

LANGSTON HUGHES:  
POEMS, PHOTOS & NOTEBOOKS  
FROM TURKESTAN

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LANGSTON HUGHES



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# KARIM AHMEDI: POEM FOR LANGSTON HUGHES ON HIS ARRIVAL TO UZBEKISTAN

Ahmedi's version of this poem is difficult to read. The Arabic handwriting is unsteady, as if a child had spelled out some of the words, and probably reflects the official change in script, along with some desire to retain tradition. Arabic script, like cursive, is written continuously, but here the letters are not always strung together, making the poem a challenge to decipher. The poem is divided into quatrains, a curious move since the Soviets discouraged archaic Turko-Persian styles in contemporary writing. Though it begins in the flowery, lyrical format of a love poem, it doesn't maintain the form or style, veering into something much more sloganeering towards the end. Here, for the first time, is an excerpt, translated by my father, Abdulsamad Saed. Directly following is an excerpt of the version that Hughes had on file, designated by him as "Dour Soviet No. 3."

## Poem for Langston Hughes on his Arrival to Uzbekistan

Crossing many oceans, you've come  
Leaving your family behind.  
I saw you and I felt wrapped in the curls of your hair.  
The black and white of you,  
a protective eye talisman,  
entered my poor home.  
When I looked in your beautiful eyes,  
I loved you. In front of your glowing face,  
your words came like stars and now you must hold my words.  
I am powerless in the face of the Komsomol.  
I am hiding.... The Negroes are a sacred race...  
low is anyone who calls them barbarians [vakhsi]...  
our tongues are folded away,  
we have many novels, poems that are woven in tears.



Hughes with Karim Ahmedi who is dressed in traditional Uzbek Chapan, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 1933.

## Listen to me, my Dear Langston

To L. H. on his arrival in Uzbekistan  
I greet your arrival—  
The hero man—hey you! Who came  
Across the ocean!  
The lion who conquered the waves of the sea.  
I am bound to you as tightly as the curls of your hair.  
And when I saw your eyes I loved you!  
Welcome you, the poor son of the West!  
When my eyes look into your  
Lively laughing eyes I see the suppression  
Of your people.  
But when I see your smiling face I raise my fist against the West!  
Why? Because in your face there are the winds of cold bitter days.  
Their aim is to take you by the throat  
To oppress you! The devils!



## POSTSCRIPT

How did I, a poor American Negro, get way down south in the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics—way down in Taskhent, Bokhara, Merv, Samarkand—almost to the Indian border, almost to Western China? I sat in the courtyard of Tamerlane's tomb and wondered, "Am I dreaming?" I looked at the camel caravans starting out into the Kizil Kum, saying to myself, "Is this me, way over here in oldest Asia?"

—Langston Hughes

LANGSTON HUGHES WROTE this passage in a handwritten draft of his essay "USA to USSR," and I often returned to it while researching his archives at both the Schomburg and Beinecke. I can easily reverse the path of Hughes' journey and ask: "How did I, a poor graduate student of Uzbek roots and Afghan birth, get *here* to Harlem (Schomburg Center) and New Haven (the Beinecke at Yale)? And, just as Hughes felt elated as he sat by the tomb of Amir Timur,<sup>26</sup> so I felt the same, standing over Hughes' ashes interred beneath a floor medallion in the foyer of the Schomburg.

As I sifted through Hughes' handwritten notes, clippings, and photos of his journey to Central Asia, I achieved two things: I traced the travels of an African American poet to a place far from familiar, and I found threads of my own family history from the birthplace of my ancestors. My family history begins in the very places that Langston Hughes visited and wrote about: Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara.

Mir Fauziljan, my great-uncle, was thirty years old sometime after 1921 and before 1925 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.<sup>27</sup> He was a descendant

<sup>26</sup> The rest of this passage is about how he feels writing all of this in front of Amir Timur's tomb in Uzbekistan.

<sup>27</sup> The exact time is not clear because everything was passed down by memory. Very little of the written record survived the multiple migrations of my ancestors: from Uzbekistan to China, India, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and, finally, the United States.

of an aristocratic family and served as governor in Soviet Tashkent. During the day he worked for the Soviet mission while, at night, he supported the counter-revolutionary movement of Turkestani nationalists, the *basmachi*. He fed the *basmachi* the locations of weaponry, goods, and other relevant information. *Basmachi* means the "overtakers." In the Turkic languages, to *bas* (pronounced more like the English word "boss"), means to press down on; and *machi* is the one doing this. The *basmachi* are "ones who press down," to claim, or otherwise "take possession." The Bolsheviks used the term *basmachestvo* to mean "marauders" or "thieves" in reference to how the *basmachi* dressed, covering their faces, working at night, and using stolen weaponry. The roots of an uprising that broke out in 1918, when some 25,000 Turkestani people were killed, were seeded in the anti-conscription movement several years earlier, in which Central Asian peoples refused to serve the Russian Empire in the First World War.

The legend I was raised on was that the *basmachi* wrapped half of their faces in disguise and worked on stealth missions at night. Women were part of the rebellion, and dressed in *paranji*, full veil that covered their body and faces. Growing up, my grandfather witnessed a group of women—wives, mothers, grandmothers—rolling out the famous Turkestani carpets that they wove by hand on the new train tracks that connected Central Asia to Russia. The men were on horseback ready for ambush. The carpets worked to derail a train filled with potatoes. Since potatoes are not native to Central Asia, they were transported in from Russia as a cheap food source for the military. The women took the food supply while the men stole the weapons. These kinds of attacks required inside knowledge from other *basmachi* working in the Soviet government. *Basmachi* members were also White Russians, elites from the former Imperial



Czarist regime, who supported nationalist movements in an attempt to destabilize the Soviet government.

Being a double agent was one of the worst crimes in Turkestan in the 1920s. As Edward Allworth wrote:

At the Sixteenth Congress of the All-Union Communist Party in Moscow (1930), where Stalin ordered campaigns against 'local nationalism' and 'great-power chauvinism', the Party was instructed to fight for complete exposure and eradication of *ikkiyuzlamachilik* (*dvurush-nichestovo*) (double dealing), which was described as the new tactic of anti-Communist groups by which they ostensibly bowed to the Party but actually continued to resist it.<sup>28</sup>

Double-dealing as a nationalist counter-revolutionary strategy had been in use as far back as 1921.

Accusations of being *ikkiyuzlamachilik*, a double-agent (literally meaning "two-facedness" in Turkestani), and working for the *basmachis* was taken quite seriously and those accused were quickly killed. Mir Fauziljan's identity as a *basmachis* had been made known to Soviet officials. A fellow *basmachis*, a White Russian named Gorgy, notified him that the military was on their way to find him. Before being captured, he fled on horseback to Kazakhstan with another *basmachis*, hoping to make it to China.

The Soviet soldiers rounded up the remaining members of Mir Fauziljan's family, young and old, including my great grandparents, my great uncles and aunts, and took them to their *hovli*, courtyard,<sup>29</sup> where they were all shot. The elaborate home of the Mir family, once symbolizing the harmonious merging of former Turkestan aristocrats with the Soviet government, became a gruesome reminder of Soviet power. The fear of being implicated along with this *ikkiyuzlamachilik*

<sup>28</sup> Allworth, Edward "Qizil Qalam and Uzbekistan's Independent Communists," *Uzbek Literary Politics* (1964), p. 126.

<sup>29</sup> Central Asian families live in large family complexes. These are multi-generational homes that can be as expansive as a few New York City blocks. At the center of these multiple yet connected homes is a courtyard.

family was so great that no one would come out to bury the victims, and their bodies were left to instill further terror and fear in the *basmachis*. In the midst of this massacre, Mir Fauziljan's half-brother, a three-month old baby, Mir Hussein, was the lone survivor. His mother had shielded him with her body. Another younger brother, Mir Kaamiljan, seventeen years old at the time, was en route from Moscow, where he had been attending school. This frightened teenage brother of Mir Fauziljan, who stood at the gates of his family home, now an open gravesite, would be my grandfather. Kaamiljan rescued his infant brother from his stepmother's arms. The remaining *basmachis* helped Kaamiljan flee on horseback, also through Kazakhstan.

Meanwhile, Mir Fauziljan reached Ili, China, through Kazakhstan. Ili was known as Almaliq, for its small sweet apples. Kublai Khan had a penchant for the apples there and so he had favored this area during his reign in the thirteenth century. It is a place where multiple languages are spoken, even now. Renamed as Yining Province, bordering Kazakhstan, there are still Russian signs on stores and Turkic language spoken among other languages. In Ili, the Soviet soldiers caught my great-uncle. He had shaved off his hair and worn clothing to fit in with the villagers, but his height at six feet gave him away.

To make his trial official, Soviet soldiers planted a red flag with a hammer and sickle in the grass in front of the home where he had taken refuge. Even though they were on Chinese land, the soldiers were brazen enough to act as if in Soviet territory. In the makeshift trial — on land that was only temporarily colonized — Mir Fauziljan was sentenced to death and publicly hanged. The soldiers then reclaimed their flag and went back across the border to Kazakhstan. He must have known that he did not have much time because he had given a friend, another *basmachis*, a photo of himself in China, and a letter to take to his younger brother, my grandfather, Kaamiljan.



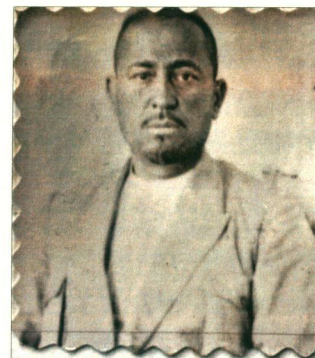
The friend had hid in a nearby home and watched the “trial” and the lynching. Once the soldiers were long gone, he buried Mir Fauziljan and read the letter.

The letter urged my grandfather to flee to India. It never reached him, though he did eventually make it to India after much hardship—first in China, then on a caravan trip over the Himalayas to enter British India. According to a note scribbled in the family’s Holy Quran, also used to record marriage dates, births, and new homes, Kaamiljan invested in a new home in Bombay in 1933. He prospered in India, putting himself and his brother through dental school in Hong Kong, in case the factories he had built were no longer viable. The Hindu-Muslim riots during the partition of India-Pakistan in 1947 did indeed destroy the factories and, soon after, he fled with his wife to Afghanistan where my father was born. Had my father been born a few months earlier, he’d have been Indian. They settled in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, where my grandfather, Kaamiljan, and great-uncle, Mir Hussein, served as the first dentists.

By a miracle of timing and chance, the letter reached my father a generation later when he was in Saudi Arabia during the 1970s oil-boom where he, also trained as a dentist, had taken us. There my father met political refugees from Turkestan who had fled to the cities of Taif and Mecca. The tightknit communities comprised of 1930s refugees (now Saudi citizens) were referred to as “Bukhari.” It was here, when my father was at a dinner party, that an elderly survivor<sup>30</sup> approached him and asked if he was the son of Kaamiljan. Once assured of my father’s lineage, he recounted the story of Mir Fauziljan’s death. This was the same man who had witnessed my great-uncle’s lynching at the hands of the Soviets as they had illegally held court in China. By this time both Mir Kaamiljan and Mir Hussein had passed

<sup>30</sup> My father said that he never knew his name. As an elder, it would be inappropriate for my father to ask his name. He only referred to him as uncle.

away. My grandfather lived his life longing for his brother, whom he believed had perished trying to cross the Himalayas. A week after my father met him, the elderly survivor passed away. He was well into his nineties when he passed these things on to my father. This devotion to my great-uncle’s memory is how I know this family history and how we have this photo of Mir Fauziljan:



Mir Fauziljan in Ili, China, c. 1920s.

This compelling story of my own family remained with me as I conducted my research. It is significant that Hughes’ trip to Turkestan came at a crucial moment in Central Asian and Russian history, just at the fall of the *basmachi* and the Turkestan Nationalist movement (1917-1932), and just prior to the infamous Stalinist purges (1937-1938). The last of the Turkestan nationalists were brought to trial circa 1932,<sup>31</sup> the same year as Hughes’ trip, and the word “basmachi” appears in his notes.

<sup>31</sup> This is how a diaspora of Central Asians was created in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, South Asia, Turkey and the US. The term Turkestan is now used mainly to refer to the North Western regions. In Saudi Arabia, refugees from Turkestan were among the few who became citizens. Last names like Turkestani, Kashgari, Bukhari, are the legacy they have maintained, but not many preserved the language. In the US, New Jersey claims the first Turkestan American Association. It was through this route that we came to the US and ended up in an area of Brooklyn filled with Crimean Tatars, Turks, Kazakhs and Uzbeks.



Hughes makes note of an older Turkic language, Chagatay, that connected the majority of Turkestan. It is the language I speak at home. In some cases, exilic consciousness tends to preserve languages and customs as if time stopped at the moment of migration. In my family's personal time capsule, we continue to speak in this rather antiquated Uzbek. This is not just us, but a diaspora of Turkestani people who fled Central Asia in that time period.

This family gift of language, tenaciously preserved in exile, proved invaluable in helping me translate the notes on the margins, the poems of Karim Ahmedi, and give names to the faces of the people Hughes befriended. In the midst of this treasure of photos, letters, poems and translations, this journey has been an intensely personal process for me, unfolding a chain of significance from Hughes' journey in Central Asia to the long-lost traditions of Turkestani poets and, finally to me, the great-niece of the *basmachi*.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

LANGSTON HUGHES (1902-1967) was born in Joplin, Missouri, and grew up in Kansas, Illinois, and Ohio. In the 1920s, he gained a reputation as a poet, becoming a leading figure in what he called in his first autobiography "the black renaissance." Hughes' earliest works appeared in W.E.B. Dubois' *The Crisis*. His first volume of poetry *The Weary Blues* was published in 1926. Known as the unofficial poet laureate of Harlem, Hughes was one of the most significant writers of the Harlem Renaissance but his influence could be felt around the world. A prolific poet, prose-writer, and playwright, he served as an example to several generations of African American writers, always lending his support to younger people and new movements in the arts, including the Umbra Arts Workshop, a key precursor to the Black Arts Movement. Always a great traveler, from 1932-1933, Hughes journeyed to the Soviet Union, spending much of his time in Central Asia and becoming the first American poet to be translated into Uzbek, and the first to translate Uzbek poetry into English. *The Weary Blues* was published in Tashkent in 1933. Hughes returned to the US from his journey with a number of notebooks, hundreds of photographs, and clippings of poems from the Central Asian writers he met there. This trip, along with his work in Spain on behalf of the Republic (featured in *Lost & Found Series III*), formed major episodes in Hughes' public political engagement. While popular and held in high international esteem, Hughes faced backlash at home. Despite his wishes to see work from this period gathered, these writings and photographs from his trip to the Soviet Union were never published in book form. Langston Hughes, award winning poet, prose writer, memoirist, essayist, playwright, librettist, translator, and major 20th c. cultural figure, passed away in Harlem May 22, 1967.