312).

The choices people make in what and when they present as a life narrative is only half the story: as when a story is told the listener is not only passively consuming the information, but helping the storyteller decide what comes next; how to proceed in the story. I began research with the Bukharan Jewish community in Queens, New York to better understand if community is, in fact, not a thing, a static condition, but a constantly shifting, moving experience that is not only lived, but also relived, through stories and narratives about the past, present and future. I never heard the narrative questioned. I often saw the grandeur of the past, and the accomplishments of the present. Thus, in a sense the Bukharan narrative is a modernist tale within a larger New York post-modernist one. Almost solely, the Bukharans are the only "knowers" of their story because most

people have never heard of them. In "What is Postmodernism" Lyotard writes that "We may thus expect a thorough exteriorization of knowledge with respect to the 'knower', at whatever point he or she may occupy in the knowledge process" (140). Bukharans *need* to externalize their culture in order to save it. And with externalization comes the problem of representation and the complications of the metanarrative.

Theater "Vozrozhdeniye" and the Grand Spectacle

The Bukharan Theater *Vozrozhdeniye* is one of the sources of pride of the Bukharan community. What they perform, and whom they perform for are direct reflections of the relationship of the community to the world around it. In the theater, I sensed an almost overwhelming sense of pride and self-awareness. That message was bolstered by their surplus of publications. This section is an analysis of the Bukharan Jewish theater's staging of the Georgian play *Hanuma* [See figure 4].

Ethnic theater has long been a creative outlet for immigrant groups. It can be a way to share a common native language, meet friends in a pubic setting, explore contemporary issues, or entertain nostalgia for the homeland for a few hours. In other words, theater is a place for an immigrant community to escape the new place and travel through time and space to a place of memory. The popularity of immigrant theater in the United States peaked between 1900 and 1930. This was a time of heavy immigration of groups with a tradition of theater in their home countries. Immigrants from places like Sweden, Italy, Germany and France came from cultures with strong traditions in the theater arts.

ТЕАТР «ВОЗРОЖДЕНИЕ» ПРИГЛАШАЕТ
на грандиозное представление грузинской классики
премьеру музыкальной комедии драматурга А. Цагарели

«ХАНУМА»

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Музыкальный руководитель – Эфраим ГАВРИЭЛОВ

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СПОНСОРЫ:
Конгресс бухарских евреев США, президент общины грузинских евреев Бениамин АТАНЕЛОВ, колледж БрамсонОРТ - Рита БАСКИН, мебельная фабрика "Lifestyle Futon" Артура и Лилии НАЗГИНОВЫХ, дентист Белла НОРМАТОВА; бизнесмены: Слава АШЕРОВ, Дэниел ЛОЗОВСКИЙ, Сион АКИЛОВ; общественный деятель Дэвид РЫБАКОФФ; вице-президент бухарско-еврейского центра Рая АБАЕВА, фотовидеостудия "Силуэт" Григория и Рафаеля КАЙКОВЫХ, ровесник театра Джонатан СУНБУЛИОН

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(718) 297-0593 - Алла; 275-0213 - Лазарь; 459-6008 - Рива, 897-4500 - Мила (рест."Тройка")

Figure 4. Poster for the Georgian play "Hanuma" performed by the Bukharan Jewish Group "Vozrozhdeniye" on July 20, 2003.

Maxine Schwartz Seller's book *Ethnic Theatre in the United States* provides an important historical analysis of the role ethnic theater has played for immigrants to the United States. I want to emphasize that although ethnic theater has seen its proverbial twilight, it has not completely disappeared as the case of *Vozrozhdeniye* shows. This seems to make sense, because the Bukharan Jews are a relatively newer immigrant group. Yet theater has always played an important role in the community. Ken Blady writes of the ancient Bukharan community in Central Asia, "The Jews occupied a preeminent position as the most talented and distinguished folk singers, instrumentalists, and dancers. Some were *khafises* (professional entertainers) who performed exclusively for the emir and his courtly routine" (180).

The name *Vozrozhdeniye* means revival or renaissance in Russian. This name has interesting implications. It could mean that the community of Bukharan Jews sees itself in a revival after so many years of repression. The group started in the mid-nineties as a response to the rising numbers of Bukharans in Queens, and was mainly the brainchild of recent immigrant, Simeon Aulov, a respected director with the Uzbek National Theater in Tashkent. Under Aulov's leadership, *Vozrozhdeniye* has become powerful cultural glue for the Bukharan community in Queens. The theater fulfils several important roles, which will be discussed below.

Vozrozhdeniye held its nightly rehearsals in a yeshiva in Forest Hills. When I entered the building, however, I felt transported to a cavernous Russian style building, fallen into disrepair during Soviet times; I was amazed to find such a place in the middle of Queens. When I walked into the classroom in the basement used for rehearsals, a hush

fell over the room. After a few moments of silence, the group of about ten people found me a chair and began offering me dates and nuts, tea and fresh bread. When I finished what they offered me, they gave me more, as I smiled embarrassed, they smiled back asking exactly what I wanted to do my project on? Why was I interested in their theater? I tried to explain that I was interested in Bukharan culture in general and I thought the theater would be a good place to start. After stumbling through an explanation, there was a moment of silence followed by someone asking me, again, what it was that I was interested in? I smiled, ate more, and moved my chair far into the corner. While somewhat perplexed by my sudden appearance, they reminded each other several times that is important for them to be "seen" by non-Bukharans, especially someone interested in their history and ethnography. They were certainly aware of the power of public relations. After a few moments, a kind looking man with a big mustache leaned forward and said to me in broken English, "Bukharan culture is very old and interesting. We have many traditions and now here in America, some of us become actors in our theater with this famous director." Then he laughed for a few seconds about his newfound talent. He told me that most of the actors in the theater were not professionals at all. They came to rehearse after work and had never imagined acting as a hobby when they lived in Uzbekistan. In this way, it did seem that America, or the ideal of America, had offered them a new kind of freedom of self-exploration that they probably did not have in the Soviet Union.

I began to wonder about the rest of this man's life here. What was his job? Did he have a family? I was not able to ask those questions because rehearsal was finally getting underway, about an hour after the scheduled time. As the hours went by into the

late night, it became clear that these Bukharans had an overwhelming sense of pride in who they are. I watched them transform themselves into excellent actors, under the charismatic leadership of a former director and actor of the National Theater of Tashkent. The rehearsal that I attended was for a play written by a respected Bukharan writer now living in Queens that they planned to stage in fall 2004. I immediately noticed that although the play was in Bukhori, and the actors all spoke it, they communicated only in Russian as soon as they took stage directions or were engaged in conversation. Bukhori seems to be in its linguistic twilight. I later found out that most people in their twenties and younger do not speak the language. There was a young girl, about seven years old, who had tagged along with her grandfather. She seemed the most interested in my presence and at one point asked me in English if I understood Bukhori. I told her no, that I barely managed with Russian. She shrugged and said that she, too, did not speak Bukhori.

According to Schwartz Seller in *Ethnic Theater in the United States*, one of the primary functions of ethnic theater is to expose community members to their native language (6). In this case, there are essentially three native languages to choose from—Bukhori, Russian, and English. *Vozrozhdeniye* divided its performance language equally between Russian and Bukhori, but had yet to perform in English. Some of the younger community leaders had begun to lobby for performances in English. This seemed a bit too ambitious, as some of the actors still struggled with conversational English.

The play, *Tashkent-New York,* was about contemporary life of Bukharan Jews in New York. In fact, domestic violence was shown in a powerful scene; this was a touchy subject since the New York Times article had caused so much controversy. It is ironic

that the Bukharans are portraying themselves daily life, but they do so in a language that is hardly used in contemporary Bukharan life. Most of the younger Bukharans that I interviewed expressed frustration that they were unable to understand plays that were written in Bukhori.

I found that there is a struggle between keeping the theater traditional, in the sense of performing plays in the Bukharan language, and performing plays in English, to a wider audience. Russian performances fall somewhere in between. The *Queens Council on the Arts (QCA)*, has annually granted the Bukharan Theater money specifically to produce shows in English or at least with English explanations, making them more accessible to the wider community. Money, according to Schwartz Seller (4) has always been chronically short for ethnic theaters and *Vozrozhdeniye* is no exception. I was sent by QCA to report if the event felt accessible and open to the wider community.

The second time I encountered *Vozrozhdeniye* was at their performance of *Hanuma,* which is the story of a king and a sly matchmaker named Hanuma and all the follies that occur in finding him a bride. *Hanuma*, produced in part with the grant money, was supposed to attract other non-Ashkenazic Soviet Jews. The play was in Russian, and although tickets were available to anyone who was interested, it was an almost exclusively Bukharan event. As a non-Bukharan, I was quite out of place. I noticed that the front row was about seventy-five percent filled with journalists from the plethora of Bukharan publications in New York, including Israeli publications with correspondents in Queens. In fact, a reporter attended the first rehearsal of Vozrozhdeniye that I attended. On the website *BJews.com* the following review of *Hanuma* was posted:

> …the theater presented a Georgian classic musical comedy "Hanuma" by A. Tsagareli, music by G.Kancheli. This play on the stage of Leningrad's Bukharan Dramatic Theater was remembered by all who saw it…Our Theater didn't copy that stage performance but created its own interpretation of it. By the common acknowledgment of media and auditorium the play was lively and interesting and demonstrated a growing master performance of actors; their ability to sing, dance, move and transform into character. The theater's goal was to reunite three Jewish communities: Bukharan, Georgian and Caucasian…

The play was presented with a comedic, non-political appeal; it was pure slapstick comedy. With *Hanuma,* the Bukharan Jews were able to reach out and attempt to encourage alliances with other groups, while maintaining cultural control and artistic license. In interviews conducted with community outsiders who had close contact Bukharan Jews in Queens, it was stressed that although there is tension between other Soviet immigrant groups, the least tension exists with the Georgian Jews. This play was an overt attempt to forge a stronger alliance with the small group of Georgian Jews in New York; Bukharan Jews most closely identify with Georgian Jews as non-Ashkenazic former Soviet Jews. Relationships with non-Ashkenazic Jews are highly revered, as Bukharan Jews tend to be marginalized by other Ashkenazic Russian Jews as "Jews in Muslim clothes" according to Gloria Blumenthal of NYANA.

Watching the play, I witnessed the overwhelming sense of dignity the actors felt for their craft. It was contagious, and despite the decrepit nature of the Jewish Community Center in Forest Hills, where the play was staged, and the fact that the enormous, faded pink curtain was sagging over half of the stage, the actors acted and the audience reacted as if they were sitting in the National Theater in Tashkent. Schwartz

Seller makes the point that the most important function of ethnic theater is to provide the audience and actors with a fantasy outlet (7). It creates a place and a time for members of the community to return back to what may or may not have existed. It provides an escape from the present. In fact, at intermission, the very elderly woman sitting next to me leaned over and asked in Russian, if it was difficult for me to follow the play? I asked her why she would think I would not follow it and she kindly told me that she felt that I was not one of them (наша). It was not clear if she meant Russian, Jewish, Uzbek, Tajik, Bukharan, or any combination of these identifiers. I told her that the play was quite enjoyable. She then told me how wonderful the theater in Tashkent had been and that one of the actors in this play had been a very popular actor in Uzbekistan. She finished by telling me that it was very good that I spoke Russian: that speaking this language was important and useful. Throughout the second act, she smiled at me during all of the funny parts.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS

Long ago, the Bukharan Jews lost their homeland, and, forced to live along the Silk Road in Central Asia, they made lives for themselves far from Israel, never completely letting go of the collective memory of a homeland. They adapted to Central Asia's Muslim majority. They adapted to Soviet rule and pervasive anti-Semitic policy and attitudes. They have always been aware of their separateness, their uniqueness; pride in their resiliency seems to fuel the desire to preserve their cultural history in Queens. They have moved from one diasporic experience to another. Bukharans are outsiders; as Annelise Orleck writes in her article, "Soviet Jews: The City's Newest Immigrants Transform New York Jewish Life," "...the vast majority have continued to observe ancient Persian traditions...Those differences have not diminished in Queens, where even affluent Bukharans have faced prejudice and stereotyping, not only in dealings with American-born but also from fellow Soviet émigrés" (111).

Adaptation happens on multiple levels at different rates, and the case of the Bukharan community is especially complex. Only time will tell what will happen if the Bukharan language ceases to exist, if people decide to resettle in their "homeland" of Israel, or if they see mass assimilation within the next generation of this perpetually "transnational" community.

New York is a postmodern landscape in every sense. Important in that phrase is not only postmodern, but also landscape. New York City is unlike any other place, it has always been a meeting place of cultures, where a Bukharan Jew will live next to a

Columbian immigrant and an African American family. While Bukharans are well versed in exile, they are learning to express themselves to people from around the world. Culture and memory are so intangible: the more one tries to define and understand the more illusive they become. I began to understand why the Bukharans feel such a strong need to document themselves. They wish to conquer their past, to take control where they have never had control. However, as this thesis has hopefully shown, this is no easy task. David Harvey writes that "This loss of historical continuity in values and beliefs, taken together with the reduction of art to a text stressing discontinuity and allegory, poses all kinds of problems for aesthetic and critical judgment" (311).

Shaped by lifetimes under Soviet rule, the Bukharans have come here as former Soviets, which is central to their character, while finding and expressing their identity as Jews, more specifically, Bukharan Jews. There is no model for this community, as their situation is unique.

They are learning to be Jewish in some new sense, trying to maintain their own sense of identity, while forming alliances with other Jewish groups, who see them as the "other." As Alanna Cooper's work shows, there are many ways to be Jewish, and not all of them are looked favorably upon. They try to express themselves in ways that will appeal to potential allies and helpers, as shown by the staging of Hanuma and their work with NYANA. There are people like Aron, working to remember and document the traditional culture before it is forgotten. The race seems against time and American culture, which has a way of seeping into even the most isolated communities.

The question is, as always, how to rectify memory with the past, and with the present. They are looking to the "other" and to their Soviet past for help with expressing themselves publicly, because they've always been together privately, but never publicly. New York may be the height of postmodernity, but for the Bukharans, it is a backdrop for their modernity. Thus, it is not only the Bukharans who have changed in coming to New York, but New York changes and shifts under the weight of the Bukharans, and it is doing what it does best, allowing itself to be reconstructed to form a new reality for this group of people. These are shards of a community, and there are many parts I didn't see. Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) that we do not consciously construct the thing, but rather allows it to construct itself before our eyes (53). What emerges in the Bukharan community is always authentically, intentionally Bukharan.

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