

KARAIM LITERATURE IN THE KARAIM LANGUAGE

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The Karaims

The origins of the Karaims was in the steppes of Central Asia, but their separate nationality took shape in the Crimean region, where they also adopted a new faith. The majority of Karaims live, as they always have, in the Crimean peninsula. Living in a Turkic-speaking area, they adopted the local Tatar dialect as their medium of speech and writing at least two centuries ago. They never created any literature in Karaim and so fall outside the scope of this small study. During the stormy times of the Middle Ages some of them migrated north to Lithuania, where there are still a few hundred today.

The Karaim Language

The Karaim language is closely related to other Turkic languages of the north-western or Tataric group, representing the more conservative type. Most of the Karaims that still speak Karaim now live in Lithuania, where they have been present for six centuries. Their religion is monotheistic, based upon the five books of Moses, although the Jewish tradition is unfamiliar to them. As Karaites by religion, they are separate from modern Judaism, and their Turkic ethnicity and language set them further apart from the Jews.

Karaim Literature

The subject of this brief study is that part of Karaim literature which is written in the Karaim language. The Karaims also composed religious literature in Hebrew and in Karaim (see Religious literature). Hebrew was the first cultural language of the Karaims, its influence on Karaim syntax and figures of speech being evident

till modern times. Modern poetry is rather free of hebraisms, as is also the prose written between the World Wars, when the Karaims skipped or attempted to avoid the influence of the Hebrew literary tradition or were taught to do so.

Literature in the Karaim language is written in two literary dialects, the southern and northern. Most of this literature is written in the northern dialect because the majority of the Karaims living in Poland and Lithuania spoke this dialect. Only a few books have been printed in the southern dialect in Galicia, and the Karaim population there was smaller.

Old literature

Karaim language had been employed in a religious context for centuries, but existing Karaim manuscripts and books are of late origin. Beginning from the sixteenth century, literature has been published in Karaim, much of it poetry. These occasional poems have been printed on pages of Karaim prayer-books and manuals of religion, which are otherwise in Hebrew. Some Karaim poets from previous centuries are known by name and their writings have been preserved till modern times. These poems were often morality poems, lamentations, or love poems, based upon Old Testament models and tradition.

Modern literature

In the year 1904, in Kiev, the first secular book was published in the Karaim language, Simon Kobecki's (1865–1933) "Irlar" (Poems). This book was an excellent specimen of the creative power of the Karaim language in the hands of this talented poet. Kobecki's themes were partly based upon the traditional Karaim way of life, partly on his personal ideas. His poems tell of love, new or lost, the activities of the Karaims, his own nostalgia for Lithuania while he served as an officer in faraway Russian lands. Kobecki's skillful use of language and his figures of speech have served as a model for later writers.

Aleksander Mardkovic (1875–1944) was born in Luck, once part of Ruthenia, then of Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and nowadays part of northern Ukraine. He was already middle-aged when he began his literary career. He is, however, considered to be the most talented and most productive writer to ever write in the southern Karaim dialect. Mardkovic also wrote some books and pamphlets about Karaim history and the Karaim language. He founded the first Karaim periodical, *Karay Awazy*, in the Karaim language. This journal became an important forum for his own and some other writers' poetic creations.

Zachariasz Abrahamowicz (1878–1903) was a talented poet from Halic who wrote in the southern dialect of Karaim. He died very young, and his poetry was published posthumously in the new Karaim literary journals.

Simon Firkovic (1897–1982) from Trakai was another well-known writer. He was for decades the spiritual leader of the Karaims in Trakai. During his long life Firkovic wrote numerous poems, some of them being translations from Polish and Russian. Some of his works were also popular as songs.

Jakov Malecki (1889–1952) was born in Trakai. After the First World War he went to Panevezys in northern Lithuania. He worked there as an assistant in the publication of Karaim journals. Malecki translated Russian literature into the Karaim language. His own works consisted of poems, ballads and plays.

Shelumiel Lopato (1904–1923) was one of the most talented poets who ever used the Karaim tongue. He and his family were evacuated to the Crimea, where he went to school. He returned to Lithuania, where he was murdered at a young age. Lopato translated European literature into Karaim. His few poems are still appreciated today because of their enjoyable and masterful language.

Mihael Tinfovic (1912–1974) was one of the last great Karaim poets. He was the intellectual leader of Karaim culture in the north between the World Wars at a time when the southern Karaim areas of modern Lithuania were a part of Poland. He was also the editor-in-chief of *Onarmach*, a literary journal in the Karaim language. In this journal both old and modern poetry was published, as well as other articles.

Kobecki wrote his Karaim texts in Russia, being an officer in the Russian army, as is shown by his nostalgic poems. Lopato, Malecki and Tinfovic lived in the Panevezys area, nowadays a small town in northern Lithuania. Mardkovic was creative in Luck. This short list includes the most important names, and shows that the real artists lived on the fringe, not in the central Karaim lands. As far as I am aware, only Jakov Malecki made his living by writing, most of the other authors having a civil or private profession. These writers also wrote prose, for example plays which were staged, but being manuscripts they have usually not been preserved.

Karaim literary journals

Two Karaim literary periodicals were published between the World Wars. The first was *Karay Awazy* ('Voice of Karaims') in Luck 1931–39. These twelve periodicals were published by the Karaim poet Aleksander Mardkovic over a period of many years. The second journal was *Onarmach* (Progress), published in Panevezys by Mihael Tinfovic. Only three issues of *Onarmach* were published in the years 1934–39, but they contained almost solely cultural articles and poetry.

These two periodicals were the most important cultural and literary forums for the Karaims, who in those days were taught to read and write in their native tongue. They were popular and widely read, in fact they are still read today, and they are a most valuable source of literary texts in the Karaim language.

Religious literature

The religious literature that has been published in Karaim is neglected here because it does not have much originality or local colour. At the beginning of nineteenth century the Old Testament was already partly available in Karaim. Prayerbooks, too, were published, imitating the models of Old Testament texts and the Hebrew language. These books contain some material of interest in the form of a few poems or forewords in Karaim but otherwise they do not represent original literary creations.

Epilogue

Karaim literature flourished between the World Wars in Lithuania and Poland, where the Karaims were free to exercise their culture till the outbreak of war. Most of this modern literature, which the Karaims still consider one of the greatest achievements of their culture, was created during those years. This literature (i.e., poetry) is even today read and quoted by the Karaims.

After the war the areas where the Karaims lived were annexed by the Soviet Union, and then their traditional way of life was no longer feasible under the new circumstances. This situation prevailed until 1988, and the outcome was disastrous for their culture and language.

Sources

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