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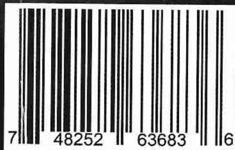

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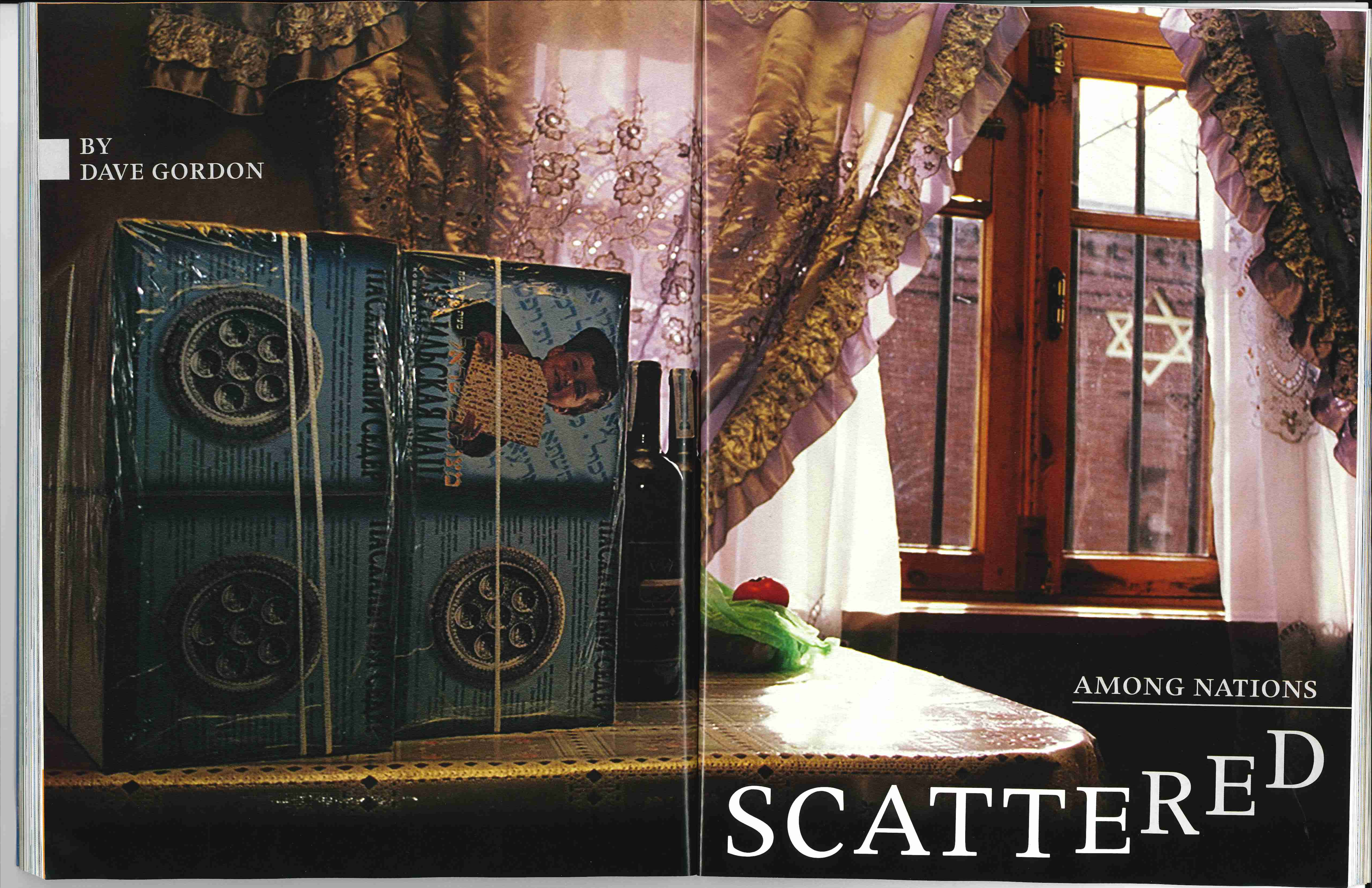


AMONG NATIONS

SCATTERED

BY
DAVE GORDON

Rabbi Natan Noachovitch Iliaguyev (second from left) gathers with Jewish men on a village street in Krasnaya Sloboda, Azerbaijan.

It was a life-changing day for Sei Mang Khong Sai, a 35-year-old man from Sajal, India.

Inside the mud and bamboo hut, on stilts, he, community leaders and his family and guests gathered, chanting tribal prayers to the beat of a lap drummer.

In this village, hours away from any major city, up a dirt road, and off another dirt road, they were readying for the ceremony they call "barhote."

At the age of 35, Sei Mang Khong Sai was preparing for his *bris milah*, the holy ritual of entry into the covenant of the Jewish tribe, within the existing Bene Menashe tribe of India.

In an area of tribal warfare, poverty and drug-running, he sought Judaism's deeper connection to a peaceable life.

Before the ceremony was complete, however, he was to be given his Jewish name. The honor was spontaneously given to visiting stranger, Bryan Schwartz, from Oakland, California.

The first thing that came to his head was "Menashe," and so "Menashe" it was.

"I was just standing there, tasked to give him the new name that he will have, that he'll carry with him through the rest of his life," recalled Schwartz.

A *kippah* was placed on Menashe's head, the huts' doors were thrown open, and the assembled outside were informed of the new name, to chorus cheers of "*siman tov* and *mazal tov*!"

Kiddush followed.

As the legend goes, seven Jewish couples were shipwrecked off the Konkan coast of India, south of Bombay, some 2,000 years ago. They were the progenitors of today's Bene Israel of India's Maharashtra State, who keep the Sabbath, circumcision and dietary laws.

"It was a pretty astonishing moment for me that brought home both the commonality, the amount that we share even in the most diverse corners of the world, and also how different some lives are from the one that I have," said Schwartz, an Oakland-based civil rights attorney.

These stories, and others, developed from his experiences traversing 30 countries, in search of—and to experience—Jews and people who claim to be Jews in distant lands.

His visits to more than a hundred villages in five continents were chronicled in his recent book, *Scattered Among the Nations*, the culmination of a 15-year journey, beginning in 1999.

It all began when he was a law student, with a spring break trip to North Africa in the planning. Much to his surprise, he stumbled upon a listing for Jews in the index of his Lonely Planet guidebook, including matter-of-fact historical descriptions of the island of Djerba in the Mediterranean off the coast

of Tunisia.

Jews there claim not only to have in their possession the oldest Torah, but a past extending to direct ancestors fleeing the destruction of the Second *Beis Hamikdash*. Some *kohanim*, it is believed, found refuge on the island, bringing with them one of the gates of the temple that they later buried. Legend has it that a synagogue was built atop the burial site that still stands today.

Schwartz learned that there were 15 synagogues on the island.

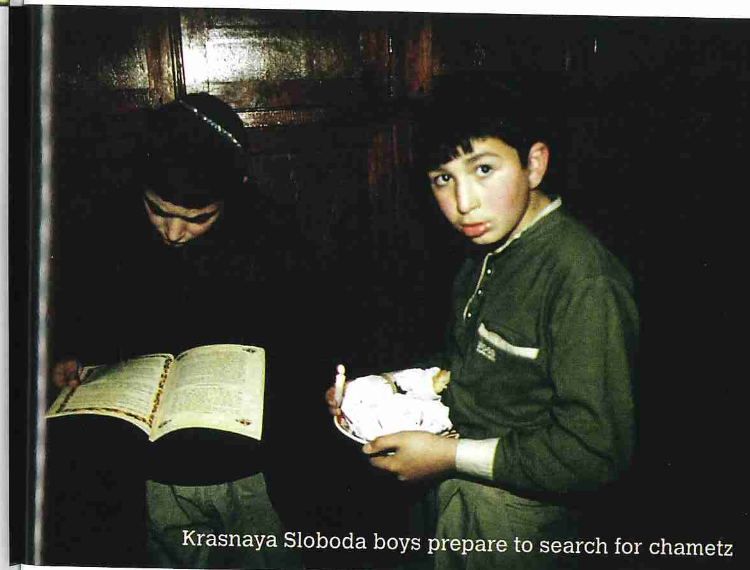
"I'm reading all of this and I'm just blown away that there is this place that is so fascinating, and a story that is so colorful and beautiful, and that I have never heard of it," he recalled.

"I decided there must be places like this all around the world that I could visit. As a writer and photographer I would capture some of it and share it with other Jewish people."

Prior to embarking on the ambitious quest to visit some of the planet's most unusual and isolated Jews, Schwartz prepared. He contacted some communities by fax and via old-fashioned snail mail.

He reached out to the global Jewish outreach center, Kulanu, which has ties to Jews in far off corners; he researched "lost" communities, having read Hillel Halkin's book on the Menashe tribe "Across the Sabbath River"; Tudor Parfitt's "The Lost Tribes of Israel"; and "Journey to the Vanished City," about the Lemba tribe of Southern Africa who maintain Jewish practices and share kohanic DNA. He also took special note of the 1999 documentary film by Simcha Jacobovici, "Quest for The Lost Tribes of Israel."

"Some of these communities exist in places so geographically and culturally distant from other Jews that they must struggle daily to maintain the religion of their ancestors," he came to



Krasnaya Sloboda boys prepare to search for chametz

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realize.

His travels took him to the hills of northeastern India, on the border of Myanmar; Ghana, on the border of Ivory Coast in West Africa; the last Jewish villages in Central Asia; Jews in the Amazon; Marranos coming out of hiding in Portugal and Mexico, among other destinations.

Over the course of two years, his articles and talks have gained attention globally in the media, learning institutions, shuls and Jewish museums.

"I want to show the diversity of the Jewish world," he said. For Bryan that diversity means groups who cling to their newfound Judaism, and groups who have held on to traditions in isolation for hundreds or even thousands of years.

"In fact there are communities embracing Judaism for the first time, and those embracing Judaism for the first time in a long time," he said.

"I wanted to go and capture some of that beauty and some of the parts that we don't always learn about in Hebrew school, and may not be at the front of our conscious."

Sefwi Wiawso, in Ghana, is 2,000 miles from the nearest Jewish community. We don't know how they got there—be it from an ancient exile or Ethiopian Jewish traders—but what's certain is that this community of 200 call themselves The House of Israel, and want to live a Jewish life.

"They embrace Judaism with such love. They have this tiny Torah that somebody delivered to the community," he recalled.

"To return home and to see in my synagogue the wall of Torahs in the ark, and then you notice Torahs draped in silver and velvet, and realize how very fortunate we are to have the kind of resources that we have."

What he said was an "extraordinary part of the journey" was showing up, not knowing a single soul, "and just by virtue of my Jewish faith I would be treated like a long lost cousin, and brought in, and I could stay with a family for Shabbat, or for a whole week or for several weeks, and nothing was asked of me at all, other than to join them."

In fact, he said, even members of economically disadvantaged communities, such as in Ghana, offered him the best room in the house to stay in, three meals a day and touring.

There, he stayed in Joseph Arma's house (one of the wealthier community members), where only one room had electricity. There was an outhouse for the home.

Arma's brother's son was staying with them, but Arma kept referring to him as his "son," not nephew. Confused, Schwartz asked him to clarify. Arma explained the tradition that people who have kinship with one another can be called "son," and that his white American visitor would soon be called that as well. "That's how it is here in Africa," Schwartz was told.

"So this is how I was treated in a lot of communities, like I was the son of the community and as much a part of the family as anyone else."

Meanwhile, far to the southeast, more than a hundred people of the Shona Jewish community convene at their synagogue each Shabbat morning outside Rusape, Zimbabwe. They sing original Afro-Jewish melodies, gospel-style, in Hebrew, Shona and English. Another far-flug community, known as The Ebo Jews of Nigeria, has several thousand members.

In each locale the practices of these communities are recognizably Jewish, though observance of said practices often requires outside assistance.

For example, the Inca Jews in Peru, as they have dubbed themselves, have struggled to maintain their traditions. "They don't have teachers, they don't have clergy, they don't have books or the resources to buy kosher foods that they want for holidays," Schwartz said.

They are by necessity vegetarian, Schwartz explained, due to the fact that kosher meat is unavailable.

So it wasn't enough to simply publish his book and hope these communities continue to cope with the lack of resources much of the larger Jewish world has access to.

Launched by Schwartz, Scattered Among the Nations, Inc. is a nonprofit organization, which, among its many mandates, is designed to assist isolated Jewish communities in gaining the recognition and resources to meet their needs.

Schwartz's organization, for example, has sent the Inca Jews some resources so that they could buy kosher meat on Pesach and the High Holidays.

Similar to the Inca Jews, there are a number of communities that don't have kosher Torahs, and at one point, the community in Northeastern India had to use a toy Torah, the kind bar-mitzvah kids are given, according to Schwartz.

After reading an article about their plight, septuagenarian Chicagoan Sam Pfeffer stepped up to the plate, offering to help them.

But it's not as though the scroll could simply be FedExed. This was a war zone, after all; anything coming or going required reams of red-taped government permits. The only alternative was to deliver it personally. And so it was, and this community, for the first time in perhaps several hundred years, *leined* from a fresh, new Torah.

"Nothing in the world could have meant more to them," he said.

"In Northeastern India, you know there is just not enough hope. Economically, life is a struggle and to get to Shabbat really is a salvation every week."

It's not as though they crave to maintain the status quo. Entire communities—including the Bene Menashe and Inca Jews—have shown a strong desire to make *aliyah*, to live fuller Jewish lives.

"This [Inca] community has been actively and deliberately practicing Judaism for decades, and really struggles to gain attention from the outside Jewish world. They're trying to get approval from the rabbinical authorities, to practice their faith, and make *aliyah*," said Schwartz.

After several of the first couple hundred of the Inca community members made *aliyah*, a secular Israeli newspaper wrote editorials suggesting that these Peruvians were just the pawns

of an Orthodox establishment trying to use them in the war against the Palestinians, recalled Schwartz.

"That, to me, is an incredibly frankly bigoted way to look at a group of people, to suggest they were sort of evil-minded, or did not have their own free will to want to exercise observance of Judaism. In fact, nothing could be farther from the truth," said Schwartz.

"The community actually struggled for a long time to gain any recognition for their Jewish practice, to the point where they were photocopying pages of the Chumash, and sticking them to parchment, to make it a 'Torah.' It's hard for most of us to imagine."

In the 1980s and 1990s, Marranos (or *anusim*) in Mexico and Portugal emerged from centuries of isolation for the first time since the Spanish Inquisition, Schwartz explained.

"Now that they no longer are forced to hide their Jewish practice; they're not as isolated as they once were. While it is a blessing is also causes challenges."

Reconnecting to the Jewish world meant newfound (to them) insight that often conflicted with their own traditions. Portuguese prayers would make way for Hebrew prayers; *kashrut* meant a whole "new" list of laws and strictures.

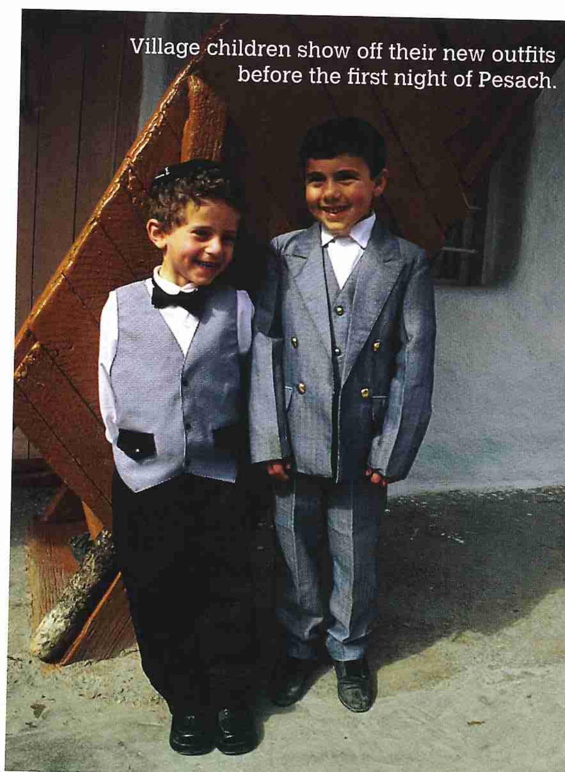
The Marrano community in Portugal had been, for hundreds of years, developing secret (to us) practices, including a holiday they consider to be their Shavuos which they refer to as Ascension Wednesday, a gathering in the field to celebrate.

"It was a struggle in the community to what extent to embrace accepted Jewish practice, or to keep going with the Marrano practices that they've had for centuries," he said.

"Suddenly you've come face to face with the entire Jewish world and realized that the way you're practicing is not entirely consistent with the way the other communities are practicing."

Schwartz couldn't help but be affected by the sheer devotion of faith of these communities, in light of what would often be harsh circumstances.

"A part that was really surprising for me was how it affected me personally… How much it changed my Jewish practice, my perspective on life, my perspective on our faith," he explained, conceding that he took his Jewish life for granted in America, where it is "easy to be Jewish."



Village children show off their new outfits before the first night of Pesach.

"In visiting these communities, I realized the struggle that some people have to survive every week, and how meaningful it is to really live the whole week, to arrive at Shabbat," he explained.

"It is just inspiring. It made me realize the gift that it is to be Jewish, and be grateful every day, in a way that I certainly wasn't before." ●

This article is for informational purpose only. Ami makes no representation as to the halachic status of the Jewish ancestry of some of the communities mentioned here.

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The following in an excerpt from *Scattered Among the Nations*

SCATTERED

THE LAST JEWISH SHTETL

KRASNAYA SLOBODA

Many Jews in the West have grown up with "Fiddler on the Roof"-style storybook images of Jewish shtetls, or villages, from centuries past, inevitably wondering if anyplace like Anatevka exists today.

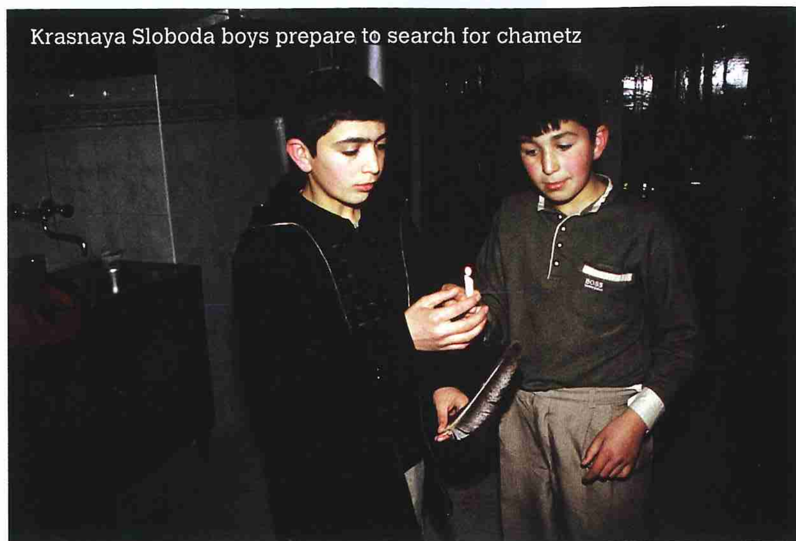
Krasnaya Sloboda is the last Jewish hamlet in the former Soviet Union, located three hours into the mountains from Baku, the seaside capital of Azerbaijan. Here virtually everyone, from the barber to the butcher, is Jewish. Once, when the village was called Yvreskaya Sloboda—literally, "Jewish Village"—its learned men were widely known and prayed at eleven synagogues. The Communists closed all but one of the synagogues, exiled the rabbis to Siberia, and changed the town's name to Krasnaya Sloboda: "Red Village."

Those who grew up in the Soviet Union before Gorbachev were deprived of formal Jewish education. However, since the fall of Communism, Jewish practice has revived in this hillside town of 4,000 Jews. Boys and girls study at the town's new *yeshivah*, staffed with Israeli teachers. Today, year-round, the streets ring with "*Shalom! Ma nishma*?" ("Hello! How are you?" in Hebrew).

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Jewish practice has revived in Krasnaya Sloboda among the 4,000 remaining "Mountain Jews" (also called *Gorskiye Yevreyi* in Russian or *Bik* in the local Mountain Jewish tongue). The population has dwindled from its pre-Stalin peak of 18,000, but Krasnaya Sloboda remains the last predominantly Jewish village in the former Soviet Union.

On an average weekday afternoon before Passover, a half-dozen men gather in the barbershop, drinking hot mint tea with lemon, smoking cigarettes, and arguing

Krasnaya Sloboda is a small village in Azerbaijan's Caucasus Mountains, where life is largely lived as it has been lived throughout the region for centuries—with one difference. In Krasnaya Sloboda, the villagers are Jewish.


Krasnaya Sloboda boys prepare to search for chametz

PASSOVER—EIGHT DAYS OF FEASTING

The roles of women and girls in the Passover celebration in Krasnaya Sloboda cannot be overstated. They spend nearly a month scouring every surface, dusting every shelf, and cleaning every rug in their homes, avidly complying with the holiday ban on bread, which requires the removal of even crumbs from the household. Cooking smells begin to permeate the village streets a week before the holiday. Ask anyone in Krasnaya Sloboda what Passover is about, and he or she immediately will list the holiday's traditional Mountain Jewish foods prepared by the village mothers and daughters: *ashkana*, beef and potato stew; *khoyagusht*, fried spinach, eggs, beef, and onions; and *khasorut*, a mixture of apples, walnuts, and a tablespoon of wine. If the latter sounds familiar, it is because those are the ingredients for *charoset*, a Seder plate staple. *Khasorut* is probably a mispronunciation of *charoset* stemming from centuries of isolation and decades of Communist religious repression. But the women of Krasnaya Sloboda insist on their modified pronunciation. Food was one of the few cultural expressions not repressed under Communism. The Mountain Jews will not eat anything made with powdered sugar on Passover—because it might contain grain—so every table includes a bowl of sugar cubes. The only imported item on the table is the matzah, supplied since the early 1990s by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

Every day of Passover, not just during the *Sedarim*, calls for a family feast and visitors are not only welcome but *required* to partake in every banquet they encounter, eating even just a handful of nuts, so as not to give offense by declining the hospitality.

in Russian about the future of their Jewish community. Most wear black leather jackets, round flat wool caps, and have thick mustaches. At least one wears a *kippah*. They fall silent briefly when a foreigner with a translator enters and starts asking questions. The barber, Hananiyah Hudatatov, answers for the group, with reticence typical among those who grew up in the Communist era, when any stranger might bring the KGB.

After the visitor requests a haircut and plants himself in a chair, Hananiyah opens up, explaining, "We don't know Torah, but we believe in G-d and we keep Him with us." Hananiyah, for his part, displays pictures of great Jewish sages and Hebrew prayers over his mirrors. Because of the Communists' systematic repression of Jewish study, he never learned to read Hebrew. Yet, today he is a regular in the town's only synagogue and knows the meanings of prayers and symbols that resonate in his life: "This one," Hananiyah says, waving with his scissors toward one of the Hebrew passages, "is for happiness in work. You see, we didn't learn it, but we know what it is." He boasts that his eight-year-old son is studying Hebrew already.

In fact, dozens of young men and boys like Hananiyah's son have studied since the fall of Communism at Krasnaya Sloboda's all-boys *yeshivah*, staffed with Israeli teachers. In one of the classrooms, the same teachers instruct approximately 20 girls, ages 9 to 13, in Hebrew and Jewish songs.

Yeshivah director Norik Mordechayev, a Krasnaya Sloboda native since his early 20s, explains, "In our village, you can ask a boy who is two years old, 'What do you eat at Pesach...do you eat candy?' And he'll say, 'No. We eat matzah!'" For most in Krasnaya Sloboda, Passover is the highlight of the Jewish year.

Villager Zolda Minyaminova's 13-year-old son will lead her family's Seder this Passover, reading the *Haggadah* in Russian and the Hebrew he learned at the *yeshivah*. Zolda, however, is less clear on the holiday's religious significance than what it means for her: "I can't explain the holiday, but I know that all the husbands come home from the different cities and go to synagogue. It's very big and important." Zolda's husband works as a merchant in Moscow, like many of Krasnaya Sloboda's men.

Wearing a tidy blue apron, Zolda is surrounded by her five children as she scrubs the white tile floor of her home in preparation for the Pesach holiday. The gleaming floor, once an unthinkable luxury, is not uncommon today in Krasnaya Sloboda. Zolda shows off her gold teeth in a warm smile as she offers Passover treats—bowls of nuts and a basket filled with oranges, apples, and pomegranates. But Passover is not all joy for her. She says, "It's hard work for us women, this holiday. We have to cook and clean everything."

This does not minimize the men's role in the preparations. The *ashkana* and *khoyagusht* would be impossible without a kosher butcher like Elazar Nisimov. "We did not have our own *shochet* for eight years in Krasnaya Sloboda," notes

Dozens of villagers gather with their chickens to have them slaughtered by the kosher butcher for Passover.

Elazar, in his early 20s, as he repeatedly whets and sharpens his long blade. "My friends could not have meat for the holidays. I decided to learn to be a *shochet*, so everyone could have kosher meat." Nisimov studied for 11 months in Israel to be certified before returning to his village.

This is his first day on the job. He tests the blade on his calloused thumb, and then continues his methodical sharpening. "If it is cut wrong, it's *treif*." Dozens of village men gather in a cluttered square with their chickens for the upcoming Passover feast—birds and boys all clucking with excitement. Elazar slits one chicken throat after another. He is well-trained and unfazed. The young religious men are especially eager for the meat. One observes that he has gone more than a year without meat while waiting for a certified *shochet* to come.

In the barbershop, Menachem Danielov, in his 90s, reflects on the changes he has witnessed in Krasnaya Sloboda. "When I was young, everyone knew everything of Torah—they all had long beards. But for 70 years, the Communists wouldn't permit us to read Torah." Menachem, who has no beard, wears thick spectacles held together with blue tape. He admits he can no longer see, but he still remembers his Hebrew prayers from childhood. "First, the problem was Nicholai," he says, referring to Czar Nicholas II, whose downfall in 1918 marked the success of the Russian Revolution. "Then, it was the Soviets. Now, the issue is different—it's money." Communism's fall opened new trading opportunities in Russia, China, and beyond. The traveling men send home more money than anyone in the village could have imagined in decades past.

Hananiyah, the barber, grunts in agreement as he exhales his cigarette smoke. "I don't want my children to be cutting hair. We have everything here—a great community, a nice house, a good shop—but what about our children? Before, we could sell apples in the bazaar. Now everyone has to go to China to buy, Moscow to sell, and no one is interested in apples. Who wants his children in China?"

When the village barber starts talking international trade, we know we are not in Anatevka anymore. Certainly, Krasnaya Sloboda's future holds challenges. But for now, with the surge of liberty after the collapse of communism and the renewal of Jewish education among village youth, it seems that Passover in Krasnaya Sloboda is as close as we can get to "Fiddler on the Roof." ●

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