

The Fabric of Memory

By: Evan Yadgarov

In an age dominated by rapid change, increasing modernization, and a relentless forward momentum, I became inspired to look back. Not out of nostalgia, but necessity.

There is a kind of overwhelming silence we inherit when we know too little about where we come from. That silence drove me to search back in time—first for stories, then for documents, then for people. I was young, fifteen in fact, but already aware that essential narratives had been left untold—perhaps at risk of permanent loss due to the inexorable advancing of time.

Through The Legacy Project, a student-led project that encourages individuals to explore their ancestry, I found not a mere platform but an enlightening pathway. This open initiative encourages students, and all people alike, to trace their lineage and rediscover their family's place within the broader fabric and timelines of history. For me, that meant untangling the threads of a Jewish diaspora that spanned the heart of the Middle East—intricately woven throughout multiple centuries across Yemen, Iraq, Persia, Syria, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan.

This journey revealed to me ancestors who were not only names or statistics, but identities: textile dyers of a plethora of fabrics, merchants of the First and Second Guilds under the Russian Empire, rabbis and community leaders, financiers, and soldiers whose uniforms bore the scars of wars long past—World War I, the Russian Civil War, the Winter War, and the Great Patriotic War. Their lives were not incidental; they were pivotal. Each decision—whether forged in the rhythm of a bazaar in Bukhara or in the firestorm of Stalingrad—sent ripples through time, until their repercussions eventually reached me.

I reached out diligently—dozens of messages, emails, and phone calls. I had long and interesting conversations with relatives scattered across continents, caretakers and administrators of Jewish cemeteries in Uzbekistan, and authors of books who spent their lives studying what I had only begun to uncover. Through them, I discovered—and even held—first-person documents: letters in faded ink and military discharge papers. Each artifact opened a new chapter.

Among the most profound discoveries was the *Vasika*: a formal document, originally written in Arabic letters—dating back to 1843—an initiative led by the Kalontar, or chief of the Jewish community of Samarkand. With hope and determination, he raised funds to purchase land from the Bukharian Emir, so that Jewish infrastructure—homes, synagogues, and schools—could blossom on soil they could finally claim. Among the signatories were my fifth great-grandfather and his father, their names beside those of other respected individuals. They did not know me, yet they built for me. They did not know us, yet they endeavored for us.

My passion project is not merely personal history. It is living history—still moving, still shaping.

And it has changed how I see the world.

We are often taught that history is a collection of grand moments: wars, treaties, revolutions. But textbooks never explained how my blood once flowed through the streets of Baghdad or that a forebear helped secure the foundations of a future Jewish community in Central Asia.

I discovered that an ancestor, ten generations back, was a dyer and merchant from the coastal city of Aden (a port city in present-day Yemen). His journey took him from the southern reaches of the Arabian Peninsula to the mountain town of Shahrizabz, and eventually to Samarkand, where he married a local Jewish woman—planting the first seeds of my family’s presence there. These stories were untold and not taught in school, so I searched for them.

What I have found is essential: we do not stand apart from the history we learn—we are its continuation. Together, we comprise the delicate fabric of history. The Legacy Project helped me see that. And now, through writing, through telling, I hope to help others see it too.

And if I have learned anything through this journey, it’s that stories have the power to soften divisions. When we listen to each other’s pasts—not just the victories but the wounds, the migrations, the quiet survival—we begin to see how inextricably intertwined we truly are.

If each of us took the time to share the legacies that shaped us, we might not only understand ourselves better, but also each other. And in that understanding, there is room for empathy—for the kind that reduces conflict, smooths over difference, and reminds us that we are not strangers to one another, just relatives whose stories have not yet been exchanged.