

KARAIMS OF THE CRIMEA AND EASTERN EUROPE: SOME QUESTIONS OF ETHNICITY AND IDENTIFICATION

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The aim of this paper is to contribute to discussions on the ethnicity and national identification of the Karaims in the Crimea and Eastern Europe at the time of the current disintegration of historical communities, accompanied by a decrease in the number of endogamous Karaim marriages as well as the loss of their language and religion.

1. GENERAL REMARKS

Karaims are a recognised minority group, but the exact definition of what it is to be a Karaim is difficult to formulate. As is well-known, the nationality is a set of many components such as common origin, culture, language, identification, sometimes religion, which is especially important in the case of Karaims. The problem of Karaim religion and Karaim ethnicity must be regarded as a process transformed by the change of historical setting, political trends, individual feelings, and internal and external factors, especially the correlation with Rabbanite Jews and Karaites. What is true for some attitudes and established facts in one period, may be untrue in another. What is applicable to one Karaim community, may be not applicable to another.

Karaims are an ethnic and religious group that emerged in the Crimea and spread out in Eastern Europe. Even if we admit the cohesion and common origin of the basic four communities of Troki (in Lithuanian Trakai, in Karaim Troch), Luck (in Polish Łuck, in Karaim Łucka), Halich-Lvov (in Polish Halicz and Lwów, in Karaim Halic and Ilew ~ Ilow, respectively) and the Crimea, after a few centuries of more or less isolated existence differentiation was inevitable. The integrity within each of these sub-groups was always stronger than the integrity of all Karaims. From these four sub-groups, three basic communities have emerged, the Troki, the Luck-Halichi and the Crimean. The Karaims of Troki spread then as far as Vilna (Vilnius), Pasvalys, Panevėžys, Naujamiestis and other towns and

cities. After 1918, they were divided between Lithuania and Poland, both occupied by the Soviet Union in 1939. After 1945, all these towns fell under the administration of the Lithuanian Socialist Soviet Republic, but some dozens of Karaims, mostly from Vilnius, repatriated to Poland. At present, the whole region belongs to independent Lithuania again, and contacts with Polish Karaims are very easy, with no visas and other administrative difficulties.

According to the last census of 2001, there were 273 Lithuanian citizens who declare Karaim nationality (Adamczuk 2003: 33).¹ The Luck community ceased to exist after 1945.² In Halich, there remained no more than four aged women.³ As is known, these three communities use a similar Turkic language, classified as Western Karaim with Troki or northern and Luck-Halichi or southern dialect. The similarity between Lucki and Halichi groups is more linguistic than historical. As for the Crimea, the exact data on Karaims from the time of Crimean Khanate are unavailable. Harviainen, referring to Abraham Firkovich's documents demonstrates that there were "1,062 Karaite *patres familias* in the Crimea" (Harviainen 1997: 74), i.e. at least 4,000 people. The number of Karaims in the Crimea attained the greatest value in 1897 when the census reported 6,166 people (Kowalski 1929: ix). However, this was the beginning of a decline, which started in 1917 and continued with the Soviet regime. The 1979 census registered 1,151 persons (Harviainen 1997: 75). At present, the number of Crimean Karaims who live in four major cities, Simferopol, Eupatoria, Feodosia, Sevastopol, approximates 515. To this some families scattered in minor towns should be added (Jankowski 2002: 103).⁴ Many Karaims left the Crimea after the Russian annexation in 1783, and settled in various cities in southern Russia, such as Odessa, Nikolaiev, Melitopol, Ekaterinoslav and Kiev, now Ukraine, as well as Moscow.⁵

¹ However, an ethno-sociological survey conducted among 280 persons in 1997 has demonstrated that only 225 Karaims declared the Karaim nationality (Adamczuk 2003: 32–33).

² In 1930 there were 80 Karaims in Luck (Mardkowicz 1930: 18), after 1946 most families repatriated to Poland and only one family remained in the town; now there are no Karaims there at all (Kobeckaitė & Pilecki 2003: 19, 25).

³ In 1939 the number of Karaims in Halich was equal to 122, and only 6 of them remained in the town in 2002 (Сшвович 2002: 208). Of these six people, two died in 2003. According to Kizilov (2002: 33), at least 8 Karaims died between 1939–45, 24 repatriated to Poland and 11 emigrated to Lithuania. Therefore, probably 69 Karaims remained in Halich after 1946.

⁴ Especially in Bakhchasarai and nearby villages. Before 1944, there was a Karaim population in various resort places on the southern coast, predominantly in Yalta. In 1944, at the time of the mass deportation of Crimean Tatars, an estimated number of 60–70 Karaims were deported from Yalta to Bashkiria. In 1955 they were rehabilitated and allowed to move to other places of the Soviet Union, but not back to the Crimea (Aleksandr Kefeli, information at the Symposium in Warsaw, 19–21 September 2003).

⁵ Currently also in Russia's other cities. For example, according to Aivaz, the Karaim community in St. Petersburg numbers approximately a hundred people (information at the Symposium in Warsaw, 19–21 September 2003).

2. ETHNIC ORIGIN IN THE LIGHT OF THE RISE OF KARAISM IN THE CRIMEA

If we accept the theory of the spread of the East European Karaims from the Crimea, we have to answer the question how and when they emerged there. The claim of Khazar origins proposed by Zajączkowski (1946: 26–33; 1960: 13, 20–23) and maintained by other researchers of Karaim descent (e.g. Szyszman 1980: 73; 1989: 26–17) is very difficult to prove (Golden 2001: 48) for lack of direct evidence. Golden (2001: 44) argues that Khazars converted to rabbinical Judaism, not Karaism, and according to Ankori (1959: 60) the first authentic record of Karaism in the Crimea dates back to the last quarter of the 13th century.⁶ As we know, the language of Khazars was of Bulgar type, and no traces of Bulgar substrate are present in Karaim. The linguistic evidence brought by Zajączkowski points in fact to the Kuman or Kipchak character. It is absolutely certain that the language of western Karaim dialects is of Kuman or Kipchak type, very close to the language of *Codex Cumanicus* (Kowalski 1929: lix–lxv; lxvi–xxi), which in the pre-Islamic Crimea was spoken by various Turkic peoples and was a *lingua franca* of other non-Turkic ethnic groups, such as Armenians, Goths, Byzantines, Jews and Caucasians (Golden 2001: 48). The Islamization under khan Özbek (1313–1341) affected all the Turkic population except the confessional groups which had already professed a monotheistic religion.

If the Karaims who migrated from the Crimea to the west were originally non-Turkic, they must have adopted the Kipchak language at least four or five generations, i.e. 100–120 years earlier, for it was already a full-fledged idiom retained until presently. Therefore, if we accept the tradition that the first settlement in the west took place at the end of the 14th century, it implies that Karaims had been Turkic-speaking as early as the middle or the end of the 13th century. This assumption is in a full agreement with the linguistic situation of the Crimea. However, there is one feature in Luck-Halichi dialect that is alien to every other Turkic dialect and language of the Crimea, and this is the shift $\check{c} > ts$ and $\check{g} > \widehat{dz}$. Among the Turkic languages of Kipchak group, this phonological shift is attested only in Balkar (Tekin & Ölmez 1999: 119). What was the cause of this shift in Balkar is unknown, but it is probably a Caucasian substrate or adstrate. The shift could arise in both languages independently, but it can challenge the assumption of a different route of migration of Luck-Halichi Karaims, not from the Crimea, but from the Caucasus. Nevertheless, the relation to the Khazar roots which once

⁶ Therefore, he concludes, the beginnings of organized Karaite life in the Crimea can be placed in the latter half of the 12th century at the very earliest.

included both territories, i.e. the Crimea and the Caucasus, is unlikely, since the Khazar state was brought to an end in 965, and it would be difficult to explain what happened in the lacking four centuries.

Naturally, the linguistic identity of Karaims does not explain their ethnic origins. In Golden's view Karaims are Jewish sectarians who came to the Crimea from Byzantium immediately preceding Mongol invasions (Golden 1992: 388). Most probably the present Karaims form a mixed anthropological type, in which Kowalski (1929: ix-x) has distinguished a Jewish and a Pontian-Turkic component. Kowalski has also pointed to some anthropological difference between the northern and the southern group of western Karaims (Kowalski 1929: ix-x). Even greater is the anthropological difference between the Crimean and Western Karaims, which is evident from a simple observation.

Some scholars claim that the Turkic identity of Karaims is of a new date and goes back to the activities of Karaim intellectuals such as Abraham Firkovich in the 19th century, which coincided with national movements in Europe (Golden 2001: 48-49). In fact, as Harviainen (1999: 99) demonstrates, one of the basic aims of Firkovich's activities was to revive and unify Karaite congregations. It is hard to imagine that Firkovich, who tried to strengthen the Karaite congregation in Jerusalem (Harviainen 1991: 182; 1998: 67ff), who made an attempt to persuade Lithuanian Karaims to wear traditional fringed garments with tassels, and who composed most of his letters in Hebrew, even to his son (Harviainen 1991: 181; 1999: 103-105), would wage a campaign for the Turkic identity. It seems that this is another label stuck to Firkovich, in addition to accusations of forging manuscripts and inscriptions. Resolving the question of the Turkic identity needs further study. What is certain is Seraia Shapshal's stand and activities in the Crimea, Turkey and Poland which resulted in the spread and a general acceptance of the Turkic identity, at least among Karaim intellectuals in the 20th century. This was a very positive factor in the revival of the cultural life of Karaims and the creation of Karaim literature in the three communities in Poland in 1928-1939, which also affected Lithuanian Karaims in Panevėžys and other regions of Lithuania.

Nevertheless, even scholars of Jewish background who are normally very sceptical about the theories of Karaims claiming their non-Jewish origin, admit that the Karaism of Karaims of the Crimea, Lithuania and Poland is different from that of other Karaites (Schur 1992: 160).

3. LANGUAGE

Western Karaim is best preserved in Lithuania. According to the survey of 1997, there are 69 Karaims in Lithuania and 17 in Poland who can speak Karaim, but only 24 of those in Lithuania and 2 in Poland actually speak it (Adamczuk 2003: 65, 70). At the same time, 28 Lithuanian and 11 Polish Karaims declared the full command of written and spoken language (Adamczuk 2003: 65).

In the Crimea the Karaim language is no longer a means of communication between Karaims.⁷ All Karaims there have changed Turkic Karaim for Russian. They also use Russian in contacts with western Karaims whose language was unintelligible to the speakers of Turkic Karaim of the Crimea when it was last in use. According to my informants, Crimean Karaims shifted finally to Russian in the 1920s and 1930s. Thus the eldest of them remember the language of their grandparents. They reported that their grandparents used Crimean Karaim when talking to each other, but they normally addressed their grandchildren in Russian. The everyday language of their parents was Russian, and they only stuck to Karaim when they wished to use it as a secrete code incomprehensible to others.

At present, there is about a dozen aged people or so who remember some Crimean Karaim as spoken by their grandparents: Aleksandra Bakkal (b.1920 in Bakhcharai, now living in Moscow), Nina Bakkal (b. 1934, now living in Dolinoie, old name Topçıköy, near Bakhcharai), three aged women from Eupatoria, notably Raisa-Rakhel Čeltek (b. 1914 in Feodosia), Sultan Paša (b. 1931, now in Israel), Anna Külte (b. 1927?) and one man, David El, and five aged women from Feodosia, Nina Saryban (b. 1912, now in Israel), Tamara Arabağy (b. 1924), Olga Salamonova (b. 1924), Emilia Kefeli (b. 1923) and Svetlana Babağan (b. 1935).⁸ There are still two or three people in Feodosia with some command of Karaim whom I could not contact. A very good native speaker of Karaim is also Anna Simonova from Odessa.

These speakers⁹ do not have a uniform opinion about the Turkic language they speak.¹⁰ All agreed that Crimean Karaim is a language different from

⁷ E.g. Джаманов in Прик 1976: 4; Wexler 1983: 27; Jankowski 2001: 105.

⁸ My best thanks go to Ms. Mariola Abkowicz (Wroclaw, Poland), Ms. Maria Čeltek (Eupatoria), Mr. Viktor Tiriaki (Eupatoria), Mr. Viacheslav Lebedev (Simferopol-Moscow), Mr. Igor Šeitan (Simferopol), Ms. Svetlana Saitova and Ms. Larysa Shpakovskaia (Feodosia) for their help with contacting people.

⁹ I was able to record voices of eight of them. The material will be published in the future.

¹⁰ Sultan Paša has admitted that her Karaim is strongly affected by Crimean Tatar because of her family relationship with Crimean Tatars, and the language of Emilia Kefeli, who was bred in the Crimean Tatar village Qul Çora was affected by the northern dialect of Crimean Tatar.

Crimean Tatar, but strangely enough, they could deliver little evidence of it. Tamara Arabağy, although her command of Karaim is very limited, considers this language her mother tongue. She added that she had not spoken it since 1941. Olga Salamonova reported that her native language was Russian. Svetlana Babağan was of the opinion that most Karaims speak in fact Crimean Tatar which is not identical with Crimean Karaim. She added that nobody knows true Karaim.

When comparing Western Karaim with Crimean Karaim we see that the former has retained much more of Hebrew lexicon than the latter. In Crimean Karaim even Hebrew religious terms have been replaced by Arabic terms. Despite the fact that much of religious vocabulary of Western Karaim is Hebrew, no serious scholar of Jewish descent was able to find evidence to claim that Western Karaim is a Jewish language.¹¹

In fact, it must be argued that the linguistic situation of Turkic Western Karaim was much clearer and more stable than that of Crimean Karaim. It is because it was developing in an isolation from other Turkic languages and retained many archaic Turkic features. The innovations were brought from either Hebrew, which was the language of religion, liturgy, science, instruction and correspondence, or Slavic which predominantly affected the spoken language, then also the language of literature. In contrast, the Turkic language of Crimean Karaims developed in a Turkic setting and was subject to many changes that also affected Urum and Krymchak, as well as the languages of the Muslim population of the Crimea, what is now Crimean Tatar.

It can be assumed that Crimean Karaims have never spoken a homogeneous language. There probably were a few regional variants of Karaim depending on the area of their habitats. The diversity was eased up by lack of standardization and literary language for which Hebrew was employed. This concerns Crimean Karaim proper. In addition, as the subjects of Crimean khans and Turkish administration in the south, Crimean Karaims spoke the respective languages in contacts with their overlords, which was very easy for them as they were similar, cognate languages. Moreover, Turkish folk literature popular among Crimean Tatars was also popular among Karaims. The literature is known from the manuscripts called *mejumas*, but their language can by no means be identified with the spoken language of Crimean Karaims. Regretfully, many scholars who followed Radloff repeated his mistake and confused these facts.¹²

¹¹ See especially the conclusion in Wexler 1983: 47–48.

¹² For the critique see Jankowski 2003: 109–130.

4. KARAIMS AND KARAITES

As has been said, for Jewish scholars the terms *Karaims* and *Karaites* cover the same notion. In their view, both Karaites and Karaims are descendants of a Jewish sect or Jewish followers of Karaite doctrine, separated by space and political trends. For this reason, they are frequently called Karaite Jews (e.g. Shapira 2001: 87). One of the painful controversies between Jewish scholars, also some Karaites, and Karaims is that the former strongly accuse of separatism most outstanding Karaim activists and intellectuals such as Abraham Firkovich and Seraia Shapshal. A general opinion of Jewish scholarship and Karaites of Israel¹³ is that the Karaim communities have no chance to survive outside Israel to where the centre of Karism has moved back (Schur 1992: 141, 160). The number of Karaites in Israel is estimated between 10,000–15,000. It is unlikely that western Karaims would ever emigrate to Israel. The relations with the local population have always been very friendly and there are no serious material reasons for emigration, especially on the eve of Lithuania's and Poland's accession to the European Union. The case of the Crimea, Ukraine and Russia is different, some people are impoverished and they seek better perspectives in Israel. In fact several hundred people did emigrate. Naturally, they will integrate with Israeli Karaites, and, in a further perspective, perhaps also with Israeli Jewry.

5. THE COMPONENTS OF MODERN KARAIM ETHNICITY

With the death of the Turkic language once spoken by all Karaims, one of the the essential components of national unity has gone away. It is particularly valid for those Karaims who left the Crimea for Russia in the 19th century. Another most important element of Karaim identity is religion, and it is the very name of Karaims which is confessional. It was religion that continued to be the principal unifying force among those Karaims who spread in Russia and changed their language for Russian, and which distinguished them from Rabbanites (called Talmudists, Дуванъ 1890: 6; Фирковичъ 1915: passim; no pagination). In the Soviet time religion has almost completely disappeared from the life of Crimean and Russian Karaims, and now it is very hard to re-establish it for lack of qualified priests, leaders and material background. It is only in Eupatoria that about a dozen of elder men meet in kenesa for common worship.

¹³ Except for Turkish in Istanbul, the other Karaite communities, such as Iraqi in Hīt and Egyptian in Cairo disappeared and their members moved either to the USA or Israel.

Also the desire of Karaims to preserve genetic and biological homogeneity seems to be hard to attain. In such tiny groups they are forced to mix with others. While intermarriages with non-Karaims were rare and banned by most Karaims in the past, nowadays mixed couples are a commonplace. In most cases, a non-Karaim spouse will never become a Karaim, but the children of such a couple can. However, in practice it is very seldom the case.

What is it like, then, to be a Karaim today? There may be only one answer: a Karaim is anybody who has Karaims among his or her ancestors, who wants to be a Karaim and whom other Karaims take to be one. In other words, the definition of the modern Karaim ethnicity is a mutual identification of an individual and the community. This mutual identification is also important because of the disappearance of other distinctive features of the culture of Karaims in the time of globalisation, such as the customs, traditional meals and literary tradition.

As the old communities of Halich and Luck are vanishing, a new over-communal identity is emerging in Poland. It is the Lithuanian community that has still a chance to survive. We can say that the perspectives to survive will not vanish as long as there are people willing to undertake activities. In fact, the spectacular rebirth of the Karaim language and literature in Luck and Halich in the 1930s was triggered by a single activist, Aleksander Mardkowicz. And a group of young Polish Karaims has recently decided to meet not only at funerals. As a result, following the international conference in Halich *The Halych Karaims – History and Culture* (September 6–9, 2002), they successfully convened an international symposium *Karaj Kiuñlari – Karaim National Heritage in Modern-Day Europe* in September 19–21, 2003.

In figures, the largest community has survived in the Crimea, but the future of Crimean Karaims is still uncertain. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that the hazzan of Eupatoria, Viktor Tiriaki, has prepared a prayer-book with prayers in Russian and old Karaim (Тиріяки 2002), similarly to the senior hazzan of Troki, Mykolas Firkovičius (d. 2000), who has edited old Western Karaim prayers in a Latin transcription (Firkovičius 1998; 1999). Although the links of Crimean Karaims to Western Karaims are slightly weaker than those of Polish to Lithuanian Karaims, through intermarriages they can help survive the Western Karaims who may be termed micro-minorities in their countries.

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