

The Uzbek *Soul*

THE BEST TRAITS WORTH
KNOWING AND CHERISHING



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The Uzbek Soul: The Best Traits
Worth Knowing and Cherishing

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Аннотация

A warm, heartfelt book about the Uzbek character, written by a young teacher living far from home. About hospitality, respect for elders, family, and honor, told simply and from the heart, the way people talk around a shared table. For anyone who wants to know Uzbeks a little closer and feel where their warmth comes from.

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Introduction

You know, for a long time I couldn't bring myself to write this book. It always felt like it wasn't my place. I'm not a scholar. I don't have shelves of thick books about peoples and cultures behind me. I'm not a blogger who knows how to make anything look interesting. I'm just an ordinary man. I've lived in Saint Petersburg for a few years now. I teach, I study, I fuss over languages, I miss home, I get happy about snow, which we almost never see where I come from. An ordinary person, nothing more.

And then one evening a small thing happened.

I was climbing the stairs in my building, tired, carrying bags, thinking only about getting inside and falling into bed. And suddenly, from someone's apartment, came the smell of fresh bread. Not store bread, but the real kind, with that crackling crust they bake at home. And it was as if someone took me by the heart and carried me far back, twenty years back, into my

grandmother's courtyard, early in the morning, when the air is still cool and the bread has only just come out of the tandoor, still hot. I stood there on a Petersburg staircase, between the third floor and the fourth, and my eyes stung. From the smell of bread. Can you imagine?

That was when I understood one simple thing. What I carry inside me is not just longing for home. It is a whole way of looking at the world. At people, at family, at a guest, at an old man, at a neighbor. And I suddenly wanted very much to share it. Not to prove that we are better than anyone, God forbid. Just to show it, the way you show a friend old family photographs. Here, look. This is my grandmother. And this is our courtyard. And this is how we welcome a guest. It's beautiful, isn't it.

This book was born from that smell of bread on the staircase.

Let me say right away how we are going to talk. Not from behind a lecture stand, not like a textbook. But the way people talk around a big table, where there is plenty of tea and plenty of slow, unhurried conversation, where no one is in any rush. At home we call such a table a dasturkhan. It is not simply a cloth with food laid out on it. It is the place where the family gathers, where a guest becomes one of your own, where the elder tells his stories and the young one listens, where people laugh and cry, and where time seems to slow down. That is the kind of table I want to sit at with you. The tea is already going cold, because the conversation is good. And let it go cold. No harm in that.

I think you have probably met Uzbeks before. Maybe at

a market, where they sell apricots and melons. Maybe on a building site. Maybe in a little place where they cook plov. Maybe your neighbor is Uzbek, or a classmate, or someone you work with. You exchanged a few words, maybe they treated you to something, maybe you noticed how respectfully they speak to their elders on the phone. And you probably felt that there is something behind it. A depth of their own, an order of their own, a warmth.

This book is here so you can look a little deeper. Not at the shop window, but into the home.

I will tell you about the things that are dear to me. About a hospitality you cannot refuse, no matter how many times you say no. About how we respect our elders, and why it is not fear at all, but love. About the big family, where you are never alone. About honor, which a person guards more carefully than any property. About the way we talk, why we so rarely say a plain "no," how we know how to make a joke even in a hard moment. About proverbs, in which the whole soul of a people fits into a few words. And about what stays with an Uzbek even when life has thrown him far, far away, to the cold north, into a strange big city.

I will tell it with living pictures, not with rules. Because you cannot learn a culture from a list. You can only feel it. The way I felt that bread on the staircase.

Here and there I will slip in Uzbek words. Don't be afraid of them, I will explain right away. I want you to hear how it really sounds, how it sounded in my childhood. A word has its own

taste and smell too. "Mehmon" means guest. "Non" means bread. "Rahmat" means thank you. Simple words, but behind each one lies a whole world.

And one more thing. I am writing with love. So there will be no criticism here, no picking apart of problems, none of those clever little "buts." Not because everything with us is perfect. There are no perfect peoples in the world. But when you show a friend your mother, you don't list her faults. You show how good she is. That is what I am doing. I want to show you what is mine, what is close to my heart, the brightest of it. The things I am proud of. The things I want to pass on, so they are not lost.

So pour yourself some tea. Take the bread, break it with your hands, we don't cut bread with a knife, we break it, and I will tell you about that too. And let's talk.

I'll start with the most important thing. With the thing you cannot picture an Uzbek without. With our hospitality.

Part One. What Lies at the Foundation

There are things an Uzbek soaks up before he ever learns to read. No one explains them on purpose. You simply live in the house, you watch how the grown-ups behave, and somehow it enters you on its own, with your mother's milk, with the smell of plov, with your grandmother's voice. These things hold up everything else, the way a foundation holds up a house. That is what this first part is about. About hospitality, about respect for elders, about the big family, and about honor. Four roots, and from them the Uzbek character grows.

Chapter 1. A Hospitality You Cannot Refuse

I remember once, late in the evening, when it was already completely dark, someone knocked at our gate. Out of the blue, with no phone call ahead. The kind of hour when sensible people are already getting ready for bed. It turned out a distant relative was passing through our town and decided to drop in. And here is what struck me back then, as a small boy. My grandmother did not gasp, she did not say "oh dear, how awkward, it's so late, and we have nothing in the house." She simply lit up. Her face turned happy, as if someone had brought her a gift. "Bolam," she said to me, and that means "my child," "go quick, put the kettle on, we have a guest."

And then began that quiet, kind commotion that I have seen hundreds of times since, and that still makes me happy every time, just like in childhood.

In fifteen minutes the dasturkhan was covered with everything. From where, you might ask? A moment ago there was nothing. And now there it all was. Flatbread my grandmother took out and warmed. Dried fruit, nuts, raisins, apricots, all of it heaped up in pretty bowls. Sweets in a dish. Jam. Fresh herbs. Tea, of course, fragrant, in a porcelain pot. And right after that something was already sizzling in the kitchen, because to let a

guest go without a hot meal is simply unthinkable for us. The guest ate something sweet, drank his tea, and meanwhile the women were already cooking the real food.

And the guest did not refuse. That part matters. He did not say "oh please, you shouldn't, I'm only here for a minute." Well, he said it, of course, out of politeness, once or twice. But everyone understood it was just courtesy, a kind of dance. Because to refuse for real would be to give offense. And you cannot offend a person who is feeding you with all his heart.

We have a proverb that holds the whole thing. "Mehmon otangdan ulug'." Word for word it comes out as "A guest is higher than your father." At first, when I was little, this seemed strange to me. How can a guest be higher than your father? Father is the most important one. And then I understood. It is not about loving your father less. It is about the enormous, almost sacred place a guest holds in our home. When a person has come to you, for that whole time he becomes the most important one. Even the head of the family will give the guest the best seat, pour his tea first, hand him the tastiest piece. And he will do it gladly.

You know why it is like that? I thought about it for a long time. It seems to me the reason is this. We grew up in a land where once there were steppes, deserts, long roads between villages. And a traveler who knocked at your door might have been walking for many days. He was tired, hungry, with nowhere to lay his head. And to take him in, to feed him, to give him a place for the night, was not simply politeness. It was a matter of honor, almost

a matter of faith. Today you shelter the weary, and tomorrow, who knows, your own son may be on the road, and someone will shelter him. That is how the world held together. On that invisible thread of kindness that runs from house to house.

And that thread has not gone anywhere. Times changed, roads became short, cars fast, hotels on every corner. But the habit stayed. It is in our blood.

I remember how people at home used to say a guest brings rahmat with him. That word is hard to put into a single English one. It is grace, and mercy, and a kind of blessing from above, all together. Which means the guest does not take from the house. On the contrary, he brings something into it. That is why he is met with such joy. Not out of duty, not through gritted teeth, but truly, with the whole heart. The more guests in a house, the happier the house.

And here is something else I want to tell you, so you understand how deep this sits. Sometimes a family lives poorly. Money is tight, every coin is counted. But if a guest comes, the very best in the house goes on the table. They take out what they were saving. They will not spare the last chicken. And they will never let the guest see that it is hard on them. On the contrary, they will smile and keep putting more on his plate, and more. Because to show a guest your poverty, to make him feel he is a burden, is a disgrace. And to give him the best, even if you yourself have to tighten your belt afterward, is an honor. I have seen this many times. And every time, something rose in my

throat.

Let me tell you about bread separately, because bread with us is something special.

Non, our flatbread, is not simply food. People treat it almost like a living thing, with respect. You must not lay bread on the table upside down, bottom side up, that is considered wrong, disrespectful. You do not cut bread with a knife, you break it with your hands, carefully. If a piece falls on the floor, someone will pick it up, and the elders may even touch it gently to the forehead or the lips before putting it away, as a sign of respect. Bread is not thrown out. If it has gone stale, it will be crumbled for the birds or soaked in something, but it will not go into the rubbish. As a child I was taught: you dropped a crumb, pick it up. In bread there is the labor of many people, and the generosity of the earth. When you come to an Uzbek and the first thing he does is break off a piece of flatbread for you, know this: he is sharing with you the most basic, the most honest thing on his table.

And the ritual of tea. It is a whole little ceremony, and respect is hidden in it too. The host pours the guest tea not to the brim, but a little, just at the bottom of the bowl. This is not stinginess, quite the opposite. It means the host wants to come back to the guest again and again, to pour him fresh hot tea, and each time to exchange a kind word. A full bowl is poured for the one you want to send on his way. For a dear guest, the opposite, you pour just a little, so there is a reason to wait on him a bit longer. You see how fine it is? Even in how much tea is in the bowl, you can

read a whole message.

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