

▣ ESTABLISHING ISLAM IN SWEDEN: THE FIRST TATAR COMMUNITY AND MUSLIM CONGREGATION AND THEIR SOURCES

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This article focuses on the history and establishment of the first Muslim congregation and organisation in Sweden, *Turk-Islam Föreningen i Sverige för Religion och Kultur* (Turk-Islamic Association for Religion and Culture), which was founded in the late 1940s by a small group of immigrants and refugees of Tatar and Turkish origin. The community has been the object of earlier research (see Svanberg & Westerlund 1999; Ståhlberg & Svanberg 2016; Sorgenfrei 2018) but the following is a first attempt to describe the historical background of the Tatars in Sweden through systematic archival work. The article thus aims at being also an orientation to the archival and private sources of the group and their organization and to point out some topics of interest for further research.

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, seventy years had passed since the first Muslim organisation established itself in Sweden, *Turk-Islam Föreningen i Sverige för Religion och Kultur* (Turk-Islamic Association in Sweden for Religion and Culture). The founders, among them Ebrahim Umerkajeff, Ali Zakerov, Osman Soukkan and several others, were of Tatar and Turkish origin. In this article, the history of the religious-cultural association and its key figures will be in focus in an effort to describe the historical background and conditions in which the congregation existed. Further, the primary sources for research on the group are presented. The community has been researched earlier (Svanberg & Westerlund 1999; Ståhlberg & Svanberg 2016; Sorgenfrei 2018), but several archival and private materials used in this article as well as interviews are published for the first time. The article will also discuss the sources and topics concerning the sources, such as conflicting data, and it raises questions for future research.

EBRAHIM UMERKAJEFF AND EARLY SOURCES

In 1897 or 1898 Ebrahim Umerkajeff (1877–1954), a Tatar from the Penza province in Russia, established himself in the Swedish capital Stockholm. It is difficult to tell exactly when Umerkajeff first crossed the Swedish border because of the relaxed migration policy at the end of the nineteenth century; between 1860 and 1917, Sweden had open borders. Russian citizens were controlled only after 1906 due to the recent political turmoil (Lövgren 2000). This indicates that some informa-

tion regarding Ebrahim Umerkajeff could be found in the archives of the Governor's Foreigner Office Crime Department (*Överståthållarämbetets utlänningsexpeditioners kriminalavdelning*) after 1906. From 1919 when he applied to become a Swedish citizen, there are materials concerning Umerkajeff in the Department of Justice archives (*Justitiedepartementets arkiv*) kept in the Swedish National Archives (*Riksarkivet*, RA).

Besides the state archives, the Nordic Museum (*Nordiska museet*, NM) in Stockholm hosts an important collection of data concerning Umerkajeff. The Umerkajeff family and especially his granddaughter Vera Tunmar have donated private materials, including personal letters and photos as well as legal documents. Vera Tunmar has also written about her personal memories of Ebrahim and his first wife, Vera's grandmother Maria Elisabeth Hult (1876–1955), in an unpublished folder distributed within the Umerkajeff family (UPA). Further information regarding addresses and occupational details can be found in telephone directories and advertisements for Umerkajeff's businesses, found through the National Media Database *Retriever*. Ebrahim Umerkajeff's great granddaughter Marie Helen DeAguilar Umerkajeff has put together a list of all known addresses (UPA).

The Umerkajeff family oral history tells that Ebrahim came as part of a Russian delegation of furriers to the General Art and Industrial Exposition in Stockholm (*Allmänna konst- och industriutställningen*) which was held at Djurgården between 15 May and 3 October 1897. There he met his future wife, Maria Elisabeth Hult, who also worked in the fur and textile industry (Vera Tunmar, UPA). A different narrative appears in a police hearing with Ebrahim Umerkajeff, when he applied for Swedish citizenship in 1919. He informed the police that he was born on 15 October 1877 and that his parents, Letejeff and Keline Umerkajeff, were farmers. His education was short, only five years in a Muslim school. He worked on his father's farm and then as a furrier for his older brother in Russia and Finland. The police report further states that he came to Stockholm on 25 December 1898 – a year after the exhibition at Djurgården – and in 1899 he also visited Denmark and Norway before deciding to settle and start a business in Sweden (JUK, Umerkajeff).

Umerkajeff told the Swedish police that he first worked as a messenger for a company called Segerborg (according to *Dagens Nyheter* 3.4.1900 its office was at Hötorget 6 in central Stockholm). Between 1903 and 1906 he worked as a managing clerk for the furrier Maria Elisabeth Hult (at Riddargatan 6). In 1906, he received permission to run his own business and he founded the Russian Fur Store (*Ryska Pälsvaruaffären*) (NM, Permission). Marie Helen DeAguilar Umerkajeff notes that his stores moved several times within central Stockholm (UPA).

According to the police report, Umerkajeff married Maria Hult in 1900 and their son Hussein was born in 1901, but a document in the family archive dates the marriage to 1919 (NM, Marriage Certificate). Possibly they married first in Russia – Maria had a residence permit (*Uppehållsbok*) as a Russian citizen in 1918 – and married again in the Hedvig Eleonora parish, Stockholm, after Ebrahim received his citizenship. In 1928 his company went bankrupt. Possibly Maria, whom he divorced in 1927, owned a part in it, and he was forced to close the shop as relations deteriorated and his ex-wife refused to have anything to do with him (Vera Tunmar, interview, 28.11.2017). The news about the bankruptcy was advertised in the newspapers (*Aftonbladet* 7.4.1928: 6; *Dagens Nyheter* 4.4.1928: 18).

In 1930, a year after marrying his young shop assistant Elisabeth Bergdahl, Ebrahim opened a store on Birger Jarlsgatan 38 near Kjellsons Café, where it would be located for a long time (*Dagens Nyheter* 13.11.1930: 20). The address was of some importance for the establishment of

both the Tatar group in Stockholm and Islam in Sweden. Umerkajeff's last years were prosperous and he bought a summer house in Viggbyholm just north of Stockholm, a place which became another important address for the Tatars arriving in Sweden in the 1940s. He died in 1954 and was buried in the Tatar Muslim cemetery in Helsinki (Vera Tunmar, interview 28.11.2017).

There are several interviews with Ebrahim Umerkajeff in Swedish newspapers in the 1940s and 1950s. The interviews contain interesting information concerning his life as one of very few Muslims living in Sweden. In an interview published in *Expressen* in 1946, Ebrahim told the reporter how he was not piously practising his religion as much as he should. It is difficult for a Muslim businessman to observe prayer times, he explained. He told the paper that he was a member of the Muslim congregation of Helsingfors (Helsinki) in Finland and that he kept a fast during the month of Ramadan. During the fasting period, he noted, Muslims cannot eat, drink or smoke from the time the sun rises until it sets: "You cannot even kiss your wife" (*Expressen* 20.1.1946: 14).

Regarding *halal* meat (permitted food according to Islam; here meat from animals slaughtered in a ritual way), he conveyed how he and another Muslim solved this problem by buying lamb from a farmer in Kårsta in Uppland. They both read the necessary prayers while the lamb was being slaughtered in the barn (*Expressen* 20.1.1946: 14). The "other Muslim" might have been Hadji Post Sahibi Akif Arhan (1905–1981) from Izmir, Turkey, who had arrived in 1928 and established a rug shop on the same block as Umerkajeff's store (SUK, Arhan). Umerkajeff also mentioned that there were "eight other Muslims living in Stockholm", most of whom had recently come to Sweden. These were most probably Tatars.

FORMATION OF THE TATAR COMMUNITY

A State Foreigner Commission (*Statens utlänningskommission*) was created to deal with refugees and immigrants arriving in Sweden after World War II. The commission strictly controlled the whereabouts and doings of all foreign citizens. Local police carried out regular interviews and hearings and gathered information about family background, earlier life history, educational background, employment and other details. The Swedish National Archives host these crucial documents concerning newly arrived Tatars before they received Swedish citizenship in the 1950s and 1960s.

Ebrahim Umerkajeff was of great importance for the establishment of the recent Tatar arrivals in Sweden in the 1940s. Several of them lived in Viggbyholm where he had his summer house or worked for him at his home or in his store. Many Tatars from the Baltic countries escaped to Finland during the war and some of them joined the Finnish army against the Soviet Union (Halén & Martikainen 2016: 90, 95–96). After the war some of them migrated to Sweden out of fear of being forcibly sent to the Soviet Union.

The first to arrive in Sweden were Ali and Zeinab Zakerov with their newborn daughter Didar. They came from Tallinn in Estonia, where the Zakerov family had been well-to-do real estate owners and one of the most prosperous families among the local Tatars (Abiline & Ringvee 2016: 108; Didar Samaletdin, interview, 6.12.2017).

Ali Zakerov fled to Finland to avoid being drafted as a close combat instructor during the war. The family's properties in Tallinn were confiscated and the family became almost destitute. Ali's daughter Didar was born in Finland. Less than a year later someone reported the family to the authorities and they had to leave. At Ala-Vojakkala, just north of Torneå on the Finnish-Swedish border, they managed to pay a smuggler to bring them across the river. On the

Swedish side, they were received by soldiers who brought them to a refugee camp in Umeå. Like many other Tatar refugees, Ali Zakerov was a trained furrier. He had already heard about Ebrahim Umerkajeff but he did not start working for him. Zakerov, who had several Jewish friends in Tallinn, found his first employment with a Jewish furrier in Stockholm. However, Umerkajeff arranged temporary accommodation for the Zakerov family in Viggbyholm (SUK, Zakerov; Didar Samaletdin, interview, 6.12.2017).

Over the next few years, other Tatar refugees also crossed the northern border from Finland. After spending time in refugee camps and finding short-term employment, through the mediation of Umerkajeff they would usually end up in summer houses in Viggbyholm and then come to Stockholm. In 1944, Väliulla Fetkullen (Veliulla Fetkulin) from Nizhny Novgorod arrived in Sweden (SUK, Fetkulin). Others were an Estonian citizen of “Turkish descent”, Ibrahim Zarip (SUK, Zarip) and Jusuf Alioglu, who stated that he was born in Istanbul but grew up in Baku (Azerbaijan) and later lived in Moscow (SUK, Alioglu). Fetkulin first worked in camps in Gävle and Ockelbo before receiving a job as a furrier in Stockholm. Zarip ended up as a farmworker outside Eskilstuna and Alioglu came to Stockholm after some time in camps and holding different temporary jobs in Haparanda, Ludvika, Krylbo and Fagersta (SUK, Zarip and Alioglu).

In 1945, Hairulla Samlihan arrived. To the State Foreigner Commission he stated that he was born in Terijoki in Finland (now Zelenogorsk, Russia) but that his parents were Turks who for many years prior to his birth had lived in Russia (SUK, Samlihan). Also, Rāfat Salah stated that he was born in Terijoki but that he grew up in Leningrad where his father – also of “Turkish descent” – was arrested in 1934. The family had fled to Finland (SUK, Salah). Both received jobs in Katrineholm at the furrier company *Aktiebolaget Pälsförädling*. In 1947, Ahmed Haerdinov from Narva, Estonia, came to Sweden (SUK, Haerdinov); another Soviet citizen of claimed “Turkish descent”, Halidulla Utarbai, had deserted to Finland and now sought political asylum in Sweden (SUK, Utarbai). Finally, in 1948, came Mānsur Nasretidin (Nesreddin), born to “Russian parents” in Villmanstrand (Finnish: Lappeenranta) in Finland (SUK, Nesreddin).

The ethnonym “Turkish” in most of these cases probably means Tatar background yet sometimes also that their parents were from Turkey. There are several reasons for the substitution of “Tatar” by “Turk”. The Swedish term *tattare* is a strong pejorative of socially challenged people and often connected to the Roma. Tatars count themselves as a Turkic people, despite the fact that some might be of partly Finno-Ugric descent (Svanberg 2011). In the case of Tatars in Finland and also Sweden, a Turkish identity was strengthened by connections with Atatürk’s new republic since the 1920s. Many Tatars saw themselves as Turks and were sympathetic with Pan-Turkish ideas. Until the 1960s or in some cases the late 1980s, many Finnish Tatars identified themselves as Northern Turks (Ståhlberg 2012).

The reason why some of the Tatar refugees coming to Sweden in the 1940s emphasized a Turkish nationality might also have strategic reasons. Most were Mishār Tatars from villages near Sergach in Nizhny Novgorod province (Soukkan 1985), who in the early twentieth century had moved to Estonia and Finland. After the war, the Soviet Union ordered the return of persons belonging to several ethnic groups and the Tatars feared that they would be expelled to the Soviet Union where harsh punishment or death awaited them (Ståhlberg & Svanberg 2016: 202–203). Claiming Turkish heritage could have been a way of avoiding being returned to the Soviet Union if they were not allowed to stay in Sweden. For example, Jusuf Alioglu and Refāt Salah were both to be expelled to Turkey soon after they arrived in Sweden, but the Turkish authori-

ties did not accept them as citizens and thus they were given the possibility to stay in Sweden where they later became Swedish citizens (SUK, Alioglu and Salah).

Also connected to the forming Tatar group was a Turkish citizen, Osman Soukkan, who had been born in 1903 in Štip in the Ottoman Empire (now in North Macedonia). The family moved to Izmir in Anatolia when Osman was two or three years old. As a young man, for two years he bicycled through Europe until he ended up in Järvenpää (Träskända) in Finland. Here he found work as a teacher in the local Tatar group, teaching history, Turkish and Islam. Among the students was a young woman named Emine Nisametdin (1920–2010). In 1939 they married and soon Emine had given birth to three children, one son and two daughters (SUK, Soukkan Osman; Türker Soukkan, interview, 7.2.2018).

In 1948, Osman Soukkan's mother died and after twenty years abroad he decided to return to Izmir with his family. For some reason, however, the family remained in Sweden and moved from Viggbyholm to central Stockholm where they opened an ironing and laundry business. In 1952, Soukkan made an attempt to move to Turkey, but the family returned to Sweden after a few months. Both Turkey and Osman had changed during the years he had been away and his family felt more at home in Sweden (Türker Soukkan, interview, 7.2.2018). In 1956, the Soukkan family received Swedish citizenship (SUK, Soukkan Emine). Osman and Emine Soukkan acquired a laundry but Emine also trained as a hairdresser and opened her own salon. Osman Soukkan was active as *imam* in the Turk-Islam Association, an assignment he would keep until the early 1960s (Türker Soukkan, interview, 7.2.2018).

THE FIRST MUSLIM ASSOCIATION

At least since 1948, every Saturday at Kjellsons Café the Tatar and Turkish men would meet and talk about current affairs (Didar Samaletdin, interview, 6.12.2017). This circle established Sweden's first Muslim organization. The constituting meeting was held at the café on 22 October 1949 and Swedish legislation was presented as the first point on the agenda (TSA, Constituting document, 22 October 1949). Archive documents show that Umerkajeff already in 1946 had invited Rāfat Salah and Jusuf Alioglu to discuss the possibility of forming a "Mohammedan Faith Community" in Stockholm (SUK, Salah).

The founding members unanimously decided to form an association "for the support and promotion of religion and culture among the Mohammedan confessors [...] in Sweden belonging to the Turkish race" (TSA, Constituting document, 22 October 1949). Rāfat Salah was appointed chairman of the meeting and after a long-standing debate and voting procedure, it was decided that the association's name would be *Turk-Islam Föreningen i Sverige för Religion och Kultur* (Turk-Islamic Association for Religion and Culture).

To the interim board of the Association were appointed Rāfat Salah, Ibrahim Zarip, Ali Zakerov, Ahmed Haerdinov and Veliulla Fetkulin. The protocol states that Osman Soukkan, at his own request, possibly because he planned to emigrate, would be admitted as a "supporting member without becoming subject to the association's statutes" (TSA, Constituting document, 22 October 1949; Türker Soukkan, interview, 7.2.2018). In the 1950s, a Swedish Muslim convert, Björn Ismail Ericsson, became a member. He recalled how Soukkan was met with the foremost respect, because he "could read Islam's sacred writings in Arabic and was an educated prayer leader – *imam*" (DEA, Ericsson).

From protocols kept in Türker Soukkan's archives, we know that the board consisted mainly of Tatars and some Turks, all Sunni Muslims of Hanafī creed. The chair and other positions



Figure 1 Front row, from left: Osman Ali Soukkan, Husein Fetkulin, Rāfat Salah, Ali Zakerov and Alibek Velibek. Back row: Jusuf Alioglu, Halidulla Utarbai, Mānsur Nasretidin and Hairulla Samlihan. Courtesy of Türker Soukkan, private archive.

shifted, but until the beginning of the 1960s Soukkan acted as *imam*; after some time, Zakerov appears to have become the permanent chairman. On 19 November 1949, a second meeting was held (TSA, Protocol, 19 November 1949). Now Veliulla Fetkulin was elected chairman, Rāfat Salah secretary and Ali Zakerov treasurer; the vice members were Ibrahim Zarip and Ahmed Haerdinov and the auditors Husein Fetkulin (Veliulla's father), Hairulla Samlihan and Ebrahim Umerkajeff (Figure 1). While the others remained in the Association for several years, Salah and Zarip emigrated to the United States (Türker Soukkan, interview, 7.2.2018). Another active participant, Alibek Velibek, has no dossier in Swedish archives. Probably he migrated to Sweden with Hairulla Samlihan in 1945 (Türker Soukkan, interview, 16.5.2019).

According to Björn Ismail Ericsson, the Turk-Islamic Association for Religion and Culture was founded primarily as a structure to preserve Tatar-Muslim traditions in Sweden (DEA, Ericsson). The first protocol shows that its goal was to cater to Muslims “of the Turkish race” in Sweden. It functioned both as a kind of Tatar cultural association and a structure for the members to practise Islam. Activities were organized in connection to festivities in a way similar to the Finnish-Islamic Congregation (Halén & Martikainen 2016: 92–102). During the 1950s the group grew when additional Tatar families arrived in Sweden from Finland and engaged in the Association and its activities. Türker Soukkan writes:

Because everyone confessed to Islam and knew each other, the spontaneous company between them was initially tight. They constituted a social network that held together and assisted each other, for example by housing each other in their homes. Dinners were organized in homes where we ate Tatar dishes. (Soukkan 1985: 108)

There was no mosque in Sweden, so the group met mainly at Kjellsons Café next to Umerkajeff's fur shop. Sometimes they arranged Friday prayers in Zakerov's apartment (Didar Samaletdin, interview, 6.12.2017). Later the Turk-Islamic Association for Religion and Culture rented a room in Folkets hus in Norrmalm, Stockholm, where they held both meetings and prayers (Türker Soukkan, interview, 7.2.2018). For the larger festivals, they rented other places, for example the Lillienhoff house or Medborgarhuset in Södermalm, or the Concert Hall at Hötorget (Soukkan 1985: 109).

For several years, celebrating the two *īd* festivities – *īd al-Fitr* or ending the fast, and *īd al-Adha* or ending the pilgrimage period – comprised the Association's two major annual

commitments. Sometimes they also celebrated the Prophet Mohammed's birthday, *mawlid*. The newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* announced such a celebration on 4 December 1953, adding a picture of Osman and Emine Soukkan:

The Turk-Islamic Association in Sweden will gather on Sunday 6 December in the small hall of the Concert Hall to commemorate the birth of Mohammed in 570 AD. There will be song and Oriental music on the gramophone – the music is recorded in Arabic, Turkish, English, and maybe also in Javanese.

The congregation's priest – or unofficial "imam" – is Osman Soukkan, who privately owns an ironing facility in Stockholm. The number of Mohammedans belonging to the congregation is 47, but in total there are about 500 *Qur'ān* confessors [Muslims] in the country. (*Dagens Nyheter* 4.12.1953: 12)

During its first four years, the Muslim association grew from just a handful to almost 50 members. In the 1950s, the Association arranged "multinational tea parties" at the Concert Hall, to which they invited Muslims of different nationalities mainly in relation to the celebration of religious festivals (Soukkan 1985: 109–110). Ambassadors and embassy staff from countries with a Muslim majority population, such as Turkey, Pakistan and Indonesia, were invited and also came. The celebration of the Muslim festivals was usually noticed in the daily press in the 1950s and 1960s. For example, in *Svenska Dagbladet* we read about such a celebration, connected by the newspaper to the recent launch of Apollo 8, the first manned mission to the Moon:

While the United States sent three astronauts to the Moon on Saturday, hundreds of Muslims in Stockholm waited for the new moon to appear, ending the month of Ramadan. On Saturday morning, hundreds of Muslims from different countries in gathered in Medborgarhuset at Söder to celebrate *beiram* [Tatar: *bäyräm*, feast].

As usual in the Islam Association, it was uncertain until the last minute who would lead the common prayer when the Muslims bow on their carpets directed towards Mecca. After a moment of hesitation, the young Turk Moustafa Aydin stood up and began by reciting *Surat al-Nasser* (the Comforter). The congregation – restaurant workers and diplomats side by side – followed the prayer ritual under the leadership of the *imam*. Who is to act as *imam* for the congregation is still an open question, but it is certain that Mr. Aydin handled the task excellently with his powerful recitation of the Arabic prayer texts.

After the service, the congregation was dispersed into small groups to end the fast with festive meals. The issue of "what Islam says about journeys to the Moon" was discussed here and there. For example, reference was made to some verses from *Surat al-Djinn*: "We had sought the heaven but had found it filled with strong warders and meteors. And we used to sit on places (high) therein to listen. But he who listened now findeth a flame in wait for him." (*Svenska Dagbladet*, 23.12.1968; Pickthall's translation of the *Qur'ān*)

The tone is often respectful in newspapers and the Muslims are presented as an exciting and exotic element in the otherwise rather homogeneous Sweden. Probably the small congregation helped to make Stockholm a bit more cosmopolitan. Türker Soukkan (interview, 26.3.2018) does not remember any trouble growing up as a Muslim in Sweden in the 1950s. On the contrary, he explained: "You suffered the risk of becoming something of a favourite at school, because you were a little different." He also remembers whispering the Muslim confession of faith during morning prayers: "Yet I didn't feel like an immigrant (*invandrare*) until the term appeared."¹

1 The term *invandrare* 'immigrant' appeared in the late 1960s with *Invandrarutredningen* 'Immigrant Investigation' 1968. It replaced the formerly more common *utlänning* 'foreigner'. In many ways the two words were used almost as synonyms from the 1970s onwards, giving the impression that people who had migrated to Sweden were always some kind of foreigners. Swedish citizens born in Sweden or whose parents were born in Sweden to some extent were still seen as foreigners in the 1990s when criticism against the term increased. See Kulturdepartementet 2000.

Before 1951, when a new law on religion was adopted, Swedish citizens could belong only to the State Church or another approved congregation (Karlsson & Svanberg 1997). For instance, Ebrahim Umerkajeff registered as a Muslim member of Hedvig Eleonora congregation at Östermalmstorg in Stockholm (JUK, Umerkajeff). Islam was not among the approved congregations, most probably because there was no Muslim congregation to approve when the previous law was approved in 1873. After the new law on religious freedom was adopted, Swedish citizens had the right to belong to any religious denomination or choose not to join any congregation. Muslims could now officially and freely organize themselves. One week after the new law was inaugurated, the daily *Aftonbladet* (9.1.1952) published a query by a pseudonymous contributor named “Wondering”: “Mohammedans! Is there any Mohammedan association in Sweden and if so, which?” A week later on 16 January, two answers were published from what appears to be two competing Muslim associations:

Solution for Mohammedans

Reply to “Wondering” January 9. 1952. You ask if there is any Mohammedan association in Sweden. – Yes, there is. The name is The Turk-Islam Association in Sweden for Religion and Culture. Contact with this association can be obtained through the address: Box 175, Stockholm 1. The association has a meeting room and a specially separated burial site at Södra begravningsplatsen [Southern Cemetery]. On our feast days, we gather for worship, and everyone who confesses to the Islamic doctrine can join. *The Secretary*

In response to the request on 9/1/52, I would like to inform you that we Mohammedans in Stockholm have formed the Mohammedan Ass. [Association] in Stockholm, c/o Umerkajeff, Kungstensgatan 1, III. Furthermore, I want to inform that we have founded the Mohammedan Faith Community, Kungstensgatan 1, c/o Umerkajeff. Annual meeting January 27. *E. Umerkajeff*

A schism between Umerkajeff and the members of the Turk-Islam Association had apparently led to the founding of a competing organization by Umerkajeff (see also Vera Tunmar, UPA). Possibly he felt that he had been sidestepped by the younger and newly arrived immigrants of the Association where he had received only a marginal role as accountant. Umerkajeff’s project came to nothing. The Muslims in Stockholm preferred to join the ranks of the Association (Türker Soukkan, interview, 27.11.2017).

In the 1950s, after the law on religious freedom came into effect, the Turk-Islam Association changed its name to the Islamic Congregation. An interesting research topic would be to investigate the impact of this first Muslim association in Sweden on the change regarding the freedom of faith. Did the fact that Muslims had now settled and organized themselves in any way influence Swedish policy and lobbying regarding the freedom of religion?

CREATING A MUSLIM SPACE IN STOCKHOLM

One of the first questions to be solved after founding the Turk-Islamic Association for Religion and Culture was how to establish a Muslim burial ground (TSA, Constituting document, 22 October 1949). In a protocol from 19 September 1950 (TSA), it is stated that the Association had been granted a quarter next to the Jewish cemetery at the southern Stockholm burial ground called Skogskyrkogården, ‘The Forest Cemetery’. This burial quarter became a dwelling of special importance for the group, a “Muslim space” (Metcalf 1996). Members of the congregation held burial ceremonies there into the mid-1970s (Ståhlberg & Svanberg 2016; Soukkan 1987: 12). The area where a group can bury their dead is a sort of sanctified place with special religious significance. Through the graves and the relatives buried there, a sort of connection is

established with the new country; graves and bodies can help to anchor the group in new soil (Balkan 2015; Larsson, Sorgenfrei & Stockman 2017).

According to Didar Samaletdin (interview, 6.12.2017), the Congregation early on also strove to build a mosque in Stockholm. Ali Zakerov requested and was granted a meeting with Swedish Prime Minister Tage Erlander to discuss the possibility of building or getting help to build one. There were no results and the Prime Minister probably thought the project too exotic. Some activists kept the dream of a mosque alive, however.

In 1959, Björn Ismail Ericsson founded a “cellar mosque” in Kärntorp, a Stockholm suburb. As a Swedish convert to Islam, he was not satisfied with the congregation’s strong orientation towards Tatar culture and primarily celebrating the few major religious festivals. He wanted a mosque for Friday prayers for a start, so he rented a cellar and began running it as a mosque. He invited Ali Zakerov and others from the congregation, but they were not impressed: Zakerov did not like its location in the suburbs and he could not imagine himself praying in a cellar. Björn Ismail arranged the prayers himself, attracting a small group of immigrant Muslims until 1962 when the place was closed due to a lack of visitors and funding (Sorgenfrei 2018: 77–81).

The question of a place for prayer remained acute throughout the congregation’s history. One of the younger members who stepped forward in the 1960s was Didar Samaletdin, one of the first persons to have grown up as a Muslim in Sweden. In a newspaper interview, she described her upbringing as not completely conflict-free. It was not always easy to navigate between parental requests and the attractions of teenage life in Stockholm during the 1950s:

In those years, teenage culture had its breakthrough, with rock music and everything, and it was harder for me to defy my parents than for my friends, especially as I was an only child. Luckily my grandmother liked Elvis Presley. She went with me to the cinema to watch Elvis and there she used to beat the pace [of the music] with a can of sweets. (*Svenska Dagbladet* 15.12.1994: 16)

Didar also described how she was torn between the different demands and cultures of her parents and her peers but at the age of fifteen she decided “to be a Muslim”. This decision (it must have pleased her father) came with a request for a position within the congregation, which she was granted. For decades Didar worked as her father’s assistant: “We had a lot of fun, many parties and cultural activities.” The congregational work strengthened her faith and interest in Islamic traditions while she also found herself well adapted to the Swedish high school with its explicit focus on Christianity: “I have had a tremendous advantage of having attended a regular, Swedish school. It gave me access to both languages, both religions. The knowledge I got in this way about Sweden has given me great security” (*Svenska Dagbladet* 15.12.1994: 16).

During the 1970s, Didar Samaletdin was elevated to leading positions within the congregation. In an interview from 1970 in *Aftonbladet* (10.11.1970: 35), she appears, 27 years old, in a short skirt and unveiled, set hair in front of an opened *Qur’ān*. The caption reads: “Girl from Stockholm becomes head of Sweden’s 10,000 Mohammedans.” In the article she says that she is disappointed with Church Minister Alva Myrdal and Prime Minister Olof Palme, who did not want to help her create a space where the congregation could celebrate Ramadan:

The need for a place to gather has been acute for 21 years. The Muslims have been referred to temporarily leased premises. For the big festivities, they have rented Medborgarhuset in Stockholm. The place was the plan also for this year with the greatest festival, Ramadan, coming up in November. But this year, Medborgarhuset was already occupied... It looks very gloomy. If the Muslims cannot find a place to rent, the feast will come to nothing. (*Aftonbladet* 10.11.1970: 35)

Most of all, the Muslims wanted a permanent residence, Didar explained in the interview, “but since the congregation largely consists of immigrants from Turkey, Yugoslavia, Pakistan and Indonesia, they lack funding to build their own place”. A few weeks later the papers again reported about Didar. The Muslims could borrow the City Museum’s premises and a few hundred people had come to break the fast together. As it turned out, the room was far too small and some of the visitors had to pray in the corridors. Didar and her father expressed their gratitude for having been able to use the museum’s locations but again pointed out the need for their own space (*Svenska Dagbladet* 27.11.1970: 11). A couple of years later, *Svenska Dagbladet* (8.9.1974) could report that Sweden’s first mosque was inaugurated in the Alvik Municipal Building: “The Islamic Congregation’s President Ali Zakerov opened the premises. In the mosque, there is a library and prayer room for women and children and a larger prayer room for men, archives and a library [sic]” (*Svenska Dagbladet* 8.9.1974: 8).

In *Dagens Nyheter* (2.9.1974: 4), the premises are called an Islamic Centre rather than a mosque. From there, the article says, “the Islamic congregation will work to help Muslim immigrants in Sweden”. In 1974, a year before both Ali Zakerov and Osman Soukkan died, the Islamic community finally received some sort of community centre. By then the congregation consisted of a very different group of people than Tatars.

DECLINE OF THE TATAR COMMUNITY

Much changed within the Tatar-Turkish community during the 1960s and 1970s, primarily due to demography as a result of increased labour immigration to Sweden. Already in the 1950s, the Turk-Islamic Association for Religion and Culture changed its name to the more inclusive Islam Congregation. In the 1960s, Türker Soukkan began feeling that it had changed into something different than the Tatar community in which he had grown up (interview 2.2.2018). In the 1970s, the Islam Congregation had difficulties finding localities to fit all the Muslims from widely different backgrounds.

The small group who founded the Turk-Islamic Association for Religion and Culture in 1949 were mostly Tatars and what could be characterized as secular or cultural Muslims (for a discussion on the concept of cultural Muslims, see, for example, Larsson & Sander 2007: 153–154). They celebrated the annual Sunni festivities but also used the Association as a structure to preserve cultural traditions, language and cuisine and other elements in a new country, a phenomenon quite common among migrant groups (see, for example, Ebaugh, Fuchs & Chafetz 2000; Sjödin 2011).

According to the Swedish convert Björn Ismail Ericsson, these cultural aspects seemed more important than religious ones (DEA, Ericsson). The Tatar ethnic and cultural background was of great significance and it is shown also in the bulletin *Heberçi*, which the Association distributed in 1952 (only one issue). In this bulletin a number of articles are devoted to the ethnic and historical background of the Tatars, as well as to traditional culture and songs. Religious and cultural identity cannot, however, be easily distinguished in the community. This seems to have been true also for the Tatars in Finland where the Tatar language used by elderly Tatars was called “the Muslim language” in contrast to Finnish which was seen as a secular language (Jonasson 2018; Ståhlberg 2012).

Different expressions of religion are important pieces in the Tatar ethnicity puzzle. An example of how religion was very much intertwined with the concept of Tatar-Turk ethnicity within the group is the case of another early Swedish convert. About the same time when Björn Ismail Ericsson came back to Sweden after some years in Paris where he converted to Islam, a

certain Gunnar Eriksson contacted the Association with the intention of taking the faith. Didar Samaletdin (interview, 6.12.2017) remembers that several of the members were hesitant:

The Tatars were not always that bright, you see. “Can he really become a Muslim, being all Swedish and red-haired?” My father said that we had to check if he knew anything about Islam and they kept on discussing this for such a long time that [Gunnar] went to the Ahmadiyya instead. My father became very angry when he heard this because Ahmadiyya is a sect, and he believed they had done great sin not accepting a person who wanted to convert.²

Discussions whether someone who is not a Tatar can convert to (Tatar) Islam are still going on in the Finnish-Islamic Congregation in Helsinki where the question is also a discourse concerning group survival. If they allow non-Tatar Muslims to become part of their diminishing congregation it will not be a Tatar Muslim congregation anymore (Jonasson 2018; Halén & Martikainen 2016: 97).

In Sweden this discussion is already in the past. By 1970, some 9,000 Muslims were estimated to live in Sweden (Karlsson & Svanberg 1997: 15). The Tatars had become a minority in the congregation they once had founded. Islam had other meanings for the immigrants and the original members of the Association felt alienated. Türker Soukkan (interview, 2.2.2018) distanced himself from the group already in the 1960s. Didar Samaletdin (interview, 6.12.2017) also put a distance between herself and what was left of the congregation in the 1990s.

Islam had been the common interest among the Tatar and Turkish members of the congregation but also one element in a Tatar-Muslim bricolage. Many of the later generations of Tatars were assimilated into Swedish majority culture and never learned their parents’ or grandparents’ language or religion. Some do not identify as Tatars, even if they learned the language and grew up in a Tatar family. The opening of the mosque in Alvik in 1973 and the deaths of Ali Zakerov and Osman Soukkan in the mid-1970s might to some extent be taken as an ending point for the Tatar community in Sweden.

PERSPECTIVES

This article discusses the early sources on the founding of a Tatar community in Sweden until its decline, from its first arrival, Ebrahim Umerkajeff through the 1940s when Tatars fled from Estonia or migrated from Finland, until the 1960s when the Tatars started leaving the congregation they themselves had established. The article is primarily intended to be a complement to existing studies on the first Muslim-Tatar community in Sweden. Through archival work, the article is also intended to point in the direction of the primary sources concerning the group and its history. Several themes and characteristics of the group are interesting for further research and analytical work. To be able to reach a more complete understanding of the Tatar community in Sweden, it is urgent that more material is gathered from the descendants. There may also be a possibility to find further materials in Finnish, Russian, Estonian and Turkish archives.

More source materials offering insights into the religious activities of the organization need to be gathered in order to analyse how Islam was practised on a daily basis in Sweden in the 1940s and 1950s. We also need to do broader and deeper work in Swedish archives in order to

² The Ahmadiyya Community is a Muslim minority not acknowledged by Sunni Muslims. They established themselves in Sweden, very much through the efforts of Gunnar Eriksson, in the 1950s. See Arly Jacobsen, Larsson & Sorgenfrei 2015 and Sorgenfrei 2018: 88–104.

analyse if and to what extent the establishment of the first Tatar community and congregation might have affected Swedish policies on religious freedom.

Further studies also need to be done concerning the relation of the Swedish congregation and the Tatar communities primarily in Finland, Estonia and Russia. Relations to Tatars in Estonia and Russia are covered even less by earlier research than the connections with Finland. The role of the Swedish Tatars in a greater transnational network needs to be analysed. Many of the Swedish Tatars had strong connections to the congregation in Finland and some of them were buried there rather than in the Muslim burial quarter they had been instrumental in establishing in Stockholm. Research in the Russian archives might, for instance, result in more detailed knowledge about the early life of Ebrahim Umerkajeff, a figure of broader historical interest as he seems to have been the first Muslim and Tatar to establish himself in Sweden.

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