

80

years

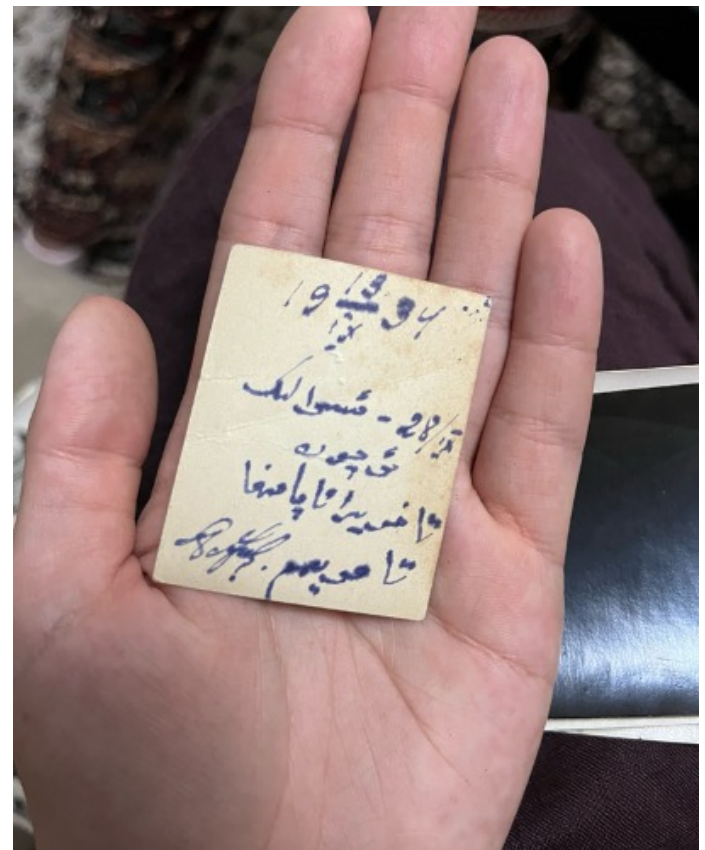
Curled up in the armchair in my grandmother's apartment in Tashkent, I rummage through her photographic archive. It is not really a proper archive, but a hard shell briefcase from the '60s or '70s, filled with pictures, that my aunt produced, upon my request and after a thorough search around the apartment, from under the dusty cupboard in her bedroom.

It is late, my grandma is sleeping in the other room. We sit around a coffee (or rather, tea, since it's Uzbekistan) table with my brother and my aunt, sifting through the pictures of my grandmother's university years, her wedding, my grandfather's study trips to Russia - both of them worked as microbiology researchers for most of their lives - then baby pictures of my dad and my aunt. Photos are dated at the back, with comments always in Cyrillic, and mostly in Russian.

Gradually we move further back in time - my grandmother as a girl of seventeen, her parents as a young couple, her own grandmother... And many irrelevant to me pictures of random relatives in between (and believe me, Uzbek families tend to be quite large), whom my aunt is busy identifying, taking the time to explain the extraneous familial relations, to my and my brother's quiet discontent.

All of it becomes rather a drag until a small visa-sized portrait of someone so painstakingly familiar - although I am sure I have never met him in my life - surfaces up in the pile of photos that overflow the hard shell briefcase. The resemblance between us is uncanny, it almost feels like I am looking in the mirror. Definitely a relative, says my aunt, let's see what there is on the back... Well.

1934.



**T**he Uzbek language suffered one too many reforms in the last 100 years.

It is a tongue in the Turkic language group spoken by an estimation of 35 to 40 million people, with a long history of evolution as a literary language since as early as the 14th century. Originally, the script used to record it was Arabic, which was brought in by the Arab conquest in the 8th century; Persian and Arabic were then used for science and poetry, while Turkic was the vernacular. In 1219 the region was invaded by Genghis Khan, who left the rule to one of his sons, Chagatai. Modern Uzbek is a succession of the Chagatai Turkic (Karluk) entwined with Persian and Arabic influences. The biggest proponent of Uzbek as a literary language was the 15th-century poet, writer, and statesman Ali-Shir Nava'i, who, controversially in his time, believed that his native Turkic-rooted language was superior to Persian when it comes to lyric expression; he is considered the founder of modern Uzbek language. I have a collection of his poems with me here in Amsterdam, translated into Russian.

Colonization by the Russian empire began in the 1860s as an attempt to compete with the British over their influence further South. By 1875 the region became part of the Russian province of Turkistan. Imperial decline and Russian civil war brought significant unrest, that was, however, subdued, to make Turkistan - then split into several Soviet Socialist Republics -

a part of the Union under the Bolsheviks.

“Union” as it was called was in fact a continuation of the old colonial project under a new political agenda. An [article](#) I found online summarizes it pretty well:

“The use of the ‘colonial’ label is ambiguous when related to a system that was ideologically founded on the values of internationalism and anti-imperialism and was employing its ‘colonies’ to promote decolonization abroad and the compatibility between socialism and Muslim societies. This attitude clearly emerged <...> in the postwar era, when Tashkent – the city of ‘Friendship of Peoples’ – was promoted as a progressivist symbol of Soviet modernity for the emerging Third World. Nonetheless, despite numerous doubts that emerged in the definition of a Soviet colonialism tout court, evident features

and dynamics typical of colonial systems are identifiable even in Soviet Central Asia, where Moscow’s authority was enforced over peoples and territories, and fundamental decisions, with at times tragic results, were taken from and in the interests of the center.“

“Eradication of Illiteracy” (ликбез) was one of those pseudo-decolonial campaigns that tied the region stronger to Russia. Russian language spread as the language of “literacy”, reforms on the indigenous languages followed. For Uzbek, a version of the Latin alphabet succeeded the Arabic script in 1927, which was in turn replaced by the Cyrillic alphabet in 1940. Cyrillic - so that Russian is easier to learn.

In 1993, the government of independent (at last) Uzbekistan reinstated Latin as the official alphabet.





*“One thing I know for sure and certain - I am not alone in this quest for memory.”*

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1934 - so there are 89 years between the hand that annotated the photograph, and my eyes that are looking at it.

Most likely, the 13th of September 1934 is the date the picture was taken or sent, and the writing below contains a short greeting to the recipient, most likely my great-grandfather, and the signature of the sender, most likely his cousin. "Most likely" was as close as we could get in this guessing game.

My first language is Russian, and English is my second, my Uzbek at this point is worse than my Dutch. My parents' and my aunt's first language is Russian, they are somewhat proficient in Uzbek, they learned it in Cyrillic in school (but they can read it in Latin thanks to studying English later in life). My paternal grandmother's first language is Uzbek. She was born in 1939, just in time to be taught Cyrillic and nothing else.

89 years - is it a gap in education? In memory? In belonging?

Later on, we found a photo of (most likely) the same young man, taken some years after the first one, and signed in Uzbek in the Latin alphabetic iteration. The likelihood that my grandmother would be able to decipher this one is just as high as me reading the Arabic script, but my dad managed to interpret the greeting on the card, and locate the name of then slightly aged relative. We're still not sure if it is indeed a cousin, and whether he ever learned yet another alphabet.

It is perhaps not uncommon to find oneself looking at pictures older than any living memory you have of those on them. That would inevitably happen to anyone going through old family albums. However, is it not absurd that the very instrument to record this memory had been fractured and reassembled so many times in a span of a single individual lifetime that it can break all connections in just three generations, leaving you guessing, guessing, guessing?

(One thing I know for sure and certain - I am not alone in this quest for memory. There is an artist I am massively inspired by in so many ways - Saodat Ismailova - who in her most recent exhibition in the Eye Filmmuseum in Amsterdam showed her artworks on this very subject. Scans of letters were overexposed on top of the pictures of family members that wrote them, in three different scripts for three generations. A granddaughter that is not able to read her grandmother's letter, and vice versa.)

I do want to learn Uzbek properly (and any translation of Nava'i I could get my hands on is rather horrid, which is extra motivating), but will it help me jump the gap?

89 years from now it will be 2112. I am 22 and my guess is, I am more or less as old as the mysterious grand-uncle on the photograph. Who will read the backside of my portraits, and what language will they speak?

