

MEMORIES OF GEORGIAN JEWS ABOUT GEORGIANS AND GEORGIA
IN TERMS OF
COMMUNICATIVE MEMORY¹

ქართველი ებრაელების მოგონებები ქართველებსა და საქართველოზე
კომუნიკაციური მეხსიერების ჭრილში²

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Abstract

Georgian Jews has been closely connected with our country since immemorial time (26 centuries) and actively participated in all spheres of public life. It is worth noting the fact that the cultural memory of the Jewish people in general is determined by mobility, that is it has always been based on the principle of extraterritoriality. This moment also came in the history of the Georgian Jewish community, when after centuries they left their homeland, Georgia and moved to their historical homeland, Israel. In connection with this event, the communicative memory of Georgians and Jews acquires special importance in order not to be erased and forgotten the details of unknown facts of the centuries-old relations between these two peoples. Being in an emotional relationship with the past, memories that already belong to history, as a historical source are valued not only by facts, but also by an unmistakable picture of socio-psychological relations.

This article is based on the narrative material obtained by our working group in the Kingdom of Belgium in September 2024, namely, the memories of Georgian Jews about Georgia and Georgians, living in the city of Antwerp.

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The mentioned research once again shows the objective and subjective reasons that contributed to the high degree of integration of the Jewish ethnic group in Georgia and the goodwill of the Georgian society towards it.

Key words: Communicative Memory; Antwerp; Israel; Jewish Community.

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აბსტრაქტი

უხსოვარი დროიდან (26 საუკუნე) ქართველი ებრაელები მჭიდროდ იყვნენ დაკავშირებული ჩვენს ქვეყანასთან და აქტიურად მონაწილეობდნენ საზოგადოებრივი ცხოვრების ყველა სფეროში. აღსანიშნავია ის ფაქტი, რომ მთლიანობაში ებრაელი ხალხის კულტურული მეხსიერება აღინიშნება მობილურობით, ანუ ის ყოველთვის ეფუძნებოდა ექსტრატერიტორიულობის პრინციპს. ეს მომენტიც დადგა ქართველი ებრაული თემის ისტორიაში, როდესაც საუკუნეების შემდეგ მათ დატოვეს სამშობლო, საქართველო და ისტორიულ სამშობლოში, ისრაელში გადასახლდნენ. ამ მოვლენასთან დაკავშირებით განსაკუთრებული მნიშვნელობა ენიჭება ქართველებისა და ებრაელების კომუნიკაციურ მეხსიერებას, რათა ამ ორი ხალხის მრავალსაუკუნოვანი ურთიერთობის უცნობი ფაქტების დეტალები არ წაიშალოს და მივიწყებას არ მიეცეს. წარსულთან ემოციურ კავშირში ყოფნა, მოგონებები, რომლებიც უკვე ისტორიას ეკუთვნის, როგორც ისტორიულ წყარო, ფასდება არა მხოლოდ ფაქტებით, არამედ სოციო-ფსიქოლოგიური ურთიერთობების უდავო სურათით.

სტატია ეფუძნება 2024 წლის სექტემბერში ბელგიის სამეფოში ჩვენი სამუშაო ჯგუფის მიერ მოპოვებულ ნარატიულ მასალას, კერძოდ, ქალაქ ანტვერპენში მცხოვრები ქართველი ებრაელების მოგონებებს საქართველოსა და ქართველებზე.

აღნიშნულმა კვლევამ კიდევ ერთხელ დაგვანახა ის ობიექტური და სუბიექტური მიზეზები, რომელთაც ხელი შეუწყო ებრაული ეთნოსის ინტეგრაციის მაღალ ხარისხს საქართველოში და ებრაელთა მიმართ ქართული სოციუმის კეთილგანწყობას მის მიმართ.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: კომუნიკაციური მეხსიერება; ანტვერპენი; ისრაელი; ებრაული თემი.

Introduction

The coexistence of Georgians and the Jewish community dates back many centuries. The informational field that shapes the shared communicative and historical memory of Georgians and Jews is rooted in their collective recollections. These memories are intertwined with various aspects of social existence and coexistence, encompassing contributions from diverse members of society. Such memories, imbued with emotional connections to the past, have now become part of history. As historical sources, they are valued not only for their factual content but also for offering an authentic depiction of socio-psychological relationships. Georgian Jewry has maintained deep-rooted connections with the country since ancient times, actively participating in all areas of public life.

As the renowned ethnologist W. Miulman observed: "The border between peoples (Völker) is not a geographical concept but is determined by individuals themselves. A person embodies the boundary, defined by anthropological characteristics, language, religious affiliation, traditions, clothing, even jewelry, cuisine, lifestyle, in sum: culture" (Mühlmann, 1995:19).

It is worth noting that the cultural memory of the Jewish people, in general, is characterized by mobility, as it has always been grounded in the principle of extraterritoriality. This aspect became significant in the history of the Georgian Jewish community when, after centuries of settlement, they left their homeland, Georgia, to move to their historical homeland. This process, known as the Great Aliyah, began in the 1970s, and today, the Jewish population in Georgia has significantly decreased. Twenty-six centuries of coexistence and deep social and cultural relations are now on the brink of disappearing. This reality has underscored the urgency of bringing "communicative memory" to the forefront (Assmann, 2011: 15-27; Assmann, 2001).

Methodology. Fieldwork and comprehensive research methods were employed to accomplish the outlined tasks. The fieldwork component involved engaging with respondents in person and digitally documenting their narratives. The second component included interdisciplinary research of thematically diverse material relevant to various fields. Special emphasis was placed on the oral history method, which involves reconstructing memories through interviews. This approach, alongside other types of memory, provides insight into the era and facilitates the study of societal history through specific narratives recorded and preserved in various formats (video, audio, text).

Results and discussion. Communicative memory encompasses memories connected to the recent past. This type of memory typically spans 80 to 100 years, covering approximately 3 to 4 generations, meaning it exists within those who are direct bearers of these memories. Communicative memory emerges at a certain historical moment and ceases with the death of its carriers. Researcher Krzysztof Malicki discusses this in one of his notable articles on Polish Jewry: "Today, the memory of the past of Polish Jews still exists, but the number of memory bearers is incomparably small... The Jewish theme is not only connected to Poles but to many other nationalities. That is why this topic, this issue, if you like, this problem, exists in the memory of many nationalities, and it is continuously recalled"(Malick, 2015: 64). Memory is shaped in daily life through interpersonal interactions, personal experiences, and individual stories. It develops during the process of everyday communication and, over time, evolves into cultural memory.

This article is based on the 2024 report by our working group. In September, we collected narrative material in the Kingdom of Belgium, specifically the memories of Georgian Jews residing in Antwerp, focusing on their recollections of Georgia and Georgians. It is worth noting that this narrative material includes previously unknown, forgotten, and sometimes significant facts about the coexistence of these two communities. The gathered material often reflects certain stereotypes and lacks depth, featuring stories and memories that are not always coherent, frequently fragmented and chaotic. This is understandable, as some of the storytellers left Georgia at a young age. Additionally, the current lives of Georgian Jews in Belgium, the events within their social circles, and their social statuses are equally compelling and provide rich ground for cultural studies research.

The story of the respondent, **Tomer Reoven** (born in 1988 in Israel, 36 years old), serves as evidence of this: "We preserved the Georgian tradition. Today, Georgian Jews in Israel do not maintain the Georgian tradition as we do here. Here, we are still very old-fashioned Georgians (laughs). We still marry each other at a young age, around 18-20. Georgian families are connected to other Georgian families, which helps the Jewish community grow, and the Georgian society continues to thrive and remain. I learned to speak Georgian over the past two years; I understand everything, but speaking is difficult. I have four daughters at home who also uphold the tradition and perform Georgian dances..."We have non-Jewish Georgians here in Belgium who teach Georgian customs, including Georgian dance. The Georgian community in Antwerp resembles a small Georgian village because we all coexist in the same space. We maintain traditional Georgian dishes at home and enjoy all the foods from Georgia, such as khachapuri and shechamandi. We eat what is typical in Georgia, so I believe the Georgian community here is more authentically Georgian than the community in Israel, where we feel more like Israelis. Here, we still identify as Georgian Jews. Although I was born in Israel, I consider myself Georgian rather than Israeli or Belgian. That reflects the mentality we have here today. Most Georgians work in the jewelry district near the station. So, if you stroll through that area and visit the various stores, you will likely find that anyone you speak with can share insights about life in the Jewish community.

Zehava Reuven (Mzia Jinjikhvili) (born in 1961 in Surami, currently 63 years old) shared: "I was young when I went to Israel with my family. To be honest, I don't remember much about the details of living alongside Georgians in Georgia or the emotions tied to it. The Georgian language was also slowly forgotten, even though we mostly spoke Georgian at home; Hebrew was taught at school and in the institute. Later, I got married and moved to Belgium with my family, where we settled in an apartment in Antwerp. A few years ago, a miracle happened in my life: I started watching the Georgian TV series "My wife's friends" on a YouTube channel, which captivated me and rekindled my connection to the Georgian language. I remembered everything and began speaking Georgian properly again. This brings me great joy."

It should be noted that Belgium was one of the first European countries where a significant number of Georgian Jews migrated as part of the "Great Aliyah." In Antwerp, Jews live in close-knit communities, with over fifty synagogues located throughout the city. Georgian Jews primarily reside near Falkomplein Street and Belgilei Street, the latter of which is regarded as a Jewish quarter. The distance from Falkomplein Street to the Jewish quarter is about two kilometers. Currently, up to 1,500 Georgian Jews (approximately 300 families) live in Antwerp, and their activities are primarily connected to the diamond business, as they own specialized stores. According to Abram Pichkhadze, a store owner, there were around 100 families in Antwerp by the year 2000, during which time Georgian Jews began advocating for the allocation of a synagogue for their community (Sepiashvili, 2000: 381).

In 2002, one of the two Georgian synagogues in Antwerp rented an apartment at Marie Ley Number: 14, which continues to function today. Alongside religious services, the synagogue is dedicated to passing on Georgian heritage to future generations by organizing educational and cultural events. The interior of this synagogue is richly decorated, with the vine motif being particularly striking. Vines are engraved on the pillars of the building, as well as on the handles and backs of the chairs. This vine motif is prevalent throughout the space. The synagogue is referred to as the "Georgian synagogue," and the prominence of the vine motif is significant; it is recognized as a cult plant among both Georgians and Jews. "...the love of the vine is also a shared idea that has been reinforced by symbolism. For a Jew, the vine is traditionally regarded as a symbol of the Jewish nation, as noted in Isaiah 5:7: 'For the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the house of Israel,' and it embodies something most holy and exalted"(Ajiashvili, 1992: 41).

This is what **Moshe (Moshka) Chianurovi**, who lives in Antwerp (born in 1952 in Tbilisi, currently 72 years old), shares: "Every year, we bought half a ton of grapes, specifically white grapes. We pressed half a ton of red grapes. My grandfather was from Akhaltsikhe and became a rabbi at the age of nineteen. When the rabbi was brought to Tbilisi, he often called out that if I had a wedding, as you call it, we would seek kosher wine for the ketuba. It is due to my grandfather's efforts that later, every Jewish family had their own kosher wine. Kosher wine is also made in the traditional way, with the important stipulation that a non-Jew must not touch or be present during the pressing process. I remember vividly how they brought the grape boxes into the cellar and how they (grape) were crushed."

Yuri (Eliu) Beridze, born in 1950 in Sachkhere and currently 74 years old, is a poet, artist, and film director. He shares, "I cannot feel what is a Jew and what is a Georgian; my homeland is one Georgia. Motherland is one like mother..." During our conversation, Mr. Yuri fondly recalled his time at school and his Georgian teacher, Ms. Tina Meladze: "When she explained the beauty of Nestan-Darejani to us, we all looked at her as if she were describing herself. Even now, her face is vivid in my memory; I can still draw it— a beautiful face, noble, with white hair flowing in waves. She loved children and didn't distinguish between us, but I still felt her love for me. She called me talented, although my behavior was quite poor, scoring a total of three (laughs). However, when I wrote poetry, she would cry and gave me a five."

He recalled his relationships with **Gia Kancheli**, who lived in Antwerp during the last years of his life, and with **Rezo Gabriadze**: "I knew Rezo Gabriadze; he was a person who could be mixed up. He was ahead of his time and once told to me, 'I swear, I am from Kutaisi, and on Saturdays I used to wish Jews on fire; they would give me money, give me food...' **Kotsia Kalmakhelidze**, a friend of his father's, came here. He called me and said, 'This is who I am. I want to see you; do you know me?' I replied, of course I know you, Tevdorich; (Theodore's son) where are you?' I settled Kotsia in Fankomplein and arranged for a hotel. He thought 1000 francs was a lot of money and asked how much he should spend. In the morning, he met me with a bag in hand, saying, "If I'm going to sleep on a bench, don't pay so much money..."

Josep Gorelashvili (born 1955 in Tbilisi, 69 years old) entrepreneur: "My name is Josep Gorelashvili Simonis dze (Simon's son), but my friends call me Soso in Georgian way. I grew up on Mamatsashvili Street, then lived on Merkviladze Street, and later on Vorontsov. I went to Israel on June 1973, just as the Yom Kippur War broke out in November. I studied at the 67th school in Tbilisi, and my parents are from Akhaltsikhe. I often visited Akhaltsikhe where my grandmother and aunt lived near Rabat. The Mekinulashvili, Ikhoshvili, and Khaimashvili families also lived in Akhaltsikhe..."

I have many friends in Georgia, and I was a second-year university student when I left. I studied cybernetics and I thought I was very smart then (laughs). One of my closest friends was Temur Dekanosidze; his father was a film director, and they lived on Dzneladze Street. Another good friend was Bichiko Gugunava. I saw him during my visit to Georgia in 1990-91. Bichiko was very heartbroken about what was happening in Georgia at the time. We spent hours reminiscing about those days. They lived behind the opera house, and they had a friend named Tengiz who played the accordion. Once, they all fell down a hill together, but surprisingly, the accordion remained intact (laughs).

"My wife is originally from Kutaisi, and her last name is Biniashvili. I remember spring in Tbilisi. Fresh air. Right in our yard, there were jujube (ziziphus) trees and mulberry trees. I spent so much time there. There was a walnut tree on Mamatsashvili, and when I climbed up, the neighbors would shake their heads. There are so many memories to cherish. When we played football in the street, the ball would sometimes break a window, and everyone would run away

(laughs).I take pride in the fact that our people, the Jewish community, have carried Georgian culture with us to Israel, preserving it even today..."

Moshe Reoveni (Merab Tsitsuashvili) (Born in 1962 in Kutaisi, 62 years old)"I was born in Kutaisi and moved to Antwerp in 1972. I own my shop and serve as a gabai in the synagogue. For my first three years in Georgia, I studied at a Russian school. At that time, there was a Russian school across from Shaumian, but it no longer exists. I left Georgia when I was ten years old, in the third grade.I had two names: when I was identified as Jewish, I was called Moshe, but on my documents in Georgian, I was listed as Merabi, so that no one would know I was a Jew by my name. A ten-year-old child should remember everything. I recall the garden, the school, and the neighborhood where I grew up. I remember my father, my uncle, and my father's brothers, all of whom were traders. They bought and sold various goods. Some sold shoes, others pants, and some even suits, which they brought from China. The police would often chase after these people, and some would offer bribes to avoid getting into trouble." "Some people who didn't have money were caught. We had good neighbors. There were mixed marriages, but rarely—maybe once in a thousand. Ninety-nine percent of Jews married Jews. Our women will not marry an Englishman, an American, or a Belgian. Eighty percent of Georgians should marry Georgians, and another twenty percent should marry Jews. In this synagogue, those who do not know Hebrew pray in Georgian. If you ask all the Jews born in Georgia, everyone loves Georgia. For example, when I am in Israel, I think of Georgia as my homeland. Who would leave the house in Kutaisi without signing a promise that they would not return tomorrow"(style reserved).

Likewise from the memoirs of **Moshe Chianurov**:"I lived on Yetim Gurji Street; from Leselidze, there was a turn off from Silver Street. We had a big house. Two families bought it: a Megreli family and our Jewish family, who purchased one floor and the basement, where there were pitchers and sticks. Even now, when I visit Tbilisi, I always go, get up, and look at my former home. My grandfather lived in the synagogue, Davitashvili Immanuel. Iura Beridze made a movie about my grandfather in Tbilisi, where Otar Koberidze plays the role of my grandfather. I want to bring our rabbi to Tbilisi and show him the Leselidze shrine, which is named after my grandfather.Do you remember the story of Lazishvili? My father was their partner. He was a businessman who employed 4,000 workers. My father, Matsaberidze, and the Lazishvili family owned shops in Dolabauri. Shevardnadze was the head of the militia then. My father was hiding for four years..."

"I went to Israel from Georgia in 1974 when I was 15 years old. After 19 years, I returned to Tbilisi, and I remember parking the car far from my house and walking the rest of the way. I love Georgia and Tbilisi so much. About two years ago, I was there with my son, and I heard him say, 'If I want to stop working and live somewhere, I want to live in Tbilisi.'

Ios was born and raised here; he knows Georgian one hundred percent. My wife is from Sokhumi. She was four years old when they left Sokhumi, and she learned Georgian in our family.If Christians have Easter, do you color eggs? I really wanted to color eggs when I was a child, but we

were forbidden to do so. Do you know what they told me once? They said, 'You kill children and use their blood to color the eggs.' They told me that when I was a child in the neighborhood. Today, the streets of Paris do not make me as happy as when I used to walk down Rustaveli as a child."

"Believe me, when I was there two months ago, I walked from "Vake Park" to the Philharmonic. I ate adjarian khachapuri at the old Lagidze, which is still under renovation. Upstairs, there used to be a store instead of a shop. Now, where the big hotel stands on Freedom Square, trolleybuses used to stop there and take people up to Mtatsminda to eat donuts, which cost 8 kopecks. Fifty years have passed, but its taste is still in my mouth.

During my visit to Tbilisi, I was invited by a rich man (the owner of several hotels). At the table, I said such things, that guests went crazy. First, they loved my Georgian, and then it was my turn to make a toast. I finally said, 'I am first a Georgian and then a Jew.' They were completely taken aback because I consider myself a Georgian Jew, not a Jewish Georgian. And you know what else I told them? I think in Georgian, and we still have Georgian food at home. We have been around for so long; we do our celebrations in Georgian, and we also enjoy Georgian music. There is no nation in Georgia that has preserved its Georgianness like the Jews."

Our compatriot, doctor, and showman **Johnny Janashia** refers to Georgian Jews as "co-bred do-gooders," a phrase that we believe fully captures our centuries-old relationship. "This is how two kindred spirits walk side by side; this is how they navigate the paths and zigzags of history. One is a Jew, the other a Christian, but the roots of both are intertwined in the ancient centuries. The 'feeling of respect for antiquity' is embedded in the bones and flesh of both. They come together as 'one soul and one flesh,' sharing a common fate, common tears, common thoughts, and common pain. They will destroy cursed temples and uprooted vineyards in the same way..."(Ajiashvili, 1992:41).

Conclusion

In the course of our work, the communicative memory of individuals has provided us with a clear understanding of the collective memory, which encapsulates the shared narratives of these individuals. The material we gathered has reaffirmed both the objective and subjective reasons that have fostered a high degree of integration of the Jewish ethnos within Georgia, as well as the goodwill of Georgian society towards them.

Our working group has also concluded that the meanings of collective and communicative memory are closely intertwined. The aggregate of individual memories simultaneously constitutes the collective memory, which we have identified as the most promising narrative approach for our study.

It is important to note that the material collected often presents ambivalence; the same event can evoke both positive and negative feelings among individuals.

Thus, alongside presenting the narrative material gathered by our research team in Antwerp, Belgium, we have illuminated significant aspects of the current lives of Georgian Jews residing there, as well as noteworthy events occurring within their social circles. This insight is crucial for interdisciplinary research.

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