

INTRODUCTION.

THE KARAIM LANGUAGE IN USE: ATTENTION TO THE LANGUAGE SPOKEN BY ONLY 30 PEOPLE IN THE WORLD

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Karaim and 2022

Karaim is a Turkic language that reached Lithuania together with the Karaim community in the 14th century and has been preserved ever since; it has been used by Karaims and is still spoken today exclusively in Lithuania by approximately 30 people.

Historically, the Karaim community is a descendant of the Kipchak Turkic tribes that resided on the shores of the Black Sea around the 14th century in Crimea and the former territories of the Khazar Khaganate, when the Grand Duke Vytautas of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania relocated a few hundred families to Lithuania in 1397, most of whom settled in Trakai, with several other smaller settlements in Lithuania being established afterward. However, throughout time Trakai remained the cultural, intellectual, and spiritual centre of the Lithuanian Karaims.

The Karaim language belongs to the West Kipchak group of the Turkic language family with the closest languages being Kumyk, Karachay and Balkar, Crimean Tatar, and now extinct Kuman languages. It existed in several varieties, namely Northwest Karaim (or Trakai Karaim spoken in Lithuania), Southwest Karaim (or Luck-Halych Karaim spoken in Galicia and Volhynia), and East Karaim (or Crimean Karaim spoken in Crimea) differing just in phonetic and vocabulary aspects. Yet over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Crimean and Luck-Halych varieties lost their native speakers, and, currently, only the Trakai Karaim can still be considered, although heavily endangered, yet a living language supported and used by its native speakers. As broadly presented in the contributions of this volume, Karaims in Lithuania have always been very conscious about their native language and its challenges, and have greatly contributed to preserving the language for future generations. Today the written Karaim in Lithuania is based on the Lithuanian alphabet with minor additions, although in the past

various other orthographies were used to write it down, like Hebrew, Cyrillic, Polish, or several systems of scholarly turcological transliterations.

The year 2022 marked the 625th anniversary of the establishment of the Karaim community in Lithuania. To commemorate this anniversary, the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania declared 2022 the Year of the Karaims of Lithuania.

The anniversary was celebrated with diverse events and artistic manifestations. One of the important happenings that year was an **international scientific conference titled ‘Karaim language in use’** organised by Lithuanian Karaim Association of Culture and The Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies of Vilnius University (Lithuania) in partnership with the Jagiellonian University in Kraków (Poland) and the Embassy of the Republic of Poland. The conference took place in Vilnius University on 19 May 2022. It was dedicated to the memory of Simon Firkovič (1897–1982, a senior priest, a poet, an outstanding Karaim personality that contributed extensively to his native language) and Aleksander Dubiński (1924–2002, a professor of turcology at Warsaw University, an orientalist, a devoted Karaim who dedicated a large part of his life to Karaim studies).

At the opening of the conference, Mr. Valdas Jaskūnas, Vice Rector of Vilnius University, expressed his conviction “that if Lithuania enjoys a tolerant society, much credit goes to the Karaims and other minorities living with us. He also remembered the contribution of such scholars as Prof. Tadeusz Kowalski and Hadji Seraya Chan Shapshal to the oriental studies domain in Vilnius University more than a hundred years ago, as well as the activities of The Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies of Vilnius University of several previous decades to the Karaim language teaching and activities during summer schools in Trakai initiated by Prof. Éva Á. Csató.

As Ms. Urszula Doroszevska, Ambassador of the Republic of Poland to the Republic of Lithuania stated in her welcoming speech, “Karaims were an inseparable part of our history and culture – and when I say “our” I mean Lithuanians, Poles, Ukrainians as well as many other nations that have lived here for centuries, creating a lively organism, full of linguistic and religious diversity. It is our common and unique heritage in Europe, the legacy we want to support and protect. It is therefore important to try to re-establish the Karaim language as a testament to the vitality of our region’s culture”.

These welcoming messages gave a very warm and hopeful frame to the conference. It might become a certain milestone in the domain of the Karaim

language building up a substantial source of scholarly knowledge on Karaim. And the publication takes over this mission.

The conference turning into the publication

The objective of the conference ‘Karaim language in use’ was to overview the state-of-the-art of Karaim, its research, and to reflect on it from its usage perspectives. Therefore, the conference was arranged in three sessions: first, ‘General introduction to Karaim language’, second ‘Living resources of Karaim’, and third ‘Karaim language in Bible translations: as language source and the tool of its preservation’. Next to the presentations of the research on this language in the past, present and future, activities for the language retention by dedicated Karaim people were also discussed and a short discussion in spoken Karaim by native speakers took place.

In this volume, which appears some time after the actual conference, the editors are presenting its outcomes while providing a somewhat summarised view. Certain presentations, such as those by Dorota Cegiołka and Dr. Anna Sulimowicz-Keruth, could not be included for publication. Additionally, Prof. Dr. Habil Michał Németh is presenting one merged text instead of two contributions that were delivered orally.

The discussion among native speakers during the conference deserves special mention. Moderated by Dr. Karina Firkavičiūtė, eight people spoke to each other in Karaim (some also joining remotely). This was a discussion about the past when speaking Karaim was much more natural – families were using only Karaim for communicating with each other at home and outside their homes with relatives. Today this scientific conference was needed as a special occasion for people to speak their native language... These days many things change their ways of being usual. And a very interesting suggestion for the language usage was introduced to the universe. It links to *kybyn*, a national Karaim dish, a very popular one. It is being prepared and sold not only in restaurants representing traditional Karaim cuisine, but also quite widely in various chains of bakeries. Therefore, each piece of *kybyn* could have a Karaim word inserted in the middle, so that while eating people would pick up on and learn at least some Karaim words and not let the language die out...

The idea to arrange this sort of discussion of native speakers came from Prof. Dr. Habil. Michał Németh from Jagiellonian University in Kraków who is also the European Research Council grantee currently implementing his

project on Karaim language in Bible translation. It was eventually also his research that inspired Dr. Karina Firkavičiūtė, Chair of Lithuanian Karaim Association of Culture to organise this conference. His research is enormously important, relevant, and timely. But what is also fascinating – potentially last speakers of the Karaim language are being given very deep scholarly attention by the highest possible scholarly excellence institution in Europe, such as the European Research Council. With this project, with his previous and hopefully numerous future investigations Michał Németh is creating a new milestone in Turcology of the 21st century dedicated to the Karaim language.

'Karaim language in use' in more detail

The Karaim language has merited great philological attention throughout centuries. In this volume, this path is being presented by Henryk Jankowski, and also by Michał Németh.

Prof. Dr. Habil. Henryk Jankowski presents an exhaustive overview of Karaim language documentation from the very beginning. He also reviews the history of research on Karaim, existing handbooks, general studies, bibliographies, catalogues and guides to manuscripts. Some studies in Karaim Bible translation, religious literature and text editions, studies in secular Karaim literature and text editions, fieldwork and documenting the language, grammars, grammatical studies, dictionaries, work on lexicology and etymology, textbooks and practical dictionaries, comparative studies are also presented. The article is a very original and unique annotated compendium on Karaim language studies, including the bibliography. There are three important features of this text: 1) each book or study mentioned has also a descriptive sentence or two featuring its main content, 2) Jankowski presents also his classification of Karaim within Turkic languages and of their varieties, 3) he outlines potential tasks for the future linguistic activities on Karaim.

Prof. Dr. Habil. Michał Németh offers an overview of the oldest West Karaim written sources presenting the phonetic adaptation processes the loanwords underwent and answering the question from which Slavic languages they were borrowed (a glossary of described loanwords is also included). The author presents here a text merging his two contributions brought orally to the conference. He focuses on manuscripts created in the first 100 years of the (known so far) written history of West Karaim, i.e. in the period between 1671 and 1772, and on subtleties of the translations. The presentation outlines how difficult a task it is to etymologise the earliest

Slavic loanwords in West Karaim (some inaccuracies of etymological qualifiers in the Karaim–Russian–Polish dictionary are noted). Most probably both Ruthenian and Polish may have acted as the main donor languages for Karaim, as far as the 17th- and early–18th-century lexical borrowings are concerned. In addition, the author hypothesises that Slavic loanwords (from almost every part of speech) were most probably pronounced by West Karaims in the same way they sounded in the respective donor languages.

Several outstanding Karaim personalities from Lithuania and Poland were given special attention by presenters during the conference reviewing their role and contributions to keep the native Karaim alive and to register and promote its resources in various ways.

Dr. Halina Kobeckaitė gives tribute to Simon Firkovič (1897–1982), one of the greatest Karaim figures in 20th century, to the memory of whom the conference was also dedicated. She evokes his activities in two strands: the work for the community in his religious and teaching duties as a senior priest, him being a poet and a writer, and in more individual vein following his vocation to cultivate, safeguard, facilitate, and nurture the Karaim identity. Teaching the language, creating poetry and theatre sketches for pedagogical purposes, contributing to the compilation of the Karaim-Russian-Polish dictionary, collecting and publishing folklore, and translating other creations into Karaim would be to mention only very few of his deeds. With his position, authority and capacities he played a unique and irreplaceable role in the preservation of the Karaim community, its vitality, religious traditions and language in Lithuania through the 20th century.

Adam Dubiński presents his father Aleksander Dubiński (1924–2002), also a memorable man, for the conference. He was a long-time researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies at the University of Warsaw and a student tutor. In his scholarly endeavors, he devoted a large part of his life to Karaim studies and made a considerable contribution to preserving the Karaim linguistic, cultural and religious heritage, also to Polish-Lithuanian Tatar heritage. The article discusses his work and activities, as well as his Oriental book collection and periodicals. For many decades he was also the Secretary of the Karaim Religious Union in Poland. Fluent in the Karaim liturgy, he actively participated in and led celebrations and religious ceremonies, and was considered an unquestionable authority in the Karaim language, religion, and customs.

Dr. Karina Firkavičiūtė presents linguistic activities of her father Mykolas Firkovičius (1924–2000) in three parts: through his dedication to religion,

poetry, and the language itself. He was a professional engineer, but for his entire life he was deeply engaged in the Karaim religious and language activities, legal and underground. In 1992, he was elected as a senior priest. Instrumental for passing over his active and deep traditional knowledge, for the revival and continuation of the Karaim language and religion, he ensured a smooth transition of the language and its resources from before to after 1988. At that time, he was the first one daring and knowing what to say. He compiled and published nine books with Karaim religious texts and poetry that provided a solid and unique ground for everything happening in Karaim life, including activities of other people in the community. His publications are presented in the article outlining their specifics, linguistic features, also importance for religious and linguistic purposes, which are adding increasingly more value every day. Several questions for future reflections on Karaim are also formulated.

Diana Lavrinovič introduces her father Markas Lavrinovičius (1938–2011). A professional engineer, he was interested in his native language. He also compiled a Russian-Karaim dictionary. In 2009, he was elected to the Highest Priest position of the Lithuanian Karaim community. A big part of the article deals with the most recent publication titled ‘100 Karaim language lessons. Trakai dialect’ (635p.), the authors of which are both Markas Lavrinovičius (post mortem) and Diana Lavrinovič. The book covers morphology and phonetics of the Karaim language, and represents both a practice book and a grammar reference.

Another two conference contributions by Anna Sulimowicz-Keruth and Éva Á. Csató discuss the situation and peculiarities of the Karaim language that was used in Luck-Halych region (in today’s Ukraine), which is already extinct today. Only one paper was available to include in this volume – a text of **Prof. Éva Á. Csató**. By the examples of Janina Eszwowicz and Amelia Abrahamowicz, the last two full-fledged speakers of Southwest Karaim, she illustrates their efforts to make use of the available possibilities to document their language. A general context of the Halych Karaim community and their cultural activities and heritage is also outlined; both native speakers are extensively presented, and quotes of their talking or writing examples with translations are included.

In his turn, **Prof. Timur Kocaoğlu** provides information on the purpose and the contents of the Karay (Karaim) Language *Online Conversational Courses for Foreigners* initiated by him. Interesting to note that during the conference in May 2022, Prof. Timur Kocaoğlu only mentioned about

his intention to launch such a course. And one year later we see it already successfully implemented. The courses were held between September and December 2022, attended by around 45 voluntary participants from various countries in Europe, Asia and the USA, speakers of various Turkic languages. Two native speakers of Karaim also helped the participants by providing them with the correct pronunciation of the language. The paper outlines the further prospects of this kind of project suggesting to establish a Facebook Group with the title ‘Karajče Siozliejbiž’. At the end of the paper, Mrs. Fatma Duman Aydın is introduced, one of the participants of the course, and her new poem in Karaim as well as some examples of teaching material that was used during the classes are included.

An original presentation of **Dr. Šarūnas Rinkevičius** reviews the new generation of dictionaries of the Karaim language prepared and published by Karaim speakers over the last two decades. These are four publications, namely two Polish-Karaim, one Russian-Karaim and one Lithuanian-Karaim dictionary. The paper also provides a brief overview of the already existing documentation of the Karaim language. The dictionaries are being analysed through the information provided in them about the Karaim language, namely the quantity of words, outline of their sources, origins, dialects, and the purpose of the edition. It can be concluded that these dictionaries mark great efforts by their authors to the preservation of the Karaim language.

The other part of the conference was dedicated to the Karaim language in Bible (Old Testament) translations. It started with the presentation of **Dr. Gina Kavaliūnaitė** giving a general context on how the Old Testament was translated in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. She reviewed Christian vernacular translations of the Old Testament that were read in the Grand Duchy in the 15th–18th centuries, – it was the time when the oldest Karaim translations were discovered. Her paper briefly discusses the circumstances of the translation of the Old Testament into Ruthenian (the Skaryna Bible), Old Church Slavonic (the Ostrog Bible), Polish (the Brest, Nesvizh and Gdansk Bibles) and Lithuanian (the Bretkūnas, Chylinski and Quandt Bibles) as well as their characteristic features. The paper concludes by outlining two motivations for Bible translation projects in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Getting deeper into their conceptual meaning, one can say they apply also to the Karaim community.

Together with Prof. Dr. Habil. Michał Németh there were three other papers (by Dorota Cegiółka, Anita András, and Murat Işık; it is a pity but a certain force majeure prevented Zsuzsanna Olach from participating in the

conference), which read on linguistic aspects of various Bible translations to Karaim. Two of them make part of this publication. **Anita András** offers a brief analysis of the Modern South-Western Karaim traits displayed in the language of the Latter Prophets manuscript copied in the second half of the 19th century in Halych. She presents the copyings and the modern South-Western Karaim features registered in the manuscript. **Dr. Murat Işık** presents an analysis of the language used in the Eupatorian print (Gözleve) translation of the Old Testament into the Karaim language published in 1841. Through an examination of phonological, morphological, and lexical features he identifies the specific Crimean Karaim variety employed in the translation. His analysis reveals features of both Crimean Kipchak Karaim and Crimean Turkish Karaim, and the fact that the characteristics vary depending on the specific books and chapters of the edition.

Acknowledgements

The 2022 international scientific conference ‘Karaim language in use’, to which this volume is dedicated, produced a remarkable result – as from October 2022, an online Karaim language learning course was introduced at Vilnius University (School of Asian Languages of the Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies) representing a great opportunity for learning the Karaim language to anyone interested across the world.

The editors of this volume firmly believe that this publication will lead to numerous fruitful impacts for the Karaim community, potentially encompassing both scholarly advancements and practical applications.

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We are confident there is still hope for Karaim to survive and continue to be used in its various, written and oral forms. It has been namely this important motivation that kept the editors engaged, and it is now being passed on to you, the readers and users of the wisdom presented here. As the Karaim proverb says – *‘Az ajtma, kieriakli kylma’* (Talking is not enough, action is needed).