

Summary

In 1998, Georgia celebrated the 2600 anniversary of the first Jewish settlement in the country. It is almost compulsory for Georgian officials to say that there has never been any anti-Semitism in Georgia. Thousands of Georgian Jews scattered all over the world regularly visit Georgia, speak Georgian language and even root for the Georgian national team at sporting events.

Strangely enough, Georgian Jews stand out among the Jewish ethnic groups — *edot* — for being probably the least known and least studied of all the Jewish communities. There are several reasons for that.

One of the reasons is both of historical and linguistic nature: Georgian Jews are well integrated into the Georgian society. As K. Lerner, one of the authors in this volume, notes a Georgian Jew has always spoken like a native Georgian, dressed like a Georgian, and in many ways adopted the Georgian way of life. It is especially important that Georgian Jews spoke Georgian. This means that any researcher of Georgian Jewry has to learn Georgian language, which has been challenging both for Russian and Western scholars. These linguistic preferences of the Georgian Jewry account for the fact that most of the research findings were described and published in Georgian by Georgian scholars, with no translations either into Russian or into other European languages.

The second obstacle in the study of Georgian Jewry was common to the Soviet Jewish studies in

general. As is known, in the post-war period Jewish studies were banned altogether. Georgian Jewish studies were no exception.

However, Georgian scholars demonstrated resistance to the state policies. The museum of Georgian Jewry, which was created in 1933, survived until 1951, whilst other Jewish cultural centres around the country were closed.

After Stalin's death Georgia became a safe haven for Jewish scholars. Despite the grimness of the state-supported anti-Semitism, famous scholars in the area of Jewish studies, such as Boris Gaponov, Nisan Babalishvili and Djemal Adzhishvili, contributed to their further development. For all this, there was little opportunity to conduct truly wide-scale comprehensive research.

The first systematic research was carried out by Isay Mendelevich Pul'ner (1900–1942) who concentrated on the Jews of Imereti. He carried out two expeditions to study the Jews of Western Georgia. Regrettably, his findings have never been published in full. Jewish historical-ethnographical commission discovered the existence of communities of Lakhlukhs (one of the names of Aramaic-speaking Kurdistan Jews). However, their studies did not cover Georgian Jews proper.

The Jewish community in Georgia displays a number of characteristic features which differentiate it from other diasporas around the world and demonstrate an outstanding ability of Georgian Jewry to integrate in the local culture.

Of crucial importance is the role which Jews played in the history of Christianity in Georgia. There are still plenty of myths which interfere with our knowledge of the subject. A number of Georgian saints of Jewish origin are supposed to have been linked to Georgia's conversion to Christianity. Perhaps, this myth contributed to the development of the unique model of Jewish-Georgian relationship, which is so different from Europe or the Muslim countries of the Middle East.

Second, Georgian Jews perceived Georgian culture as their own. This is, perhaps, the most important trait of the Georgian Jewry. They are the only



Еврейское кладбище в Лапилаши.



В фондах Национального музея Грузии в Тбилиси.



В Грузинском национальном центре рукописей в Тбилиси.

Jewish community that have never created a writing tradition of their own.

Our knowledge of the history of Georgian Jewry is extremely fragmented. We are aware of the mythology which appeared 2000 years ago and which was incorporated into the Christian tradition; we know about a few epigraphic artifacts which were created in Antiquity; we know that there were references to the sect of Tiflisists in the Middle ages. More information on them did not surface until the 18th century. In the 18th century sources Georgian Jews were described as slaves. In other countries members of the Jewish diaspora were never associated with serfdom.

In the last 50 years Georgian Jews, as well as the majority of Jewish communities around the world, went through dramatic events of history. Most of them left Georgia, where their community had been forming through centuries. They became dispersed around the world with the largest number settling down in Israel. Georgian Jews can be found living in Russia, Germany, Austria and the USA. Inevitably, with time their identity and culture will be lost. There are only a few thousands of Georgian Jews still living in Georgia, whereas around 100 000 are scattered around the world.

* * *

The expedition, which was organized by the Moscow Centre for Jewish Studies “Sefer”, inherits the tradition of the Moscow and Leningrad schools of Jewish studies. Natalya Kashovskaya (Saint Peters-

burg), Mark Kupovetskiy (Moscow), Leonid Landa (Saint Petersburg) and Konstantin Lerner (Jerusalem) acted as lecturers and managers of the school. Apart from that, the cooperation between “Sefer” and Georgian universities made it possible for the participants of the school to listen to the lectures of professors Shota Bostanashvili, Guram Lortkipanidze and Eldar Mamistvalishvili, Lela Tsitsuashvili.

The participants in the expedition explored the history of Georgian Jewry and analyzed the current state of the Georgian Jewish community. They visited Tbilisi, Gori, Surami, Kulashi, Kutaisi and Laylashi where no prior research had been carried out. Members of the epigraphic group did a lot of work at the urban and rural cemeteries located in the area. At Laylashi, which is known as the only “mountain” Jewish shtetl in Europe, participants gathered vast ethnographic material, collected myths and legends about the Jews, which appear to form a part of the Georgian folklore. This material will help to explore in detail the Jewish past and recreate the pattern of relations between Georgians and Jewish inhabitants of this area.

The current volume consists of the articles of researchers, scholars of the history and culture of Georgian Jewry, who took part in the expedition. A particularly important part of the book contains the material collected during the expedition, as well as illustrations which will certainly enrich the existing studies.

Translated by Ilya Yablokov