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WebMail - [TelAvivLetters] letter 30 TIME WARP

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**TIME WARP**

Where have I seen this movie before? Abram Isakov is leading us through the Bukhara Jewish Cemetery, reputed to be 1000 years old, and the (video) camera is rolling. He is speaking in mame-loshn, which is to say, Bukharian, not Russian, and he seems to know each and every tombstone by heart; as well he should, for he comes here every day, and tells the camera that except for the Uzbek laborers who are busy removing weeds and boulders and creating paved walkways, the work of cleaning the graves is done by volunteers. We descend the stone steps into the ancient cistern, where for centuries fresh water was drawn for the purification of the dead. Isakov does not mention that in Galut America, Bukharian Jews will have to abide by shockingly deficient Ashkenazi burial practices. Instead, he beckons the camera to follow him into the completely renovated cleansing-room-plus-funeral-parlor, where benches flank the walls, as tradition dictates. Here shall rest the body sans coffin. Here shall sit the mourners, and here--the family and neighbors, on special pillows to cover the benches. For the sake of his potential benefactors in Queens, Isakov luxuriates over certain black granite tombstones with photos of the deceased permanently embossed on their surface--the telltale sign of Soviet influence. "This is your beloved mother," he says. "You see how well we care for her?"

I know the script! I have seen and even used comparable film footage myself, of prewar Polish shtetls. The difference is that back in the Thirties, only the wealthiest landsman could hire a film crew to accompany him home, while Isakov, the President of the Bukharian Jewish Community, expects this film to pay for itself. And to pay for the complete restoration of the countless graves. And to underwrite the landscaping, and the multicolored fountain he envisages, for unlike the Jews of prewar Poland, the Jews of Bukhara are not leaving their ancestral home due to poverty or pogroms. They are leaving for the sake of their children.

Everyone is taking pictures. We are accompanied by Christine, a professional photographer from the Upper West Side who is documenting The Jewish Diaspora. Christine, who just came from Cuba, is spreading herself thin. She is exercised, for example, that having traveled such a distance, the men at the synagogue forbade her from taking pictures during Shavuot services. This week she will have better luck. There's a Torah reading on Thursday morning, and a wedding on Thursday night. Shana and I are also armed with our trusty Minolta, which we bought the week before Aryeh was born, and we will take twelve rolls of film before the week is out. They will be of two distinct kinds: the usual shots of magnificent mosques and exotic faces--Uzbek women love to be photographed--photos that have a timeless quality; and snapshots of Jewish life at this, the eleventh hour.

The Jews, emulating their Uzbek neighbors, are the most hospitable peoples on earth. We are wined and dined at the home of total strangers each day of our visit. Any door we knock on, we are invited in. Aaron, our friend and guide, wants us to see how Jews live, their huge courtyards, lush gardens, and spacious quarters, hidden from public eye. This particular courtyard is nothing special, firstly, because the occupants have only been living here for four years, and secondly, because they are expecting to leave for the States. The parents and daughter have their visas in hand. Their son is waiting for his "parole." Incongruously, his computer is set up in the narrow vestibule next to the kitchen. They are happy to pose outside for the camera. The mother-and-daughter are beautiful, one a younger version of the other. The daughter leans her head slightly in her mother's direction. There is sadness and stoicism in their eyes. I watch Shana taking the picture and start crying. I have seen this picture before. Many time before.

The wedding exceeds all our expectations--even Christine's. Three hundred guests are arranged at tables inside a not-yet-abandoned courtyard in the Old City. A solid platform has been built to complete the rectangle. Above the head table, two menorahs flank a Magen David, and just as we arrive, they are lit up and continue flashing throughout the night. We anxiously await the start of the celebration, when the bride and groom (re)appear and dance around a bonfire. Why? Because the Uzbeks do it, and before them, probably, the Zoroastrians. There are no more Jewish musicians left in Uzbekistan, so Uzbeks, with synthesizers and traditional drums, must take their place, and the professional Uzbek dancer in pink glistening dress and golden cap is a good thirty years younger than the Jewish dancer who performed for us in Queens, when this amazing trip first crossed the febrile mind of my beloved wife. Even after my third shot of vodka I am too shy to join the gyrating men who shower the dancer with Sums each time she performs her sensuous, non-sexual, dance. Happily, after about two hours, the Muslim women, and then the men, finally join in with the Jewish celebrants. At one point, Rabbi Aaron Sion is called up to bless the bride and groom, then he sings them "Tsur mishelo" from the Friday night zemirot, followed, by popular demand, by a Russian love song, rendered with lots of schmaltz, for Rabbi Sion performed in an amateur theatrical troupe when he was still at university. "When I pray on Yom Kippur before the Ark," he assures Shana and me, "there is not a dry eye in the whole congregation." The groom's father, who immigrated to Queens and now lives from ISI, offers a toast in perfect Uzbek, and he insists that Aaron, his former colleague at the Institute of Foreign Languages in Tashkent, also say a few words. Aaron speaks in declamatory Russian. His blessing on this occasion is that Jews and Muslims in the Middle East

should learn a lesson in harmonious living from their counterparts in Uzbekistan. When Aaron returns to our VIP table, he explains why he mixed politics into his speech. "I spoke in this way, David, so that after we all leave, they won't destroy our synagogues and cemeteries."

Jerusalem, June 1, 2002

David G. Roskies  
Department of Jewish Literature  
Jewish Theological Seminary  
3080 Broadway  
New York, NY 10027-4649  
daroskies@jtsa.edu

posted by

Michael Rand Rav Machshiveem v Technologica Director of Academic &  
Administrative Computing <http://www.ssdsnassau.org>  
Solomon Schechter High & Middle School of LI 516-656-5500 x110  
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