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A Contribution towards the History of the Jewish Communities in the Caucasus Region

Abstract: The Jewish community in the Caucasus region appears to have emerged in the early medieval period, following the settlement of Persian Jews along major trade routes. By the twentieth century, Jewish communities were primarily concentrated in the eastern and southern Caucasus, particularly in the town of Krasnaya Sloboda in Azerbaijan, as well as in Georgia and several autonomous republics of what is now the Russian Federation, including Chechnya, Dagestan, Karachay-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and North Ossetia. Over the centuries, most of Caucasian Jewish communities adopted the Sephardic rite of Rabbinic Judaism. This paper aims to explore and map the contributions of Jewish communities to the societies of the Caucasus. The study draws primarily on secondary sources.

Keywords: Jewish community; Judaism; Caucasus; Krasnaya Sloboda; Azerbaijan; Georgia; Dagestan.

The Jewish presence in the Caucasus dates back over a millennium. The first significant documentation of Jewish communities in the Caucasus appears as early as the fourth century CE, when Jewish traders and settlers migrated along the ‘Silk Road(s)’. Some historical accounts suggest that Jews arrived in the Caucasus following the Babylonian and Roman exiles, settling along the shores of the Black Sea, the Kolkhetian Valley, and migrating from Persian lands to North Caucasus and Central Asia (Levin, 2025, p. 153–154).

Jews make up an important part of the multi-ethnic and multilingual landscape of the Caucasus, current national narratives in Georgia speak of a “26 centuries” of shared history. The Jews of Georgia, Azerbaijan and the North Caucasus have developed particular identities, usually divided along language proficiency lines. The Jews residing in Azerbaijan and in Russian controlled Northern Caucasus, mostly in Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria, are commonly referred to in Russian as “Mountain Jews.” This designation reflects important historical connections to various local groups in the Northeast and North-Central

Caucasus, but also the colonial Russian gaze, which is why we prefer the designators “Kavkaz Jews” or “Caucasus Jews”. The so-called Georgian Jews have Georgian as their mother tongue, whereas Juhuri (Judeo-Tat) is based on a distinct Iranian language and includes elements of Hebrew, Aramaic, Russian, Azeri and other local languages – with a few different dialects in different parts of the Caucasus.

The Caucasus is also home to a sizeable community of Ashkenazi or Russian speaking Jews. Some of them immigrated from the European part of the Russian Empire to the area in the XIX century during the first oil boom at the Caspian Sea. Others found refuge in the Caucasus during the Second World War or moved to the Soviet “peripheries” as a strategy for upward mobility when careers met a dead end in the Russian metropolises due to anti-Semitism (Darieva et al, 2025, p. 562–563).

In an unstable world of wars and conflicts, Jews in the Caucasus kept alive and transformed Jewish traditions, while simultaneously being strongly incorporated into local societies. Jewish communities in the Caucasus adopted local languages, local rites and lifestyles, living side by side with Muslims and Orthodox Christians (Ibid., 563).

Azerbaijan

Jews appeared on the territory of modern Azerbaijan after Cyrus II the Great, established the Achaemenid Empire, which included both Azerbaijani lands and the territory of the former Kingdom of Babylon. After the famous “Edict of Cyrus” of 538 BC, some Babylonian exiles returned home, while the remainder was drawn into the orbit of the new state’s economic and social life. The Silk Road was laid in the 2th century BC. A significant segment of it passed through the territory of Azerbaijan, and that determined the Jewish presence there. In connection with the spread of Christianity in Iran, a confrontation arose between the Zoroastrian religion and the new religion, whose adherents were active in missionary work, and that affected the Jews, who, as we know, did not proselytise. However, during the rule of King Yazgered II (438–451), all the Gentiles were subjected to harassment and persecution. Religious confrontation peaked during the rule of King Firuz I (459–484). As a result, a significant portion of the Jewish population moved to Azerbaijan, Dagestan and the Khazar Kaganate. (*Religions in the Caucasus*, 2016, p. 51).

The 7th century historian, Moses Kalankatuyskiy, provides information about the life of “Christians, Jews and Gentiles” in the 7th cen-

ture in the capital of Caucasian Albania – the city of Barda. In the second half of the 13th century, the Elkhanids turned Azerbaijan into the central region of the empire. Their religious tolerance attracted many Jews to Azerbaijan. The first minister of Agun Khan (1284–1291), the Jew Sa'ad al-Dawla, actually directed all the internal and external policy of the state of the Elkhanids. The Jew Muhazzim al – Dawla was chief of administration of Tabriz, the Jew Labid bin Abi-r-Rabi headed the administration system of the whole of Azerbaijan. In the middle of the 18th century, small feudal states appeared on the territory of Azerbaijan. Huseynali Khan, the founder of the largest of them, the Guba Khanate, began to invite merchants, craftsmen and mining experts. There were many Jews among the immigrants, who, after the devastating attacks by Nadir Shah, settled near the town of Guba. There, they founded a new settlement in 1731 – the Jewish (Krasnaya) or Podgornaya Sloboda settlement. This settlement began to develop especially quickly under Fatali Khan. According to S. Bronevskiy, “Jews inhabiting the village of Kulgat located opposite Guba confess their law. They have four rabbis and four sinagogues.” (Ibid., 52).

The settlement of Jews throughout Azerbaijan began around 1770, when they migrated from Southern Azerbaijan, where approximately 1,000 Jewish families lived in Zalem, to Vartashen, Nuhi, Müji, and other areas. By the time of the reigns of Nasuralla Sultan and Ahmad Sultan, Jews in Zalem were primarily engaged in agriculture and trade. Jews settled the northern part of Zalem, toward the village of Kudakhshen. Jewish land holdings extended north to Yanchigi, south to Elgan, east to the Karachai River, and west to the village of Kanda Kubi.

The southern part of Azerbaijan remained part of Iran, so its historical fate took a different turn. The southern end of Transcaucasia, and especially Armenia, were most severely subjected to the devastating invasions of Turkish and Iranian troops, where the Jews of Persia also sought refuge. As early as 1781–1786, negotiations were held between Armenian political figures and the Russian government regarding the restoration of the Armenian state. The invasion of the Iranian commander Agha Muhammad Khan in Transcaucasia strengthened the pro-Russian trend in Armenia as well. Following the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828, eastern Armenia joined Russia, and in the same year, the Armenian Oblast was established. Western Armenia (Kars, Ardahan, Bayazet, and Erzurum), according to the Treaty of Adrianople

in 1829, remained under Turkish rule. Numerous Turkish-Iranian invasions of Armenia, internal unrest, and turmoil led to increased migration flows from and through Armenia, not only of Armenians themselves but also of other ethnic groups, including Jews. The Armenian bourgeoisie gradually began to occupy a dominant position in the industrial and commercial centers of Transcaucasia (Baku, Tiflis, Batum, etc.). The tsarist government carried out administrative and judicial reforms, and in 1824, the Yerevan Province was established. To encourage trade, preferential tariffs were established, and the previous tax system was abolished. Industrial and agricultural societies began to emerge. Armenia was gradually drawn into the pan-Russian market, and ties with the metropolis strengthened (Давид, 1989а, p. 144).

The entry of Azerbaijan into the Russian Empire allowed the Mountain Jews to strengthen contacts with the rest of the Jewish world. In addition, civil wars between local rulers ceased and raids by Iranian troops stopped. As a result of this, the population of the Krasnaya Sloboda (Jewish) settlement began to show a tendency to grow constantly. In 1856, it was home to 3000 people. In 1868, there were 4947 people in it. In 1873, there were 5120 people here, in 1886 – 6280, and in 1916 – 8400. (*Religions in the Caucasus*, 2016, p. 52).

The first Ashkenazi Jews came to Azerbaijan in 1810. In the same year, in Baku there were 897 Muslim, 24 Armenian, and 10 Jewish houses. After the earthquake in Shemakha in 1859, the status of provincial city was conferred on Baku. In the 1870's, thanks to the oil discovered in its vicinity, this new industrial centre of the empire began to develop rapidly. It should be noted that for Jews of the western region of czarist Russia, resettlement in Azerbaijan was a factor of their moral emancipation. According to the information provided by the correspondent of the newspaper "Ha-Tsafir", Mordechai Glick, the position of Jews here is quite favorable: "They have successfully advanced in life, become rooted and entrenched in society, accumulated wealth and been awarded a calm and carefree life. Many of them were artisans, masons, factory workers, watchmakers, tailors, weavers and jewellers. They have turned into full – fledged citizens of the country". The first Jewish Oil Company, Dembo and Kagan, was founded in the late 1870's. The company financed the building of a kerosene production refinery and the laying of the first pipeline, the Balakhany – Black City pipeline. (*Ibid.*, 52–53).

In the late 1880's, the owners of the oil companies anticipated the possibilities of using oil waste. With a view to transporting it, the firm

Dembo began to acquire cargo barges from the Persians, which were then re-equipped and turned into tankers, which marked the beginning of the tanker fleet. The Caspian–Black Sea oil and trading company of Rotschild played a prominent role in the development of the oil industry. In 1913, 14 Jewish companies produced 44% of kerosene in the Russian Empire. In the same year, the Jewish population of Baku reached 9690. The following facts show the Jewish population's successful adaptation to life in Azerbaijan. Thus, of the 283 registered lawyers and attorneys, 75 were Jews, and of the 185 practicing physicians – 69 were Jewish. It must be added that of the 190 pharmacists and pharmacy owners registered in the city of Baku, 137 were Jews.

A yeshiva opened in Baku in 1896. A Saturday adult school for men opened in 1898 and a Saturday adult school for women opened in 1901. The Choral Synagogue, a school for Georgian Jews, a Jewish library, literary and music circle, the departments of the Society of the Education of Jews and a society of lovers of Hebrew opened in 1910. Prior to 1920, there was a Jewish gymnasium in Baku. A Jewish kindergarten was opened in 1890. In 1891, an office of Hovevei Zion (Lovers of Zion) was opened in Baku. In 1899, E. Kaplan established the first Zionist Organisation. In 1903, a representative of the Baku Zionists E. Eyzenbet, participated in the 6th Zionist Congress in Basel. (Ibid., 53).

The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was proclaimed on 28 May 1918. There were one or two representatives of the Jewish population in all the government bodies and the parliament of the newly established state. In the courts, the Jews were granted the right to swear the oath in Hebrew. The famous paediatrician, professor E. Gindes, who was the minister of health, was a prominent figure in the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. In the parliament of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, the Zionist activist, A. Gukhman, represented the Jewish community. The Jewish National Council that united the majority of Jewish parties and movements was recognised as the official representative of the Jewish minority. In 1926, 19000 European (Ashkenazi), 7500 Mountain, and 427 Georgian Jews lived in the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1927, Kurdistan Jews appeared in Baku. From 1932 to 1936 the Baku Jewish Workers Theatre gave performance in Yiddish. The synagogue of Mountain Jews opened in Baku in 1945 and the synagogue of Ashkenazi and Georgian Jews was opened in 1946. In 1959, the All – Union census showed that in the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, the Jewish population reached 40204. In 1969, the figure had risen to

41288. Jews played a prominent role in the development in the culture, science and art of Azerbaijan. (Ibidem, 54).

Among the famous Jewish scientists born in Azerbaijan, we should mention: Nobel Laureate and Hero of Socialist Labour, academician of the USSR Academy of Sciences I. Landau; the theoretical physicist, corresponding member of the USSR Academy of Sciences E. Feynberg; the geologist, academician of the USSR Academy of Sciences V. Hain, the philosopher M. Blek, and others. The first legal Hebrew courses in the USSR were opened in Baku in 1987. The Aleph Club of Jewish Culture opened in 1989. The Matone musical ensemble was established. The Azerbaijan-Israel Friendship Society and the representation of the Sokhnut Jewish Agency started their activities in 1990, and the embassy of Israel was opened in Baku in 1993. In 1994, the Vaad Hatzola opened a yeshiva, and a division of Hebrew was also opened at the Department of Oriental Studies of the Baku State University. In 2005, the head of the Jewish community, Yevda Abramov, was elected in parliament. In 2010, he was re-elected. In 2011, a new synagogue of Mountain Jews was built in Baku. (Ibid., 54).

Georgia

The Mountain Jews, ever since they lost their homeland and were resettled as captives in the Caucasus Mountains, adopted the customs of the tribes among whom they lived. During their early years in the Caucasus, they still retained their national character and even the language of their ancestors, as is evident from the biography of Saint Nina: when she came to Georgia from Jerusalem to spread the Christian faith, she was overjoyed to find her compatriots in the city of Urbnis in Kartli, where she spent a month conversing with them in their national Hebrew language, as well as with the Jews then living in Mtskheta, whose language she had known well since Jerusalem. At that time, their type and character were still purely patriarchal. But during the Persian rule in Transcaucasia, the Jews adopted the Old Persian language, which they call Farsi and Tat. They likely developed a jargon composed of these two languages, with an admixture of Hebrew (that is, biblical words), and many words and languages from local, neighboring tribes. They wrote this jargon in a Hebrew square script, called Assyrian. During the Muslim rule in Transcaucasia, the Jews became completely Tatarized, adopting a Muslim character and many of the customs and lifestyle of Muslims. But their language remained the same, Farsi-Tat, which they

still speak among themselves today (Немирович-Данченко и др., 2017, p. 23–24).

The first Jews arrived in Georgia in 539 BC. The information on the presence of Jews in Mtskheta in the first centuries AD is confirmed by archaeological findings. There is evidence of a wave of Jewish migration from Armenia to Georgia. In the Early Middle Ages, Georgian Jews were apparently associated with the Jews of Iran. Marco Polo, who visited Tbilisi in 1272, found a very small number of Jews there. The distressful situation of Georgian Jews after the Mongol invasion served to turn them into serfs. Free Jews, merchants and artisans lived in the cities. The serfs lived in villages in small groups. The desire for liberation from serfdom sometimes led Jews to convert to Christianity (*Religions in the Caucasus*, 2016, p. 55).

By the beginning of the second half of the 18th century, Georgian Jews had become owners of not only land plots, estates, and especially vineyards, indicating that until very late times they were engaged in agriculture and, to a lesser extent, trade. This primarily applies to that portion of the Jewish population concentrated in the provinces, villages, and settlements. However, it remains unknown what factors and circumstances compelled them to sell their own vineyards. For example, in 1750, the Jews Mamula Besikas-shvili (a surname not found among Georgian Jews today) and his grandson Mardakha sold their vineyard to the Georgian Murvan Murvanishvili. In a document defining the boundaries of the vineyard, they emphasized that they had no claims to the neighboring plot, which belonged to their cousin Kobia. It is believed that after the disintegration of the large Jewish family, the land plots were divided among family members and separate independent families were formed (Давид, 1989a, p.133).

After the inclusion of Eastern Georgia into the Russian Empire (in 1801), Georgian Jews belonging to the category of loyal serfs became “serfs of the treasury”. With the abolition of serfdom, they moved to the cities. A relatively small number of them were artisans. Urbanisation encouraged the formation of the definitive structure of the Jewish community. A gabbay (trustee) was elected to head each community. The Jewish population of each city formed their own neighbourhood. The establishment of contacts with Russian Ashkenazi Jews was an important event in the life of Georgian Jews in the 19th century (*Religions in the Caucasus*, 2016, p. 55).

When Jews began to engage in trade spontaneously, Armenians had long since felt themselves to be masters in this sphere as well. The

question of the usefulness of Armenian-Jewish trade for the socioeconomic reality of Georgia is complex and ambiguous, and naturally, this aspect and the diverse reactions of the population to Jewish-Armenian trade were largely determined by both ethnonational and neighborly relations.

Moreover, the attitudes of the Christian Georgian population toward the Jews and the Armenians were far from uniform. Armenians, who had migrated from a neighboring country, persistently and consistently strengthened their position in the socioeconomic life of Georgia. Jews, on the other hand, represented a heterodox stratum of former serfs who had embarked on various activities, from petty peddling to smuggling. In this context, the Georgian population acted as a kind of arbiter, expressing its attitudes toward two different ethnic elements: the Semitic-Jewish and the Armenian-Indo-European, whose paths crossed in the same industry, in the same country.

The newspaper "Kavkaz", in an article entitled "Wandering Jewish Traders in Imeretin," vividly described them: "Generally, a Jewish trader pursues large profits; he is content to earn ten or fifteen rubles from his goods, and he and his horse will be well fed, and he needs no more. Meanwhile, he also has special expenses. At home, there is a family consisting of a wife and children – perhaps an elderly mother, a sister, and young brothers. A significant portion of his earnings must be devoted to them. Then he must pay state taxes and trade duties. He must deposit a substantial sum with the merchant from whom he buys goods on credit; he must pay rent to the landowner or peasant from whom he rents a house. He must give a small share to his rabbi, who at certain times serves the children of Israel.

Furthermore, he must give gifts to the elder from whom he takes his passport; to the village clerk who registers his passport; to the foreman for protecting his family during his absence. And who knows what else might be needed. It may happen that in some district, evil people appear who profit at the expense of their neighbor's well-being. In such cases, the Jew is the scapegoat. If he doesn't appease the wicked, they'll rob him, and not only rob him, but they won't even hesitate to kill him if he resists. And so the Jewish merchant faces a new concern, a new expense: he must earn enough money from his trade to give the bandits gifts (Давид, 1989b, p. 258).

At the end of the 1890's, Avraham Ha-Levy Khvoles was elected the chief rabbi of the city of Tskhinvali. Girls' education was introduced

for the first time in the history of Georgian Jews. A school for the children of Georgian Jews was founded in Tbilisi in 1902 and teaching there was conducted on the basis of the system of “Hebrew in Hebrew”. The Georgian Democratic Republic was declared in May 1918. Two seats were reserved for election to the Constituent Assembly of the new state for candidates from the Georgian Jews and one from the Ashkenazi Jews. 500 to 2000 Georgian Jews left the country after the Red Army invaded Georgia, and of them about 1200 arrived in Palestine that was under the British Mandate. In 1921, the number of Georgian Jews in Eretz Israel (Land of Israel) reached 1700 (*Religions in the Caucasus*, 2016, p. 55).

At the beginning of the Sovietisation of Georgia, the central Soviet authorities acted there with marked respect for national and religious traditions. In the 1920's, there was no interference in Zionist activity, either. Hebrew was studied as the language of the Georgian Jews. However, after the suppression of the anti – Soviet rebellion in 1924, the policy of the authorities became much tougher. Legal and semi – legal Zionist activity was prohibited. The actions of the Soviet authorities in the economy led to the bankruptcy of many Georgian Jews – large and small traders. The first collective farm of Georgian Jews was established in Tsiteli Hora in 1928. In 1933, there already were 15 such collective farms. However, from the 1930's, the authorities began to take steps to destroy the Jewish collective ethnic homogeneity. As a result, the Jews began to settle in cities. Here, in cooperatives, ethnic unity allowed them to continue to comply with their traditions. Nine hakhams (Torah scholar, rabbi – two of them Ashkenazi Jews) of the city of Tskhinvali were arrested in September 1937. Despite the repression, most Georgian Jews continued to regularly attend the synagogue and to observe kosher rules. Children under the age of 13 studied in clandestine cheders (private Jewish elementary religious school). The mass aliya (immigration) of Georgian Jews (to Israel) began in 1971. By mid – 1981, about 30000 Georgian Jews had repatriated to Israel (Ibid., 56).

Dagestan

Both European (Ashkenazi) and Mountain Jews live in Dagestan. Researchers attribute the appearance of Mountain Jews in the Eastern Caucasus to the reign of the Sasanid dynasty in Iran (226–651). Historical legends suggest that the Mountain Jews were originally in Shirvan and Aran (the Republic of Azerbaijan). The most ancient place off their

settlement in Dagestan is the Dzhuud Gatta ("Jewish Gorge"), in Kaitag (Ibid., 58).

From the perspective of Dagestan's political structure, it should be emphasized that the desire of a number of feudal lords to expand their holdings by seizing neighboring territories gave rise to internecine wars not only between individual holdings but also within them – between individual mahals and even auls. This led to the region's extreme feudal fragmentation on the eve of its annexation to Russia: "Dagestan still did not represent a unified, politically and economically coherent territory." It was fragmented into small and tiniest political units: the Endreev, Aksay, and Kostekovo domains, the Tarkov Shamkhalate, the Kaytag Utsmiystvo, the Tabasaran Maisumstvo, the domains of the Qadi of Tabasaran, the Mekhtullin, Avar, and Kazi-Kumukh khanates, and more than 60 small associations – unions of rural communities known as Avar, Dargin, and Lazgin "free" societies. These historically established state entities continued to exist politically and economically. However, despite their specific features, the administrative structure and political system of the feudal domains and unions of rural communities had many similarities.

The 18th century also proved fatal for the Jews of Dagestan. In his 1728 accounts of Jewish settlements in Kaitak, Shirvan, Rustan, Quba, and Shemakha, Gerber describes their situation as follows: "Jews, like Armenians, pay their landlords a special tax, a harach or capitation tax, in addition to the usual one, and are used for all kinds of hard and dirty labor that cannot be entrusted to Muslims. They are left with only enough property to avoid starvation. If a Jew is riding somewhere and encounters a Qizilbash or other Muslim, he must pull off the road and, at the request of the oncoming Muslim, dismount; If he doesn't do this, then a Muslim is allowed to beat him in any way he pleases, as long as he remains alive, and the beaten person has no right to complain... They say that they were once more numerous, but due to the many oppressions they suffered from the natives, their numbers constantly decreased and could not increase." Everywhere, according to Gerber, the Jews were engaged in agriculture and cattle breeding, and in the city of Shemakha, they were engaged in trade. They speak the language of the surrounding peoples, and the rabbis also understand Hebrew (Давид, 1989a, p. 155).

The Persian military commander Nadir Shah, who destroyed Shemakha and the Jewish city of Kul-Katta in 1734, captured the city of Quba and the entire region, where the entire Jewish population (Akhti,

Kuzari, Ruchyama, etc.) was converted to Islam. Large Jewish communities remained in Quba and Derbent. The Jewish population of the remaining areas dispersed throughout Dagestan and the North Caucasus and became serfs of the mountain feudal lords.

Nadir Shah, who invaded Aragh, placed the local bey, Yakub Pasha, in charge of the village of Kasum Kent. The Jews, residents of Aragh and Kasum Kent, were subject to him. By order of Nadir Shah, the Jew Ibtai Biba was appointed Yakub Pasha's deputy. In addition to taxes, the Jews of Aragh and Kasum Kent paid the pasha 30 kopecks per year for smoke and worked five days in his fields. He was replaced by Surkhay Khan. And Surkhay Khan, who fled to Turkey, was succeeded by Aslan Khan, who took advantage of the Russian military might (*Ibid.*, p. 156).

The Jewish residents paid him 6 rubles per year for smoke, and also performed various services for the bek. Generally, khans and beks patronized and protected the Jews (among them Aslan Khan, Mursal Khan, Mahmed Mirza Khan, and others). In 1862, the Russian Girenko was appointed governor of the Kyurinsko-Kumik region. Nadir Shah took the large Jewish population captive and settled them in Iran-Kharib (destroyed Iran), between Mushkur and Baledzhiya. The Jews remained there until they were taken back by Ruza Khan of Kusumkent, who presented Nadir Shah with a very expensive horse. The Jews were again settled in Aragh under the rule of Ruza Khan, his son Yaqub Khan, and then Surkhav Khan. Jews were obliged to pay 30 kopecks for each married Jew. The duties the Jews performed were as follows: Three days a year, they went to work in the beks' fields and harvested the crops. They were provided with food during this time. Jews were also given plots of land for sowing tobacco free of charge. They exchanged tobacco for grain in neighboring villages (*Ibid.*, p. 157).

The peasant reform in Dagestan was carried out from 1865 to 1868. As a result, the raya and some peasants dependent on the feudal lords were set free. The difficult era and the turbulent times of Shamil meant ruin for the overwhelming majority of Mountain Jews. "Leaving their families without any means of subsistence," Alexandrov wrote in the newspaper "Russian Jew," "the Mountain Jews wandered from place to place among their fellow Jews, begging for monetary rewards to ransom their captives from the hands of tyrants. We will attempt to focus our attention on this issue. According to Prozumentdor, before Dagestan's annexation to Russia and the rise of the fanatical Muslim legal movement led by false prophets like Kazn Mullah, Makhmat Bek,

and Shamil, Jews lived in the Dagestan region, maintaining good and loyal relations with the surrounding peoples and tribes. However, with the intensification of religious hostility and social oppression, the Jews began to turn to the Russian authorities for help and protection, resettling within or near military fortifications, and the Russian government patronized them and protected them from the predatory raids of wild and fanatically driven Dagestani tribes. The Jews of Dagestan perceived such patronage with gratitude, and this was reflected, among other things, in the fact that the chief rabbi of Dagestani Jews since the 1840s, Eliyahu Mizrahi, who blessed Russia for its loyalty to the Jewish population, called on members of his flock to use all available means to assist and provide assistance to the fighting Russian troops, to guard the approaches to their fortifications and fortresses, etc. Apparently, internal ethnic-tribal relations in Dagestan before and after Russia's intervention in the Caucasian theater had undergone a rather complex path, culminating by the 1860s in the incredible oppression and enslavement of Jews by local ruler. Not only the Jewish peasantry of Georgia, but also those of Dagestan, were subjected to the process of mass land dispossession. Jews of the North Caucasus, Kuban Oblast, and Dagestan often sought assistance from high-ranking officials and civil servants in the Caucasus. In his memoirs of his service in the Caucasus, Baron N. von der Hoeven wrote: "Knowing that barely 20% of Transcaucasia has been demarcated and that most of the Kuban Oblast is in dispute with the treasury, with neighboring farmers, and with co-owners, I refused them my assistance and advised them to turn directly to the state property management department of the Baku Governorate and Dagestan Oblast" (Ibid., p. 353).

Jews, not belonging to any of the population groups that had legal rights to land under the "adat," were sometimes equated with "redzhebat," i.e., temporarily obligated, and sometimes with state-owned peasants. But since Muslim law grants land ownership to those who conquered and cultivated it, over time, Jews were forced to seek their livelihood in livestock farming, handicrafts, and trade. Recent cattle epidemics in Dagestan, due to the reduction of pastures, significantly reduced Jewish herds. Thus, the author noted, in many once-wealthy villages of Dagestan, the population has become so impoverished that in Karabdakent, Ag-Labi, Buinak, Durili, Guvden, and Khan-Meltsul*, for a population of over 500 Jews, there are only 9 pack animals and the same number of cattle. The population of these villages lives by physi-

cal labor in seasonal work and is characterized by low intellectual development. Overall, it can be safely said that three-fifths of Caucasian Jews live by agriculture, gardening, and, to some extent, livestock breeding and handicrafts. (Ibid., p. 353)

As is well known, the region was governed by a military-popular system. The head of the region was the military governor with two assistants. Each district was divided into 37 districts, which were managed by naibs appointed by the government from among local residents.

In juridical matters, Dagestan belonged to the district of the Tiflis Judicial Chamber and the Baku District Court. Justices of the Peace were in T.-Kh.-Shura, Petrovsk, and Derbent. The highlanders were subordinate to the Dagestan People's Court and District Verbal Courts, in which, according to the number of districts – nine – they were represented by district governors or their assistants. The Dagestan People's Court was chaired by an assistant to the military governor. It can be assumed that, in essence, the Mountain Jews' way of life and economic activity were no different from those of non-Jewish mountaineers. Besides plowing their land and drying grass, which served as feed for cattle, the mountaineers reaped the harvest with special sickles. The grain was cut at the very root. Children gathered the ears of grain. The grain was transported to the village on donkeys, or the women themselves carried it and stored it in a special barn located near the threshing floor, or they arranged the sheaves in large stacks in the open air so skillfully that rain did not penetrate and harm the ears. The Gunib district chief's report for 1890 states that the work of cultivating the field, with the exception of plowing, falls entirely on the woman, who "cherishes the field like a mother her child;" she ensures watering, weed control, and harvests the grain herself, carrying the harvest on her back and transporting it to the threshing floor on a donkey. Only then, in the threshing process, does the head of the family participate (Давид, 1989b, p. 292).

Describing in detail the threshing and grain preparation of the highlanders, Khashaev writes: " Threshing was done in a cleared and compacted threshing floor. Sheaves of grain were untied and spread out across the floor, forming a circle. A pair of oxen were harnessed to threshing boards, studded underneath with sharp flint chips. A stone was placed on the boards to add weight, or the person driving the oxen across the grain spread out on the threshing floor stood on them. The grain fell from the ears, and the straw turned into chaff, which served, mixed with hay, as fodder for cattle, horses, and donkeys. The grain and chaff were collected in a pile, and the men winnowed it, throwing it

with a special wooden shovel. The chaff was separated and carried away by the wind, and the grain fell immediately. The grain was cleaned and carried home in sacks, and the chaff was carefully collected and taken to the barn. The day of the end of prayer and the day of the first furrow were celebrated as a holiday. Corn sown in the lowlands was weeded twice, with each stalk lightly hilled to promote better plant development. Potatoes and beans are usually planted in the same area where corn is sown, and pumpkins are planted along the edges of the terraces. The pumpkins climb the terrace walls without interfering with the corn. Fruit trees are also planted along the edges of the terraces so that their shadow falls on the corn plot (Ibid., p. 292).

The development of several industries (especially copper), the growth of commercial agriculture in Armenia, and the construction of the Tiflis-Alexandropol-Kars railway line in 1899 led to an increase in the urban population in Armenia. With the support of the Tiflis Social-Democratic Organization, local Social-Democratic committees were established in Armenia. In the former Shirvan Khanate, which at the beginning of 1900 comprised the Shemakha, Geokchai, and Javad districts, there were two Jewish villages, Mūdji and Haftaran, whose residents were engaged in peddling. These villages were located near the city of Shemakha. Jewish merchants would pick up various goods in Shemakha, mostly on credit, and, loading them onto their horses, would travel to various Muslim villages, where they would live for the entire year. They would leave these villages only on their major holidays, then return home and travel to Shemakha to buy goods. In each village where Jews traded, they always lived with their relatives and servants (Ibid., p. 304).

These Jews, wrote the newspaper "Future," are, in the full sense of the word, peaceful citizens, unacquainted with weapons. Every morning, having taken some of their goods with them, they would travel through their neighborhoods, and by evening they would invariably return to their shops. In the past, all trade was concentrated in their hands. Among them, there were those who traded for tens of thousands of rubles. As the negative fruits of modern civilization, expressed in the non-recognition of debts, etc., began to spread throughout the villages, these nomadic merchants found it more difficult, but they soon adapted to this new order and began to trade for cash or under the guarantee of trustworthy individuals, but they nevertheless continued their work. By the end of the 19th century. anti-Jewish persecution intensified in all Persian cities, especially in the cities of southern Azerbaijan, with its capital,

Tabriz. Here, following a blood libel from local Armenians, who saw Jews as rivals, the population, incited against the Jews, killed more than 4,000 Jews. Thus, having destroyed almost the entire community, a few Jews fled to the Caucasus, seeking refuge among the local Jewish communities (Ibid., p. 304).

On the eve of World War I, the general situation of Mountain Jews was not the best; many family farms were in disrepair, and in some cases, it became necessary to return those Mountain Jews from Palestine who had emigrated there. Typical in this regard is the story of Sason ben Rachmil, whose father, Rachmil ben Shalom, immigrated to Palestine at the age of 23, leaving the entire family farm in the care of his brother, Benjamin. However, in 1907, He was forced to return to Derbent. Sason recounts that "My father intended to restore the farm, leave his eldest son in charge, and then return to Eretz Israel. But in Derbent, my father found his farm in a very neglected state, and a quick return to Israel was out of the question. And soon World War I broke out. By then, the family had grown even larger—my sister and I, Sason, were born. My father was never able to restore the farm. And so he began to engage in small-scale trade. My father had many friends. In almost every village in Southern Dagestan, he had several kunaks (close friends, acquaintances with whom one could stay). My father would often load his horse with manufactured goods and visit his acquaintances in the Lezgin, Dargin, and Kumyk villages. The cotton textile mill was especially popular. My father often sold his goods on credit, and his kunaks would then collect the money from their villagers for my father's next visit. Very often, customers would repay him – with his permission – in kind: eggs, dried fruits, walnuts, almonds, apples, pears, and other food products. When food supplies were plentiful, my father's friends would bring them to Derbent in their carts. Almost every week, in the fall and winter, several of these carts would arrive with food supplies. Our yard was like a caravanserai. My father then sold all these products to wholesalers, who, in turn, would transport them to Russia's central cities. During the war, this trade took on particular importance, as some of the food went to the active army (Ibid., p. 524).

Comparing the cultural levels of two Jewish communities in the Caucasus – the Georgian Jewish and Mountain Jewish – Dr. S. Weissenberg writes: "The generally unenviable cultural status of the Mountain Jews can be positively called high when compared with that of the Georgian Jews. While the Mountain Jews have adapted the Hebrew al-

phabet for the Tat language, which significantly facilitates the acquisition of this language and correspondence in it, Georgian Jews, if I am not mistaken, currently constitute the only Jewish group that does not use the Hebrew script for their spoken language." In this, they agree only with the Abyssinian Fallashians and the "Black Jews" of India. The Mountain Jews have recently even developed the rudiments of writing. In 1908, a Tat translation of Dr. Sapir's prayer book and Zionist pamphlet was published in Vilnius, entitled "Matlab Tsionigo" (translated by A. Pinkhasov). I believe that it is only thanks to the adaptability of the Hebrew script to the Tat language that the Mountain Jews have occupied both a materially and culturally higher position than their Georgian brethren, for while the former can study both Hebrew and Tat in the same cheder, the latter are forced to turn to a special teacher to learn Georgian, which, given their poverty, is not always accessible to everyone. The consequence of this is a comparatively larger number of literate people among the Mountain Jews, and along with this, greater success in the struggle for existence (Ibid., p. 524).

Kabardino – Balkaria

Mountain Jews founded a Jewish community near the fortress of Nalchik in 1847–1848. In the new settlement, they began to develop the leather industry and furriery business. Trade flourished. Mountain Jews lived in Nalchik quite safely. In the early 1980's, the city's Mountain Jew community numbered over 12000, and by 1991–1992, it was 17000–18000. The local population always treated them kindly. However, with the collapse of USSR, the situation changed. The criminal situation and low standards of living caused them to leave en masse. In the early 2000's, departures were paused (*Religions in the Caucasus*, 2016, p. 56).

During World War II, the community of Nalchik fell into the hands of the Nazis. Every day, people awaited execution. They were saved by the fact that the Nazis questioned the "Jewishness" of the Mountain Jews and began to seek their origins. A national council, headed by the Kabardian lawyer, Semyon Shadov, was established in Kabardino – Balkaria. He decided to prove to Field Marshall von Kleist that the Nalchik Jews were a mountain people. It was explained to the Germans that they were Tats – people of an Iranian group that spoke a dialect of the New Persian language. The occupiers were shown the national dances. The enemies were treated to dishes of the Mountain Jew-

ish cuisine. Meanwhile, the residents of the colony left for local villages. They were hidden, fed and saved. At the same time, the Nazis continued to compile lists of the Mountain Jews, intending their complete destruction. They set the date for their mass execution. But the underground that served in the German administration managed to inform the Mountain Jews of the planned event. Partisans and the Red Army liberated Nalchik ahead of schedule. In 1993, a new synagogue was built in Nalchik. Next to it was the two – storey building of the Hesed Imid Charitable Foundation. It hosts a variety of activities, people study Hebrew, the traditions and history of the Jewish people there (Ibid., p. 57).

North Ossetia (Alania)

The Jews of Vladikavkaz have been living there for over 200 years. In 1804, a royal edict was issued, allowing European Jews to live in the Caucasus, which was associated with the need for skilled craftsmen. Over time, retired “Jews from the lower ranks”, began to settle in Vladikavkaz. The Soldier synagogue was built in mid – 1860. Relations with the local population were very friendly. In 1879, a cheder was opened. In 1885, a religious board headed by an official rabbi was established in Vladikavkaz. In 1880, the Craft synagogue was opened in Vladikavkaz. On 1 January 1877, the Jewish residents of Vladikavkaz numbered 742. According to the first all Russian census, in 1897 there were already 1214 of them, and in 1923–1143 of them. In the late 19th – early 20th century, Jews were well represented in the merchant class. Especially, there were a lot of Jewish pharmacies, fashion boutiques etc. The revival of the Jewish community of Vladikavkaz began in March 1989, when Shalom cultural and educational society and the Mekhina school were opened, where Hebrew, the Torah, the history and traditions of the Jewish people are studied. (Ibid., p. 57–58).

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