



Advocates on behalf of Jews in Russia,
Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia

NCSJ Azerbaijan Trip March 2003

By Lesley Weiss, NCSJ Director of Community Services and Cultural Affairs

NCSJ was invited by the government of Azerbaijan and the Baku Religious Community of European Jews to attend the opening of a newly-built synagogue in Baku on March 9, 2003. I attended the opening ceremony and banquet and met with community leaders, American and Israeli Embassy representatives, and the delegations of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress, the Federation of Jewish Communities, and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). I also had the opportunity to travel to Quba and Krasnaya Sloboda to meet with the Jewish and Muslim leadership in those mountain towns. The visit to this predominantly Muslim country provided an opportunity to assess societal and governmental relations with the Jewish community and deepen relations with community leadership. Throughout, I received logistical support from both the Israeli government and the U.S. Embassy.

Baku Jewish Community

While the opening of the synagogue, the first to be built in Baku in nearly a century, was important to the local Jewish community of Baku, it was also significant for the participation of government representatives from Azerbaijan, the United States, Israel, Germany, Russia, Ukraine, Poland, and China.

The Adviser for Ethnic Policy, Hidayat Orujev, represented Azerbaijan President Heydar Aliyev – who was in the United States receiving medical treatment.



Azerbaijan Muslim leader speaks at Baku synagogue opening

Also speaking were Abbas Abbasov, First Deputy Prime Minister of Azerbaijan, and Rafi Alev, Chairman of the Azerbaijan National Committee for Religious Associations.

The ceremony included greetings from the heads of the Muslim and Orthodox Christian communities and some of the benefactors of the synagogue: Alexander Mashkevich,

President of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress (from Kazakhstan); Rabbi Berel Lazar, one of Russia's two Chief Rabbis; and the Jewish community leadership of the Czech Republic. Noted Russian entertainer Gennadi Khazanov was a guest of honor. Mr. Mashkevich cut the red ribbon, officially opening the new synagogue.



In Baku: Lesley Weiss, NCSJ Director of Community Services and Cultural Affairs, with U.S. Ambassador Ross Wilson

The opening celebration was followed by a banquet at the Gulistan Palace where I delivered greetings on behalf of NCSJ, among other speakers.

I was seated with U.S. Ambassador Ross Wilson, and we discussed issues relating to American-Azerbaijani relations as well as the status of the Jewish community in the country. Before the banquet, I also met with U.S. Embassy Political Officer Mary Glantz.

The estimate of the Jewish population in Azerbaijan is 18,000-30,000. Three communities make up the community: Ashkenazim, Mountain Jews, and Georgian Jews. Ashkenazi Jews arrived in the 19th century from Eastern Europe and Russia.

Many Mountain Jews say their ancestors were among the ten tribes exiled from Israel in 722 B.C.E., who settled in the Caucasus Mountains, then part of Persia. Others claim that their ancestors migrated from what is now Iran and established the Jewish settlement of Krasnaya Sloboda three centuries ago. They speak a distinct dialect called Judeo-Tat. The smaller community of Jews from neighboring Georgia will share the synagogue with the larger community.

Azerbaijan's Jews have not experienced the overt anti-Semitism suffered by Jews in some of the other former Soviet republics. However, one member of the community told me that anti-Semitic feelings do exist below the surface and are expressed periodically. Although most Azerbaijanis are Muslim, they are Turkic and have so far remained unaffected by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in neighboring states.

Historically, there is a cultural friendliness toward the Jewish community, and Judaism is officially protected as a "traditional" religion. Azerbaijani-Israeli relations are good and Israel has an embassy in Baku. Discussions continue as to whether President Aliyev will open an embassy in Israel as he has pledged, and whether he will send his Foreign Minister to visit the country.



One of Krasnaya Sloboda's two main synagogues



Solmaz Yusifova, Director of the Havva welfare center in Baku, and Lesley Weiss

Numerous Jewish organizations exist in Baku and are supported by JDC and individual donors, primarily Jewish business leaders from Baku. I visited the Havva welfare center for single mothers directed by Solmaz Yusifova. The Center provides medical aid as well as Jewish educational services to women and children, who desperately need this social support and welfare assistance.



Havdalah service at the Baku Hillel

I attended a Saturday evening Havdalah service at the Hillel with Meir Zizov, JDC Regional Coordinator; Stanley Abramovitch, JDC Country Director, Central Asia and the Caucasus; and Michael Steiner, Director of Donor Development for the United Jewish Federation of Pittsburgh. I spoke to the group about the work of NCSJ and our involvement in the region.

Trip to Quba and Krasnaya Sloboda

I accompanied Israeli Consul Sasha Shlimak and Avi Idan, of the Israeli Prime Minister's office, to the city of Quba and the town of Krasnaya Sloboda (Russian for "red village"). Located in the highlands of northern Azerbaijan, a three-hour drive from Baku, Krasnaya Sloboda is populated almost exclusively by Mountain Jews, the only town in the former Soviet Union that is almost entirely Jewish. The Jewish population is approximately 4,000. The town of Quba, located across the river, is entirely Muslim. The two communities co-exist peacefully, and the Jewish community has not assimilated.

We met with Boris Semyontov, the president of the Jewish community for the region, and Simanduev Yavushva, director of the state school in Krasnaya Sloboda. We visited the two synagogues, one of which was recently renovated with JDC and private support. The community is dependent on money sent from Mountain Jews who have started businesses in Moscow, Israel, and the West.



At a Krasnaya Sloboda state school: (l.-r.): a Hebrew teacher; Boris Semyontov, president of the Jewish community; Sasha Shlimak, Israeli Consul; Lesley Weiss; Simanduev Yavushva, school Director

We visited the school, which is attended by 200 Muslims, 260 Jews, and a handful of Turkish and Russian students. According to the director, it is the only state school in Azerbaijan where minorities can learn their own language. Beginning in first grade, Hebrew is offered and a number of Muslims also study the language. The students learn about Jewish and Islamic holidays.



Students at the Krasnaya Sloboda state school

Although the school receives donations from the community, which enabled them to fix the roof and two classrooms, the school is in need of further renovation. There is no heat and most of the classrooms are in disrepair. The director lamented the lack of computers and English books.

He also mentioned that, although lunch is available for students to purchase, many of the students do not have the money. Despite the economic difficulties, the school is an example of positive Jewish-Muslim co-existence.

During lunch with the community leaders, we were joined by Akhun Naim Safarov, the Muslim religious leader of six regions of Azerbaijan and an old friend of Boris Semyontov.



(l.-r.): Akhun Naim Safarov; Boris Semyontov; local Muslim community member from Quba.

Conclusion

The Jewish community of Azerbaijan, like the rest of the population, suffers from high unemployment. On the trip to the north the poverty was evident, the factories closed, and the oil-drilling equipment dormant. The development of charitable and educational Jewish centers has contributed to better living conditions in the country for the Jews of Azerbaijan, but they are dependent on outside assistance for their survival.

U.S.-Azerbaijan ties have grown stronger during the international fight against terrorism, and Azerbaijani support for U.S. counter-terrorism efforts paved the way for President Bush to waive Section 907 of the 1992 Freedom Support Act. The measure had banned U.S. aid to the Azerbaijan government until Azerbaijan agreed to concessions relating to the Karabakh dispute.



Baku

NCSJ and our member agencies will continue to urge the Azerbaijan government to move forward in strengthening relations with Israel by opening an embassy there, and by sending the Foreign Minister on an official visit to Israel.

On the eve of the U.S.- led mobilization in Iraq, some political observers feared that the attack might turn public sentiment against the United States, as many Azerbaijanis oppose the use of force against fellow Muslims. Strong Azerbaijan-U.S. relations, increased economic opportunity, sustained American Jewish support and continued Muslim tolerance toward the community will help assure the safety and continuity of the Jewish communities in Azerbaijan.

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