

One Woman – Many Transitions

Deborah Davidoff from Tashkent, Uzbekistan as a model of the transformations of Bukharan Jewish women's dress from the early twentieth century to the middle of the twentieth century

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Abstract:

Out of the 20,000 photographs documenting dress and lifestyle of various communities in Israel in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem Archives, I chose to focus on the images of Deborah Davidoff who came to Israel (then Palestine) from Tashkent, Uzbekistan through Moscow in 1929. About twenty of her photographs were given to us by her granddaughters.

In our archive, it is very rare to come across photographs of one woman depicting several periods in her life, which not only illustrate the changes that occurred in her life, but also manifest the traditions and trends of dress in the regions of Bukhara, Uzbekistan, Russia and Israel among a certain social layer of her community members.

This paper will try to show the cultural influences through the changing style of dress of one woman, and the prominent role of the photo archive as means of better understanding our dress collection.

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The Archival photos as an Ethnographic Tulle

Among the 20,000 photographs documenting dress and lifestyle of various communities in Israel found at the Photos Archive in the Isidore and Anne Falk Information Center for Jewish Art and Life, it is very rare to come across photographs of one woman depicting several periods in her life, like those of Deborah Davidoff, a Bukharan woman from Uzbekistan. There are photos of her from the age of six years old until close to the time she passed away at the age of sixty. They illustrate the dramatic changes which took place in the shadow of major historic events she had experienced throughout her life. In addition, they depict the cultural influences that the changes brought with them, affecting many aspects of life, such as traditions and trends of dress in the various places where Deborah lived before immigrating to Jerusalem.

The Bukharan Jewish Community

The term Bukharan Jewry is actually a name for all the Jewish communities situated in the republics of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan – an arbitrary political division created by the Soviet Union between 1924 and 1936, all of which became independent following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In essence, we are speaking about the Jewish communities in the cities of Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, Kokand, Shahri-sabz, Farghana, etc. We do not know for sure when the Jews arrived in this region of Central Asia. The oral tradition dates the period of settlement to the time of the First Temple's destruction in the sixth century BCE, but some historians and researchers date it much later to the sixth century AD.

In any case, the name "Bukharan community" derives from the Bukhara Muslim–Sunni Emirate established in the sixteenth century, where the largest Jewish community existed. Being located on the Silk Road allowed the Jews to prosper from the silk industry, which included weaving, dyeing (especially Ikat dyeing), and commerce.

Deborah Davidoff – early years

Deborah Davidoff was born in 1887 in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan today, to a family of wealthy merchants who founded the Jewish community in Tashkent in the mid-nineteenth century and became pillars of the community. Her father, Joseph Davidoff, was the head of the large Torgovi Dom Company, which comprised many commercial enterprises, including real estate, textiles, the production of cotton, breweries, oil prospecting, coal mining and the export of agricultural products.

The custom at that time was to keep families together through intermarriage. Therefore, Deborah was betrothed at the age of nine to her cousin Abraham whom her father very much wanted as a son-in-law, and also to join the family business. Abraham had been engaged to her older sister, but she died before the marriage and Deborah consequently became his fiancée. Even though it was an arranged marriage, according to her granddaughters, they were very happy together and produced seven children. The betrothed couple was photographed, a rare situation, and as we can see, Deborah is dressed traditionally as a little woman in a wide silk floral dress. Her skull cap is embroidered in gilt and silk threads with a typical hair curl falling on her forehead (fig. 1).



Fig. 1:
Deborah (age 9) and Avraham (age 19) Davidoff at their betrothal ceremony, Tashkent, 1896.
Courtesy of her granddaughter Edna Ravnitzki, Giv'atayim.

As a young couple, Deborah and Abraham Davidoff belonged to a thin layer of rich bourgeoisie within the Jewish community who identified more with the European Russians. They saw them as a means of advancing their commercial and cultural development and to elevating their social status among the ruling Muslim majority.

Bukharan Jewry at the End of the Nineteenth Century

As a minority, the Bukharan Jews were discriminated against by the Muslims and were forced to obey Omar laws which required them to pay heavy taxes and to abide by restrictions on where and how they could live. These laws also included the way a Jew was allowed to dress, prohibiting them from wearing lavish clothes in public, and forcing the men to tie a rope around their waists and to wear a special hat. Under such pressure, some of the Jewish merchants saw a window of opportunity opening up to them with the Russian conquest in Central Asia, which began in the beginning of the nineteenth century and reached its peak when the Emirate of Bukhara was conquered in 1868. With much ingenuity, these Jewish merchants became involved with Russian merchants, importing new industrial innovations from Russia to this undeveloped region, especially in the area of Tashkent and the Farghana Valley, where they greatly advanced the textile industry.

Deborah Davidoff in her Twenties



Fig. 2:
Deborah (far right) with her mother in the center and her sisters, Tashkent, early 20th century.
Courtesy of her granddaughter Zviah Cohen, Jerusalem.

Due to Deborah and Abraham Davidoff's high social status, they lived in an upscale Russian neighborhood. The status of their large family is represented in two photographs: the first (fig. 2) was taken in Deborah's mother's house where Deborah is in her late teens, with her sisters and mother in the center. We can see how their Ikat dresses are already sewn with European influence – gatherings, flounces, lace ribbons decorating the chest and the sleeves. The young women are wearing Bukharan gold jewelry typical of wealthy married women. Their hair is braided under gold embroidered caps with a fold in the middle, which was the fashion at the time.



Fig. 3:
Deborah pregnant holding her first daughter with an unknown friend of hers, both with silk dyed dresses and European style vests, Tashkent, early 20th century. Courtesy of her granddaughter Edna Ravnitzki, Giv'atayim.

The second photo (fig. 3) represents the same period in Deborah's life: At around the age of eighteen, she is photographed with an unidentified woman and holding her first daughter. Both of the women are dressed in silk tie and dye (*plangi*) dresses, very typical of the region. The cut of the dress is very wide and the gold embroidered caps and the hair curl on their foreheads appear, as was the style. The main innovation in their dress is a silk vest, machine sewn and with a European collar, already attesting to the western influence on their dress.



Fig. 4:
Silk *ikat* and *plangi* dyed dresses. Israel Museum Collection. Photo: Mauro Magliani.

In the museum collection we have *plangi* and *ikat* dresses in the traditional cut, usually with a Chinese collar (fig. 4). From the same period, the early twentieth century, we have in our collection dresses and coats, which show European influence, either in the choice of the textiles that arrived with the Russians to the area or in their cut and machine sewing. The textiles from Russia were industrial but adhered to the vibrant colors suited to the Bukharan taste (fig. 5).



Fig. 5:
Dresses sewn in European cut out of industrial Russian silk suited to the Bukharan taste. Israel Museum Collection. Photo: Oleg Kalashnikov.

The Europeanization Stage

Her total Europeanized look (fig. 6) in the spirit of the Russian bourgeoisie of the early twentieth century came several years later when she was in her thirties. Her hairdo had totally changed and became upswept and voluminous. Her dress and jewelry and all her accessories were now modern, as can be seen from her wide-brimmed hat with artificial decorations, a watch pendant, and a fashionable purse knitted from silver threads.



Fig. 6:
Deborah in her 30s in a total European look, Tashkent, Early 20th century.
Courtesy of her granddaughter Edna Ravnitzki, Giv'atayim.

But as in so many Jewish families in the Diaspora, this elevated style of living was short lived and the collapse of their good fortune, when it came, was total. In the case of Deborah and Abraham, it was tragic. After using the Jews of Bukhara as a means of expanding their domination to Afghanistan and China, the Russians began to take measures limiting their freedom and economic prosperity. This tendency became more extreme following the October 17th Revolution. With the Soviet conquest, the wealthy merchants were declared capitalists and their properties were nationalized. All of the central Asian region was divided into separate republics under the Soviet Union umbrella.

After the Soviet Revolution

The economy of the family was deteriorating. They tried to escape from the Bolsheviks and moved for a short time to Karshi, close to the city of Bukhara. Then, they were forced to move to Moscow in 1927, where they stayed for about two years. Their extended family, including the parents of Deborah and Abraham, left Uzbekistan, and part of them immigrated to Jerusalem between 1912 and 1914. Three of her elder daughters immigrated to Jerusalem already in 1914, with their grandfathers and mothers. From her time in Moscow at the end of the 1920s, we have one photo of Deborah dressed in a fur coat and hat typical of the time.

The Communists refused to grant Abraham an exit visa so the couple had to go through a fictitious divorce. Deborah immigrated herself to what was then Palestine together with some

of her children in the beginning of 1929. Abraham had to stay behind and planned his escape via Iran, where he was subsequently murdered by thieves, it is assumed. His place of burial is unknown.

Deborah in Jerusalem – Back to Traditional Dress



Fig. 7:
Deborah back in the old traditional Bukharan style, Jerusalem, 1930s.
Courtesy of her granddaughter Edna Ravnitzki, Giv'atayim.

After Abraham's death, Deborah remained with his family in the Bukharan neighborhood in Jerusalem. It was the custom in this conservative community to obey one's mother-in-law, as well as the dictates of the elderly women, including reverting to the traditional Bukharan dress: Deborah as an adult widow (fig.7). Returning to traditional dress was not easy for Deborah since she was already accustomed to the modern European Russian style and customs. It was done only because of social pressures from within the community. According to her granddaughters, Abraham, from his exile in Russia, knew that Deborah was being asked to change her lifestyle and wrote her not to give in to this pressure. But, of course, he could not imagine what the reality was there and how forceful the social dictates of the community in Jerusalem were.

Deborah continued to raise her young children with very meagre economic means. Some of her older daughters were already married, and were wearing modern western clothing (fig.8). It is interesting to note that although the young generation of the Bukharan community looked completely Israeli, traditional dress codes were followed during feasts and life-cycle ceremo-

nies, especially weddings. Almost every couple of Bukharan origin wore traditional clothes for their engagement party or the *henna* ceremony, but modern style white dress for the marriage ceremony itself. This custom is maintained until today but the traditional dress is imported from Uzbekistan and is a synthetic copy of the original.



Fig. 8:
Deborah and her children, Jerusalem, 1940s. Courtesy of her granddaughters Zviah Cohen, Daliah Cohen and Medinah Babayoff, Jerusalem.

There is no doubt that going back to traditional dress from the height of modern dress is an unusual phenomenon. Through research in the various communities we can observe the tendency to adopt modern dress as a way of conveying flexibility, progress, the need to be up-to-date, the will to fit in with the larger community and in that way to declare their identification with the ruling class.

We can compare the reverting to the traditional dress of Deborah with what happens to women in conservative societies who tend to change their manner of dress as they age, abandoning colorful clothes for more solid, dark and drab shades. At the same time, their religious observance becomes more pronounced.

Going back to traditional dress is an exceptional step and expresses perhaps more than anything the crisis of Deborah's life, from being an independent married woman to one living under the domination of her mother-in-law in the conservative Bukharan courtyard of the 1930s in Jerusalem. From a wealthy woman of high socio-economic status she became one of poor means in a new country, who did not speak the local language. She saw her daughters and only son marry and raise families. In her last years, she suffered a stroke and was partially paralyzed. In 1947 she died at the age of sixty.

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