



Stalin's Forgotten Corner

An unplanned visit to Georgia unearthed signs of vibrant Jewish life, even during the Communist reign. How did the “Gruzinis” of the past manage to keep a warm hold on tradition despite the chilling odds?

BY Ari Greenspan and Ari Z. Zivotofsky

PHOTOS Ari Greenspan

If everything had gone according to plan, you would now be reading about our trip to Tunisia. We'd heard tantalizing anecdotes about shuls in Tunisian caves, and we wanted to see those, and other exotica, firsthand. So we did our research and mapped out a detailed itinerary. As an added perk, we planned to join a small film crew together with Rabbi Eliyahu Birnbaum, a *dayan* and world Jewish traveler, who is putting together a media series called “The Jew of the World.” It's a program after our own hearts, a series that follows his travels to exotic communities to meet the last Jewish remnants and understand their history.

But then when the three *bochurim* were kidnapped and murdered and the Gaza war started, the Israeli foreign ministry warned us of concrete threats toward Israelis in Tunis. We were disappointed that Tunis was no longer on the agenda — at least not this summer — but we didn't cancel our travel plans entirely. Instead, we took a spur-of-the-moment trip to Georgia, a spectacularly beautiful, tree-covered country in the former Soviet Union.

Meat and Vodka Our visits to these off-the-beaten-track (at least for us) communities are often filled with surprises, and they usually teach us how little we know about world Jewry. We figured that we'd see some old Russian types, look at some depressing apartment blocks, and that would be our tour. How wrong we were.

Georgia had close to 100,000 Jews at the beginning of the 20th century, although the majority made aliyah in the '90s or moved to New York. Still, it's one of the oldest-known Jewish communities, and, according to their tradition, some have been there since the era of the Bayis Rishon. Some claim the community was from the original dispersion of the Ten Tribes, while others posit that the Jews fled here after Nevuchadnetzar conquered the first Beis Hamikdash. One thing is for sure — the *kehillah* is ancient, and the Georgian government even announced this year that there

would be official celebrations to mark the 2600th anniversary of Georgian Jewry.

Known by their Russian nickname, Gruzinis, these Jews' indecipherable Georgian language is a Kartvelian language found in the Caucasus, unique to them, with no etymological relatives. Their script is a circular scribble, unlike anything we'd seen before in our travels. In addition, they speak a local Judeo-Georgian language — similar to Yiddish or Ladino — called Ebraeli. We were lucky to get David Aziz, a local *chacham* and *chazzan*, to join us as translator and facilitator.

David, whose sense of *mesorah* and duty to the community is inspiring, is a cheery fellow who learned Torah from the old men of Georgia. Although most people left the strictures of religion under the Communist regime, the Georgians still retained their Judaism. Unlike in other parts of the USSR, here there was very little intermarriage, the shuls generally stayed open, and people managed to continue their lives as Jews. Maybe due to the distance from Moscow, or to the favoritism of Georgian-born dictator Stalin, Gruzia — as it was called by the Russians — seemed to have things a bit better than the rest of the empire. There was never a ban on *shechitah*, so meat was always available, and the community was able to bake matzos without government interference. In fact, on our 1985 trip to Russia to visit refuseniks — those waiting for visas to Israel — there was very little food in general, and certainly no kosher meat. We were sitting in a Moscow succah one day, when all of a sudden a big, hot meat stew and vodka appeared. Our hosts explained that it was courtesy of a Georgian Jew who had a *yahrtzeit*, and that *shechitah* was allowed in his country since the typical constraints were a bit more relaxed over there.

Blessing for the Czar What was the secret of Gruzini Jews' tenacious hold on their past? We got a glimpse when we arrived at night in the capital city of Tbilisi, which was in the middle of a citywide blackout. We hoped the darkness wouldn't be a bad omen as we drove down George Bush Avenue, the main thoroughfare into town. It was named in honor

of the US president's state visit years ago and is a testament to the Western leanings of the country. Georgia is strategically important to Israel as well, in that it shares a southern border with Turkey and Armenia, and Armenia is just north of Iran. Israel has a full embassy and fine relations with Georgia. In fact, people seemed pleased to see us and we wore our *yar-mulkes* proudly — although an old man who showed us his old school building remembers that as a child, the local children would pass around stories of Pesach blood libels. There were blood libels less than a century ago, and of course during the times of the Czar and subsequent Communism life was difficult. But today that seems to be all part of the past.

Tbilisi is still the center of Jewish life, and although it once had many more, today it still boasts three shuls, daily minyanim, a kosher

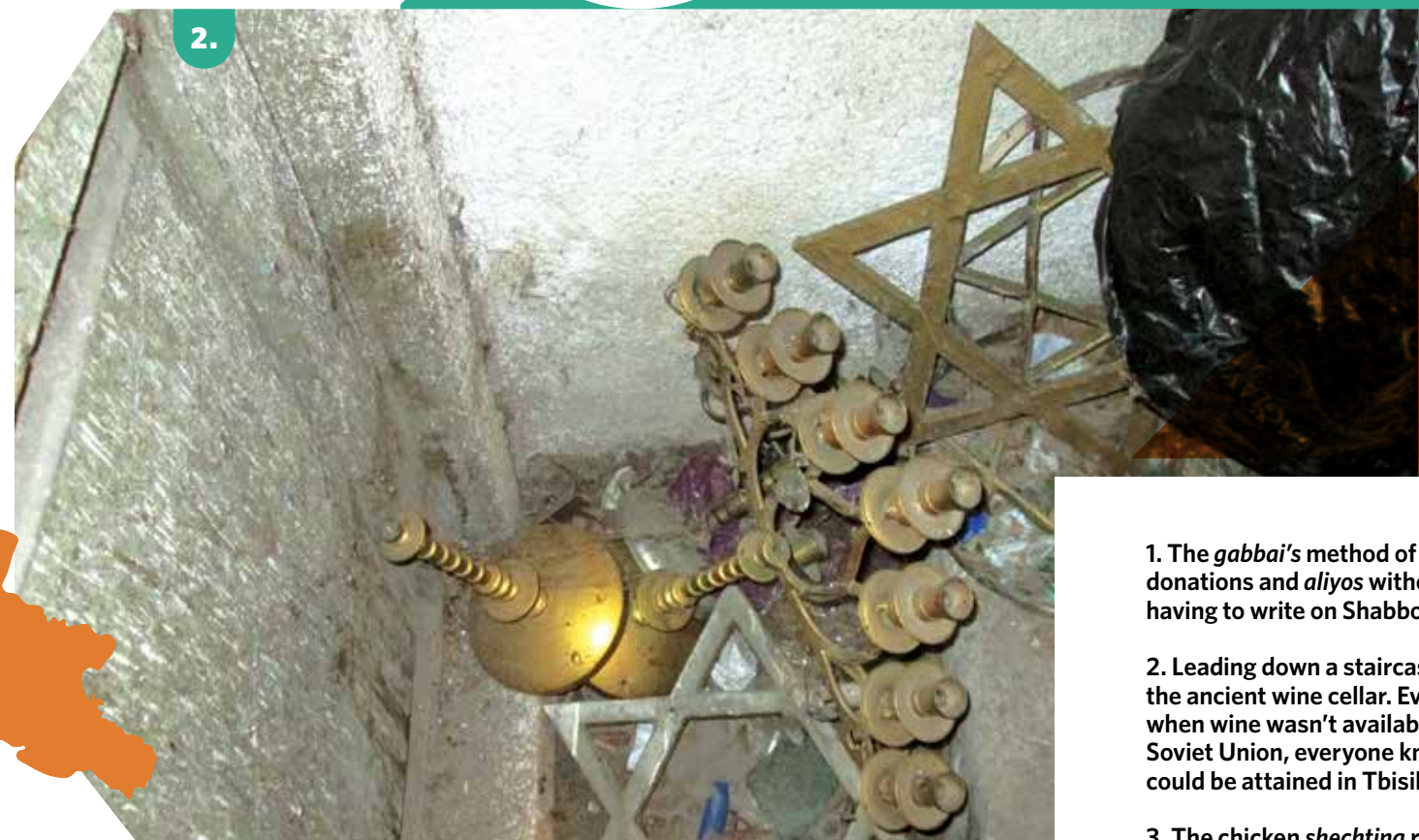
restaurant, and butcher. Here there are distinct *minhagim* and tunes, not to mention food.

While the average Georgian Jew today is not learned, some interesting books are still to be found on the shelves. In one of the shuls, we found a *gabbai's* Shabbos *aliyah* book, which allowed him to keep track of who received an *aliyah* to the Torah and the amount the man donated. The book was handwritten in the local Georgian alphabet. An old Soviet-era siddur still has the prayer for the Communist government of the USSR. "The protector of peace," the community was forced to recite, "should be blessed." Every Jewish community always had a public prayer for the local government or monarch, no matter how

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1. The *gabbai's* method of record donations and *aliyos* without having to write on Shabbos

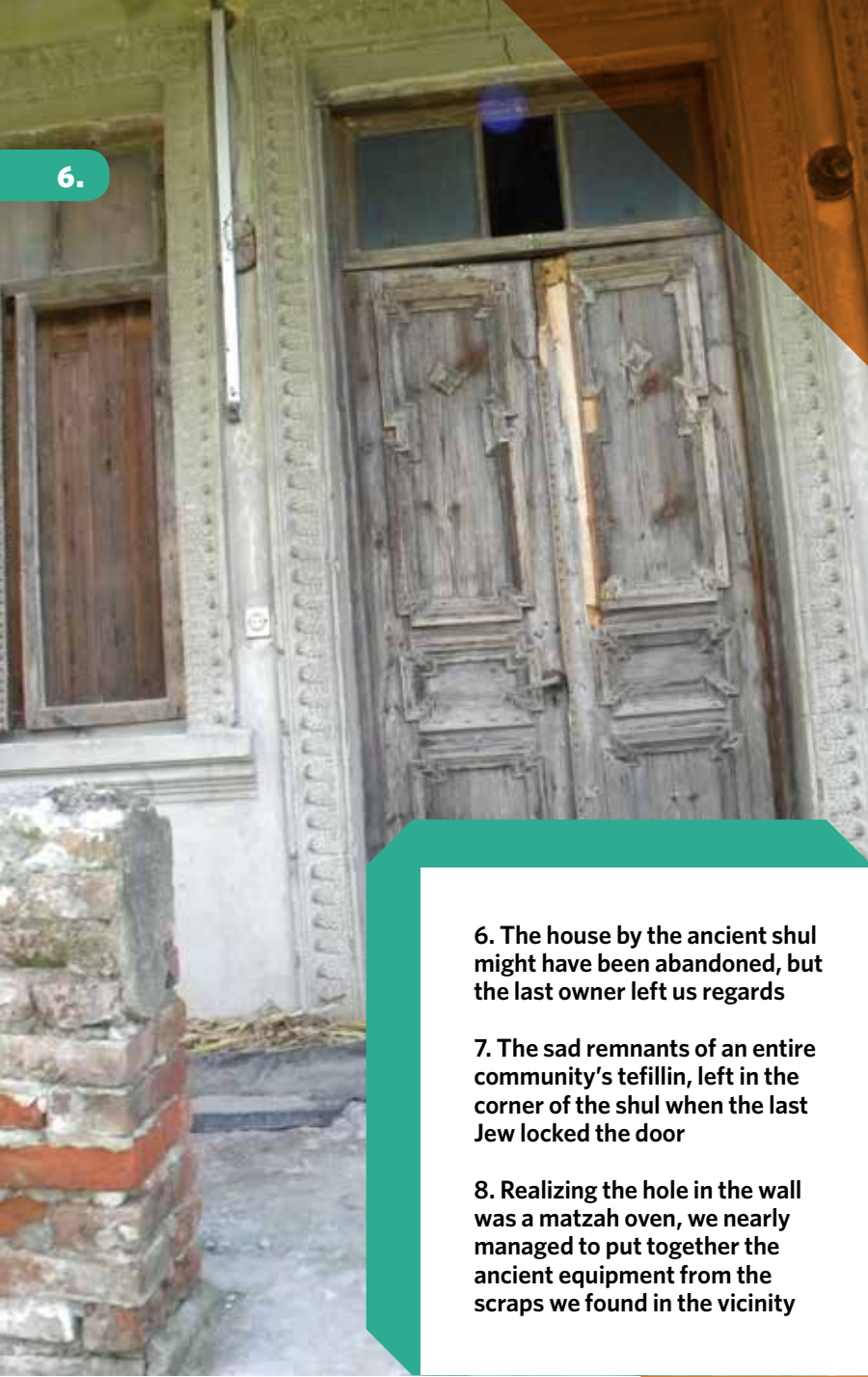
2. Leading down a staircase into the ancient wine cellar. Even when wine wasn't available in the Soviet Union, everyone knew it could be attained in Tbilisi

3. The chicken *shechting* room in the Surami shul was fascinating

for Ari G., who's a trained *shochet* himself

4. We found numerous lead-lined *taharah* boxes from a community that refused to relinquish tradition

5. Our team couldn't resist slapping some dough on the baker's oven and enjoying the results



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6. The house by the ancient shul might have been abandoned, but the last owner left us regards

7. The sad remnants of an entire community's tefillin, left in the corner of the shul when the last Jew locked the door

8. Realizing the hole in the wall was a matzah oven, we nearly managed to put together the ancient equipment from the scraps we found in the vicinity

wicked he was. Who could forget Tevye's *Fiddler on the Roof* blessing for the Czar? "May G-d bless and keep the Czar... far away from us!"

Ever on the lookout for relics of tradition, we asked about old matzah ovens, and were told that matzah used to be made in Tbilisi, but the machinery was thrown out years ago, since the community now imports it from Israel. But despite the imports of kosher food and wine from Israel, the president of the synagogue took us down some stairs into a dark and dank basement room where they still make kosher wine. In fact, Ari G.'s neighbor in Israel, a prominent Russian refusenik from the 1970s and '80s, used to tell him how he would travel from Moscow to Tbilisi in order to get kosher wine — the only place in the Soviet Union where it was available. Looking around the walls between the large wine jugs, we spotted a huge old copper bowl. When we asked him about it, the president of the synagogue said this was the utensil used for mixing the flour and water for the matzah. We also saw bags and bags of *seforim*, talleisim, and tefillin that we hoped were earmarked for burial, as they were outside, exposed to the elements and rotting.

Then we were off to meet one of the old men who've kept the *mesorah* of *tefillah* and songs alive. He was also David's primary teacher. While we were filming and interviewing him, a family of religious Muslims walked by, the women and girls all with their heads covered. They saw the yarmulkes and beards and excitedly started whispering, pointing, and taking pictures of us. We asked where they were from and with great



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conviviality, despite the war going on in Gaza, they said they were from Iran. They even asked if we would mind if we posed for pictures. We parted company with huge waves and big smiles.

Ruined Relics Every little Georgian *kehillah* was its own self-contained community with its own shul, *mikveh*, matzah oven, and *chevra kaddisha*. During our trip, we found numerous lead-lined wooden boxes that were used for the *taharah* process (washing the body before burial). Every box had a hole at the end that could be unplugged to open and release the water used to prepare the body.

Each shul we visited, no matter how small, had an adjoining room for *shechting* chickens. In the town of Gori we went down to the basement of the shul and saw a hole in the wall, and, realizing that it was a matzah oven, we began looking around for all the antique equipment. In the end, we were almost able to put together an entire matzah machine.

Gori has the ignominious honor of being the birthplace of one of the 20th century's most wicked people, Joseph Stalin. After the death of Vladimir Lenin in 1924, Stalin consolidated his rule until he became the undisputed general secretary of the Communist Party, ruling the USSR with an iron fist until his death in 1953. This wicked man was directly responsible for the torture and deaths of between 4 million and 20 million people, and for the suffering and hunger of tens of millions more.

Moving away from Stalin's birthplace to the town of Surami, we took a horse and buggy to the shul to visit the few Jews left there. In the silence of the countryside, it was not hard to imagine the people walking home from shul on Friday night. Because it was nearly impossible to access by car, the carriage drive along the dirt roads made us feel like we were stepping into Jewish history.

There was what looked like an outhouse behind the shul, with a broken door and surrounded by weeds. We entered the main building and found the hallway strewn with old shul benches; then we spotted an opening in the wall in the back. We scaled the benches, risking splinters from the old wood, but it was worth it when we got to the opening: There we found the community *mikveh*. Clearly this was a town that had not used its *mikveh* for many years.

Hungry after that climb, we found one of the many traditional bread bakeries in the country. The bread is just flour and water with no additives, and is approved as kosher. There's no streamlined automation here. An old-fashioned, round, four-foot-high oven that extends another four feet below the floor is heated with wood, while

the dough is slapped on the wall for a flat bread. We felt like kids, but we couldn't resist asking the baker if we could slap some of that dough on the oven wall ourselves.

Time to Leave The village of Kulashi proved to be fascinating as well. The last Jew moved out in 1993, when the last *tefillah* was recited there. The shul campus is on the outskirts of this small picturesque town, with old-fashioned motorbikes and horse-drawn carriages on the streets. People here are friendly and were happy to talk to us. We asked where there was a Jewish house, and they pointed to one on the same block as the shul. We walked over and could see the indentation where the mezuzah had been. The owner came out to see all of us peering at her front door, but she was good-natured about

it. She could have chased us away, but instead just waved and smiled.

Kulashi had two shuls next door to each other — the new shul, built in 1862, and the old shul, built at least 250 years ago, if not more. Walking into the empty old shul was a haunting experience. The old wood floors slant and might never be restored. We started humming Kol Nidrei and the notes reverberating off the ancient wood gave us the chills. The non-Jewish caretaker told us that a few years back, some Israeli tourists

came and walked off with the holy books. She jumped into a taxi and chased them down to get the books back. It seems to be a family tradition: her mother used to guard the shul with a pistol in hand.

Three doors away from the synagogue, we spotted an abandoned house. We assumed it was a Jewish house as it was so close to the shul, and indeed, as we approached through the uncut grass, we examined the front door and found the place where the mezuzah had been. We jimmied the door and through the dust and gloom, saw that some kids had turned it into a gym, with a weight set and sit-up ramp. There was no furniture other than a single built-in cabinet in one room. We opened it up and saw some old lampshades and what looked like a piece of paper on the top shelf. Reaching up, we took down the long roll and discovered we were holding part of a Megillas Esther! It was as if the former occupant — who had undoubtedly left for Israel at least two decades ago — had left it there for us as a memento.

The hidden scroll seemed a fitting finale to our visit, summing up what Georgian Jewry represents: ancient roots, fealty to tradition, and miraculous survival despite overwhelming odds. ●

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