“We hate the word ‘melting pot,’” Aron Aronov claimed, reflecting on his people’s dispo- sition regarding American assimilation. Aronov, who is often called the Mayor of Queen-sistan, has received the unusual moniker because of his arduous activism for preserving the culture, language, and heritage of his people, the Bukharian Jews, who have mi- grated en masse to Queens from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.2 The Bukharian Jews, also known as Bukharian and Bukharic Jews, are believed to be de- scendants of Israelites who were exiled to Babylonia in 586 BC. Having later come under the influence of the Persians, Bukharan Jews today speak a language called Buk- hori, which is similar to Tajik Persian, with a trace of Hebrew and Russian. For over two thousand years, Bukharian Jews were one of the most isolated Jewish groups in the world. Eventually settling in the region of Bukhara in Central Asia due to, among other reasons, commercial opportunities along the Silk Road, Jews from this region came to be known as “Bukharian Jews.” While only a few hundred are left in Central Asia today, an estimated 50 thousand now call Metro New York home, making it the largest concentration of Bukharian Jews in the world and home to one-fourth of the world’s Bukharian Jew- ish population.3

When Did They Come to New York?

The biblical exile led the Bukharian Jews to settle along the great commercial route called the Silk Road; the new exile has led them to one of the greatest commercial centers in the world—New York City. The immigration primarily started in the 1960s, and the first Bukharian Jewish synagogue in Queens was founded in 1965.4 Bukharian Jewish immigration continued sporadically until the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In newly formed countries such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, increased nationalism, xenophobia, and Islamic fundamentalism led to a mass exodus throughout the 1990s of most Bukharian Jews still in Central Asia. During the differ- ent waves of immigration to New York, some Bukharian Jews came directly from Central Asia, while others came via Israel.

Where Do They Live?

With such a concentration of Bukharian Jews along 108th Street in Forest Hills, the street has been dubbed “Bukharan Broadway,” and neighboring Rego Park has been dubbed “Regostan,” both, of course, part of “Queenstown.” The Bukharian Jews are so concen- trated in the borough that Queens College actually started a Bukharian Jewish history and culture class in 2010.

What Do They Believe?

Now that freedom to practice their religion has been realized, many Bukharian Jews have used the opportunity not only to embrace their distinct religious identity but also to gain knowledge of Orthodox traditions normally associated with the Ashkenazi branch of Ju- daism. As the Bukharian Jewish community’s chief rabbi explains, “About twenty percent of the community are Orthodox, sixty percent are traditional but not necessarily obser- vant, and twenty percent are unaffiliated.”44 Despite the influence of Ashkenazi Orthodoxy in Queens, Bukharans (while being Mizrahi like many other Jews from Central Asia) still practice Sephardic Judaism. Most Bukharian Jews are very superstitious and do not question their rabbis, which is one reason why their distinct religious rites and customs have been preserved, though evangelical studies are occurring with Bukharian Jews—some of who have become believers—there is still no Bukharian Christian church or messianic synagogue in Metro New York.

What Are Their Lives Like?

Almost nightly, the Bukharian restaurants in Queens convert into party halls, usually cele- brating someone’s birthday, wedding, bar mitzvah, or a Jewish holiday. If a Bukharian family is wealthy enough, these parties take place in their large mansions, which house multiple generations of families under one roof. While the Bukharian community has its share of unemployed people with limited English skills, a super-wealthy class has emerged as well, primarily from working in the jewelry industry.

How Can I Pray?

Although Queens is the most strategic place in the world to share the gospel with Buk- harian Jews, there are only a couple of workers among them. Pray that God would send laborers.

Pray for the first church or messianic synagogue to be started among the Bukharian Jews.


2. Fifty thousand in the number often quoted concerning the population of Bukharian Jews in Metro New York, and the world’s Bukharian Jewish population is often estimated to be around 200,000. See “History of Bukharian Jews,” Beth Ganzer (World of Bukharian Jews), http://bethganze.com/content/history/Of-Bukharian-Jews.html (accessed November 18, 2009).


4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.