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CENTRAL ASIA: COMING TO TERMS WITH THE PAST – COPING IN THE PRESENT

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“Unmasking Enemies” Again and Again? The Memoirs of Mordekhay Bachayev and the Revenge of the Soviet Past

Thomas Loy

Summary

The memoirs of Mordekhay Bachayev (1911–2007), a Bukharan Jewish intellectual and poet, are an important document for understanding the history, culture, and everyday life of Bukharan Jews in the first two decades of Soviet rule in Central Asia. Nevertheless, thus far they have been widely excluded from the post-Soviet efforts of the Bukharan Jewish communities in Israel and the United States to create a unifying “nationalist historiography.” This paper argues that this omission relates to Bachayev’s openness about interpersonal antagonisms and denunciations within the Bukharan Jewish intellectual circles of 1930s Soviet Uzbekistan. The publications of the memoirs in 1988/89 caused a fierce debate among Bukharan Jews about the role and personal guilt of Bukharan Jewish intellectuals during the time of the Great Terror, and transported the internal group tensions and interpersonal differences of the Soviet past into the present.

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Keywords: Bukharan Jews, Soviet Union, Great Terror, memoirs, denunciation, historiography, Mordekhay Bachayev

Introduction

“Tear off the masks!” was *the* slogan used to encourage the social practice of denunciation in the Soviet Union of the 1930s, especially during the Great Terror of 1937–1938, “as citizens were exhorted to watch out for spies and saboteurs and unmask hidden ‘enemies of the people’” (Fitzpatrick 2005: 207). While Fitzpatrick deals with “written communication to the authorities,” whose “damaging” (Fitzpatrick 2005: 209) potential unfolded right there and then on the spot, I instead intend to present and discuss here a case of denunciation in the Bukharan Jewish intellectual circles of Tashkent that not only affected people at the time but that was to also live on even many decades later, appearing as circumstances hardly less noxious than the original events in the 1930s. The case became public when Mordekhay ben Hiyo Bachayev, a writer, journalist, and émigré, published in Israel his memoirs

*Dar juvol-i sangin (DJS)*¹ in the late 1980s. Memoirs and other recollections of the past “can bring to light much that would remain hidden even to those whose access to Soviet archives is unlimited” (Kamp 2001: 58). What I thus try to show in this article is how these denunciations among the intellectual elites of the Bukharan Jewish minority have been transferred from the Soviet past into the present, and furthermore how this “highly ambiguous practice” (Fitzpatrick 2005: 205) of denunciation during the Stalin era still affects the Bukharan Jewish communities today.

Who are the Bukharan Jews?

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries Central Asian Jewish communities big and small lived in the major towns of northern Afghanistan (Herat, Maimana, Mazar-e Sharif) and of Transoxiana (Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, and the towns of the Ferghana Valley). As a religious minority group in a Muslim environment, these Jews were allowed to follow their own religious practices and laws as long as they recognized the superiority of Muslim rule. Nevertheless, they had to endure certain restrictions and limitations. Culturally widely assimilated into the surrounding Muslim societies, the Jews of Central Asia spoke local varieties of Persian and wrote that language in the Hebrew script. Hebrew was used primarily as a liturgical language.

After the Russian conquest of Central Asia in the second half of the 19th century, Russian Turkestan attracted a lot of Jews from the Emirate of Bukhara and many from Afghanistan as well as northwestern Iran. The nomenclature “Bukharan Jews” was used for those Central Asian Jews who came under Russian rule and jurisdiction or who lived in the Bukharan Emirate until its dissolution in 1920 and later became inhabitants of the Soviet Union.² Only in the 20th century did it also become a mode of self-designation. Numerically a relatively small component of the population (less than 1 percent), local Jews — who mainly engaged in crafts and trade — were the second- or third-largest native group in the big cities of Uzbekistan in the 1920s. When in its early years the Soviet state started to transform manifold local societies into a single Soviet one, the secular representatives of the so-called “national minority” (*nacional’noe menshinstvo/mayda millat*) of the Bukharan Jews were heavily promoted (Levin 2008a).

From 1938 on the Soviet authorities stopped the sociocultural endorsement of the Bukharan Jews, just as they did with all other “national minority groups” inhabiting Soviet territory. Cultural and political institutions and activities that had previously

1 *Dar Juvol-i Sangin* translates into English as *In a Stone Sack*. *Juvol-i sangin* is a Tajik translation from the Russian *kamennoe meshok*. According to Bachayev, prison inmates in the Soviet Union used this term as slang for a very narrow type of solitary confinement cell. In his memoirs, Bachayev applied the metaphor *juvol-i sangin* to the Soviet Union as such (interview with Mordekhay Bachayev, Israel 2005).

2 The most valuable introduction to Bukharan Jewish history up to the late Soviet period is still Zand (1989).

been encouraged and supported were now banned and criminalized. At the same time, the intellectual elites of the Bukharan Jewish community were seized almost in their entirety by the Great Terror and “thus the demolition of Bukharan Jewish culture activities became complete” (Zand 1991: 408). In one of my interviews with Mordekhay Bachayev, I was told that in 1937 and 1938 “the Bolsheviks trimmed down the Soviet people. The Bukharan Jews were also among them. [...] They arrested 300–400 of us. They expunged teachers, journalists, intellectuals, and so on from the system.”³

In a revision of early Soviet nationalities policy, from the 1940s on Bukharan Jews, as well as all other non-Ashkenazi and Ashkenazi Jewish communities of the Soviet Union have been regarded as forming one Jewish nationality, by that ignoring and denying their cultural and regional distinctions. At the end of the 20th century, and especially after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, a mass exodus of Bukharan Jews from Central Asia commenced. Today, Israel and the United States are home to the largest Bukharan Jewish communities, while in Central Asia Bukharan Jewish life has almost completely vanished.⁴

The memoirs of Mordekhay Bachayev

Among scholars, the memoirs of Mordekhay ben Hiyo Bachayev (1911–2007) — also known by his pen-name “Muhib” — are regarded as a document of great value for understanding the history, culture, and everyday life of Bukharan Jews in the first two decades of Soviet rule.⁵ In it, the author depicts the changes and consequences of Soviet nationalities policy, while also describing the worsening of living conditions and the waves of repression that seized Samarkand and Tashkent in the 1920s and 1930s. *DJS* is a portrait of the short heyday and the sudden end of Bukharan Jewish culture in the Soviet Union and provides a unique insight into the Bukharan Jewish lifeworld of its day. The memoirs cover the first thirty years of the author’s life. They end in 1944, the year when Bachayev returned home from a labor camp in the Uralas to his family in Tashkent.⁶

In Israel and the United States, the 1990s saw a wave of private publications of memoirs, family histories, and biographical literature by and of Bukharan Jews.

3 Interview with Bachayev, Israel 2006. Here Mordekhay Bachayev used the botanical metaphor “amputating trees” (*kallak zadan*) two times to describe the consequences of Bolshevik terror for the Bukharan Jews.

4 Kaganovitch (2008: 115–116) estimates that 65,000 Bukharan Jews live in Israel, 28,000 in the United States and 2,000 in Central Asia. 7,000 Bukharan Jews are to be found in other countries. For more detailed numbers of the remaining communities in Central Asia (Bukhara, Ferghana, Kokand, Samarkand, Tashkent, and Dushanbe), see Pinkhasov (2008: 228, 239–241).

5 See Zand (2006) for a short overview of the few works in Czech, English, French, Hebrew, and Russian that deal with *DJS* in whole or in part.

6 Until today, the Gulag narration included in the second part of *DJS* remains the only recollection of the Gulag published in the Tajik language.

Yet Bachayev's approach and literary quality remain unique. He dedicated *DJS* to "the victims of Soviet imprisonment and World War II" and embedded his personal memories into the broader context of Soviet and Bukharan Jewish history. His main aim was not just to be a chronicler of his own life and family, but rather to bear witness to the destruction of Bukharan Jewish life and culture in Soviet Central Asia — and to help preserve their cultural memory for future generations.

Mordekhay Bachayev started to work on his memoirs after he had migrated to Israel in 1973. According to Jiří Bečka,

[...] the value of Bačayev's book is documentary rather than literary. [...] In a large majority of cases, Muhib recorded events which he had personally witnessed, with a rare objectivity — many times he mentions his own errors as well as those of other members of the Jewish community, sometimes even their mercenary intentions [...]. (2011: 72).

I first opened Bachayev's book in 2005. Ever since I have wondered why the memoirs are widely ignored both in debates on Bukharan Jewish history and within the Bukharan Jewish community itself. Although the work is now available in three languages (Tajik, Hebrew, Russian),⁷ so far hardly anything of it has been cited, analyzed, or discussed in academic studies dealing with Bukharan Jews.⁸ During many years of research in various Bukharan Jewish communities in Central Asia, Europe, and Israel hardly anybody I asked — with the exception of a few intellectuals — about Bachayev's memoirs even knew of their existence. While Mordekhay Bachayev is highly respected and admired for his poetry, his memoirs are virtually unknown among Bukharan Jews.

When *DJS* was published in Israel in 1988/89 it stirred some unease within the Bukharan Jewish community, with a debate ensuing about who was involved in the terror of the Stalin era, about personal guilt, and also about the nature of "truth" in Mordekhay Bachayev's memoirs. The chapters on the years 1937–1938, in which the author describes his individual experience of the Great Terror, have in particular been contested repeatedly. Some of those who (or their relatives) were the subject of accusations or criticism in Bachayev's memoirs initiated a dispute about the role of certain members of the Bukharan Jewish intelligentsia in the extraordinary times of "everyday Stalinism" (Fitzpatrick 1999).⁹ Nevertheless, as in other post-Soviet — especially Central Asian — societies, a broader debate and confrontation with the Soviet past and the question of guilt and atonement, repression, and memory has not taken place in the Bukharan Jewish academic and public discourse.

7 The Hebrew translation (*BeTokh Saq ha'Even*, Jerusalem, 1990) was accomplished by Mordekhay Bachayev with the help of his brother Yahudo and Binyomin ben Dovid. The Russian translation (*V kamennom meshke. Kniga vospominaniy*, Jerusalem: Tsur-Ot, 2011) is the work of Bachayev's daughter Lydia.

8 One exception is Zand (1991: 400–408). See also Zand (2006). Mikhael Zand was appointed as Mordekhay Bachayev's lecturer and jointly worked with him on the memoirs.

9 On this dispute, still ongoing, see the final part (Postludium) of this paper.

More often than not Bukharan Jews are described as a “close knit” community, which is to say that they have “a greater degree of kin solidarity and internal cohesion” and “loyalty to a limited and well defined circle of kin (real or fictitious)” (Slezkine 2004: 24–26). “They learnt to shut up,” was the answer that came when I asked one of my Bukharan Jewish interlocutors about what their strategies for adapting to their Central Asian Muslim neighbors and to the Soviet environment were (Loy 2011: 135–137). This lesson was painfully learnt during the 1930s, but it seems that Mordekhay Bachayev did not keep to that rule when he wrote up his memories of this era of culpability. In penning his recollections he intended not only to “unmask” Stalin and to blame the Soviet system, but to also point the finger at Bukharan Jewish individuals as collaborators in, and even beneficiaries of, the terror. Herein he named and blamed various former colleagues and friends, and did not refrain from speaking his mind about other members of the Bukharan Jewish community as well. At one point Bachayev makes fun of Mikhoël Tolmasov (1887–1969), a famous and highly decorated Bukharan Jewish singer, who “would dance to the beat of the day” (*doira-i zamona raqsidani shuda*) and who served as “a court minstrel for the Uzbek political upstarts” at a time when most of the Bukharan Jewish intelligentsia were already in prison (Bachayev 1988: 474–475). In writing and publishing his memoirs, Bachayev made closed group information and discourses public, and thus rendered them available to outsiders. This is why some Bukharan Jews regard him as a “liar” and “traitor” (Ochil’diev 1990), and it is therefore, I assume, also why his memoirs are widely ignored and even suppressed within these communities.

The World Congress of Bukharan Jews, initiated in 2000 and financed by the Bukharan Jewish businessman Lev Levayev, aims to unite Bukharan Jewish communities and organizations all over the world. In most publications funded or published by Bukharan Jewish community organizations and associations — such as the two-volume anthology *The History of the Bukharian (sic!) Jews* — the Soviet era and the impact of the Soviet experience are widely neglected, or are simply glossed over with the dichotomy of “state” vs. “community.” In his foreword to this publication, Lev Levayev stressed the role of the “Bukharan Jewish intelligentsia as a worthy role model for our youth” (2005: 5). No wonder then that the only article dealing with Bukharan Jews during the Great Terror that has appeared to date is titled “Victims of Stalinist repression.” In this piece, which is part of the aforementioned anthology, Robert Pinkhasov lists about 200 names of Bukharan Jews who were repressed — among them Mordekhay Bachayev. However, no mention is made of inner group rivalries, “errors,” or “mercenary intentions” (Bečka 2011: 72), or of Bukharan Jews playing an active role in the repression of others. Within group difficulties and tensions of the 1920s and 1930s are also missing in all issues thus far of Bukharan Jewish encyclopedias, such as Shalamūyev and Tolmas 1998 and Mosheev 1995 and 1999–2002.

By virtue of their author's openness about interpersonal differences and antagonisms within Bukharan Jewish secular intellectual circles during the 1920s and 1930s, especially among the staff of the Bukharan Jewish newspaper *Bayroq-i Mihnat, DJS* does not lend itself to being interpreted as the kind of writing that Svetlana Jaquesson and Ildiko Bellér-Hann have recently called "state and state-sponsored nationalist historiography" (2012: 247). In the current zeitgeist — with Bukharan Jewish families, communities, and institutions scattered all over the world, longing meanwhile for an integrative, unambiguous, and unifying narrative — Bachayev's memoirs do not serve as a master narrative of the desired kind.¹⁰

In 2012 I sent a draft chapter, based both on the memoirs of Mordekhay Bachayev and on interviews I had conducted with him in 2005 and 2006, to a Bukharan Jewish entrepreneur whose father plays a certain part in the memoirs and who is, along with other members of the Bukharan Jewish community, held responsible by Bachayev for his degradation, arrest, and conviction in the late 1930s. "You are not a part of the Bukharan community," I was told,

You read his memoirs like you would read any novel, or as a historical document. And maybe future generations will be reading it in the same way. But not today. [...] He [Bachayev] did not change the names of people [...] without regard to the next generations. [...] He did not stop to slander my father in front of his children. [...] The main reason he [Bachayev] wrote this book is revenge. Vengeance! He wanted revenge against everyone who, as he believed, had in any way hurt him [in the 1930s]. Nothing stopped him.¹¹

The author

Mordekhay Bachayev was a typical young and aspiring Central Asian intellectual of the 1920s and 1930s. Soviet nationalities policy then aimed at the creation of ethnic particularism, through the forced promotion of native languages and their speakers. From the mid-1920s on, Soviet authorities built on the works of secularized Bukharan Jewish intellectuals who had been inspired by Communism, doing so particularly by supporting their modes of cultural production: education, language-building, journalism, literature, theatre, and the like.

Mordekhay Bachayev belonged to the last generation of native Central Asian Jews who had not been first educated in Soviet institutions. Born into a tailor's family in Merv (in present-day Turkmenistan) in 1911, from 1918 Mordekhay grew up in the Jewish quarter of Samarqand, the *Mahalla-i Sharq*. He enjoyed various kinds of schooling: he attended traditional Bukharan Jewish primary confessional schools

¹⁰ A text that does satisfy these desires is, for example, the foreword and introduction to the exhibition catalogue *Threads of Silk – The Story of Bukharan Jewry* (2013). For recent attempts, meanwhile, to counter static and homogenizing narratives of Bukharan Jewish history, see Loy (2011) and Cooper (2012: 3–14, 57–66).

¹¹ Personal email correspondence, December 2012.

and modern Jewish reformatory schools; his father sent him to state-run Bukharan Jewish and Russian-language schools and hired private teachers. At home Mordekhay's father familiarized his youngest son with Judeo-Persian and classical Persian literary traditions.

In 1927 sixteen-year-old Mordekhay, with his first poems in hand, entered the editorial offices of the Bukharan Jewish newspaper *Roshnayi*¹² (*Light/Enlightenment*). The editor-in-chief promised to publish his *ghazals* (*short poems*) in one of the newspaper's next issues. One year later, young Bachayev had become a regular member of the editorial staff and was working as a translator, journalist, and editor for the publication.

Roshnayi soon became the leading voice of and platform for pro-Soviet Bukharan Jewish intellectuals. In 1930 the newspaper was renamed *Bayroq-i Mihnati* (*The Banner of Labor*) and its staff transferred from Samarkand to Tashkent, the new capital of the Uzbek SSR. Using his pen-name Muhib, Mordekhay Bachayev also published his first anthologies of poetry at this time.¹³ In 1932 he married Klara Naumovna Levieva from Samarkand. They rented a small flat on the upper floor of the former O'qchi synagogue in Tashkent, which now also housed the editorial office of *Bayroq-i Mihnati* as well as its printing press. In 1933 a son was born to them; a daughter followed three years later. In the years to follow, however, the political situation deteriorated. This once flourishing Bukharan Jewish newspaper would turn into a milieu of political and personal strife, and Bachayev's promising career as a Bukharan Jewish intellectual in the Soviet Union consequently came to a quick end.

From "Cultural Revolution" to the Great Terror

In Soviet Central Asia all spheres of life changed during the "Cultural Revolution" of the late 1920s: an antireligious campaign was launched; synagogues were closed down or converted into secular "culturally enlightening institutions" (*muassisaho-i madani-i ravshannamo'i*) — a term that meant chemist shops, post offices, hospitals, warehouses, and the like. In Samarkand, for example, the Gumbaz Synagogue — which had been the spiritual and intellectual center of the local Jewish community for more than 50 years — was converted into a hospital for venereal diseases called the "scab-house" (*kalkhona*) by the local Jewish population (all quotations from Bachayev 1988: 317). In 1927 the women's liberation campaign, the so-called *hujum* ("assault"), aimed at changing the legal and social status of women, Jewish

12 In the Latin script of the 1920s this would spell *Roshnaji*. In 1991 an association of Bukharan Jewish academics of the same name was founded in New York City. The club "Roshnoi – Light" is chaired by Robert Pinkhasov.

13 *Bahor-i surkh* (*The Red Spring*) in 1931, *Sado-yi mihnati* (*The Voice of Labor*) in 1932, and the children's book, *Quvat-i kollektivi* (*Collective Strength*) in 1931. A significant part of Muhib's early poetry has since been republished (in Cyrillic script) by Bachayev (2006/2007, Vol. VI: 8–136).

women included (Levin 2008b). In order to put a stop to the relatively liberal New Economic Policy (NEP), trade and other private businesses were closed down; the first Five-Year Plan (1929–1932) was inaugurated. Thousands of Bukharan Jews were thus deprived of their workshops and businesses and forced to engage in agriculture or industrial labor (see Amitin-Shapiro and Yuabov 1935: 126–135). The economic situation of many Soviet citizens consequently went from bad to worse. In 1932 the authorities launched a campaign across the whole Uzbek SSR to “build up Socialism,” in the course of which primarily private property was confiscated by the state. Among Bukharan Jews and other Persian/Tajik speakers, this campaign became infamously known as *tillogiri* (“taking the gold”).¹⁴

The Jewish population and even individual families were split into several camps. While some supported Communism and sincerely believed in it, others were untouched by or even antagonistic to the rhetoric of emancipation and the building up of Socialism. The majority presumably were simply concerned about living a normal life, which became more and more difficult as time went by. As of the late 1920s, the numbers of Bukharan Jews fleeing the Soviet Union sharply increased. By the mid-1930s, when Soviet authorities sealed their southern borders for good, an estimated four thousand Bukharan Jewish refugees (or about one-tenth of the whole community) had left (Bachayev 1988: 223–34, 291–92; Gitlin 2004: 526–28; Koplik 2003). Almost everybody had relatives or friends among the refugees, and so did Mordekhay Bachayev. His brothers Hizqiyo and Yūno were the first in his family to leave the Soviet Union for Palestine. In 1930 — shortly after their father had passed away — they left their families behind and crossed the border into Afghanistan. Yūno died on the way after their group of refugees was assaulted near the town of Maimana in northwestern Afghanistan, being buried in the town’s Jewish cemetery. Hizqiyo made it to Palestine, from where he sent a letter encouraging his relatives to join him there. In July 1933 Mordekhay Bachayev’s mother, together with one of his sisters, her three children, and her husband’s younger brother also left for Palestine. About one year later, they luckily all reached Jerusalem (Bachayev 1988: 316–320).

After the women had left the Soviet Union, Mordekhay Bachayev was fearful of being held responsible for the “anti-Soviet” behavior of his family members.¹⁵ Aharon Saidov,¹⁶ editor-in-chief of *Bayroq-i Mihnati*, tried to protect Mordekhay Bachayev — who had already been in the line of fire after his two elder brothers had taken flight — by agreeing to send him on a working vacation to Samarkand. There Bachayev’s family lived in the home of his sister Sonya. Bachayev was at the time working on a piece of epic poetry (*doston*), and only now and then was he hired

14 For impressive recollections of this Soviet confiscation drive, see Bachayev (1988: 248–257); Arabov (1998: 41–52); Mirrahim (2001: 16–17).

15 Having one or more close relatives abroad was dangerous. People kept it a family secret, at least until the mid-1950s. This was a fact recounted by many of my Bukharan Jewish interlocutors.

16 On Aharon Saidov (1902–1954), a leading Bukharan Jewish intellectual, see Shalamūyev and Tolmas (1998: 291–298).

to contribute to a new schoolbook or to write an article for a local newspaper (Bachayev 1988: 274–277, 298).

Already in the late 1920s and early 1930s Bachayev’s position — like that of all those who had participated in the process of Soviet nation-building — was challenged when the first cohort of Bukharan Jews raised in Soviet educational institutions entered the ranks of the recently created cultural and political institutions of their national minority group. In his memoirs Bachayev disparagingly calls these political upstarts “have-nots” (*poyluchon*, literally “barefooted”), and many of the intellectual newcomers “yes-men” (*labbaygūyho*) and opportunists, but for the time being at least his network of colleagues and friends were able to withstand the arrival of this first wave of the new Soviet cadres (Bachayev 1988: 140–145, 317–318). His mentors and friends Yaqub Kalontarov¹⁷ and Rahmin Badalov¹⁸ still succeeded in providing him with extra work and income.

In December 1934 the assassination of Sergei Mironovich Kirov, Leningrad party leader and member of the Politburo, sent shockwaves across the Soviet Union. It revived political tensions and led to the mass arrest and deportation of so-called “social aliens” as well as of past opponents. Mordekhay Bachayev’s memoirs provide much information on the deteriorating political situation of 1935–1937 and the rivalries existing among the editorial staff of *Bayroq-i Mihnati*, as violence from the central regions of the Soviet Union gradually extended into the southern periphery.

In the two years following Kirov’s assassination, in particular, the situation became more critical and dangerous by the day. Everybody felt like an acrobat with a balancing pole in his hand, stumbling along a thin tightrope and barely keeping his balance. (Bachayev 1988: 416)

In the grim social environment of the capital of the Uzbek SSR, hostilities among Bukharan Jewish intellectuals became fiercer too.

Friends and foes: The end of Bukharan Jewish cultural activities in the Soviet Union

In 1936 the newspaper moved from the former synagogue to a recently built press center. Thanks to enhanced technical equipment and an increase in staff it could now be published daily. Bachayev identifies the newspaper’s acting editor-in-chief, Menashe Aminov,¹⁹ and his “right hand” Nison Fuzaylov,²⁰ the new head of the

17 On Yaqub Iskhakovich Kalontarov (1903–1987), an outstanding Bukharan Jewish linguist and philologist, see Mosheev (1995: 127–131).

18 For details on Rahmin Badalov (1897–1991), see the entry on “personalities” at www.bukharianjews.com (accessed: 2007-02-16) and Bachayev (1988: 322).

19 Menashe Aminov (1902–1980) had worked at the Samarkand office of the Society for the Rural Settlement of Toiling Jews in the Soviet Union, and in 1928–1929 studied at the Communist Institute for Journalism in Moscow. On his return to Samarkand, he started to work for *Roshnayi* (I am grateful to David Mavashev for this information); Shalamūyev and Tolmas (1998: 282–290) give different years of birth and death for him (1890–1974).

cultural department, as having been his main enemies at *Bayroq-i Mihnat*. Both men heavily criticized one of Muhib's poems for making "political mistakes" (*khatoho-i siyosi*), a "lack of class consciousness" (*hushyori-i sinfi az dast doda*), and having "a smell of nationalism" (*bū-i millatchigi*). Bachayev describes his situation in these days as difficult but still manageable (Bachayev 1988: 355–363, 438–447).

In June 1937, though, that situation changed dramatically. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan (CPUz) sent a one-man commission to screen the editorial board of *Bayroq-i Mihnat*. Bachayev and most of his colleagues knew the investigator, Avrom Abdurahmonov, very well since he was a Bukharan Jew and had in the 1920s worked as a people's judge on behalf of the Jewish quarter in Samarkand.²¹ Bachayev's turn to be scrutinized came on the fourth and last day of the investigations: Abdurahmonov's interrogation concentrated on the NEP period and on the flight of Bachayev's relatives. In the end, Bachayev was urged to submit to the Ministry of Justice an autobiographical statement (beginning with details concerning his grandfather) and written answers to all the questions that he had been asked during the screening (Bachayev 1988: 429–432).

Bachayev was worried. He chose to follow a friend's advice, and thus rather than writing the report left with his family for a one-month stay at Aksakovo, a small town in the Bashkir Autonomous SSR. On their return in August 1937, they found that the situation had considerably worsened. From the office noticeboard, Bachayev learnt about his demotion from editor to ordinary literary translator. His job had been given to Il'yohu (Boris) Ochil'diev, a junior member of *Bayroq-i Mihnat* who was close to Bachayev and his family, about whom we will hear more at the end of this paper (Bachayev 1988: 441).²² Only a few days later, at a meeting of Bukharan Jewish intellectuals and Party functionaries held at the editorial office, Menashe Aminov openly denounced Bachayev as a possible "foreign spy" (*josus-i khoriji*) and as an "enemy of the people" (*dushman-i khalq*). While Bachayev — at least in retrospect — deemed this behavior still within the limits of the Soviet norm of those days, what came next was a total surprise: on the following day he was dismissed from *Bayroq-i Mihnat* (Bachayev 1988: 442–446).

Aminov's attacks increased in ferocity. In an editorial entitled "The Enemy Needs to be Completely Unmasked" (*Dushmanro to ba okhir fosh kardan lozim ast*)

20 Nison Fuzaylov (1911–1980) graduated from the Communist Institute for Journalism in Moscow and was dispatched to Tajikistan to work for the newspaper *Komsomol-i Tojikiston*. From 1935 to 1938 he worked as head of the cultural department of *Bayroq-i Mihnat*. In 1939 Fuzaylov returned to Tajikistan, where he subsequently made a political career for himself (Shalamūyev and Tolmas 1998: 299–301).

21 According to Bachayev (1988: 428–429, 467), Avrom Abdurahmonov came from a Chala family who had left the Bukharan Emirate for Russian Turkestan, where they converted back from Islam to Judaism. He became Minister of Justice of the Uzbek SSR in 1936, but was arrested in the spring of 1938 and fell victim to the purges.

22 Bachayev (1988: 441) describes Ochil'diev as gifted and educated, and as one of his most capable and respected apprentices.

published in *Bayroq-i Mihnat* on August 30, 1937, he launched a public hunt for any “enemies of the people and of revolution, evil spies, traitors, trotskyst-bukharinist lackeys of fascism, and counterrevolutionary nationalists” lurking within the ranks of the editorial staff. This editorial, and indeed the whole campaign that it was part of, was a response to *Pravda*’s call to “enhance class consciousness and unmask enemies and spies inside the Soviet press.” Aminov accused Mordekhay Bachayev and his supporters of being proponents of nationalism and anti-Soviet propaganda: “Bachayev the two-faced, the liar, the wolf in sheep’s clothing, who hides his shameless eyes behind thick glasses, wanted to betray both the Party and the Soviet government.” On top of all this, Bachayev was accused of having failed to rid himself of his family’s “counterrevolutionary attitude”: he covered up and actively supported his mother’s escape from the Soviet Union, as well as that of some other relatives.²³

Only two weeks later, on September 15, 1937, the teacher and publicist Itshak Mavashev²⁴ followed suit and criticized Muhib’s first anthology, *Bahor-i surkh* (*The Red Spring*), which had been published in 1931.²⁵ He bluntly stated that the failure to name Stalin in a single one of the forty-five poems in that booklet revealed Muhib’s political disloyalty and anti-Soviet attitude. In Mavashev’s view, Muhib was a follower of Trotsky, Bukharin, and other enemies of the people (Bachayev 1990: 58–59). Bachayev was upset. One night a friend told him that Mavashev, at that time a casual acquaintance of Bachayev, was one of those opportunistic upstarts who “tried to gain political capital” by any possible means (Bachayev 1988: 447–448).

Mordekhay Bachayev was dismissed from his job and a short time later the Uzbek Writers’ Union expelled Muhib from its ranks, with his circle of friends also rapidly dissolving. Bachayev’s 1937 certificate of discharge states that “[...] he no longer enjoys the trust of the editorial staff [of *Bayroq-i Mihnat*] since he maintains contacts with [people] abroad” (Bachayev 1988: 446–447). This hampered Bachayev’s efforts to find another job. In the meantime, the Great Terror was in full swing and rumors would prove true that the political leaders of the Uzbek SSR, Akmal Ikromov and Fayzullo Kho‘jayev, had been removed from office and placed under arrest. In January 1938, just as Bachayev was hopeful that he would manage to have the aforementioned incriminating sentence erased from his papers, news

23 Aminov’s editorial was republished in the original form (in Latin script) with a Russian translation in Bachayev (1990: 45–54). All quotations are from this.

24 Itshak Mavashev (1905–1978) was born in Samarkand, where he became a rabbi and ritual slaughterer and graduated from a Russian-Jewish gymnasium. He studied at pedagogical and other institutes and worked for various Uzbek and (after 1947) Tajik educational and broadcasting institutions. In 1966 he visited Israel and in 1973 he was granted permission to emigrate. In Israel he founded the Bukharan Jewish weekly magazine *Hatkhia*, being its chief editor (Niazov and Nektalov 2005: 17–24).

25 Mavashev’s review of Muhib’s poems was republished in the original form (in Latin script) and with a Russian translation in Bachayev (1990: 55–67).

reached Tashkent about the first mass arrests in the Bukharan Jewish community of Samarkand. The round-ups quickly spread to other cities in the region and would continue for several months. Among those arrested were many members of the Bukharan Jewish elite, almost all members of the pre-Soviet Jewish upper class, and all those still active in religious life. When the sentence on Bachayev's certificate of discharge was at last deleted by court order, the editorial office of *Bayroq-i Mihnat* had already been shut down and many of Bachayev's closest friends and influential supporters arrested (Bachayev 1988: 463–472).

The Central Committee of the CPUz gave the following reason for closing down *Bayroq-i Mihnat*: from the Soviet point of view, by the end of the 1930s the minority press had already “perfectly fulfilled its revolutionary tasks.” It had “raised the cultural and political awareness of the Bukharan Jewish workers to a sufficiently high level.” It was therefore no longer needed for the further development of Soviet society. Bukharan Jewish clubs, schools, kolkhozes, cooperatives, and theatres were also shut down on the same grounds. The change of elites among Bukharan Jews was seen as having been an accomplished feat (Bachayev 1988: 471–472, 476–477).

One evening in early July, after a long day spent running around for a job, I was on my way home, tired. Suddenly an unknown person approached me from behind, called me by my name and showed me his red card. He invited me for a walk to have a talk. (Bachayev 1988: 477)

The first part of *Dar Juvol-i Sangin* ends with Bachayev's arrest and his first night in solitary confinement, which took place in July 1938. On October 1, 1940, Bachayev was sentenced to five years' imprisonment in a so-called “reformatory labor camp” in the northern Urals. The second part of the memoirs thus covers the years of imprisonment. It ends, as noted, in late 1944, when Mordekhay Bachayev would — for the first time since his arrest — return home from the labor camp to spend two weeks with his family in Tashkent. Mordekhay Bachayev spent altogether fifteen years in Soviet jails, labor camps, and in banishment. While he was lucky enough to survive the Stalinist repressions, Bukharan Jewish cultural activities in the Soviet Union ultimately were not.

Back to normal life?

The circle of Bukharan Jewish intellectuals was forever blown apart by these events — some dead, some in prison, some outside the Soviet Union, and some still working in Soviet institutions, although not in Bukharan Jewish but rather Tajik or (far less often) Uzbek ones. Many of those — friends as well as foes — who had survived Stalin and the waves of repression would meet again in the 1950s or later. Unable to find work as a writer and without the right to settle down in Tashkent or any other big city in Uzbekistan, Mordekhay Bachayev accepted a job as assistant to the general accountant at a fluoride mine about 100 km southeast of Tashkent in order to be “close” to his family. There he worked from 1945 until 1954. A few days

after Stalin's death, the Party decreed a partial amnesty would be granted to the victims of the past repression. This enabled Bachayev to see his family more often, but he still had no chance of being able to work again in his proper profession within Uzbekistan.

They did not give [us] anything. All we got was an apartment [in Tashkent] and we moved in. That was the whole compensation.²⁶

In the early 1950s an old friend invited Bachayev to come to Dushanbe and work for the Institute of Leninism-Stalinism. To run the Tajikistan republic effectively, men of (Tajik) letters were still badly needed. In 1955 he and his family finally moved to the capital of the Tajik SSR. Among the town's many intellectuals from Samarkand and Bukhara — Jews as well as Muslims — Bachayev quickly found a new circle of friends. Some of them had had the same Gulag experience, and were like him trying to get back to normal.

[After rehabilitation] we were just tired of all this trouble. They said, "Go here and go there," and then, after you go there they will send you back again [...] harassment! But we thanked God that every day we woke up alive and they did not arrest me again. "Barukh ha-Shem," we said, ducked our heads and lived our lives. We also stopped talking back and made no demands. "The less we see them, the better," we would always say to ourselves. They were not to be trifled with. [They thought] he wanted to flee from the Soviet Union, now he still is here — my greatest fear was to be arrested again. They had the right to arrest you just when it came to their mind. We worried what would be if that happened again. They were able to do as they liked. It was despotism. I can do whatever I want. That's it. The whole Soviet system was based on that principle: "I will do everything I want to do. I am the boss!" Both Brezhnev and Stalin — may their names be erased — reached their end but we are still alive — may His name be blessed — and so are our friends.²⁷

Bachayev was fully rehabilitated in 1957.²⁸ In the years that followed, he became a renowned and highly respected translator and editor in the Tajik SSR. He worked for the Irfon publishing house, translated two volumes of Lenin's collected works from Russian into Tajik, and participated in major Tajik cultural projects such as the *Ēntsiklopediya-i Soveti-i Tojik*.²⁹

Itshak Mavashev and many other Bukharan Jews who knew each other from Tashkent back in the 1930s also worked in these institutions and helped to create and develop the cultural, educational, and scientific sectors of the Tajik SSR. Until the 1980s Soviet taboos such as writing about Stalin's repressions were still in force in the Soviet Union, and as such outstanding scores could not be settled in public.

26 Interview with Bachayev, Israel 2005.

27 Interview with Bachayev, Israel 2005.

28 On the difficulties that persons who had been victims of state repression had in leading a normal life even after having been rehabilitated, see the memoirs of the Uzbek poet Shukrulloh (1991/2005).

29 Bachayev translated Vols. 14, *Materializm i imperiakrititsizm*, and 38, *Filosofskie zapiski Lenina*. The dictionary *Lughat-i Rusi-Tojiki-i Terminologiya-i Filosofya* was published in Dushanbe in 1966 with M. Osimi, M. Bachayev, and M. Dinorshoyev named as the editors.

One can only assume that in the 1950s and 1960s within the Bukharan Jewish community of Dushanbe discussions about the role and guilt of certain individuals were going on below surface in private and professional settings, and among old friends.³⁰ This situation changed in the early 1970s. In order to enhance her international relations with the West, in the late 1960s the Soviet Union opened its borders to contingents of Jewish residents wishing to emigrate. This move caused a rising wave of legal (Bukharan) Jewish emigration to Israel and the United States, the so-called *Aliya* (“Return”) movement, on a scale that was apparently unanticipated by the Soviet authorities (Mertens 1993: 5–9, 84–120).³¹ When both of their sons opted for emigration to Israel, Mordekhay Bachayev and his wife also submitted their petition to leave. In 1973 the authorities finally granted Bachayev an exit permit, and so he and his wife left the Soviet Union. In their new home and surroundings of Jerusalem, Mordekhay Bachayev would start to write his memoirs.

Postludium

Aside from the memoirs of Mordekhay Bachayev, so far very little — if anything — of note has been published about the internal antagonisms of the Bukharan Jewish community. According to Bachayev, this tension and infighting aggravated the effects of the Stalinist purges on the Bukharan Jewish elite of the Uzbek SSR and accelerated its self-destruction. After *DJS* was published in 1988 a dispute arose among the Bukharan Jewish intelligentsia in Israel and the United States and the descendants of some of those mentioned in Bachayev’s memoirs about the role that Bukharan Jewish individuals had played both before and during the Stalinist purges. Bachayev’s recollection of the Soviet past and his description of the “shortcomings and faults of others” (*‘aybu gunoh-i’ digaron*) were called into question (Ochil’diev 1990: 21).

In an open letter to Mordekhay Bachayev written in May 1989, descendants of Itshak Mavashev complained about the way in which their father had been portrayed by Bachayev in some passages of *DJS* — thereby accusing Mordekhay Bachayev of slander.³² He responded to these complaints and allegations by seeking out and publishing the abovementioned articles written by Aminov and Mavashev that provide clear details of the fights, denunciations, and personal differences existing among the editorial staff of *Bayroq-i Mihnati* in the late 1930s.³³

30 Ochil’diev (1990: 36) states that Bachayev was spreading rumors in Dushanbe about what had happened in the 1930s.

31 This wave of legal Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union (with its peak in 1979) was halted by Soviet authorities in the early 1980s.

32 For such “slandering,” see for example Bachayev 1988: 445–448. The open letter was reprinted in Bachayev 1990: 4–7.

33 See the reprints of these articles in Bachayev 1990: 13–23, 29–34.

Yet a second “open letter” has been circulating in Bukharan Jewish communities since October 1990. Boris Ochil’diev, a Bukharan Jew and an eyewitness with intimate knowledge of the Bukharan Jewish intellectual circles of the 1930s (and who is also mentioned in Bachayev’s memoirs), decided to author that open letter after reading *DJS*.³⁴ He describes Bachayev as “mean and uncivilized” (*pastfitrat va kammadaniyat*), “shameless and unscrupulous” (*nokasi va bevidoni*), and criticizes him for slandering “dead people [...] who cannot defend themselves,” for whitewashing his own role and self, and for “befouling his own nest” (Ochil’diev 1990: 22, 39). As a junior member of the editorial staff of *Bayroq-i Mihnat*, Boris Ochil’diev had been in touch with Bachayev and his family back in Tashkent. He challenges and repudiates Bachayev’s recollections of the events of 1937–1938, especially the alleged circumstances that led to his arrest, yet without providing any evidence in support of his own position and claims. Ochil’diev blames Bachayev for deliberately falsifying truth and history while keeping silent about whatever role he himself might have played at that time, and about the purges affecting the rest of the editorial staff of *Bayroq-i Mihnat*. The open letter, which culminates in Ochil’diev’s accusation that Bachayev himself “was an informant of the NKVD,” would remain unanswered by Mordekhay Bachayev. According to Ochil’diev, he came to this conclusion in 1938 when he was called in as a witness to an interrogation in the wake of Bachayev’s arrest (Ochil’diev 1990: 36–38).

More than anything else, Ochil’diev’s open letter points to the bitterness, malice, and open wounds that the “ill-fated” and malicious publications, denunciations, and destructive events of the Stalinist era had inflicted and left on individuals and the Bukharan Jewish community. Whatever the “hard facts” may have been that led to the arrest of Mordekhay Bachayev and many others, recollections of the past can shed no light on these — nor, for that matter, will archival materials. But recollections of the past — be they oral or written — can give us an impression of, and insight into, historical and social developments, networks of individuals, the attitudes they held (or later in hindsight believed they had held), and the strategies they had been pursuing for successfully fulfilling whatever their goals were in those days of hardship. Recollections are not sources by which to detect how the past actually was, but rather how it was and is perceived in retrospect or is perceived today.³⁵ In the totalitarian state, and especially during the Great Terror of 1937 and 1938, one could easily simultaneously be both victim and collaborator. But for those who lived through that period and are only now beginning to actively remember it, it has apparently become very difficult — or perhaps even impossible — to come to terms

34 The open letter, “My Answer to Mordekhay ben Hiyo Bachayev,” has been published in both Russian and Tajik in the form of a 42-page booklet. I am grateful to David Mavashev, the son of Itshak Mavashev, who both informed me about the existence of this letter and also sent me a copy of it, as well as of a book written about his father.

35 For a discussion of the connection of history and memory, and ego documents as a source in history, see for example Welzer (2000: esp. 61–63) and Haumann (2006).

with that ambiguity and complexity permeating the interactions between the Soviet state and its citizens.³⁶

Even today — more than twenty years after the publication of *DJS* and with some six years having passed since Mordekhay Bachayev's death — this dispute is yet to be resolved. The wounds ripped open by these published memoirs have been neither healed nor forgotten. As an outside observer who was dragged into these internal quarrels during the course of my research on Bukharan Jewish autobiographical narrations, for me it was and still is both surprising and sad to see how the “times of trouble” continue to haunt both those who survived the Stalin era and the generations born afterward.

In our email correspondence, one descendant of a Bukharan Jewish intellectual of the 1930s made mention of a manuscript written by Menashe Aminov — the man Bachayev described as his main enemy back in those dark years. Aminov allegedly finished writing those memoirs in 1975, and in the manuscript the events that ultimately led to the destruction of the Bukharan Jewish cultural modes of production and the decimation of its intellectual elite, I was told, are recollected differently from how they are in Bachayev's account. But since Aminov's descendants have not granted permission for it to happen, these memoirs are as yet unpublished. Only time will tell, then, what debates (and perhaps denunciations) are held in store within the “close knit” Bukharan Jewish communities now spread across the globe, and what future efforts will be made by Bukharan Jews so as to come to terms with their experiences of and in Soviet Central Asia in the 1920s and 1930s.

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³⁶ See Kamp (2001) for a case study from Uzbekistan. Slezkine (2011) describes the difficulties for witness and historian to deal with the “strangness and complexity” of Soviet life in the 1930s, especially when it comes to “the question of guilt and innocence” (ibid.: 40).

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