

SHABBAT IN SAMARKAND

The JR group have Friday night dinner at the Iskhakovs and find out about Jewish life in Samarkand now

Nina Iskhakova is smiling, confident and engaging, despite being one of only a few Jews remaining in Samarkand, out of a once large and thriving population, living in streets filled with kosher butchers and Jewish shops. Nina is the positive face of Jewish Samarkand offering a warm welcome to guests who wish to spend Friday night at her home, an opportunity the Sherpa/JR group took up enthusiastically.

Tables were laid attractively with dishes of appetisers: water melon, vegetable samosas, salads of cabbage, beetroot, courgettes, tomato and cucumber, and the grapes and apples that were to be our dessert. One of our number, Harris Clarke, made kiddush with the local round flat bread we were now getting used to and we started our meal. The main course was the traditional Shabbat meal of *bahsh*, rice flavoured with onion, herbs and small pieces of lamb, usually cooked in a cloth to prevent rice deteriorating during long slow cooking. As it was October, ours was cooked in a pumpkin.

After dinner Nina talked about herself and the community in excellent Hebrew that she had learnt, she told us, from the Jewish Agency. Our leader Yvan Berrebi translated. Nina's ancestors had come from Iran and Afghanistan in the early 18th century. Her husband Boris's family were from Turkmenistan on the border with Iran, though one great-grandfather was from Yugoslavia.

Nina's grandfather was director of a kolkhoz producing wine that was sold to the Russians. She recalled the big barrels of wine on the farm. When they visited as children they used to turn the taps and take a drink when no-one was looking.

Nina's father was an optician – a profession now being pursued by her son and one of her daughters in Israel.

Asked about life in Soviet times Nina says there were always restrictions but the impact varied at different times. It was particularly bad under Stalin's rule. Then all religious practice was forbidden. They still went to synagogue but there was great propaganda against religion. Many were sent to the Gulag, including Boris's grandfather. It was only in 1982 that they received confirmation about those who had died in the Gulag.

Now there are only 50 Bukharian Jews in Samarkand and about 100 Ashkenazi Jews, though the Ashkenazi number is difficult to estimate as they frequently intermarry with Uzbeks and know little about Judaism. Two synagogues are still active but there are no Jewish schools and no rabbi, just a head of the community and a head of the burial society. There has not been a marriage for two years and the last one was of a Jewish woman to a Muslim man.

We ask Nina how much the Bukharians and the Ashkenazi mix. "Very little", she says, "the Ashkenazi Jews see us as little different from Muslims. If an Ashkenazi man wants to marry a Bukharian woman, that is OK as Bukharian women are hard-working and submissive – but Ashkenazi women are too independent for Bukharian men." Her son married an Ashkenazi girl, she tells us, smiling, but that was in Israel.

Nina and Boris keep a kosher home. The shochet, Eliazer, comes from Bukhara once a month – on his round of visiting all the towns in Uzbekistan.

When we ask her about her social life, Nina says she is very close to all the Jewish members of the community. She has friends amongst her other neighbours, is invited to weddings and parties, but there is not the same closeness, partly because while she and the rest of the Jewish community speak

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the Jewish version of Tajik as well as Russian, her neighbours speak Uzbek. "Is there antisemitism?" we ask her. "No," she says, without hesitation. "Occasionally someone might say, 'You're still here? We thought you had all gone.' But then they quickly add, 'But we love you. We want you to stay. You are a blessing to the community' There are now no doctors, no cobblers."



Why did the community go when no-one was pushing them? "We are a religious people," she told us. "Every day 'Next year in Jerusalem' is included in our prayers." Part of Boris's family left in 1972 when leaving the Soviet Union first became possible. Nina's family left in 1991. But why did they continue to leave once the restrictions of Soviet times had gone; when the government had built a new Jewish cultural centre, primary school and kindergarten and they could practise Judaism openly? "The Jewish Agency sent representatives and talked about life in Israel in every house. People started to receive visas in the post and all sorts of luxury goods – even fur coats. They thought, 'if people who don't even know us can send such things, how rich life must be'." She also mentioned family closeness: "Once one goes, everyone goes."

Nina would also like to move to Israel but Boris will not leave. "He says, 'my family have been here so many years, I have built my own house, I don't want to leave'. I have a house and yet I can't help my children – they are renting places in Israel. I go to Israel four times a year and I always come back crying." JL