

MYKOLAS FIRKOVIČIUS (1924–2000) AND HIS WORK AS A UNIQUE BASIS FOR THE KARAIM LANGUAGE REVIVAL

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Abstract. This article presents the contribution of Mykolas Firkovičius (1924–2000) to the revival and continuation of the Karaim language through three strands of his activities: religion, poetry and the language itself. Mykolas Firkovičius was a native speaker of Karaim, Karaim community leader in Lithuania for many years and officially served a senior priest in 1993–2000. Among other works, he published texts in Karaim, sources, poetry compilations, prayerbooks, textbooks, and wrote himself in Karaim. He was a man that profoundly helped his nation to continue its cultural and linguistic life after disastrous times that interrupted Karaim legacy, changed and transformed it. He provided plenty of material to be used by those who want to survive as Karaims, to still speak the language, and to stay strong rooted in the traditions.

Keywords: Mykolas Firkovičius, Karaim, Karaim language, Karaim religion, Karaim poetry

The objective of this article is to present my father Mykolas Firkovičius and his activities related to the Karaim language. I take this challenge in a rather neutral and objective way. I believe that those who knew him personally would confirm that this is a possible approach regarding him, – he was a humble and modest person, entirely devoted to the Karaim way of life and its traditions. Besides, he was a very conscious person able to understand every detail in those traditional procedures and religious life, also the language, each and every word. He was also always curious about those genuine Karaim attributes, looking for a deeper knowledge of what that word or tradition was, what it meant, and how to go about it.

Mykolas Firkovičius was born in Trakai, in 1924, as a second child in the family of four children. The years of the war was a difficult time, moreover, in 1939 he lost his father. To help the family survive, he and his sister needed to interrupt their studies at school and start working, – he was employed at the railway station in Lentvaris. In 1948, he was able to enter and

graduate from Vilnius polytechnical school and later, in 1963, – from Vilnius branch of Kaunas Polytechnic Institute and become a professional engineer. After the graduation, he spent almost his entire professional life working at Vilnius Institute of Urban Planning designing houses and new architectural districts in Vilnius city, paying a special attention to the development of technological innovations of that time.

He was a very talented and successful engineer, was leading a team within that institution and got a status of a senior engineer. Nevertheless, he was prevented from any bigger career path because he did not belong to the communist party, the single one that existed at that time. Therefore, the professional career of Mykolas Firkovičius can be presented only in a very brief way.

Yet his work for Karaim culture was much more elaborated and had many more sides to it. In this text only the work dedicated to the Karaim language will be presented concentrating on the three most prominent strands of his work for the language: religion, poetry and the language itself. Mykolas Firkovičius' activities within the community as its leader and as from 1992 – officially the senior priest – will not be discussed here. They merit becoming a relevant subject to further separate investigation.

Let's first analyze his language-devoted work that is related to Karaim religion. And this is an absolutely impressive milestone not only in his personal life, but also in the general history of Karaim culture in Lithuania. Mykolas Firkovičius has published 4 outstanding items on religious topics – a prayerbook for special occasions to be used at home called *Karaj koltchalary* (1993), a two-volume prayerbook for the Karaim liturgy (*Karaj diñliliar-niñ jalbarmach jergialiari*, 1998–1999), and two publications that are Bible parts translated into Karaim – the Book of Psalms (*David' Bijniiñ machtav čozmachlary*, 1994) and the Book of Proverbs (*Šelomonun mašallary*, 2000).

All of them, though serving a religious purpose, are also very important linguistic publications. In order to prepare them, a huge amount of work was done in two directions. Firstly, Mykolas Firkovičius developed a reliable system of how to register the Karaim language in Latin alphabet based on the Lithuanian language rules (phonetics). He analysed the grammar and specific features of the Karaim language construction so that those symbols and letters would properly reflect the language without damaging it, and would be useful for all potential users, both to native Karaim people and also to scientists and foreign nationals. He conducted this work in consultation with linguists, turcologists and professionals of the Lithuanian language.



M. Firkovičius with his sister in the garden of their parents house



Mykolas Firkovičius and his daughter Karina, 1993



Senior priest Mykolas Firkovičius with Pope Jan Pawel II in Vilnius 1993



Senior priest M. Firkovičius in Trakai Kenesa

The second important working direction on religious publications is related to the texts themselves. Again twofold. Until these publications of the nineties came out, there had been only few Biblical texts published in Karaim, since they traditionally circulated in manuscripts mainly. Therefore, Mykolas Firkovičius' huge endeavor consisted of looking for proper texts among the manuscripts, transcribing them and compiling them together to a prayer book.

As he says in the introduction to the second volume of the prayer book: *“Obgialiarimiž ušpu jerliardia tochtejdohon da karaj dininiñ kadahasyn resimliari byla kip saklejdohon, bar vachtlarda Tieřriniñ kyblalary alnyna aziž kieniesa üvliariñdia jalbaryr ěd'liar. Biugiun'liej biž alarnyn kaldyrhan üliušiuñ mieriesliejbiž, jachšy adlary byla ullulanabyz, karaj diniñ adiet'liaribia kiučiumiužgia kioria bahabyz“*. [Our forfathers staying in these lands and caring for religious traditions always were praying to God in kenasas. Today we take over from them, happily using their good names, we follow Karaim traditions as much as we can.]

Next to the compiled texts, Mykolas Firkovičius produced also comments in Karaim about the proper usage of texts for both community liturgy and private home practice. *“Har bir jergianiñ bašlyhynda anyn ady bil'dirt'kiañ dahy jazhan niečik bu jergia ochulat: nie diñ jesisi čozat, kačan da nie barlaryna džuvat biermia, kačan čiokmia kieriakli, kačan tyjlytyn koltchasy ochulat.”* [A title is given in the beginning of each prayer and it is written how to read that prayer: what the priest is singing, when and what is read as the community response, when people need to kneel or which prayer is read in silence.] The comments read as follows, i.e. – *“Diñ jesisi synhan üriak byla čozhun”* [The priest to read as if with a broken heart]; or – *“Turup – diñ jesisi ěksi-die janyrna Džymatcha ajtsyn”* [The priest is standing up to say to the community leaning to both sides].

The texts were published and so made available to the modern Karaim community in a comprehensive and explanatory way. Since people of today in principle are not familiar with the manuscripts and also not all of them would remember how the proper liturgy needs to be performed, the books were of huge help and could be immediately used for religious services. Those brief or sometimes more elaborated comments on how and when the texts were to be used contributed substantially to the preservation of the Karaim religious terminology and to its bridging, from the undefined traditional past that was still in the heart and the memory of Mykolas

Firkovičius – up to these days. They were recorded for survival and for those keen on learning.

The second volume of that prayer book consists of procedure descriptions for various family occasions and celebrations: birth, wedding, funeral, and some others. It is more valuable information for those who want to properly follow the traditions and know what to read or say in proper Karaim. There were some attempts to translate those descriptions of festivities, into Russian and Lithuanian, however, no full edition has been published yet.

Very often a question arises these days about how the Karaim language has survived and is still alive in Lithuania today. And the first reply to this phenomenon is related to people. Thanks to people, to their courage, deep knowledge and various productive activities, the language has survived up until now. Mykolas Firkovičius is one of those remarkable persons who contributed enormously in this regard. The second reply is tightly linked to the religion – religious service has always been and is until now still being held in the Karaim language. The work and publications of Mykolas Firkovičius facilitated this prolonged use of Karaim in religious service, even though the active knowledge of Karaim is fading away. Another important achievement of these books relates actually to the history of Bible translations into Karaim.

If we move to the second strand of Mykolas Firkovičius's work on Karaim language, namely to poetry, first we have to note a collection of Simon Firkovič (1897–1982) poetry that Mykolas Firkovičius compiled in the 70-ies. Simon Firkovič, this outstanding personality of Karaim community in Lithuania of the 20th century was his uncle, but at the same time a very charismatic and influential, well-educated person and a favourite authority representative as well as teacher of Mykolas Firkovičius. For this first collection Mykolas Firkovičius did what was possible for that time, – he copied some typewritten papers with poems and stucked them together manually producing several files. It became very useful material for teaching of the language that was done secretly during the Soviet times in the homes of several community members. Mykolas Firkovičius was one of those teachers at that time.

Later on, in 1989, after Lithuania started regaining its independence, the first real publication of a poetry book prepared by Mykolas Firkovičius with a title *Karaj jyrlary* appeared. It included the heritage of several Karaim poets from the 16th to the 20th century, but also some old anonymous poetry

and religious hymns. Mykolas Firkovičius was always very pleased when he happened to find a manuscript, a poem or a religious text that represented very beautifully simple and “pure, nice” Karaim language, – he was happy to bring that text into the light, as he did while putting together the above compilation. This way it served an additional purpose – not only a poem as such was published and registered, but linguistic treasures of Karaim ancestors were showcased. An example to that can be a part of the poem that is not very often quoted, but that is written in a wonderful language (anonymous author):

*Jukudan turup tieržiagia bahamyn,
Tan saruvunda jolha tielmiariamiń.*

*Mień tielmiariamiń, jašba juvunamyn,
Har kieziuvčiudiań dostumnu
soramyn.*

*Kiozium kioriadir, jolha kieziadir,
Ajachlarym šaharha kieliadir.*

Čychtym karšyha, džanym bijaniadir,

*Kiozium jadady, ajahym artchary
kajtadyr.*

Nie sień turasyn, kimni tioziasin?

*Bir dahy any kiormiassin tirini.
Mień kiordium any, tirligi alyndy.
Kijiz bajlanyp, zieriatkia eltińdi.*

*Da nie kylajym, suvha tiušiajim?
Ol ajtty kajtmas, otcha tiušiajim.*

*Niegia tiriliam, kimni tioziarmiń?
Bolmasa jaryhym, mień-die öliarmiń.*

*Woken up, i look through the window,
From the very morning i am longing
for the road,*

*I hope, wash myself with tears,
Every passing person i ask for my
friend.*

*My eyes are looking to the road,
And my legs come to the city.*

*I went to the other side, my sole is
happy,*

*But my eyes got tired, my legs return
back.*

*Why you are here, who are you waiting
for?*

You will not see him alive anyway.

*I saw him, i started living,
Wrapped in a fabric, he was taken to
the graveyard.*

*What shall i do? Descend to waters?
He said he would not come back, shall
i go to flames?*

*Why do i live? Whom do i wait for?
If he will not be here, i'll also die.*

The compilations of poetry were possible to publish only because during his entire life Mykolas Firkovičius was consciously collecting these

precious pieces of the past and dealing with them: analyzing the language, following its history or retracting from texts any available information on Karaim life in the past (as is the example of his favourite “Father’s moral guidance to his son”:

„...Da har adam bolsun ullurach sieńdiań kioźliarijdia. Da ěgier uslu ěriań ěsia ol jemesia chodža, borčtur saja syjlama any. Da ěgier jarly ěsia ol da sień chodža jemiesia ushurach andan, sahyš ětkiń kioľniujdia ki sień jazychlyrachsyn andan da ol rastrach sieńdiań....” (Let every person be bigger/more important than you in your eyes. And if it is a clever person or very rich, you need to cherish him. And if he is poor and you are richer or more clever than him, think that you are more sinful than him and he is much more honest than you are...).

Soon poetry became a solid foundation not only for the follow-up publications (such as translations into other languages) or stage performances (such as festive poetry reading or singing the songs), but also for further language learning both privately and in the various available classes, which were quite numerous and open since 1988.

Turning to the third strand of Mykolas Firkovičius’ activity, which is the language itself, a Karaim grammar self-teaching book ‘Mień karajče ũrianiam’ of 1996 has to be mentioned. This was also a result of his continuous effort, especially during the Soviet times, to have a certain compendium of Karaim grammar and a book that would allow people to learn the language by themselves, having the rules explained and several exercises to practice provided. He was preparing the material in the course of long decades, also using the experience of the underground classes conducted in Soviet times. And when the possibilities finally opened, the main material was in place. Only the final finetuning and preparations for printing had to step in.

In the grammar book, the Russian language is used for explanations – at that time he obviously still wanted to reach the Karaim communities in Ukraine or Russia as the target audience of that self-learning book. Whatever the reasoning, the essence of the language and its scheme was explained in the book and well recorded. In this book the grammar is explained very thoroughly, rather in a scholarly way, following the examples of earlier publications of Kowalski, Musajev, and the Karaim-Russian-Polish dictionary. It is a very rich compendium of the language knowledge and a good source for any further versions, if needed. For long years this was the first and the only modern practical publication on the Karaim language. The various other editions started to come later. To mention just one – a book on Karaim

titled *Karay: the Trakai dialect* (2006) by prof. Timur Kocaoglu inspired by „Mieñ karajče ūrianiam“.

Scholars nowadays state that *“It is becoming a matter of an individual choice – to nurture your traditional culture or not, to understand your roots or to not care. This individualistic attitude towards everything in someone’s life is prevailing, and this is a new normal in this globalised modern world, wherever you are”* (Language, Identity and Migration, 2016).

Just to confirm – this conclusion is fully valid and applicable to the situation of Karaim people and the Karaim language in Lithuania. Everything now is very much individualistic. It is in this context that all the work done by Mykolas Firkovičius, all the books and sources published are getting an additional value: they become a perfect basis for all further potential individual use and re-use, interpretation, studying, translations, etc. What’s more – the basis is a very solid one, also in its spirit, so no interpretation can do any harm to it. It contains the real and sound tradition continuing for ages before us in that different, still community way.

Concluding remarks

The revival of the Karaim language first time started in 1988. The second stage of the revival is taking place at this very moment. However, it is different now. 34 years ago, there was still something to be continued via the revival. Mykolas Firkovičius was instrumental at that time in passing over his active and deep traditional knowledge, including the Karaim language. At that time he was the first one daring and knowing what to say.

Today, to keep Karaim traditions and the language alive, a new, true revival, a renaissance is needed. And it can mainly happen on an individual basis, meaning that every individual needs to revive him/herself, if he or she wishes to still remember or know their own roots. A lot is happening now – various projects are underway, the still existing memory is being recorded as much as possible, and also new approaches are getting some attention reinforcing the positive trends for Karaims’ cultural survival.

I am proud to be a daughter of a man who helped his nation so profoundly to continue its cultural and linguistic life after those disastrous times (Soviet including) that interrupted Karaim legacy, changed and transformed it. New times produced immense and acute challenges for Karaim people to face – how to survive as a Karaim? How to perceive that special cultural heritage? How to still speak the language? How to stay strong within the

tradition? Many answers to these questions can be found in that traditional knowledge accumulated and published by Mykolas Firkovičius.

I am also happy and thankful to both my parents for being courageous and speaking to me in Karaim from the moment I was born, for teaching me Karaim songs and poems, so that I could inherit the language in a very natural way and that I can still enjoy it openly today.

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