

Twisted Trajectories and Jewish-Muslim Interfaces: Bukharan Jews of Central Asia in Vienna

VERA SKVIRSKAJA

Abstract

This article discusses migration of Bukharan Jews—an ethnic-religious minority in (post-)Soviet Central Asia—and the establishment of multi-confessional, multi-ethnic Central Asian diaspora in the city of Vienna, Austria. During the Cold War period, Vienna was transformed from being a major transit hub for Soviet Jews moving from the USSR to Israel, USA and other destinations to a site of the most numerous and prominent Bukharan Jewish diaspora in Europe. Using the concept of ‘migration infrastructure’, the article investigates the ways in which this transformation took place. Furthermore, it focuses on Jewish-Muslim interfaces, both in Soviet Uzbekistan and present-day diaspora, to document the ongoing, albeit changing, coexistence and collaboration across ethnic-religious boundaries that facilitate transnational migration. I argue that the Jewish infrastructure, which emerged in Vienna’s historically Jewish district of Leopoldstadt in the last decades, has also become a migrant infrastructure for the post-Soviet Tadjik-speaking Muslim migrants from Central Asia.

Keywords: USSR; Uzbekistan; shadow economy; migration infrastructure; cultural mobility

Introduction

Migration from the former Soviet Central Asian republics (or post-Soviet Central Asia) and Central Asian diaspora have been a subject of in-depth anthropological and other social scientific research for decades. Studies of ethnic Russian repatriates (i.e., return Soviet migrants) as well as Uzbek and Tajik labour migrants have produced nuanced and diverse scholarship of post-Soviet mobility in Central Asia (e.g., Abashin 2017, 2022; Pilkington 2002; Reeve 2023; Turaeva

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& Urinboev 2021). This article aims at complementing this body of Central Asian mobility and migration research by focusing on the Soviet and post-Soviet migration of Bukharan Jews who, until the collapse of the USSR, resided mainly in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan but by now have almost completely disappeared in the region. During the Cold War era, Bukharan Jews represented the only transnationally mobile group of Central Asians; besides migration within the USSR (mainly to Russia) and *aliyah* or 'moving up' to Israel, they have established prominent diasporic hubs in the USA (mainly New York) and Western Europe (mainly Austria and Germany); some families have also settled in Canada, Australia and other countries.¹

The term 'Bukharan Jews' designates an ethno-religious minority who represent 'native' Jewish traditions in Central Asia, speaking Bukhori or Jewish-Tajik language.² Bukhori is still spoken alongside Russian in the diaspora, as well as in Israel and post-Soviet Central Asian countries, but it is disappearing among the younger generations, being replaced by the national languages of their new homelands (e.g., German, English and Hebrew). Bukharans have also formed distinct urban identities that have 'followed' them in emigration. For instance, Bukharan Jews of Samarkand have claimed a particularly energetic and ambitious identity, pointing out that many community and religious leaders in diaspora and Israel, as well as the majority of diamond traders in New York's 47th district, are native Samarkandis.³ Many Bukharan Jews from Tashkent have tended to distance themselves from what they see as Bukharan 'parochial' attitudes, taking pride in their educational achievements, cosmopolitan outlook and Soviet/Russian modernity. 'They have always been much freer in Tashkent', explained a Bukharan from Samarkand who left the USSR in the early 1970s.

In contrast to the histories of mobility of other Asian Jews throughout the 20th century (e.g., Afghan and Syrian Jews, see Anderson 2023, Marsden 2023 in this volume), Bukharan Jews' transnational mobility was punctured by the arrival of the Soviets. Prior to that, Bukharan merchants established commercial hubs and invested in commercial properties in Moscow and other big Russian cities as well as in London and Palestine (Levin 2015: 7-13; Kimyagarov & Fazylov 2020). Some of the wealthy Bukharans moved to Jerusalem and built the quarter 'Shkhunat Bukharim' (Galibov 1998: 14). Today, the fifty year period (1867-1917) leading up to the Bolshevik revolution is represented by

Bukharan researchers and activists as ‘the golden age’ of Bukharan merchants, including wealthy wholesale traders, industrialists and landowners (Kimyagarov & Fazylov 2020: 82-92; Pinkhasov 2022; 2023: 28).⁴ Recollections of the ‘golden age’ and mobile merchants (and their properties) feature in the diasporic publications (e.g., Galibov 1998: 15; Pinkhasov 2023) and in family genealogies told by the elders at various gatherings: tours to the ancestral graves, participation in life-cycle events and religious holidays in homeland and diaspora. People relate stories of global mobility in the distant past at a time when Central Asia’s ‘native’ Jews are, once again, expanding their geography through transnational kinship networks and mobile businessmen with multiple homes.

Many aspects of the Bukharan Jews’ migration history have been covered by Jewish Studies’ scholars or published in Jewish Studies journals and book series rather than in Central Asian studies publications (e.g., Cooper 2011, 2012, 2023; Loy 2022). It is my intention to contribute to the studies of Central Asian migration with the case of Bukharan Jews not only by discussing their migration trajectories and experiences, but also by bringing into focus Jewish-Muslim interfaces and the ways in which these have structured coexistence in Uzbekistan and eventually ‘travelled’ to diaspora. Here, ‘Jewish-Muslim interfaces’ refer to issues of mutual concerns and collaboration, past and present. Recently, the interfaces’ underlying idea of inter-confessional, inter-ethnic cooperation or mutuality has been integrated into people’s diplomacy (*narodnaia diplomatiia*, in Russian) agendas promoted by the Bukharan global diaspora and Uzbek government (e.g., Shukurzoda 2019; Skvirskaja 2022).

Dealing with these issues methodologically, I discuss the case study of the Bukharan diaspora in Vienna, Austria—the site of the most prominent Bukharan community in Europe, numbering around 2,500 people⁵—and consider elements of their ‘migration infrastructure’ (Xiang and Lindquist 2014) and ‘cultural mobility’ (Greenblatt 2009). The former implies a combination of various institutions, practices, actors and broader societal transformations that enable migration. The latter highlights mobilities of Central Asian cultures that have not existed in isolation from one another at ‘home’ and have continued to converge in diaspora.

The ethnographic fieldwork for this study was carried out in Vienna and in the cities of Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara, Uzbekistan, in 2022-2024.⁶ In Vienna, I have talked primarily to different cohorts of

‘first generation’ emigrants, i.e., those who were born in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and emigrated as either adults or children. All of my interlocutors are fluent in Russian and the community has Russian-speaking rabbis of Bukharan Jewish descent. While I use the phrase ‘first generation migrants’, I agree with Mandel (2008: 19) that a simple periodisation of emigrants into first-, second- and third-generations of migrants can disguise complex sociocultural configurations. My usage refers to the place of birth of my diasporic informants and not to assumed shared dispositions.

In what follows, I discuss the Cold War and post-Cold War migration from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and the establishment of Vienna as a new diasporic hub of Soviet Jews.⁷ I then turn to the theme of coexistence and diasporic relations, suggesting that the Bukharan Jewish infrastructure in Vienna now provides the elements of migrant infrastructure for the new wave of Tadjik-speaking Muslim migrants, contributing to the emergence of the ethnically heterogeneous Central Asia diaspora.

Broken Promises and a New Diasporic Hub

Taking off

The migration of Bukharan Jews has been an integral part of Soviet Jewry emigration from the USSR that involved complex procedures, obscure decision-making logic by the OVIR (Office of Visas and Registration) and months if not years of waiting for ‘exit visas’ (Loy 2016; Zaltzman 2023: 361). While culturally different and geographically dispersed Soviet Jews had shared several reasons for leaving the USSR (improving their living standards; anti-Semitism), many Bukharan Jews claimed to have been motivated by Zionism. My interlocutors in Vienna and New York as well as some diasporic publications (e.g., Borokhov 2015: 24) have stated that the first Bukharan families emigrated not because they desperately wanted to leave the Soviet Union like many Soviet Ashkenazi did, but because they wanted to move to Israel.

‘Ordinary’ Soviet antisemitism might have made some Bukharans feel that they were ‘second class people’ (Loy 2016: 148), but in his memoirs, the former community leader of the Bukharan Jews in Vienna, Grigorii Galibov (1998: 18-23), has underlined that many Bukharans were well-integrated into the state structures and enjoyed ‘good life’ in Central Asia. According to Galibov, it was Soviet

anti-Israeli propaganda at the time of the Six-Day-War (1967) that represented the conflict as the Jews' hostility towards Islam that had nourished people's Zionism; this in turn had provoked negative attitudes towards local Jews among Muslim Uzbeks and Tajiks, including outbursts such as: 'Go to your Israel!' (Galibov 1998: 23). 'Only when the troubles started in Israel, we understood that we have to go there. Before that we did not pay much attention to who was who', explained a woman who was around twenty at the time of the war. A similar trigger for Jewish emigration was also recorded in other Asian regions; in Afghanistan, for instance, the war resulted in the growing hostility towards the Jews and, at one point, Afghani Jews had to seek refuge in the synagogue in Kabul to protect themselves from the mob (Marsden 2023).

A very different trigger was a fear of Soviet authorities in the realm of the shadow economy. The particular pervasiveness of the shadow economy at the Muslim periphery, which was made public in the whole of the USSR by a number of high-profile corruption cases in the 1980s, had even cast doubt on representations of Central Asia as a socialist region (Abashin 2023). Participation in informal and 'underground' economic activities—from running 'underground' factories (e.g., *tsekhoviki* in Russian) and private trade in furs, carpets and small commodities, to the underreporting of one's earnings (e.g., in shoe repair businesses, informal food joints)—was commonplace. Bukharan Jews, not unlike many Uzbeks or Tajiks, preferred to have independent cash earnings in addition to or instead of state wages. '[Many] people wanted to bring some money home every day, rather than receiving a fixed salary once a month', I was told by a resident of the Jewish neighborhood, *Shark* ('East') in Samarkand (cf. Zaltzman 2023: 380).

The shadow economy was embedded in the state bureaucracy and extensive patronage networks. While it was 'living by its own laws' (Tokhtakhodzhaeva 2007: 113) and incorporated Central Asian ethnic diversity, it was also hierarchically ranked and divided along ethnic lines. A glass ceiling prevented the most ambitious Bukharans to raise to the very top in Soviet bureaucratic and administrative structures. Yet, various lucrative positions, such as an administrator of the Soviet House of Services (*dom byta*, in Russian)⁸ or a warehouse director, were within their reach and provided opportunities for large-scale informal activities. Some 'underground entrepreneurs', including Bukharan Jews, became the protagonists of urban myths in the 1950s-1970s in

which their fabulous wealth was often 'matched' by capital punishment or disappearance in the KGB structures.

There were, of course, different ways to legitimise or disguise illegal earnings,⁹ but the shadow economy also took its toll on people. 'In Samarkand, a woman of fifty looked like an old woman. Here [in Vienna] she looks twenty-five. Here she does not have to think about a tax inspector! My father was a *shochet* (kosher slaughterer) and a taxman would come to us. What stress!' shared an elderly Bukharan in Vienna. In a similar vein, one of my interlocutors in Tashkent illustrated people's anxiety about their involvement in the shadow economy with a story:

A Jewish woman had been talking enthusiastically to her Uzbek neighbour about emigration to Israel together with her son who had a good position at a textile factory. The neighbour was puzzled by her optimism: 'But your son will never have such a good job in Israel, and he will not have money to give you, and you, with your poor health, will not have the money to pay for your medicine!' The Jewish woman replied: 'When we move to Israel, I will no longer have this poor health and need medicine! All my worries [about this money] will be gone'.

Freedom to do business and/or freedom of religious worship were associated with life outside the Soviet Union. Moreover, the state of Israel had an affective and ideological appeal as 'the land of the Jews' and lost ancestors. Many families traced their genealogies (real or imaginary) to Israel via ancestors who moved to Palestine in the late 19th and early 20th century or managed to escape from the Soviet Union in the 1920s or early 1930s. Although this early migration often resulted in irrevocably broken social ties and truncated kinship networks, the memories of the vanished emigres have been cultivated as families' cultural capital, often supported by references to actual capital, i.e., properties in Jerusalem owned by their ancestors.¹⁰

Despite the affective relationship to Israel and the newly found 'freedom', for many Bukharans, the experience of *aliyah* was marked by disappointment. Some felt humiliated by the low social status ascribed to Eastern Jews, especially to the Soviet Central Asian Jews, by the Ashkenazi (see also Skvirskaja 2022: 62). 'In Tajikistan, many Ashkenazi came as refugees during WWII; they were poor, had hard lives, but in Israel they ruled and looked down upon us', an educated

Bukharan, a former teacher in his 70s, shared with me in Vienna. As Sadjed (2022: 2208) pointed out in her discussion of Israelis' hierarchies at the time, the official definition of a person's nationality was based on their religious affiliation, but many Soviet Jews did not share this understanding. Bukharan Jews were among those newcomers who challenged Israelis' vision of a single, homogenous Jewish people (cf. Shohat 1988: 24; 2-5).¹¹ The (few) religious Bukharans who were among the first to leave Central Asia were, in turn, disappointed by the modern secularism in Israel (Lechleitner & Lomidze 2008: 572).¹² Many Soviet emigrants were also unwilling to sacrifice themselves for Israel in the ongoing conflicts. 'My children are not cannon fodder', my interlocutor in Vienna recalled how his father explained his decision to return to Uzbekistan.

Returning

Having touched upon Bukharan Jews' motivations to migrate to Israel and many people's disappointments with the move, I consider the aspects of the migration infrastructure that enabled Bukharans' anchoring in Vienna. The founding of the Bukharan Jewish diaspora in Austria is a particularly illuminating case of the role played by the regulatory (state apparatus) and the technological (communication and transport) dimensions of this infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). A mix of geopolitics and the available transport infrastructure conditioned the initial arrival of Soviet Jews to the Austrian capital.

The Six-Day-War caused the severance of diplomatic ties between Israel and the USSR and an approximately two-year ban on exit visas to Israel. The Netherlands became the diplomatic intermediary between the USSR and Israel, and the Dutch embassy in Moscow came to represent Israel and took care of the emigration paperwork (Zaltzman 2023: 360-370). Austria, in turn, offered Vienna to be used as a transit hub for Soviet Jews on their way to the USA, Israel and other destinations like Canada and Australia. The infrastructural focal point was not the city but a transit camp near Vienna, isolated from the surrounding society for security reasons. In the camp, the representatives of the Israeli organisations (the Jewish Agency and the Ministry of Religious Affairs) attempted to make sure that migrants proceeded to Israel rather than to other destinations, and that they were 'real', *halakhic* Jews (i.e., born to a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism, Zaltzman 2023: 372-373).

Crucially for the Bukharan diaspora, the city had also become a major transit hub for *yerida* (moving 'down' from Israel) – the return Soviet Jewish migrants (*yordim*), Bukharan and Ashkenazi Jews alike, on their way back to the Soviet Union. The Soviet Embassy in Vienna processed documents of the prospective returnees while Austrian emigration authorities, different international and American Jewish emigration organisations, dealt with *yordim* and Jewish migrants who did not want to move to Israel to begin with. Some of these agencies constituted important humanitarian and social dimensions of migration infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). For example, the Jewish Orthodox organisation 'Rav Tov', which promoted emigration to the USA, set up a religious school, a kosher kindergarten and employed a Russophone administrator to cater to the Soviet Jews stuck in Vienna (Galibov 1998: 27-29).

And stuck they were: the history of Vienna's Bukharan diaspora doubles as a story of the Soviet state's 'deceit' (Galibov 1998: 34) of its Jewish repatriates. The *yordim* who wanted to go back to the USSR arrived on tourist visas that allowed them stay in the country for only three months; after this period, they had to be in formal employment or register with emigration organisations to be able to stay in Vienna legally. Very few individuals were issued Soviet visas; people's desire to return was exploited for the purposes of Soviet propaganda. Some migrants, often after years of waiting, received permission to move to the USA or other destinations, but many of those who were refused entry to the USSR settled in Vienna. Many had moved to the historical Jewish neighborhood of Leopoldstadt to be joined by their co-ethnics who arrived in subsequent migration waves in the 1980s and 1990s and were motivated by economic considerations, family reunions and fears of new ethnic nationalisms and violence.

In this way, the core of the Bukharan Vienna community was composed of the *yordim* who were not allowed to return to the USSR, and the city transformed from being a transit hub for the Soviet Jewish migrants to a global diasporic hub of Central Asians in its own right. The first migration wave or *yordim* has become integral to the social dimension of migration infrastructure, providing new arrivals from Central Asia ('direct migrants', *priamiki* in Russian, Galibov 1998: 28) with places of work, help with housing arrangements and, more importantly, with reliable information and contacts. A story of a Bukharan family from Tashkent that I introduce below illustrates this dynamic as well as people's reliance on diverse skills acquired in Soviet Uzbekistan.

The Case of a 'Tashkent Tailor' in Vienna

By the early 1970s, the Tashkent tailor David was not an ordinary tailor; he was trained as a professional tailor but worked as one of the top managers at a textile factory. This position allowed him to sell a share of his factory's produce 'on the side', i.e., on the black market. His family was very well off. His wife was a stay-at-home mother, taking care of the couple's two small children in a spacious apartment. In 1970, David's parents moved to Israel while his brother's family relocated to the USA. Two years later, David arrived to Vienna in transit where, after some deliberation, he decided to go to Israel to join his parents. Since it was not possible to take large sums of money out of the USSR, David converted his savings into valuable commodities (carpets, furniture and a grand piano) and sent them by sea to Israel. Most of his possessions were damaged during transportation, and he became disappointed by 'reality in Israel' (cf. also Zaltzman 2023: 376-381). In 1974, David was again in Vienna, penniless and waiting for the Soviet entry visa to return to Uzbekistan. 'Tomorrow, tomorrow', the Soviet embassy said again and again. In the meanwhile, his children went to an Austrian school. Similar to other Bukharan caught in transit, children's integration into the Austrian schooling system was a factor informing the family's decision to stay in the country: 'After some time, the children did not want to move; they said they would not manage yet another migration'. David decided to get a job that would allow him to obtain an Austrian residence permit until the visa situation was resolved. Day after day, he roamed Vienna's streets looking for a sign of a tailor workshop where he could offer his services. He eventually found one. He started from scratch as a 'mute tailor', because he did not know a word in German.

David was later introduced to an Austrian owner of a textile factory and got a job for seven days a week, including a small flat nearby. It was a difficult professional relationship, but soon David was overseeing production, and as a manager, he could employ other Bukharan migrants: one would clean the premises, the other would attach buttons and yet another could do the ironing. When the factory owner went bankrupt, David bought some of the factory equipment and opened his own workshop. After some years, he paid off his loans and started a bigger production employing more than twenty people at his premises. By the 1980s, the family became well-off and moved to Leopoldstadt to be close to their Russian- and Bukharo-speaking co-ethnics. David's business came to an end in the late 1990s when

it could no longer compete with China-made clothes, and he had to resign due to ill health; none of his children were interested in taking his business in the direction of transnational trade. (By that time, real estate had become a popular option among the business-minded Bukharans.)

David's story was told to me by his daughter, an educated woman in her early fifties. Reflecting on her father's life, she noted that he always told his children about the importance of having 'a real profession' (*spetsal'nost'*, in Russian) that one can rely upon in the most adverse circumstances. All of David's children studied tailoring after they graduated from school, even though they were not interested in this profession. 'Our father built this Vienna', exclaimed David's daughter when she described the expansion of the Bukharan community and how socially and religiously relaxed it was in the 1970s and 1980s. 'Everybody was visiting each other, and nobody was concerned about kosher and non-kosher homes. You did not have to worry about being seen doing shopping on Shabbat'. At the time, the Bukharan diaspora still reflected the spirit of Soviet coexistence and Jewish identity where the rules of *halakhah* were largely unheard of (cf. Sapritsky 2012: 75).¹³

Today, by contrast, in the words of Levi Levaev (2024: 4), the president of the World Congress of Bukharan Jews, the younger generations of Vienna's Bukharans 'have created a real revolution'. The revolution here implies Jewish religious revival that has had a profound impact on diasporic sociality, resulting in some ruptures hinted at by David's daughter. By the estimates of my informants, eighty per cent of the community observe kosher rules; the number of synagogues is growing.

It is now widely recognised by the wider Jewish community that Bukharan Jews have reinvigorated Jewish life and contributed to the development and greater visibility of Jewish infrastructure in Leopoldstadt.¹⁴ They have opened new synagogues, founded the bilingual (German-Russian) diasporic journal *Sefardinews*, established the old people's clubs, matchmakers 'agencies', a kosher supermarket, kosher cafes and restaurants. The Bukharan Jewish infrastructure in Vienna has not only taken on some of the functions of migration infrastructure (e.g., places of employment, information exchange, migration brokers) for the subsequent flows of co-ethnics from Central Asia and Israel; it has, moreover, enabled mobility of Muslims from post-Soviet Central Asia to the West and established new Jewish-Muslim interfaces in Leopoldstadt.

Cultural Mobility and Jewish-Muslim Interfaces

In Vienna, similar to Israel, the first Bukharan migrants brought along a cultural model of Jewishness that was unfamiliar, and sometimes not agreeable, to the host society and to Austrian Jews alike. For the locals, Bukharans were initially 'the unknown Jews' (Hoare 2018) as an Austrian newspaper once called them, or 'the Gypsy Jews' as one of my Bukharan interlocutors pointed out. Galibov (1998) recorded how Bukharan families with their noisy offspring had 'injected life' into the 'dead quiet' quarters of Leopoldstadt, provoking discontent among their Austrian neighbors. The Viennese Jewry were much less helpful than expected by the Bukharan newcomers. 'At the beginning, we were not accepted here – neither by the synagogues, nor by the Jewish community... We were pushed away. It is only after years of being here, that we have gained some respect of the local [Jewish] community',¹⁵ shared a Bukharan woman who arrived in Vienna in the early 1990s.

Some Bukharan families have gone an extra mile to break the ice and secure acceptance by the Viennese Jewry. A Jewish university lecturer whose children attended the Jewish school in Leopoldstadt recalled that a Bukharan family invited all classmates and their parents to a birthday party of their daughter. It has not been a custom at the school to invite the parents of the classmates, but the Bukharan family wanted to extend the hospitality to the parents in order to get together as a community. This gesture was appreciated. However, as I also observed in Vienna, the overall social and cultural distancing from Bukharans is still present and many locals find Bukharans 'too Asian/Oriental'. 'We do not like how they treat their women – their rabbis marry them off too young', a middle-aged chocolate shop owner told me in Leopoldstadt. (Among the Bukharans, early marriages are indeed preferred due to the importance placed on the bride's virginity.)

Bukharans have had the status of an ethnic-religious minority (that at some periods and localities, doubled as a marginalised minority) for centuries, but this has not always implied cultural distancing or disregard. In this section, I discuss how this status had not been an obstacle to the emergence of Jewish-Muslim interfaces, and how Soviet experiences of coexistence moulded Bukharans' ways of dealing with difference in the new, diasporic context of Vienna. To start with, there is a body of scholarship on 'the Jews of Islam', i.e., the

Jews in the Islamic world (e.g., Lewis 2014) that has described centuries-old Jewish-Muslim interfaces by looking at similarities between Jewish and Muslim beliefs and practices. Lewis (2014: 77-78) uses the term 'symbiosis' to account for the interfaith relations and reciprocal influences of Jewish and Muslim cultures in the classical period.¹⁶ Prior to the Soviet conquest, Bukharan Jews and their Muslim neighbors were hardly distinguishable by their ethnic dress (Emel'ianenko 2020), and until today, Bukharan Jewish *kippah* (Jewish male hat) and traditional square Uzbek hat *tiubiteika* (in Russian) have been identical. Some of the shared cultural-religious traits, such as marriage norms (polygamy, bride's virginity), gender segregation and dietary restrictions had been present to varying degrees throughout the Soviet period.

It was the cultural proximity and economic interdependence of Bukharan Jews and Muslims in Soviet Central Asia that had often mitigated against hostilities and social segregation in the minority-majority relationships. Alongside the state's ideological insistence on 'friendship between peoples', intermarriages¹⁷ and the formal integrative role of the Soviet 'collectives', there were also informal practices that sustained cultural proximity and encouraged collaborations across ethno-religious boundaries. Let me briefly illustrate this Soviet legacy with two examples of inter-ethnic mutuality and collaboration: the realm of religious practices and the shadow economy.

In the Muslim periphery of the USSR, the key strategy of anti-religious propaganda was to convince Soviet subjects that their culture, traditions and spiritual values existed independently from religion. It was argued that national/ethnic cultures and customs had been changing long before the emergence of Islam (Rogovaia 1986: 166-167).¹⁸ For many Soviet Central Asians, some Islamic and Jewish rituals had remained a part of local customs and a marker of identity, for which no personal observance (of religious laws or restrictions) was necessary (Khalid 2003: 578). For instance, Uzbek and Tajiks, including the communists, were habitually buried according to Islamic ritual (Khalid 2003: 579). I was told about Ashkenazi from the European part of the USSR bringing their sons to Uzbekistan to be circumcised. Some Bukharans adhered to *kashrut* (Jewish dietary practice) (Cooper 2012: 141); their insistence on bringing their own food to the festivities of their non-Jewish neighbors to avoid pollution was approved of by their Muslim neighbors as evidence that

people cared about their 'customs' and were cultured (Humphrey et al. 2009: 210-211). As these examples demonstrate (and there are many more, cf. Cooper 2012; Khalid 2003), both Muslim and Jewish modes of religious belonging were reproduced as cultural or national traditions.

The point here is that for this reproduction to happen in the context of the Soviet repressive state where the (well-justified) fear of denunciation was always present, the local nodes of solidarity had to operate across majority-minority/Muslim-Jewish divides. Cooper (2012: 21) argued that antireligious campaigns were not as harshly enforced in Central Asia as in other parts of the USSR. Yet, enforcement of such campaigns would need many (willing) subjects to do it. Muslims respected Bukharans' insistence on their own 'traditions' because preservation of one's own 'cultural traditions' was an issue of mutual concern. As Galibov (1998: 18-19) put it in his memoirs, many Soviet leaders in Central Asia remained 'close to Islam' and therefore turned a blind eye to adult Bukharan Jews attending synagogues. Some religious practices were simply kept hidden from public-professional life.

A different type of collaboration across the ethnic-religious divide was instigated by the shortcomings of, or opportunities provided by, the Soviet planned economy. Some forms of 'the embezzlement of socialist property' were taking place in ethnically heterogeneous work collectives as a matter of course (e.g., Loy 2016: 110-112). For decades, in Samarkand, some Bukharan households sold 'underground' kebabs that were popular with the Muslim neighbours (Skvirskaja 2023). In Bukhara, a Jewish woman worked as an intermediary between two Muslim groups by supplying Uzbek villagers with golden jewellery that were privately manufactured by Muslim migrants from Dagestan.

Given that top managerial and administrative positions were mainly held by the representatives of the titular nationalities, Uzbeks or Tajiks, many operations of the shadow economy were based on the hierarchically structured inter-ethnic partnerships and networks. Samuel, whom I met in Vienna, told me how back home in Tashkent in the 1970s, he approached an Uzbek director of an entertainment park and offered him his refurbishing services together with 'a scheme'. Samuel's plan was to employ a fictive team of decorators, claim their salaries and do the job single-handedly.¹⁹ The director welcomed Samuel and his plan and always treated him with respect. Samuel worked hard,

the salaries of the ghost employees were shared between the two, and, in addition, Samuel gave his Uzbek boss the accrued annual bonuses. It all ran smoothly until the day the inspection arrived. To Samuel's dismay, his Uzbek boss refused to use his network to help him out. 'You just leave me out of this', he told Samuel. To avoid imprisonment, Samuel had to go to 'his own people' (i.e., Bukharan networks) in commercial structures who had access to the powerful in Muslim networks and found a solution. Despite the bad ending, which also showed the limits of inter-ethnic cooperation, Samuel remembered the warm welcome he was given by the Uzbek: 'Your people bring blessing and prosperity'.

With the mass emigration of Bukharan Jews, the hard-learned skills of navigating Muslim-Jewish interfaces in Soviet Central Asia have proven to be useful in the diaspora and have helped some Bukharan migrants to negotiate new parameters of coexistence with the host society in Austria. This dynamic, including rough experiences that today people are often not keen to talk about because they prioritise an emphasis on harmonious coexistence promoted by people's diplomacy discourse (cf. Shukurzoda 2019), is captured by the elderly Aron who shared an episode from his early days in Vienna in the 1970s. Aron used to run a vegetable stall on the market, and one day an Austrian man, a passer-by, approached his stall and started abusing him verbally: 'You dirty emigrants, why did you come here?' and so on. Aron did not lose his cool:

My grandmother always said, 'An angry dog has to be fed'. So I took a plastic bag and filled it up with a bit of everything from my stall. Potatoes, onions, carrots. I gave it to the raging man. 'Take it', I said. 'All is good'. The man was very surprised, but he took the bag and left.

This situation was repeated a couple of times and eventually Aron won—the hostile Austrian was pacified. 'I ended up even employing the guy at my stall', Aron concluded proudly.

As this episode indicates, Bukharan skills of coexistence have become transferrable to a different type of society where their minoritarian status has changed but not disappeared. With the post-Soviet migration of Central Asian Muslims to the West (and Israel), the Jewish-Muslim social networks have again been activated while the Soviet hierarchy of the minority-majority relationship has been reversed, which I turn to now.

Post-Soviet Central Asian Diasporic Collaboration

The majority of adult 'first generation' Bukharans in Vienna, especially those who arrived during the Cold War (similar to their compatriot co-ethnics in Israel and the US), could not count on securing livelihoods by using their old, Soviet professions from the start. An exception were cobblers, nurses and tailors who were in demand (Galibov 1998: 42). Limited local networks, the inability to speak German fluently and the absence of capital led many Bukharans to take up any low-skilled jobs that were available: they worked as cleaners, baby-sitters, gardeners, cooks, porters, dockworkers, factory workers and vegetable sellers.

Many Bukharan families settled in the same neighbourhood not only because they used the same real estate agents, but also to cooperate and help each other with childcare and other tasks, thus freeing 'labour resources' from domestic chores. Some people moved into petty trade, running 'Waren aller art' shops (similar to 'One Pound' shops) or grocery stalls, while their children went to college. With time, individuals and clusters of families (e.g., a group of brothers), pulled resources together to branch out into real estate, jewelry trade and/or restaurant business. The later covers both the kosher segment in Leopoldstadt and non-kosher venues in the city, including the upscale market-cum-food-court in the city centre, such as Nashmarkt where the first Bukharan migrants sold vegetables in the 1970s-80s.

The collapse of the USSR has opened up new avenues for global interconnectedness and migration from Central Asia: similar to Bukharan yordim decades earlier, Muslim Uzbek and Tajiks have arrived in Vienna on tourist visas or entered the country illegally. With Russia losing some of its appeal as a key migration destination, more young Muslim Central Asians have been embarking on educational migration to Europe, including Austria. Some students come from the new resource-strong middle-classes. For others, formal 'educational migration' can also entail labour migration and/or emigration (e.g., Dadabaev and Soipov 2020; Olwig and Valentin 2015). Numerous formal and informal brokers have appeared on- and off-line to facilitate both legal and illegal Central Asian migration to Vienna.²⁰

These diverse migration pathways rely on different infrastructural processes; Bukharan Jewish infrastructure has become a dimension of migration infrastructure that has enabled the mobility of hundreds of Tajik and Tajik-speaking labour migrants from Samarkand and

Bukhara, along with less prominent sites.²¹ Linguistic, not only cultural proximity, seems to be important for the social aspect of Jewish infrastructure enabling migration. Most of the Central Asian Muslims who have been absorbed by Jewish infrastructure have either been helped by brokers or arrived as tourists and overstayed their visas; many have settled in Leopoldstadt where they share accommodations and can navigate without much knowledge of Germany or formal residency for years. Today, when you visit a Bukharan-owned kosher restaurant in Leopoldstadt, there is a likelihood that a Tajik cooks your kosher food. Central Asian Muslims are offered low-paid jobs as workers, cleaners, waiters, drivers and domestic helpers. (Very similar processes have taken place in the Bukharan diaspora in the USA and Israel.) Some Uzbek and Tajiks also cooperate with the Afghan-run food joints that attract less observant Bukharan clientele keen on 'home-made' Central Asian cuisine.

The majority of illegal Central Asian migrants stay in Vienna as long as they have to or can because after violating the visa regime there is no possibility of traveling in and out of Austria. Some Tajik-speaking Muslims have become a fixed feature of Leopoldstadt for years. For instance, one can often spot Mohamad, a tall and strong man in his late thirties, in different Bukharan places – in the kosher supermarket, synagogues and cafes. Considered to be 'intellectually challenged', Mohamad came from an impoverished Tajik village with a group of migrants in the 2000s. My acquaintances, who worked with Mohamad, speculated that back home he would not have had a chance of getting married or managing economically. In Vienna, he has been taken care of by the Jewish infrastructure; he is provided with accommodations by his different employers and, for modest remuneration, he does regular and odd jobs: he stacks shelves at the supermarket, cleans dishes in a restaurant or helps in a synagogue. Mohamad has not managed to learn German, but his knowledge of Tajik and limited Russian is sufficient for the tasks he is allocated. Before I learned about Mohamad's identity, I met him at a commemoration feast in a synagogue. Wearing a casket, he was enjoying the meal and listened attentively (it seemed) to the rabbi's moral tales.

Jewish-migrant infrastructure in Vienna may contribute to the representation of Central Asian Muslim migrants as a racialised cheap labour force (not unlike in Russia). It is known in the neighbourhood that some owners take advantage financially of their migrant employees, as is often the case with illegal migrants. There are, however, also

success stories that closely resemble Bukharans' own strategies of securing a livelihood and underscore the role of Jewish-Muslim interfaces in the Central Asian diaspora. We can see this dynamic and the ways in which cultural mobility is manifest in Central Asian migration in the case of Karim.

A Tajik Cook, Vienna Schnitzel and Public Diplomacy

In the late 2000s, as a young single man, Karim came to Austria from Samarkand and succeeded in receiving asylum as a representative of the repressed Tajik minority. Upon his arrival to Vienna, he came to Leopoldstadt and started working as a dishwasher and a helper in a kosher restaurant. Karim made an effort to learn German as quickly as possible, but for work, he had been reliant on the linguistic community of Tajik- and Russian-speaking Bukharan Jews. On one occasion, he was asked whether he could cook pilaf rice (*plov*, in Russian); he cooked a good pilaf and this set him off on a new path of becoming a chef. He studied all kosher rules, learned when to call in a kosher supervisor (*mashgiach*, in Hebrew) and how to cook a range of Jewish dishes. In other words, Karim became not just a chef, but a chef responsible for kosher catering. (A similar development in Muslim-Jewish interfaces has taken place in Uzbekistan, where Uzbeks have studied kosher rules and Jewish cuisine in order to work in the remaining synagogues and to cater for the caravans of Bukharan Jewish tourists and pilgrims.)

As Karim's German improved, he could look outside of the Bukharan community. Eventually, he 'passed the test' of cooking a Vienna schnitzel and landed a proper contract-based job at a Hasidic school. From time to time, he also helped different Bukharan outlets with catering and is generally held in high esteem. In Vienna, Karim has met his future spouse – a Tajik girl who came to the city as a labour migrant and worked as a nanny and domestic helper in a Russophone Bukharan household. By now, Karim and his wife have several children together; the children speak fluent German and good Russian. The children's proficiency in Russian is considered to be an important asset in the global multi-ethnic and multi-confessional Central Asian diaspora that spans over Israel, the USA, Western Europe, South Korea and Japan.

The story of Karim's family is not only a story of an individual migrant's success, although people comment on his agreeable character, work discipline and dedication. It also fits neatly into the people's

diplomacy discourse that extols 'historical interconnection of different peoples of Central Asia' and specifically, the unique history of Bukharan Jews that show to the world that the tradition of mutual respect and tolerance can exist in Jewish and Muslim communities (Shukurzoda 2019: 195-196). These formulations of people's diplomacy are part and parcel of Uzbek official narrative and declarations of Bukharan community leaders worldwide (e.g., Skvirskaja 2022), but this very language has also been adopted by my interlocutors in Vienna. As a 70-year-old Bukharan lady I met at the old persons' club put it:

We were born in Uzbekistan. We were born in the Muslim lands. For us, an Uzbek or a Tajik is our brother. We respect each other. If you look around, you will see that we mainly work with Tajiks and Uzbeks ... because they are our brothers. Other Jewish groups cannot yet accept [Muslims] in their midst as Bukharan Jews do. It is more difficult for them, because there is still this border (*gran'*, in Russian) between them and the Muslims. But we, via our attitudes, will attain [God's] love. We believe that God expects us to be close to our brothers – Muslims.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed some of the infrastructural processes and Bukharan Jewish-Muslim interfaces that have resulted in the establishment of a Central Asian diaspora in Vienna. In contrast to many migration destinations that are actively sought after by mobile subjects, Vienna was initially only a temporary transit point for Soviet Jews leaving the USSR. The city has since been transformed into a migration destination largely by chance as a result of Soviet diplomacy on the one hand, and by the desire and inability of some members of the first wave of Soviet Jewish migrants to Israel to return to the USSR, on the other. At the time, it seemed a bad twist of fate.

With time, however, Vienna has become an important centre of Bukharan social, cultural and economic life where migrants have managed to organise themselves as a distinct ethno-religious community and contribute to the Jewish infrastructure of the historical Jewish neighborhood of Leopoldstadt. Nothing like that has happened in, for example, London or Paris (cf. Levaev 2024: 5; Pinkhasov 2022: 311-313). Today, it is a global diasporic hub that, similar to New York, attracts newcomers from Israel (e.g., via marriages) and hosts various important events in the Bukharan community. Family members, friends and relatives come to Vienna from far and wide to attend weddings, bar and

bat mitzvahs and to commemorate their dead. The city's significance is reflected in the parallel that Bukharans have drawn between their Soviet and current mobility and kinship geography: 'Today Austria, Israel and the USA are just like Tashkent, Samarkand and Dushanbe' (Galibov 1998: 179).

The mass emigration of Bukharan Jews from Central Asia during the Cold War and post-Soviet periods has changed the fabric of the local society in the cities and towns where they previously resided. The legacies of Soviet inter-ethnic coexistence have not, however, been obliterated. The engagement between Muslim Tajiks, Tajik-speaking Uzbeks and Bukharan Jews—the Jewish-Muslim interfaces—have taken new forms and moved into new spaces, both in Central Asia and in the diaspora. In Vienna, these Jewish-Muslim interfaces have operated by expanding and diversifying the Central Asian diaspora in Leopoldstadt. The global Bukharan community has now become a pull factor for Central Asian labour migration, demonstrating the ways in which cultural mobility can mediate migration.

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VERA SKVIRSKAJA is a social anthropologist and Associate Professor at the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen. Her research interests include post-Soviet society and economy, migration, coexistence, cultural heritage and grass-roots propaganda. Email: bdq883@hum.ku.dk

NOTES

- 1 At present, the majority of Bukharan Jews—approximately 120,000—live in Israel. For the diaspora's numbers elsewhere, see Pinkhasov (2022).
- 2 Until the early 1930s, Hebrew letters were used to write/print in Bukhori. Throughout the Soviet period, Bukhori was a language of everyday communication in many Jewish families; it was used in tandem with Russian, but

- proficiency in both languages varied from place to place. In Bukhara, approximately five per cent could only use Russian (Niiazov 1992: 173). According to my informants, this number could be higher in Tashkent.
- 3 Rafael Nektalov, Editor-in-Chief of 'The Bukharian Times', September 2022, personal communication.
- 4 This 'golden age' is different from 'the golden age' of the Tajik-speaking population of Central Asia that today is identified with the rule by the Iranian dynasty of Samanids (IX-X centuries) when the Persian-Tajik language was formed and trade, arts and science flourished. It is an ideological construct of the post-Soviet Tajikistan where the Tajik-speaking regions of Samarkand and Bukhara are considered 'sacred territories' that ended up in Uzbekistan by 'historical mistake' (Bolashenkova 2023).
- 5 According to Shlomo Ustoniyazov, the president of the Bukharan community of Vienna, there are 2500 Bukharans in Vienna (personal communication, 4 January 2024). Pinkhasov (2022: 308) has stated that the Bukharan community in Vienna consists of 400 families.
- 6 With exception of public figures, names of all interviewees and informants are changed to secure anonymity. In some cases, gender is changed as well. Data relevant to parts of the article is available at <https://doi.org/10.17894/ucph.bbf942d0-f2b5-4330-8dbe-ae537316a5f0>.
- 7 In literature, culturally and linguistically different groups of Jews from the USSR are sometimes called 'Russian Jews' (e.g., Zaltzman 2023) while Bukharans often refer to Russophone Ashkenazi as 'Russian Jews'. Borokhov (2015: 217) has recalled how the nationality 'Russian Jew' was registered in Soviet passports in Samarkand during WWII because local Uzbeks did not recognise Ashkenazi as Jews due to their 'whiteness'. To avoid terminological confusion, I refer to all Jews who resided in the USSR as Soviet Jews.
- 8 An organisation that in Soviet times provided a wide range of services to the population – from making clothes and footwear to laundry and photography.
- 9 For instance, I was told about one Bukharan manager who used to buy a large number of lottery tickets to cover up his expensive purchases.
- 10 A common story I heard was about a male (a 'father') or a small family group crossing the Soviet border illegally or being smuggled to Afghanistan, hoping to reach Palestine, and then organising a move for the remaining family. These stories often describe the violence, including rapes of the female family members, and sacrifices faced by the brave who dared to cross illegally.
- 11 A similar hierarchy was also reproduced within the Soviet Jewish emigrant community where Soviet Ashkenazi sometimes referred to Bukharans as Uzbeks.
- 12 One of the very first Bukharan Jews to leave the USSR was the Head Rabbi of Tashkent, Mani Borukhov. He left in 1965 (Galibov 1998: 20).
- 13 An important exception was the community of Chassidic Jews who moved to Samarkand during WWII and established an underground *yeshiva* (religious school, Zaltzman 2023).
- 14 The state has contributed to the Jewish visibility by means of the projects of memorialisation of Viennese Jewish past and the Holocaust, such as commemorative lampposts and Stolpersteine.
- 15 My interlocutor refers here to The Vienna's Jewish Community (*Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Wien*, IKG). See also Galibov (1998) on the ways in which the IKG distanced itself from the Bukharan newcomers in the 1970s-80s.
- 16 This is a schematic historical representation of Jewish-Muslim coexistence in Central Asia. There were also historical periods where Jews 'disappeared' from Central Asia. Kaganovitch (2019), for instance, speculates whether this

disappearance was due to mass conversion to Islam or emigration. He points out that the Jewish quarters in Bukhara appeared 'suddenly' in the 17th century (Kaganovitch 2019: 936).

- 17 Bukharan-Uzbek Muslim marriages, including arranged marriages, were common and continue until today in the diaspora, Israel and Uzbekistan (cf. Levaev 2024: 4). See also <https://www.mako.co.il/men-weekend/Article-d0595e2d9856d81027.htm?sCh=7d61bdd9ccbc4310&pId=1471243973&Partner=mw>. Accessed on 5 February 2024.
- 18 This understanding permeated different aspects of Soviet life, including material culture. For instance, there is a Tashkent metro station built in the madrassa style, but in the Soviet context, it was understood as a case of national rather than Muslim architecture (Azimov 2024).
- 19 This was, apparently, a common scheme; see, e.g., Zaltzman (2023: 258-257) for a discussion of his operations in Soviet Samarkand. It is notable that in his recollections of Soviet life, Zaltzman refers to himself as a businessman.
- 20 For an example of the educational migration website, see, e.g., <https://xn----8kcgc5afa4eeffhe4d8d7b.xn--p1ai/vysshee-obrazovanie-v-avstrii/ucheba-uzbekistan>. Accessed on 19 September 2023.
- 21 I do not have any reliable figures as to how many Muslim Central Asians reside in Vienna. By my informants' own estimates, there are approximately 500 Tajik-speaking migrants working in Leopoldstadt.

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