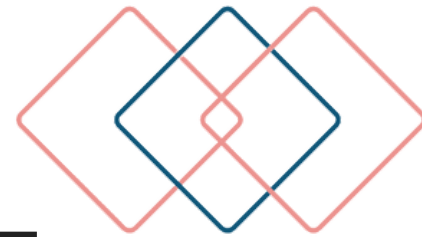


QESHER MAGAZINE



Synagogue of Plovdiv, Bulgaria

WINTER EDITION



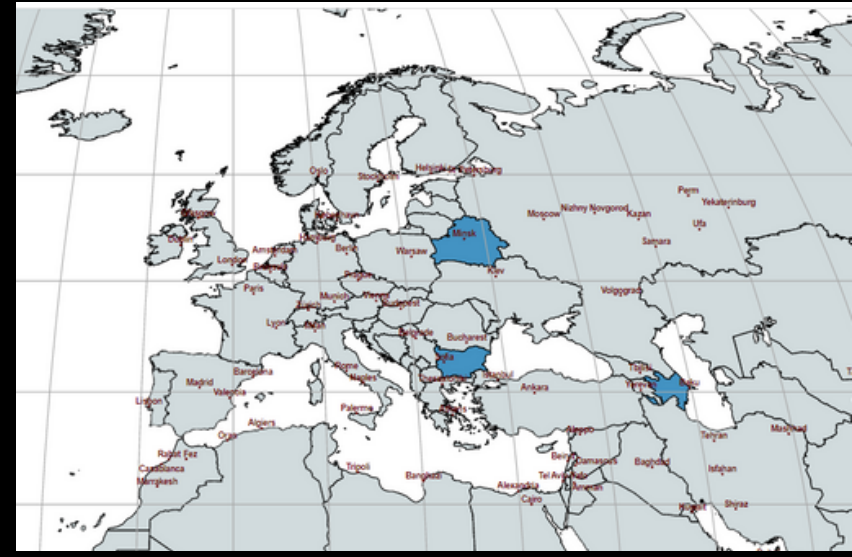
Red City, Azerbaijan

Qesher - Connecting Jewish
Communities Since 2020

QESHER MAGAZINE - WINTER EDITION

In this issue we are featuring articles related to three different regions of the former Communist bloc. Although sharing so much in their recent history, they represent three completely different Jewish communities, with different culture, customs and languages.

What these communities have in common is the struggle to keep their identity and heritage alive, in spite of the repression they all had to experience in the 20th century.



In this Issue: Belarus, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria

IN THIS ISSUE GET TO KNOW:

DEBRA BRUNNER

FOUNDER OF THE TOGETHER PLAN: A CHARITY
SUPPORTING COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT IN
BELARUS

VALERIYA NAKSHUN

SPEAKER ON QESHER - "KAVKAZI JEWS"
CULTURE WRITER, COMMUNITY OUTREACH
FELLOW AND FORMER DANCER AT SILK
ROAD DANCE COMPANY (SRDC).

LEAH DAVCHEVA

PARTICIPANT - COACH, WRITER AND
RESEARCHER OF LADINO
SPEAKERS IN BULGARIA



Slonim Synagogue, Belarus



GET TO KNOW DEBRA BRUNNER

FOUNDER OF THE TOGETHER PLAN: A CHARITY SUPPORTING COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT IN BELARUS



Qesher: Where does your strong connection to Belarus come from?

Debra: That's a very good question! My maternal grandparents and paternal great-grandparents, they all came to the UK from Poland, and I was married to the son of Hungarian Holocaust survivors. So, I was always interested in the Holocaust but also in the countries that became part of the Soviet bloc.

In 2008, Finchley Reform Synagogue in north London, where I am a member, hosted a program and welcomed 11 Belarusian Jewish children for two weeks over the summer and I was asked to be a host family. None of the children really seemed to know what

being Jewish meant and were completely unaware of anything Jewish. It intrigued me and I wanted to know more. After their visit, our Rabbi suggested we start a twinning with a Jewish community in Belarus and I agreed to initiate that. And that's how we ended up creating links with the Jewish community in Polotsk.

Q: What was your impression of that Jewish community?

D: When I started to travel to the country, I came to understand how neglected these communities were and how there was so much work that needed to be done to support them. I met Artur Livshyts based in Minsk, and he

became my guide and I started to understand the real needs of the Jews of Belarus – which were highly challenging and complex.

The more I discovered, the more I visited and the more I saw, and I felt a very strong sense of connection. This is how it began. In 2013, Artur and I registered The Together Plan charity and started to work with the aim of helping communities grow and self-develop.

Q: How did you actually start working with Jewish heritage?

D: After spending many years involved with Belarus, it became very clear to me that working with Jewish

communities in the former Soviet Union brought up many complex challenges, but we saw that above all, people wanted and needed to talk about their history and heritage and explore their Jewish identity. We decided to build some projects around encouraging people to come together to explore this.

Then, five years ago, I attended a talk in Krakow by the AEPJ (European Association for the Preservation and Promotion of Jewish Heritage and Culture), the organization managing the European Route of Jewish Heritage (one of the Cultural Routes of the *Council of Europe*).

The AEPJ invited us to apply to take the lead in the building of a Jewish Cultural Heritage Route in Belarus. We submitted our application making it clear that our program would need to have citizens at its heart, since our mission as a charity is community capacity building. Our application was accepted and this is now a central focus of our work in Belarus.

Q: Can you tell us more about the activities of “The Together Plan”?

D: The mission of *The Together Plan* is the revival of communities in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, with a current focus on Belarus. We promote community capacity building through research, exploration, cultural events and dialogue. *The Together Plan* draws its inspiration for projects around three central pillars – ‘past’, ‘present’ and ‘future’ and each project drives a central belief which can be distilled into one line... Jewish people, wherever they are, are not alone.

As we grow, more projects are coming to life. These include heritage clubs, preservation, exploration of Jewish sites, archive work, summer programs and youth engagement. We run a search service to help people find ancestral records in the Belarus archives. We are developing tools to connect to Belarusians in the Diaspora so that they can share their stories, recipes and photographs – which help to tell the story of the Jews of Belarus. We are translating books which were written in Russian and printed for private use, by Holocaust survivors who have never publicly told their stories. Our youth group, Youth for Youth, connects young adults between the ages of 17 and 30 in a virtual space and when we are not in a pandemic, some travel to Belarus to participate in summer programs. We are researching and building our task force



Zoymen 2018 Youth for Youth summer camp, Belarus

for the development of the Belarus Cultural Heritage Route.

In 2020 we also launched ‘Making History Together’ a Holocaust Education program for 12- and 13-year-olds, which explores what happened to the Jews of Belarus and the Soviet Union.

Q: Did you encounter any negative reactions from the local community?

D: At the beginning, it was definitely not easy and we had to face some tough challenges. Our approach of helping people to learn how to help themselves was not well received at the outset



Jewish cemetery in Druya 2021

and it was difficult trying to bring that concept to the table. Some long-established Jewish organizations were also skeptical of our arrival and finding our place took time and a lot of staying power. It was also difficult to engage people into ideas or new concepts without funding.

So, a lot of our initial work was hard and required sheer determination, but we did change hearts and minds and finally started to show people the value of collaborative efforts and self-determination.

Q: What plans do you have for The Together Plan in the next few years?

D: We will continue to work with individuals and communities in Belarus to help them become the heartbeat of the Jewish Heritage Route. We are already working with Belarusians who are learning how to create audio tours so that locals, as well as visitors, will be able to immerse themselves in the rich Jewish story of Belarus, and indeed even people who are not able to visit, will also be able to enjoy these tours from afar.

We will be developing the 'Making History Together' Holocaust Education program to grow the dialogue around the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, and we have a number of projects in progress to preserve significant sites

of memory. We strongly believe that cultural heritage is a powerful vehicle to engage citizens in dialogue around their own history, opening opportunities to have conversations with neighbors and across borders. It stimulates and encourages an understanding and respect for the value of diversity and cultural differences.

We cannot thank our incredible funders enough for bringing The Together Plan this far and we can't wait to see what the future holds with all the support we receive; from companies sponsoring us, people running, cooking and even drawing for us - to grants and personal legacies. And we strive to reach new donors every day.

As our work snowballs in its impact, the more we are able to qualify the importance of our projects. It has been a relentless campaign to get to where we are, and we have reached a significant step change on so many levels. Right now, more than ever, it is vital that we secure support, to ensure the continuation of our important work of putting citizens and community at the heart of cultural heritage.



Debra Brunner, Purim in Polotsk

GET TO KNOW VALERIYA NAKSHUN

BY SYLVIE HODES

I spoke to Valeriya Nakshun about her experiences as a member of the Kavkazi Jewish community, which she continues to be a strong part of even after her childhood migration to Maryland, USA.

Valeriya was born in Makhachkala, the capital of Dagestan in the Caucasus mountain range. It is home to a plethora of tribes and ethnic groups, among them an ancient Jewish community. Also known as “Mountain Jews”, they are ethnically and culturally distinct from other Jewish groups in the region, descending from Persian Jews who migrated to the northern borders of the Persian empire.

Her childhood in the deeply traditional community left a strong imprint on her identity. The remoteness of the region also meant the development of a rich culture with its own unique traditions and religious practices, infused with both local and Middle Eastern elements from their neighbours. Valeriya talks fondly of the food, music and religious rituals, which reflect those of the region. For example, Kavkazi Jewish celebrations and weddings include lezginka dancing, a warrior’s dance with a quick drum tempo and jewelled rice dishes encrusted with “jugh,” the crispy rice that sticks to the bottom of a rice pot - known as “tahdig” in Iran. It was an interconnected, tight-knit community where everybody knew everybody.

Their language is Juhuri (Judeo-Tat), a Persian-based language with many Turkic and Hebrew elements. It is not mutually intelligible with modern Farsi spoken in Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan but a Persian-speaker well-versed in the history

of the language would be able to pick up on its nuances.

Its curious nature as an early offshoot of Persian inspired some academics to study and document the language, and it was even written about in the Handbook of Jewish Languages.

Valeriya has many memories of her grandparents speaking and singing to her in Juhuri. The Caucasus region, being on the border between Russia and Iran, has changed hands throughout history. A project of russification was initiated under the Soviet Union, resulting in the gradual replacing of Juhuri with Russian. As the USSR expanded its power base, her grandmother switched from a Juhuri to a Russian-speaking school. Her parents were similarly educated in Soviet institutions, though they continued to speak and understand Juhuri amongst themselves.

Valeriya tells an anecdote about the time when, once in her school in America, her

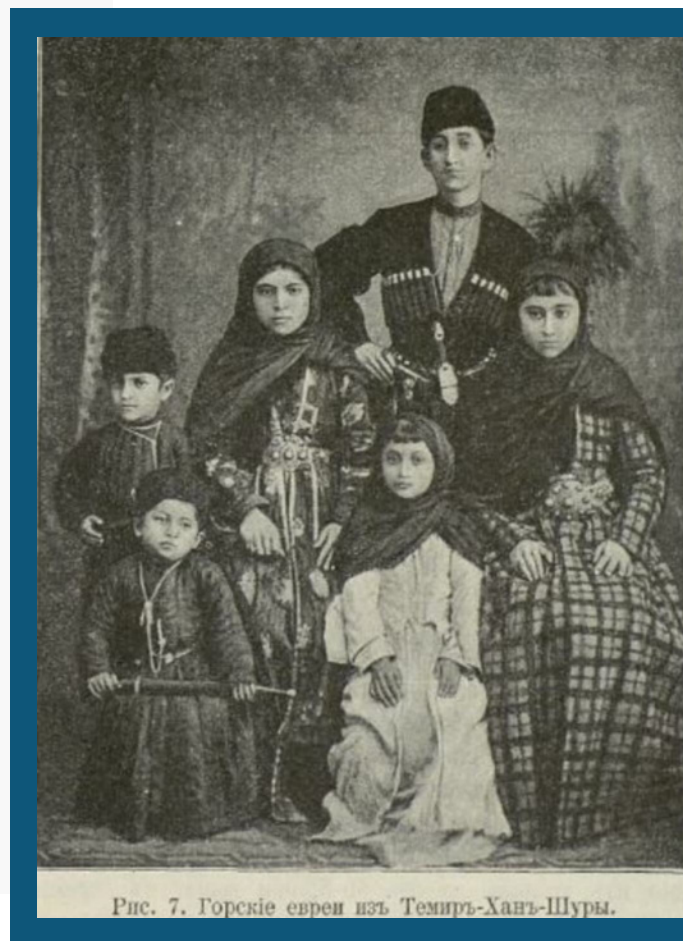


Valeriya Nakshun

teacher asked the class to bring in a list of Yiddish words from their grandparents. Unaware that the language her own grandmother spoke was not Yiddish but Juhuri, Valeriya came prepared with a long list of words she had heard her Kavkazi Jewish grandmother saying. Only upon the teacher's confusion did she realise her own background was special, distinct from the majority of Baltimore's Jews. This is a humorous example, but it demonstrates the lack of awareness about the richness and diversity of Jewish communities around the world.

For an old and religious Jewish community, the spread of the Soviet Union to the Caucasus meant drastic change. As well as attending Russian-language schools, most synagogues were shut down and religion went mostly underground. Her grandfather was active in the communist party, so after marrying formally on paper, her grandparents had to keep their religious ceremony under the chuppah a secret.

At the end of the 20th century, nearby regional conflicts and the fall of the USSR escalated the emigration of Mountain Jews, who faced particular difficulties because they were often the targets of violent antisemitic attacks, especially in Dagestan and Chechnya. So, their population gradually dwindled. Valeriya and her family were designated as refugees through the help of HIAS, an American organisation which helped Jewish refugees from the former Soviet Union emigrate. Migration happened so quickly that by the time her aunt was getting married in 1994, many of the community's Jews had left and the family couldn't find many people to invite to the wedding.

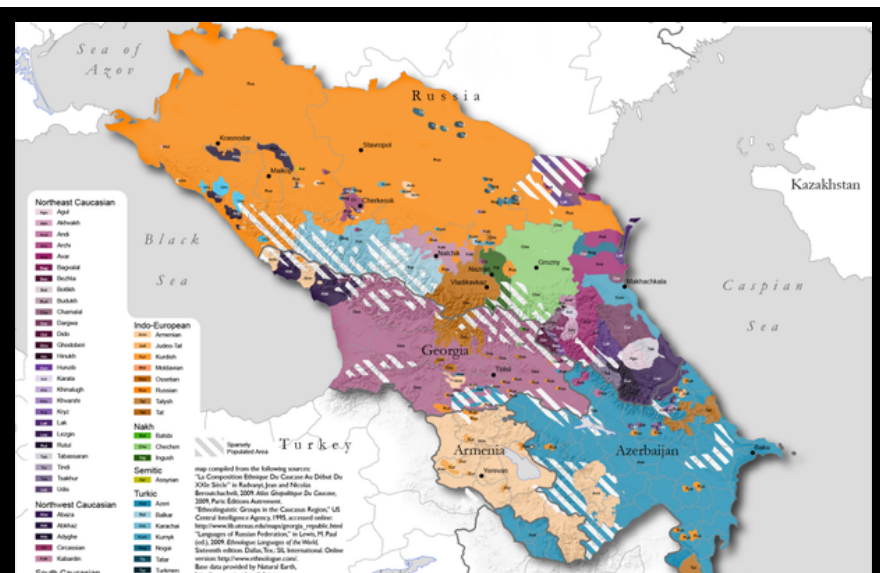


Kavkazi Jewish Family

In the US, Valeriya continues to preserve Kavkazi Jewish culture, which, despite similarities to Iraqi and Persian Jewry, remains unique. Identity is extremely important to her, and she shares traditional recipes and articles with the world through online platforms. For several years, she was a company dancer for the Silk Road Dance Company, and worked with Sephardic Heritage International DC, which spreads awareness of underrepresented Jewish communities.

Kavkazi Jews are now scattered around the world, particularly in North America, Europe and Israel, though an indigenous community still exists in Azerbaijan. The internet is important in unifying Mountain Jews from around the world. In 2017, Mountain Jews were instrumental in initiating a Festival of the Caucasus in Brooklyn, New York. Museum projects, dance schools, synagogues and online forums continue to keep the community's heritage alive and vibrant.

Language map of the Caucasus



GET TO KNOW LEAH DAVCHEVA

DR. LEAH DAVCHEVA IS AN INTERCULTURAL COACH, AND FACILITATOR BASED IN SOFIA, BULGARIA. SHE IS INTERESTED IN LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE BALKANS AND SHE HAS RUN SEVERAL NARRATIVE RESEARCH STUDIES.

BY DORA KORANYI & SEBASTIAN MIZRAHI



Leah Davcheva

Leah Davcheva, a participant of Qesher, told us about the fascinating book she recently published *Kaleidoscope of Identities*. In her book she tells stories of Sephardic Jews in Bulgaria, and how the Ladino language impacted their lives.

Bulgarian and / or Jewish

Ten years ago, I was in England, walking the Lake District with a colleague of mine – a linguist and an educator, like me. All of a sudden, he asked me about my Sephardic identity, noting that it had never appeared in our conversations. Although we had known each other for quite some time, we had never touched upon this topic. Nothing deliberate, just that this one of my identities had rarely been on my mind.

I grew up in Bulgaria, I played with Bulgarian friends (as well as with Turkish, Armenian, and Roma kids) in our neighborhood. I went to a Bulgarian school and later on, taught in one. I did not know many Jewish people then and even less who spoke Ladino. So, when asked, I would always

say that I am Bulgarian, it did not even occur to me to add that I am also Jewish.

Family roots

I am, however, aware of our family roots thanks to my father. He was interested in the history of our family and was using every opportunity to find out something new, unknown, and curious. He would reach out to other people, across the globe, bearing the same family name, i.e. Rosanis. Most of the people he got in touch with would write to him in English and I was the one to translate their letters into Bulgarian for him. And then, I would translate his responses into English and, by and by, I became quite an insider to our family history.

First steps into the research journey

There and then, on that mountain path in the Lake District, the idea of a narrative study sprang into existence. My colleague and I agreed to focus on Ladino, the heritage language for many Sephardic Jews in Bulgaria (and beyond). Ladino is often discussed in terms of language endangerment and of cultural loss for the Sephardic community and for

humanity more widely. However, for us, intercultural communication specialists with a linguistic focus, the Ladino experiences of Sephardic Jews provide rich insights regarding the linguistic complexities of identity. Through the Ladino-framed narratives of (often elderly) members of this community, we were hoping to learn how they drew, and continue to draw, upon their diverse linguistic and cultural resources to define themselves, to articulate their various identities, and to communicate within and beyond Bulgarian society.

On the ground

I somehow discovered that there was a Ladino club in Sofia, called *Shalom*. Before long, I became a member and started taking part in their gatherings. At first, I was offered a rather cool welcome. I was younger than most of them and to make things worse, I did not speak Ladino. They did! However, I persisted and finally, most of the other members made space for me to present my research project.

There was this dear lady, Reni Lidgi, who was the first to volunteer to tell me her Ladino story. We arranged to meet in a couple of days, at *Shalom*. Her story was truly brilliant. She told me about the way she learned Ladino from her grandmother, how, at some stage in her life, she refused to speak it because she thought it was not sophisticated enough. And then, she met a Spanish teacher from Spain and Ladino became their means of communication. A sound friendship developed, supported by their mutual search of the common roots between Ladino and modern Spanish.

I was very grateful to Reni, because, following her example, more and more people came to me offering their stories. I met some of my storytellers in cafés, some came to our house, others - I visited their homes. These narrative-generating encounters were managed through, and in, Bulgarian. I was the story-prompter and immediate audience. My prompts were based on a desire to learn more about what they did with Ladino in their lifetime, how they did it, with whom, where, and when.

The fact that I could not speak Ladino actually worked in favor of the research process because the storytellers grew confident in their competence and were willing to share all they knew and could remember.



Reni Lidgi - Interviewee in Leah's book

Memories from my childhood kept coming back. Words that my parents used to say, events, experiences, things seemingly forgotten. The stories I was hearing triggered previous experiences, and it all became a very passionate process.

The next stage

I then transcribed each story into Bulgarian which I shared with the storytellers (to ensure that it captured what they had said and wanted to say). Then, following the narrative inquiry tradition, I used these transcripts to create Bulgarian-medium, restored prose versions of the narratives. For various reasons – for my researcher



Sofi Dannon - Interviewee in Leah's book

friend's benefit, to enable our English-medium researcher collaborative discussion, and for dissemination/representation purposes – I translated these restorings into English.

In a thematic analysis process we developed a five-zoned conceptual framework for capturing the insights we took from the stories about the Ladino-foregrounded interculturality of our storytellers

Five zones of interculturality

The storytellers can be understood to be performing their identity in terms of five, to some extent overlapping, zones, namely:

- (1) the (intra-)personal, that is a zone of internal dialogue;
- (2) the domestic, that is a zone for the family;
- (3) the local, that is a zone for the Sephardic community in Bulgaria;
- (4) the diasporic, that is a zone for the wider Sephardic Jewish community; and
- (5) the international, that is the international community of Spanish-speakers.

My book: Kaleidoscope of Identities

Having brought the research process to a kind of completion, I started to warm up to the idea of writing a whole book on the identity play of the Sephardic Jews in Bulgaria and their performance in the Ladino language. My main stimulus was the desire for the stories of the research participants to find a wider audience. I wanted them heard, far and wide. Secondly, I wanted to honor the memory of my parents and my wider family. So, I decided I would write a book in Bulgarian, more for the general public rather than for an academic audience.

The RIVA publishers responded enthusiastically and the book has been already published. People are buying it and we have presented it in several cities and, naturally, also in *Shalom*.

My teacher of Spanish has already translated it into Spanish, and my publisher in Bulgaria negotiated a joint publication with the Spanish publisher Lacre. The Spanish book will be published before the end of 2021.

In between the research and the publishing of the book, I feel I have come full circle with regard to my Jewish identity. A sense of something new emerged, a new card which I feel confident to play.



Itsko Finzi - interviewee in Leah's book

**THANK
YOU FOR
BEING
PART OF
THE
QESHER
FAMILY!**

