

Baku, Azerbaijan, Jews and The Klionskys

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I tried to write a little bit about Baku and its Jewish population, but found myself not being able to fit everything I want to share in the space of several paragraphs. I compiled these notes from different sources and personal memories, trying to present a picture of this lesser known part of the world, which occupies a big part in my heart. Not only did I live in Baku most of my life, but it is there that my wife Yelena (great grand daughter of Mark Markovich Klionsky), her parents, our elder son, and many other Klionsky descendants were born.

Baku is the capital of Azerbaijan, former Soviet republic, now officially Republic of Azerbaijan, located in Transcaucasia. Baku is situated on the southern shore of the Apsheron (Absheron) Peninsula, on the western coast of the Caspian Sea. Its history dates back to the 1st millennium BC, with the earliest written evidence from 6th century AD. The city has a rich history with a mixture of Turkic, European, Russian and Persian influences.



Baku is the fifth largest city in the former Soviet Union (after Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev and Tashkent) with beautiful beaches amid the striking setting on the Caspian Sea.

The [Caspian Sea](#) (also known in antiquity as Hyrcanian Ocean and later as Khazar Sea and Mazandaran Sea) is the largest lake on Earth (though it is not a freshwater lake) and is shared by five countries. The water level is 28 meters below sea level, but fluctuates over the centuries. The Volga and Ural rivers discharge into the Caspian Sea, but there is no natural outflow other than by evaporation. The sea holds great numbers of sturgeon, yielding eggs that are processed into caviar. In 20th century substantial oil and gas reserves were discovered underneath the Caspian Sea.



Baku and Azerbaijan have been at the crossroads of history for centuries – it was an important trading center on the Silk Road from China to Europe. Given this geographic advantage, many empires and such warriors as Cyrus the Great, Pompey, Alexander the Great, Tamerlane and Genghis Khan, have fought to gain control over the region.

Caspian Sea viewed from orbit

Little is known about Azerbaijan's history until its conquest and conversion to Islam by the Arabs in 642 AD. After the decline of the Arab Empire during the 13th and 14th centuries Baku was captured and ravaged by Mongol invaders.



These pictures present "Giz Galasi" ("Maiden Tower") - Baku's most prominent landmark, located along the seafront in downtown Baku. The tower dates back to at least 12th century. Two story buildings between sea shore and Maiden Tower were demolished in 1960s and the whole seafront was rebuilt at the same time. Right behind Maiden Tower there are two caravanserais (inns), built in 14th and 16th century to accommodate traveling merchants from northern India and central Asia.

Baku flourished in the 15th century under the independent Shirvan Shahs and from 1509 to 1723 under Persian rule until it was captured by Tsar Peter the Great. After his death in 1725 the Caspian area became a burden on the Russian Empire. A large army was

required to maintain the occupied territories. In 1735 Baku was therefore returned to Persia. Under Tsar Alexander I, Russia definitively annexed Azerbaijan under the Gyulistan Treaty, concluding Russo-Persian War of 1804-1813. The larger part of Azerbaijan remained under Persian rule and now belongs to Iran. Persia unsuccessfully tried to retake Azerbaijan during the second war (1826-1828) and the two parts of Azerbaijan remain divided at the Aras (Araks) River. Azerbaijan remained under foreign control until recent times except for its brief independence in 1918-1920. It again became independent on August 30, 1991 during the breakup of the Soviet Union.



The Ateshgah

Azerbaijan's petroleum deposits were known to exist since ancient times. As one of the holy centers of Zoroastrianism, Azerbaijan was the location of numerous holy shrines which prominently featured eternal flames fed by natural gas seepage. One landmark is The Ateshgah (or Fire Temple) on the Apsheron peninsula, founded in XVIII century by the fire-worshippers from Northern India.

Only in 19th century however did full blown production of oil begin. Within a very short period Baku transformed into an important commercial city. By 1821, approximately 120 oil wells were functioning on the Apsheron peninsula. In 1844 in Baku's suburb Bibi Heybat the first oil well ever drilled (rather than dug by hand) was established.



The smell of oil attracted investors and oil developers from all over the world, including Alfred Nobel and his brothers. Baku's emerging oil industry was one source of his great wealth; he was a largest single stock holder in the Nobel Brothers' Petroleum Company. After Alfred Nobel's death in 1896 his will was executed and the Nobel Prize established with the first ones awarded in 1901. The money Alfred Nobel acquired in Baku is still being used to honor Nobel Laureates.

One of the first oil gushers of the Nobels in Baku (1880s).

By the turn of the century, Baku was the global center for the international oil industry. By that time Baku produced more than half of the world's oil output – 11.3 million tons per year – a worldwide record at the time. Even today, Baku still ranks as one of the largest centers for the production of oil industry equipment.

It's at that time (around 1903) that Mark and Perla Klionsky moved from Belarus to Baku. Over the years [Mark Klionsky](#) became successful businessman and came into the possession of an iron foundry and several oil wells.

Taken by the Bolsheviks in 1917, the city then was occupied during the next two years by the White Army and its foreign allies (mainly Great Britain). From 1918 to 1920, Baku belonged to the independent, anti-Bolshevik Azerbaijan republic. In April 1920 Baku was taken by 11th Red Army and Soviet power was established in Azerbaijan. In March 1922 Azerbaijan was merged with Georgia and Armenia to form the Transcaucasian Federation of Soviet Republics. In 1936 this federation was reorganized into three separate Soviet republics.

During the presence of British troops in the region, Mark and Perla's daughter [Louba](#) studied in Tiflis (now Tbilisi, Georgia), where she met her future husband Jos Rubens, a British Navy officer. Through their own channels of friends and relatives Mark and Perla made an inquiry about Joshua Rubenstein's family, who were originally from Belarus and approved their marriage. Louba left for London where she settled for the rest of her life. She did not see her family again until the end of the WWII in 1945.

By 1920-1921 oil production declined in Azerbaijan due to World War I and political instability in the region. In 1921 oil extraction fell to 2.46 million tons, reverting to a level produced in Azerbaijan in 1872. By 1923, stability was re-established and in 1940 Azerbaijan achieved highest level of oil extraction in its history at 23.3 million tons. In 1971 cumulative oil production in Azerbaijan reached one billion tons, but in the second half of the 20th century much of the oil reservoirs had been exhausted, and drilling had extended into the sea.

On May 24, 1924, the Azerbaijan Revolutionary Committee decreed the nationalization of the Azerbaijan oil industry and all oil producing, refining, oil trade, and auxiliary enterprises were declared state property. The Oil Committee, created to manage the oil business in Azerbaijan, liquidated 272 private petroleum companies located in the Baku region. [Mark Klionsky](#)'s factory and wells were nationalized at this time and he had to work as a manager in an iron foundry that once belonged to him. Mark and Perla made a decision to leave Baku with their family (except two daughters Sofia and Esphir) and go to Palestine. By the late 1930s millions of people vanished in Stalin's camps including many one time business owners. Sofia and Esphir never saw their parents and siblings ever again, but despite atmosphere of fear, not withstanding the danger they continued to communicate with their parents and siblings, which resulted in numerous interrogations and persecution.

During WWII both of [Sofia Bogod](#)'s sons, [Leonid and Alexander](#), fought in the Soviet Army against Nazi Germany. Adolph Hitler planned for the German Army to attack Baku on September 25, 1942 to gain access to its coveted oil resources which provided during the war 63.2% of Soviet oil output. After capturing Baku Hitler planned to move on to Iran, Iraq and India. While there was fierce fighting in the Battle of the Caucasus, the Germans could not fight their way into the region and WWII did not directly touch on Azeri territory.

At the beginning of 19th century, at the time of its conquest by Russia, Baku was limited to the enwalled Old City with only about 300 houses and 3,000 inhabitants on the 21.5 hectares (ha) of territory. Only after the termination of the Russo-Persian War of 1826-1828 the city began to grow. By 1874 its population was 15,000, in 1897 – 112,000, in 1918 – 248,300 (on 1,300 ha of territory), in 1952 – 982,000 and in 1982 – 1,618,000. In 2005, Baku has an estimated population of 2,036,000 people.



The Old City. Flat roofs covered with tar are typical for Baku

Baku is known for the longevity of its people. In 1985, for instance, there were 1,400 persons over the age of 90 and 120 persons over the age of 100 in the city. The trend, however, is not exclusive to Baku and applies to the Caucasus region as a whole.

Baku is located amid a dry, semiarid steppe. The nearest forest is 2-3 hours drive away. A special feature of this city is the constant north wind (khazri) which blows day and night. During the summer, high humidity and sweltering heat sizzle its citizens. Throughout the winter the ferocious winds chill their bones.



The one of the most widely known theories about the origin of the city's name suggests that Baku comes from Persian "bad kube", meaning "city of winds". The curvilinear planning of streets not only assisted in blocking the gusts of the ice-cold North wind of Baku in the winter, but also created coolness in day time, owing to the shadow falling from walls of houses in streets.



Due to the active oil development Baku is a very polluted city. Longtime residents remember a beach in the city bay area in 1930s. Now a thin film of crude oil covers the sea surface and visitors can smell oil walking along the seafront park, rebuilt in 1960s. Baku's best beaches are on the northern side of Apsheron Peninsula outside the city borders.



Oil wells in Baku and vicinity were pumping oil into reservoir lakes. The ecological disaster still plagues the region. These pictures are about 100 years apart

The Old City remains in the center of Baku, called by local people Icheri Sheher (Inner City). The fortress surrounding the Old City became the first location in Azerbaijan to be classified as a world cultural site by UNESCO (2000). Most of the original walls and towers remain intact. The Old City is picturesque, with its maze of narrow cobbled streets, minarets, medieval palaces, and ancient buildings.



Shemakhi Gate of the Old City



Divan Khana – heart of the Shirvan Shah's Palace



Poem in stone

Modern Baku spreads outside the walls, its streets and buildings rising up hills that rim the Bay of Baku, which resembles bays in Naples (Italy) and Izmir (Turkey).



General view of Baku Bay from the highest point during the Oil Boom in late 19th century (left) and 100 years later

The architectural styles and methods used in the construction in the 19th century were very diverse, sometimes depending not on the skills of architects, but on the customer's taste. Buildings in "new-renaissance", "new-gothic", "new-baroque", "classicism", "ampere", "modern" styles appeared in Baku. There were also buildings in the pseudo-oriental, the so-called "Moorish" style. Sometimes two or more architectural styles were mixed in one building due to the customer's requests.



These two buildings were built during the oil boom period (1880-1920): Baku City Hall, 1904 (left) and Academy Of Science, 1913 (right)

This was a period of rapid development, with new residential districts, gardens and park systems, transport and city communications, oil producing and refining industrial districts all established at the time. This created unique architecture of Baku, which has still not lost its beauty.

Azerbaijan

Special administrative subdivisions are the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic with mostly Azeri population, which is separated from the rest of Azerbaijan by a strip of Armenian territory and Nagorno-Karabach Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) with mostly Armenian population (65% in 1988), which after recent war with Armenia now belongs to Armenia.

A small part of Nakhichevan borders Turkey to the northwest. Azerbaijan also borders Russia, Armenia, Georgia and Iran. The population of the country is 7,912,000 as of 2005 (estimate). Azerbaijan is about the size of Portuguese and slightly smaller than the state of Maine.

Ethnically and linguistically, the Azerbaijani people are descended from the nomadic Turkish tribes that migrated west across Transcaucasia into present day Turkey more than one thousand years ago. The Azeri (Azerbaijani), a Turkic-speaking, Shiite Muslim people, make up about 90% of the republic's population. Azerbaijani society is more secular than that of some neighboring Muslim countries.

Azeris were referred to as Tatars (Tartars) by the Russians; the name Azerbaijani came into use in the pre-revolutionary decades at first among urban nationalist intellectuals. Only in the Soviet period did it become the official and widely accepted name for this people.

In 1945, Stalin sought to unite the Azeri Soviet Republic with (Iranian) South Azerbaijan, which had and still has a majority Azeri population (about 15 million), but under international protests Soviet troops were forced to retreat from Persia, which was occupied by British, American and Soviet troops since 1941.



The Azeri people are friendly and welcoming; their food is delicious and complex. In a typical Azeri house you always will be treated with a freshly brewed tea, which is served in a small pear shaped glasses called “armud” (pear) with hard sugar, sweets and preserves. Public tea houses (chaikhanas) are ubiquitous in Azerbaijan, but according to the customs only men gather there.

Approximately 400,000 Azerbaijani Americans now live in the United States, the majority of them being originally from Southern (Iranian) Azerbaijan. California is home to the largest Azerbaijani-American community in the U.S. (100,000). The greater

Washington, D.C. and New York areas account for the second largest population of Azeris living in the United States.

Jews in Azerbaijan

There are three main Jewish communities on the territory of the present-day Azerbaijan: Mountain Jews, Ashkenazi Jews and Georgian Jews. There are also rapidly diminishing communities of [Ger and Subbotnik Jews](#) in the village Privolnoe near Iran border. The biggest and most ancient is the community of Mountain Jews, which have lived in Azerbaijan for many centuries. They are known by this name because they live primarily in the foothills of the northern Caucasus Mountains, near the city of Kuba, in the Krasnaya Sloboda village. They are believed to be descendants of Jews enslaved in Babylon during the First Exile from Israel in the 6th century BC. Some sources trace their departure from Israel in ancient times and not to the Babylonian exile, but to the time of the Assyrians. Mountain Jews are often considered to be remnants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. According to local records, 972 families of Mountain Jews lived in Sloboda at the end of the nineteenth century, running eleven synagogues and twenty Jewish schools. Only one synagogue is still active today.



The synagogue in Krasnaya Sloboda, turned into a textile factory in 1959

Mountain Jews speak a dialect that resembles Farsi, the main language of Iran, but there is a mixture of other languages as well. They have preserved their traditions and way of life and are

considered to be more orthodox than the Ashkenazi Jews.

Muslim Azerbaijan has a centuries-old history of tolerance and respect for its Jewish minority. Jews felt comfortable here and unlike other anti-Semitic republics as Russia, Ukraine and others this land attracted Jews from other parts of the Soviet Union.

Ashkenazi Jews first appeared in Azerbaijan soon after the Russian Empire's conquest in the 19th century. Ashkenazi Jews were attracted to Baku during the first oil boom in the late 1800s, with such notable Jewish families as the Rothschilds playing important roles in developing Baku's oil production. The Rothschilds established their oil and commercial company in the Caspian-Black Sea region in 1885. Georgian Jews appeared in Azerbaijan at the same time as Ashkenazi Jews.

In Soviet times the number of Jews living in Azerbaijan tripled. There is a folk-saying about a resident of Baku who is asked of his nationality. His reply is "I am Bakinet's" – the person from Baku, Bakunian. And this was true. Mixed marriages involving all nationalities were rather commonplace in Baku and as a result, multicultural families were very common.

Of the many Jewish intermarriages, European Jews more frequently married Russians, while Mountain Jews tend to marry Azeris, which reflected similarities of the respective cultures.

Baku was the first city in the former Soviet Union to officially allow the teaching of Hebrew in 1987. Students and teachers of these first Hebrew classes later organized the first Jewish cultural society and registered it with the Minister of Culture in 1989, although local authorities changed the name to the Club of Jewish Culture “Alef”. Many other Jewish organizations were subsequently created in Baku. Some were officially registered, such as the Azerbaijan-Israel Society which included well known Azerbaijani and Jewish lawyers, scientists, and musicians. Many other organizations existed under the Club “Alef” umbrella, created and operated by club enthusiasts.

In order to educate the Jewish population in Azerbaijan, two organizations – the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the World Jewish Agency (Sochnut) – have been actively spreading awareness of Jewish culture and traditions. Other organizations, such as B’nai B’rith, also provided help with different activities.

Mass-scale emigration and aliya of Azerbaijani Jews started in the late 1980s. Some important reasons for this emigration included the unstable political and economic situation in the republic in 1989-1993 (including the ongoing war with Armenia, perestroika, nationalist-inspired murders of Armenians, military intervention, curfew, etc.). Overall about 45,000 people emigrated from Azerbaijan to Israel from 1989 to 2002; many emigrated to the United States, Canada, Australia, Germany and other countries. Big communities of Mountain Jews now exist in Israel and the United States. Mountain Jews are easily distinguishable on the streets of New York by their traditional Azerbaijani-Caucasian clothes.

In late 1980s approximately 60,000 Jews lived in Azerbaijan, 38,000 of whom lived in Baku. According to data available to Baku religious community leaders, about 16,000 Jews now live in Azerbaijan, including:

- Mountain Jews - 11,000 people (6,000 in Baku; 3,600 in Kuba; and 1,300 in other regions of the country);
- Ashkenazi Jews - 4,300 people (3,300 in Baku)
- Georgian Jews - about 600 people.



Baku has 2 synagogues: an Ashkenazi (which is traditionally shared with much smaller community of Georgian Jews) and a Sephardi. A new three-story synagogue opened in 2003 for the Ashkenazi and Georgian Jews, replacing the old run down semi-basement building that the Soviet government had assigned for a synagogue in 1946 and which had previously been used for military storage.

The new Baku synagogue

Azerbaijano-Armenian Conflict and Jews

The term Nagorno-Karabakh translates from the Russian and Turkic languages as "Mountainous Black Garden". The very notion of Nagorno-Karabakh did not exist prior to the creation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) in 1923, which is an enclave inside Azerbaijan. Throughout the history it has been the integral part of the entire Karabakh region where, according to the American scholar Tadeusz Swietochowski, the majority was Azeri.

Nagorno-Karabakh has always been a part of Azerbaijan and never part of Armenia. The myth of its belonging to Armenia was supposed to serve as an ideological background for the Armenian Karabakh nationalist movement. Armenian propaganda even tried to ignore that in 1978 Nagorno-Karabakh celebrated the 150th anniversary of their resettlement from Persia to Karabakh, after it came under Russian rule.

In the spirit of glasnost and perestroika preceding the breakup of the Soviet Union, Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh voted on February 20, 1988 in favor of unification with Armenia, but the conflict itself started in Armenia with the initiative to banish the Azeri minority and convert the Armenian Republic into a homogeneous state in the winter of 1987-1988, when 165,000 Azeris were driven out of Armenia. Following that expulsion, there were serious massacres and atrocities on both sides. Armenians were massacred in the Azerbaijani cities of Sumgait in February 1988, when a first wave of refugees from Armenia arrived in this city and two years later in Baku in January 1990. In Khojali (Nagorno Karabakh) in 1992 Armenians wiped out more than 500 (by some sources more than 700) villagers in one night, including women and children who were trying to flee in the darkness.

The situation deteriorated over time and in January 1990 became even worse. In Baku a mob entered Armenian apartments, threw furniture and belongings from windows and balconies to the streets and set fires. I saw several such fires in a few blocks from our apartment. The government had lost control of the situation and local militia (police) did not intervene which led to a massacre. It was only when most of the Armenian population fled the city and some less fortunate ones were killed that the government declared a state of emergency and Russian troops were brought in to defend Armenians and restore order. By then no Armenians were to be found in the city, except those few in hiding. Rather, the Soviet government sent the troops to punish the city. On January 20 around midnight troops violently entered Baku from several directions. 122 people were reportedly killed during their assault. Five of them were Jews or of Jewish descent, out of which I remember three names.



Near Shemakhi Gate of the Old City, 1990

Alexander Marchevka was a doctor riding in an emergency car with a well lit red cross painted on the outside. The car stopped at an intersection in a suburb outside Baku to yield to moving troops. He and his driver were killed on the spot.

Yan Meerovich with his Azeri friend were helping their elderly Armenian women neighbor escape by plane. On the way to the airport they encountered troops that were entering the city. Yan and his friend were killed, but Armenian women survived to later tell this story. Sadly, Yan Meerovich and his family already had exit visas for Australia and were supposed to live soon. Club Alef tried to help everybody involved and as an active club member and later Chairman of the Board, I visited Yan's family to express our sympathy and offer help. I distinctly remember how at the entrance to their apartment his bullet-riddled muddy coat hung eerily.

The third person was a 16 years old girl named Vera Besantina, who was killed in her fifth floor apartment. She was caught in crossfire with protesters on the roof. Vera was supposed to graduate from school later that year but never lived to see that moment. We did all we could to help her single mother, whom I happened to know from my student years. The city was paralyzed and even getting a casket was a problem due to the accidental death of 20 marines the day before which exhausted all funeral resources. With the help of one of my Hebrew students we managed to get a casket. We picked up Vera's body from the morgue and transported it to the cemetery by van. The city streets were deserted due to ongoing fighting in different parts of the city between the army and armed protesters. The road to the cemetery was blocked and our only remaining choice was to bury her not in the family grave on Jewish cemetery, but in one of the lanes in the Kirov Park, located on the highest point in Baku where others had already started to bury many victims. Yan Meerovich was also buried there. Nowadays the park is renamed and this gravesite is now called Martyr's Lane.



Monument on Martyrs' Lane

In May of 1994 a cease-fire agreement went into effect, which is still in place today. A network of wire fences and minefields now separate the two armies who watch each other warily across a kilometer of no man's land. As a result of the conflict Azerbaijan has lost **16% of its territory**, including Nagorno-Karabkh itself (2,069 sq. miles or 5,358 sq. km) and seven Azerbaijani regions beyond Nagorno-Karabakh (3,404 sq. miles or 8,818 sq. km). The Azerbaijan Army is unlikely to try to recover its lost territory

because it has failed every time in the past.

As of November 1994, there were more than 800,000 refugees and internally displaced persons in Azerbaijan which were driven from the occupied lands and Armenia; about 230,000 ethnic Armenians were driven from their homes in Azerbaijan.

In December 1991, both Armenia and Azerbaijan joined the new Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) that replaced the Soviet Union.

In early 1990s the last Klionsky descendants left Baku for Israel and the United States. This ended a nearly 90 year period when several generations of the Klionskys lived in this international city. They left as Baku started losing its international flavor under the weight of Azeri nationalism, expulsion of Armenians, mass emigration of Russians, Jews and other Russian speaking people. Many Azeris also left the city. Azerbaijan is still facing many challenges including the refugee problem, high levels of poverty and child mortality, a corrupt government, high pollution and others. Azerbaijan continues to share all the formidable problems of the former Soviet republics in making the transition from a command to a market economy.