

A Bukharan Woman's Journey to Freedom

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Book changed Dahlia's view of her mother

By Doreen Wachman

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Zina ABRAHAM was born in 1933 in a Soviet Uzbekistan prison. Her pregnant mother DORA had been imprisoned after her diamond merchant husband HASID had escaped to Afghanistan. Possession of diamonds was a crime under the Soviet regime.

Although conditions were harsh in the prison, the female guards supported Dora during the pregnancy and birth.

Mother and daughter were released when Zina was six months old. They were smuggled over the border to Afghanistan to join up with Hasid.

The incredible story of Miami resident Zina, now 90, is told by her daughter, Dahlia Abraham- Klein in *Caravan of Hope — A Bukharan Woman's Journey to Freedom* (Shamashi Press).

Dahlia, who has written other books, including *Silk Road Vegetarian*, *Spiritual Kneading through the Jewish Months* and *Necessary Mourning*, explained: "There are very few anecdotal stories of central Asian Jews.

"Most of them don't even want to talk about their experiences.

"They don't even want to fund any projects to memorialize their stories. But my mother always said she wanted her story written. If I didn't write it, the story is gone."

And an incredible story of adaptability, perseverance and Jewish contribution it is.

Although Dora was freed from her Uzbekistan prison, Dahlia writes that in Afghanistan "she was in a different prison . . . no woman was supposed to see anything on the outside".

Not only were women discriminated against in the Muslim country, but Jews were beginning to become the butt of Nazi anti-semitism in the 1930s.

After the birth of Dora's second daughter in 1935, the family fled from Herat to the Afghani capital Kabul.

But Dora had to mainly bring up her growing family alone as Hasid often travelled abroad on business. She eventually had eight children, of whom Zina was the eldest.

At the age of 12, in order to gain more freedom than women had in Afghanistan, Zina was sent to stay with her aunt Rachel in Peshawar, which was then in India.

Rachel had her eye on Zina as a future bride for her 19-year-old son Yehuda, whom she did eventually marry.

But first Zina had to leave India for Afghanistan because of the pre-independence unrest between India and Pakistan.

With the establishment of the state of Israel and heightened antisemitism in Afghanistan, Zina, her mother and siblings left for the new state, where Zina married Yehuda and returned with him to live in Bombay.

After the wedding Dora, whose husband had been absent from her on business for so long — it was 10 years before Hasid joined his family in Israel — told her daughter: "Wherever your husband goes, you go. Never let him leave you."

Zina followed her mother's advice. In 1956 she and her husband emigrated to New York, but in the 1960s Yehuda set up a branch of his jewelery business in Thailand.

As Dahlia was growing up, her mother often left her with nannies and other family members as Zina accompanied Yehuda there.

Dahlia said: "I tremendously resented my mother always being away. As a young child I didn't understand it.

"Writing the book and as a mother myself, I came to understand that what they were doing was greater."

Yehuda and Zina were very instrumental in helping many Bukharian Jews leave their Asian countries, to such an extent that on a New York visit, then Israel Sephardi Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef called on them to thank them for their efforts.

Dahlia recalls: "It was in the early 1980s when I was a child. Ovadia Yosef was like a superstar. We had paparazzi outside our house. There was a very big hullabaloo around the visit."

After establishing a Sephardi congregation in Queens, New York, Yehuda and Zina were responsible for establishing one of Thailand's first synagogues, Even Chen, which began in Yehuda's office.

A visit to the Lubavitcher Rebbe in New York, resulted in the couple building a mikva in Bangkok. The present large Chabad facilities in Thailand were built on the original efforts of Yehuda and Zina.

Dahlia said: “My parents always thought outside the box. They did not stay stuck in an insulated box. They were very well known for being movers and shakers.”

After Yehuda died in 2014, Zina moved from New York to Miami, where she began to tell her life story to a Chabad women’s group.

Dahlia said: “My mother never got stuck. She always said, if it’s not working, get up and move, push forward. Nothing’s going to come to you.

“You’ve got to make it happen. Always reinvent yourself. It was part of her character makeup, being the oldest sibling, she always took the responsibility of the family on her shoulders.”