

KARAIM PERIODICALS IN THE KARAIM LANGUAGE, I.

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The history of Karaim periodicals commenced before the First World War. It was started by the eastern Karaims of Russia, i.e. Karaims who originated from the Black Sea areas and who, in Moscow between the years 1912–14, published a journal called *Karaimskaya Zhizn* ('The Life of the Karaims'), which was principally concerned with Karaim life in the central parts of Russia and in the Crimean peninsula.

The second journal, *Sabah* ('Morning'), was published in 1913 by the poet Sergius Rudkovski in Luck. Unfortunately, I have so far been unable to find a copy of this early publication.

In 1931 Aleksander Mardkovic, a writer and poet, began to publish a journal by the name *Karay Avazy* ('The voice of the Karaims'), which was the first periodical in the Karaim language. Numerous articles and poems from the pen of this talented poet appear on the pages of the twelve volumes which were printed in Luck in the southern dialect of the Karaim language up until 1939. This treasure-house of Karaim material is to be dealt with in another connection after an examination has been made of the material contained in the journal.

Sahyzsyzmyz in Wilno (Poland)

In Wilno (Vilnius) there was only one attempt to publish a periodical in the Karaim language: *Sahyzsyzmyz* ('Our thoughts') appeared in 1927. Many reasons can be adduced to explain this fact. A journal called *Karaimskoe Slovo* had been published in Russian in Vilna during the two last years preceding the First World War. On the other hand, the the Polish-language periodical *Mysl Karaimska* ('Karaim thought') was launched in 1924 and was published up until 1939 in Lithuania. This periodical exhausted much of the creative energy available for writing in the Karaim language.

Many young Karaims had been educated in Polish and preferred to use this language; thus they were likely to receive more publicity for their work, and as a matter of fact they were better able to express their ideas in Polish.

The periodical *Sahyzsmyz*, comprising only a few pages, contained mainly brief items of local news which was probably no news at all to the readers; in *Sahyzsmyz*, however, the news was for the first time available in the Karaim language. Details were given of recent deaths, contributors to the journal, and the names of subscribers, such as civil servants.

However, there are two interesting articles in the periodical. The first tells about the well-known Karaim scholar and haham Pinahas Malecki, who in his retirement translated the Torah and the *haftara* texts from Hebrew for publication in the Karaim language. The second article introduces the Karaim library which was established in Eupatoria in 1916 by Seraja Szapszal, a scholar and the haham of the Crimean Karaims, and re-opened in 1924.

The publisher of *Sahyzsmyz*, like that of *Karaimskoe Slovo*, was Ovadja Pilecki of Wilno. The journal was printed in two columns: the left column in the Karaim language spelt in accordance with Polish orthography, and the right one in the Russian language since numerous Karaims were more familiar with Russian than with Karaim printed matters; in this way the journal received more publicity among the Russian Karaims, who spoke Crimean Tatar and Russian.

Onarmah

The main subject of this paper is the description of the periodical *Onarmah* (in Karaim *onarmah* refers to progress and success), which was published in the Karaim language in Lithuania; it appeared between 1934 and 1939. The journal was written by Karaims and thus the articles provide glimpses into Karaim history, literature, language policy and even ethnography "from the inside". The publisher of this periodical was Mihael Tinfovic, a lawyer, author and poet.

As a consequence of the First World War the region of Wilno (Vilnius) and Troki (Trakai) was separated from the northern Karaim area of Panevežys (Poniewies in Polish) by the Polish-Lithuanian border. Panevežys, and the surrounding small cities with a Karaim population now became the centre of Karaim culture in the Republic of Lithuania. The local Karaims set out to create a new material and literary culture with renewed vigour. They acquired a house as a community centre and their *kenesa* was renovated. A Karaim library was established in the Community House together with a Cultural Society providing instruction in the Karaim language for Karaims of all ages; in addition they began to publish a Karaim-language journal – an excellent achievement considering that the Karaim community in the region numbered only 150! At any rate, however,

the Karaims of Lithuania suffered from lack of contact with their brethren on the other side of the border, because for centuries Troki and Wilno had been the heartland of their culture and religion. Furthermore, they were in need of help from the larger Karaim population living in eastern Poland, since the Polish Karaims possessed greater resources.

The Karaims of Lithuania began to modernize their culture, which had previously focused on their religion. The writers who now began to produce new literature were not only learned *erbis*, i.e. Karaim rabbis, who could use Hebrew as their literary medium, but Karaims who had studied in state schools and had learnt modern languages, history and literature as part of their curriculum. So far only religious literature had been available in the Karaim language, written in Hebrew characters, besides a small number of occasional and rare prose texts or original poems. Now with the profound changes taking place around them, and the pressure of the great cultural languages, the Karaims were stirred to make efforts to raise their culture and language to the level of other nations and to modify their conservative culture to an increasing extent in accordance with the needs of the modern world.

The first phase of the new cultural era in the life of the western Karaims only lasted until the First World War. In 1916 they were evacuated to the major Russian cities and the Crimea whence, however, they were allowed to return to their native towns in the 1920s. After this migration the most productive era of modern Karaim culture began in Lithuania and Poland, lasting until 1940, when their hopes were again shattered by political developments in eastern Europe. The Second World War was followed by the Soviet period, and the stagnation it caused continued till our own days. During this time the Karaim culture suffered irreparable losses.

Onarmah seems to consist of a single collection of articles which were later on published over a period of several years. This conclusion is based on the fact that the first volume includes an expression of gratitude for articles which appeared many years later in other editions of the journal. An article on the Karaim language by Professor Ananiasz Zajaczkowski was printed twice, and Daniel Čaprocki wrote two articles about the Karaim groups in which he investigated places connected with the history of the Karaims in northern Lithuania in the 1930s. Also, Boris Kokenai's article on Karaim philology is announced in the first volume, although it was published in the very last volume. Kokenai came from the Crimea, as did S. Krym, who had earlier published a collection of Crimean folk-tales in Paris. All in all, this leads one to conclude that *Onarmah* suffered from a lack of good local writers and interesting topics. The variety of writings is remarkable in the third volume of *Onarmah*, extending from simple poems and stories to a number of the best texts which were printed in the journals

under consideration in this paper; in this respect the third volume surpasses the earlier two.

There are some topics which recur with regularity in all the volumes of *Onarmah*. In fact, the majority of articles published in the Karaim journals are in one way or another connected with the very same limited number of themes. Since these topics were central to Karaim culture, they are here collected under a few headings as follows:

The Karaim kenesa

The repair of the kenesa in Panevežys was a demanding enterprise for the Karaim community. The need for repairs had been discussed for some time; however, the problem of funding had delayed the material work. In independent Lithuania it became possible for the Karaims to receive substantial financial support from the government as well as from workers and private donors within their own community, and even from their co-religionists living abroad. Thus the repair work became feasible, and the kenesa was enlarged, renovated and repainted.

The Karaims were very pleased with the outcome. Many commented on the beautiful appearance of the building and its surroundings, which were embellished with the help of the officials of the city planning department.

The Karaim library

The Karaim community possessed a house of its own in Panevežys. In it the Karaim Society was established; it provided the Karaims with numerous cultural activities, including instruction in reading and writing their own language. A library was also set up in the Community House for the benefit of the Karaim population. Valuable manuscripts, books and journals were donated to the library, and by 1939 the collection had grown to 400 items. The periodical *Onarmah* was printed in the building where the local Karaims planned to print further material in the Karaim language. The library also housed the manuscripts of Karaim dramas by Karaim authors; from time to time these were played on stage.

The Karaim language

Problems concerning the Karaim language itself, and its everyday use, are repeatedly mentioned in some of the articles in the journals. In articles concerning the language one can observe that writers like Ananiasz Zajaczkowski and Boris Kokenai represent a conservative viewpoint as concerns Karaim: the classical

literary language of earlier centuries is considered to be the only acceptable literary form of their language.

The everyday spoken language was changing; it had picked up words and expressions from Russian and even more from Polish. The literary language was not changing at the same pace; but the written language of these journals was no longer exactly the same as the language of the prayer-books of the previous century. The language in the *Onarmah* is no means uniform but differs from writer to writer. Moreover, there was no official norm or standard for written Karaim.

Karaim literature

Karaim literature is a very prominent subject, and the journals constitute one of the few collections of original secular texts which have ever been published in the Karaim language. What makes them even more interesting is the fact that some of the authors, such as Mihael Tinfovic and Jakov Malecki, are among the most eminent writers in the Karaim language. As a source of poetry, too, these journals are important: While two hymns of lamentation in the traditional style appear in the *Sahyzsyzmyz*, the *Onarmah* contains numerous poems by the most outstanding poets to have written in the Karaim language; some fine poems by Tinfovic and the best posthumous poems of the famous Simon Kobecki are included. Jakov Malecki, a writer and critic, wrote a biography of the poet Šelumiel Lopato in which the most important poems of this talented young poet are evaluated.

A number of poems by Aleksander Mardkovic of Luck are also printed in the second volume of the *Onarmah*. He is considered to be the best writer to have written in the southern Karaim dialect.

Karaim religion

In the same way as the Karaims have remained faithful to the traditions of their forefathers, and to their language, they also endeavour to be faithful to the traditions of their religion as transmitted by their ancestors.

The Karaims consider themselves to be followers of an older and more original tradition of religion than that of the Rabbanites (i.e. the Jews). The foundation of their religion consists of the five books of Moses, which human beings are permitted to expound. However, such commentaries are considered to be plainly man's work and as such enjoy no divine status. The Karaims consider themselves to be followers of the Law of Moses, and as a consequence they call

themselves by the name “Sons of the Law” as can be seen in the articles by the poet Mardkovic and the hacham Tovija Babovic.

Karaim history

One important and recurring theme is the specific notion which the Karaims of Lithuania have of their own origins and history through the ages. This view has been adapted from the old historical legends and retold in the pages of books and articles dealing with their history. The final word on this topic was said in the publications of Seraja Szapszal, the well-known Karaim scholar and haham of all Karaims. The tale may be repeated here in brief:

The Karaims were taken to the North by Prince Vytautas, the great Lithuanian conqueror, while he was waging war against the Golden Horde in 1397. When the Prince returned to Lithuania, he is said to have brought with him some 400 Karaim families who were settled in Trakai, the capital city, where his castle was located. These Karaims served as his personal bodyguard, and in the garrisons of small fortifications on the border between Lithuania and the Order of the Teutonic Knights. In this military service the Karaims acquired the reputation for being brave and loyal servants of the state, both in Lithuania, and later in Poland-Lithuania. Of course, they were useful soldiers in the east, too, because the Turkish language was their mother tongue, and during the campaigns against the Tatars and Turks they made a name for proverbial fidelity, even on delicate missions abroad. In the 17th century, when the great modern nations with their large armies were formed, because of their small numbers the Karaim regiments lost their significance, and thus they all gradually were compelled to turn their hands to small-scale farming in the midst of the majority Lithuanian population.

In the second volume of the *Onarmah* this historical legend surfaces in an article concerning the history and religion of the Karaims by hacham Levi-Babovic, and in a sermon by Simon Firkovic, the hazzan of Trakai, in remarks about the past of the Karaim people made during a visit to the Lithuanian community of the Karaims.

In the *Onarmah* Daniel Čaprocki wrote two articles about visits by Karaim groups to historical sites in northern Lithuania in the 1930s. They visited the castle of Radziwills, where the Karaims had formed a garrison. They went to see the ruins of the old kenesa in Birzai and tried to read the texts of the old tombstones in the cemetery. Old people recounted traditional memories of the past, and they all recalled the times when the Karaims occupied a more prominent position in the land.

Many of these articles reveal that the historical past was ever-present in the minds of the Karaim people. They always seemed to be looking back at their own

history. The truth remains that the Karaims were once of considerable significance in Lithuania, and they themselves have never forgotten their past glory.¹

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¹ The article is based on a paper read at the Seventh Scandinavian Congress of Jewish Studies, Järvenpää, Finland, May 14, 2000.

