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The Lutsk Karaites and the Cultural and Educational Activities of the Karaite Minority in Poland in the Interwar Period

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Of the four Karaite communities lying within the borders of newly independent Poland the Lutsk community was the smallest. However, it was here that efforts to preserve the Karaim language and identity were most intense, as a consequence of which Lutsk became a major centre of Karaite intellectual and cultural life in the 1930s. Lutsk activists, such as the writer and editor Aleksander Mardkowicz and the poet Sergiusz Rudkowski, strove to preserve the Karaim language and strengthen ethnic self-identity. Their efforts served as an inspiration for similar endeavours in other Karaite communities. The present paper endeavours to shed light on the circumstances that led to this cultural eudaimonia in Lutsk.

Key words: *Polish-Lithuanian Karaites; Karaites in Lutsk; Karaite communities in interwar Poland; Karaite self-identity*

The years 1919–1939 were a time of intense cultural and educational development for the Karaite communities in Poland. To a certain extent these activities were simply a continuation of the Karaites' interest in traditional education based on doctrinal principles (e.g. obligatory reading of the Tanakh). However, they were also greatly shaped by social changes and the political and economic situation that the Polish-Lithuanian Karaites found themselves in after World War I.

At the end of the 19th century, alongside their long-established sense of religious self-identification the Karaites also began to manifest a sense of identity based on ethnicity. The roots of this shift lay in the growing tendency of Karaite Judaism to separate itself from Rabbinical Judaism – ideological differences led to Karaism constituting itself as an independent faith. Underlying this process, referred to by Freund as “endogenous dejudaisation”,¹

were both socio-political and economic factors as well as endeavours to improve the conditions of the Karaites in the Russian Empire in the face of restrictive and discriminatory laws against the Jewish population. The establishment of the Karaite Consistory in Eupatoria in 1837 marks the bifurcation of these two creeds. Separatist ideas were espoused in the works of Abraham Firkowicz, who aimed to demonstrate the ancient pedigree of Karaism and to prove its independent development. The emergence of theories promoting the Khazar origins of Eastern European Jewry opened up new horizons in the search for the Karaites' own ethnic roots. Research conducted by the Russian academician, V. V. Radloff, who included Karaim linguistic and literary materials in his two groundbreaking works in the field of Turkic studies,² not only made the Eastern European Karaites an area of interest for Turkologists, but also provided arguments in favour of the thesis that the Karaites have Turkic roots, which awakened interest among Karaites themselves in their own language and popular literature.

Some contemporary researchers regard Seraya Shapshal (1873–1961), the former hakham of Crimea and a graduate of the School of Oriental Languages in Petersburg who in 1927 was also elected Karaite hakham in the Republic of Poland, as the individual most responsible for instilling the “Turkic roots” theory in the minds of the western Karaites.³ However, this idea had already spread to

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- ¹ Freund, R. (1991). Karaites and dejudaisation. A historical review of an endogenous and exogenous paradigm. *Stockholm Studies in Comparative Religion* 30. Stockholm. With regard to changes in the self-identity of the eastern European Karaites, see also: Kizilov, M. (2008). Between the Jews and the Khazars: the Formation of Ethnic Identity and the Historical Views of the East European Karaites in the General Context of European History from the Late Eighteenth Century until Today. *Pinkas*, Vol. 2, 34–52; idem (2011). Social Adaptation and Manipulation of Self-Identity: Karaites in Eastern Europe in Modern Times. In D. D. Y. Shapira, D. J. Lasker (Eds.), *Eastern European Karaites in the Last Generations*, Jerusalem, 130–153; Miller, P. E. (1993). *Karaite Separatism in Nineteenth-Century Russia: Joseph Solomon Lutski's Epistle of Israel's Deliverance*, Cincinnati; Shapira, D. (2003). *Avraham Firkowicz in Istanbul (1830–1832). Paving the Way for Turkic Nationalism*, Ankara; idem (2006). Tendencies and Agendas in Turkic-Karaite and Karaite-Related Studies in Eastern Europe in the 20th Century. *Pinkas*, Vol. 1, 210–214; Schur, N. (1992). *History of the Karaites*, Frankfurt am Main; Troskovaite, D. (2013). Identity in Transition: The Case of Polish Karaites in the First Half of the 20th Century, *Codrul Cosminului*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 207–228.
- ² Radloff, W. (1866–1896). *Proben der Volksliteratur der türkischen Stämme*, Vol. I–VIII. St. Petersburg; idem (1888–1911). *Versuch eines Wörterbuches der Türkdialecte*, Vol. I–IV. St. Petersburg.
- ³ Shapira, D. (2005). A Jewish Pan-Turkist: Seraya Szapszal (Şapşaloğlu) and His Work *Qırım Qaray Türkleri* (1928). *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, Vol. 58 (4), 356; Kizilov, M. (2009). *Karaites in Galizia. An Ethnoreligious Minority among the Ashkenazim, the Turks, and the Slavs 1772–1945*. Leiden – Boston, 237, 239 – however, it should be

these areas much earlier thanks to close intellectual contacts with the Karaite communities in Russia. An important role in its propagation was also played by the *bezhenstvo*, i.e. the forced resettlement of civilians in the interior of Russia in 1915. Many Karaite families from Lithuania moved to Crimea, where for the first time their members had contact with local Karaite culture, music and literature. When they returned home they brought with them a particular fascination with the Orient.⁴

Even before the election of Shapshal and his arrival in Poland encounters between Karaites and researchers interested in the Karaim language prepared the ground for a new ethnic self-identity. In Halicz it was Jan Grzegorzewski (1848–1922), a Polish ethnographer, orientalist and slavist, who on several occasions visited the local Karaite community and increased their awareness of the Turkic origins of their language. However, it was the research trip made by Professor Tadeusz Kowalski (1889–1948) of the Jagiellonian University in Cracow that had the most far-reaching implications. In 1925 he visited communities in Troki (Trakai) and Vilnius, and a year later made his way to those in Halicz and Lutsk. During his stay he became acquainted with Karaite activists and afterwards remained on friendly terms with Szymon Firkowicz, Rafał Abkowicz, and Józef Łopatto in Trakai and Vilnius, Aleksander Mardkowicz and Sergiusz Rudkowski in Lutsk, as well as Sabina and Zachariasz Nowachowicz, Leon Sulimowicz and Zarach Zarachowicz in Halicz. Direct contact with Kowalski, an expert in Turkish and Middle-East studies, provided them with the impulse to undertake efforts to preserve their language and strengthen national consciousness. Kowalski encouraged the younger generation of Karaites to study turkology at the university. Ananiasz Zajączkowski (1903–1970), later a professor at the University of Warsaw and a member of the Polish Academy of Sciences, became his pupil. Zajączkowski was followed by other young Karaites: Włodzimierz Zajączkowski (1914–1982) and Józef Sulimowicz (1913–1973).⁵

When Shapshal arrived in Poland in 1928, local Karaites were ready to accept their new ethnic self-identity based on Turkic, namely Khazar descent. Despite reservations expressed by Kowalski⁶, the Khazar theory was actively promoted and soon became (and still remains) widely accepted by Polish-Lithuanian Karaites.

admitted that in his later work, *The Sons of Scripture*, Warsaw – Berlin 2015, the author revised his opinion, pointing out earlier manifestations of a non-Jewish identity among Polish-Lithuanian Karaites.

⁴ This fascination is mostly visible in borrowings from the music repertoire, see: Firkavičūtė, K. (2016). *Życie w pieśni karaimskiej*. Wrocław, 13.

⁵ With regard to the contribution of the Karaites to the development of Turkish studies in Poland, see: Sulimowicz, A. (2012). Polscy turkolodzy Karaimi. Od przedmiotu do podmiotu badań. In Machul-Telus (Ed.) *Karaimi*. Warsaw, 119–144.

⁶ Kowalski, T. (1929). Turecka monografia o Karaimach krymskich. *Mysł Karaimska*, Vol. 2 (2), 3–8.

Regardless of its veracity, any assessment of which goes beyond the subject of this paper, it should be noted that this theory had a significant impact on the cultural and social life of the community, bringing to the fore the need to preserve the Karaim language as both a symbol of the new identity and testimony to the Turkic origins of the East European Karaites.

The Karaim language is a member of the Western Turkic (Kiptchak) language group and is divided into three dialects: two western Karaim dialects (northwestern, spoken by Karaites living in Lithuania, and southwestern, used in Lutsk and Halicz) and the eastern (Crimean) dialect (already extinct by as early as the 18th century). The western Karaim dialect has always been in a unique situation. The number of its speakers has never been great and, in fact, has tended to decline. Centuries of isolation from other Turkic languages and the Slavonic environment had a great impact on its development.⁷ The Karaites owe the preservation of their language over such a long period of time (in contrast to the Polish-Lithuanian Tatars who, although they migrated at the same time as Karaites, had already lost their language by the 17th century) to their faith and the endogamy inherent in it. Although present in the liturgy, Karaim remained mostly the language of everyday life, whereas in religious literature, the correspondence of scholars and the communities' internal documents it was Hebrew that enjoyed the dominant position. Towards the end of the 19th century the Karaim language began to steadily disappear from usage, to be replaced by languages from the surrounding environment: Polish, Russian and Ukrainian.

We can conclude that efforts to strengthen and enhance the knowledge of the native language became the starting point and primary goal of most cultural and educational activities in Karaite communities in the interwar period. As was pointed out above, Karaim was present in the liturgy, and as a consequence religious education and religious schools played an important role in increasing knowledge of the language and developing the ability of Karaims to speak and write in their native tongue. Such schools were organised in Trakai and Vilnius. Most credit for enhancing linguistic awareness among younger Trakai Karaites should be given to Simon (Shemayah) Firkowicz (1897–1982), *ułtu hazzan* (Karaite priest) and a member of the Karaite Consistory, whose teaching methods included practising nursery rhymes he had composed himself. He was also the author of plays staged by the amateur Karaite theatre troupe. It is worth mentioning that his exertions were not limited solely to teaching religion and language, but also extended to physical culture – he organised the “Karaj Idman Birliġi” Karaite youth sports club.⁸ In Halicz, religious education – and language

⁷ Dubiński, A. (1969). Über die slawischen Einflüsse in der karaimischen Sprache. *Studia Slavica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, No. 15, 139–144.

⁸ Dubiński, A. (1987). Z życia Karaimów trockich w okresie międzywojennym. In A. Dubiński, E. Śliwka (Eds.), *Karaimi. (Materiały z sesji naukowej.)* Pieniężno, 38.

instruction as well – was not organised on a systematic basis, despite several attempts to do so. However, in this particular community Karaim remained in wide use in most families and the task of increasing knowledge of the language among younger Karaims in the 1930s was undertaken through extracurricular activities (such as a children's theatre) led by Sabina Nowachowiczowa (1885–1960), a retired primary school teacher and social activist.

In the interwar period a few cultural and educational organizations were active in Polish-Lithuanian Karaite communities. In 1921 the Association of Vilnius Karaites (Wileńskie Stowarzyszenie Karaimów) was established, whose initial aim was to carry out social and charitable work and to represent the Karaites in their dealings with the authorities.⁹ However, cultural and educational matters soon became its main focus. In 1924, the Association's Cultural – Educational Section launched the first Karaite journal in independent Poland – “*Myśl Karaimska*”.

In 1932, the Society of Friends of Karaite History and Literature (Towarzystwo Miłośników Historii i Literatury Karaimskiej) was founded on the initiative of hakham Seraya Shapshal. Its mission was to foster interest among Karaites in their own history, culture, language and literature. Its members also included Lutsk Karaites: Aleksander Greczny, Aleksander Mardkowicz, and Zachariasz Szpakowski.¹⁰ The new organization took over the task of editing “*Myśl Karaimska*”, which in this period assumed a more scholarly character and became a vehicle for promoting the interests of the Karaite minority in Polish society as a whole.

Also, young Karaites formed organizations such as the “Bir-Baw” Association of Karaite Youth (Koło Młodzieży Karaimskiej “Bir-Baw”) in Trakai and the “Odrodzenie” Educational Association of Young Karaites in Halicz. The latter cooperated closely with the Association of Karaite Ladies in Halicz (Koło Pań Karaimskich w Haliczu), which became the first ever Karaite women's organization when it was established in 1932. Led by its founder and chairwoman Sabina Nowachowicz, its principal aim was to educate Karaite women in women's rights, child psychology and child-raising, as well as increase women's awareness of their role in passing on traditional, religious and national values, and language to new generations.¹¹ A women's organization was also active in Trakai and Vilnius – in 1936 the Committee of Ladies affiliated with the Trakai prayer house was transformed into the “Katyn Odżahy” Association of Karaite Ladies headed by Beata Kobecka, a widow of a prominent Karaite activist, Emanuel Kobecki.¹² In

⁹ E. K. (1924). Z Wileńskiego Stowarzyszenia Karaimów. *Myśl Karaimska*, No. 1, 24.

¹⁰ Gąsiorowski, S. (2004). Towarzystwo Miłośników Historii i Literatury karaimskiej w Wilnie i jego członkowie w latach 1932–1939. In M. Abkowicz, H. Jankowski (Eds.), *Karaj Kiuriliari. Dziedzictwo narodu karaimskiego we współczesnej Europie. Warszawa 19–21.09.2003*. Wrocław, 72, 76–82.

¹¹ For more information, see: Sulimowicz, A. (2015). Działalność społeczna i edukacyjna Koła Pań Karaimskich w Haliczu. *Almanach Karaimski*, Vol. 4, 90.

¹² S. F. [Szymon Firkowicz] (1939), Troki. *Myśl Karaimska*, No. 12, 150.

1937 “Katyn Odżahy” joined forces with “Bir-Baw” in furnishing a common room in Trakai, in which lectures and social meetings were organized.¹³

Another important channel of socio-cultural life for Karaites in the interwar period was theatre. In Trakai young people staged performances – mainly comedies in the Karaite language written and directed by Sz. Firkowicz – describing everyday life in the community. In Halicz the drama section of the Karaite youth association was very productive, putting on stage plays by Firkowicz and J. Łobanos directed by Leon Sulimowicz, a train-driver and at the same time a theatre enthusiast.¹⁴ In Vilnius, theatre performances and pantomimes were organized by the local drama section of the Association of Karaites.¹⁵

Set against this background the social, cultural and educational activities of the Lutsk Karaites would appear, broadly speaking, extremely modest. Unlike other communities it lacked educational and cultural organizations, or any associations that might bring together young people or women. Nor was there any Karaite amateur theatre in the town.

The main reason for this state of affairs seems to have been the absence of a motivating figure capable of inspiring others in Lutsk, in the same way S. Nowachowiczowa did in Halicz, S. Firkowicz in Trakai and B. Kobecka in Vilnius. The social and intellectual aptitudes as well as the professional and material status of the community’s members also played an important role. It should also be pointed out that Lutsk was the least numerous of all the Karaite communities in interwar Poland, consisting solely of around 60 members, mostly white-collar employees,¹⁶ none of whom enjoyed sufficient financial independence to enable them to dedicate themselves exclusively to social and cultural projects without jeopardising their or their family’s livelihood. The majority of adult male members of the community were involved in administrative tasks – it should not be forgotten that the 1920s and 1930s were a time of very important undertakings launched by the community which demanded a great deal of time and effort: the renovation of the *kienesa* prayer house, which suffered extensive damage during World War I,¹⁷ and the construction of the profit-house

¹³ Lietuvos mokslų akademijos Vrublevskių biblioteka (The Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, hereinafter known as LMAVB) F. 301–250, fol. 6; S. F. (1939), *op. cit.*, 151.

¹⁴ Sulimowicz, A. (2014). Leon Sulimowicz (1884–1941) a życie społeczności karaimskiej w Haliczu. In L. Bojko et al. (Eds.), *Galič i galič'ka zemlâ. Materiali Mižnarodnoï Naukovoï Konferencii Galič, 30–31 žovtnâ 2014 roku*. Galič, 397–398.

¹⁵ Wróblewska, U. (2015). *Działalność kulturalno-oświatowa Karaimów w Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*. Białystok, 163.

¹⁶ A census of the Lutsk Karaites of 1934, LMAVB F, 301–419.

¹⁷ Inspection report of October 3, 1921. The Archive of the Karaite Community of Lutsk (hereinafter known as AKCL) VII.04.28.

on a lot adjoining the Karaite cemetery¹⁸ to ensure financing for the restoration works, as well as the construction of the community building (the “parish house”)¹⁹ which got underway in 1931 without sufficient resources and brought the community close to bankruptcy. All these challenges exhausted the capability of the community’s members to commit to any other projects. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that personal preferences and habits might also have played a role in the lukewarm interest that the Lutsk Karaites showed in cultural and educational activities.

In 1928 Rafał Abkowicz (1896–1992), a former teacher of religion in Vilnius, was appointed *hazzan* in Lutsk, filling a post that had been vacant for more than a decade.²⁰ His arrival was greatly anticipated, not only as it would mean regular religious services and a proper religious education for children, but also because the *hazzan* would be a spiritual leader who would help bring the community together and preserve its identity, tradition and language, just as S. Firkowicz had in Trakai.

Abkowicz regrettably failed to fulfil these hopes. This was due in part to his own personality – he had a dominant, not to say authoritarian streak,²¹ which may have put off some members of the community – which had after all survived more than ten years without any religious leadership – from cooperating with him. Moreover, he had to operate in an environment in which he was an outsider. Furthermore, what would have been a naturally difficult and lengthy process of adjustment for the *hazzan* was made even worse by a quarrel between the *hazzan* and his congregation regarding his salary. Having accepted the terms of his employment proposed by the community and approved by the *hakham*, almost immediately after his arrival in Lutsk Abkowicz demanded an increase in his stipend²² and when this was refused (the effects of the Great Depression were beginning to make themselves felt in Poland at this time and the community had difficulties raising enough money to cover the emolument allocated to the *hazzan*) he started to spend long periods of time in his native Troki on the pretext of visiting his ill wife. We should not be surprised that in these circumstances he was unwilling to engage in any additional undertakings.

¹⁸ Sulimowicz, A. (2010). Z dziejów gminy karaimskiej w Łucku. Gminny „dom dochodowy“. In E. Siemieniec-Gołaś, J. Georgiewa-Okoń (Eds.), *Od Anatolii po Syberię. Świat turecki w oczach badaczy*. Kraków, 199–204.

¹⁹ “Project for a brick-house near the Kienesa in the town of Lutsk on Karaimska Street”, AKCL VII.04.49 and other documents in the Community’s archive.

²⁰ Even before World War I the position had fallen vacant between 1902 and 1906 when the former *hazzan*, Rojecki, resigned, and it was a long time before it was possible to convene an election meeting. LMAVB F. 301–320, fol. 5–6.

²¹ Personal correspondence: Anna Dubińska Nowicka, 1990 and Amalia Rudkowska Nowicka, 2009.

²² A letter of R. Abkowicz, dated May 31, 1931, AKCL VII.05.70.

However, it should to be made clear here that there were also a number of objective obstacles that impeded Abkowicz from animating cultural life in Lutsk. As far as phonetics was concerned the northern dialect spoken in Lithuania differed significantly from its southern equivalent in Lutsk – it made both teaching Karaim as well as teaching other subjects in Karaim very difficult for him, and given that Karaite children in Lutsk had practically no command of this language – the task proved obviously impossible.

Differences of opinion regarding the religious education of children was the main cause of a dispute between Abkowicz and Aleksander Mardkowicz (1875–1944), one of the most prominent Karaite activists in Lutsk in the 1920s.

Mardkowicz was an educated and enlightened man²³ who after graduating from the secondary school left Lutsk and moved to Brest and Kiev to continue his studies and eventually spent around 20 years in Ekaterinoslav working as a notary. Upon his return from Russia, he played an active role in the life of the community. In the years 1922–1928, Mardkowicz served as a member of the Karaite Community's Board, including time as its president. He joined the *Kienesa* Reconstruction Committee and not only coordinated the restoration work, but also supported it financially.

Aware that the Karaites in Lutsk faced the real danger of extinction he advocated a new identity based on ethnicity rather than religion, an identity which would allow for intermarriage with non-Karaites²⁴ and thus would help halt the decline in the Karaite population. To achieve this goal a new model of education that featured ethnic components and highlighted the role of the native language was required.

Yet another factor that might have steered Mardkowicz towards the idea of a Karaim ethnic identity, and one that should not be discounted altogether, was the state of Karaite-Rabbanite relations at that time. Long before separatist tendencies began to gain momentum in Russia the Karaites had already clearly grasped the distinctiveness of their language and culture in relation to Rabbanites whilst still regarding themselves as “the people of Israel”. This tendency among the Karaites to dissociate themselves from Rabbanical Jews was especially marked in Lutsk, a town with a relatively large Jewish population – in 1931 worshippers of Judaism constituted 48.8 % of the total population and represented the largest religious group in a town with 35,500 inhabitants.²⁵ In contrast both to Halicz, a much

²³ On the life of Mardkowicz see Sulimowicz, A. (2013). Listy do Łucka. Aleksander Mardkowicz jako adresat korespondencji Ananiasza Zajączkowskiego. *Almanach Karaimski*, Vol. 2, 36–62.

²⁴ In case of such marriages children could be raised as ethnical Karaites, although since there was no civil marriage institution in former Russian law which continued to be extant in Volhynia, in an event of a marriage to a Christian the change of faith was inevitable. In the case of Mardkowicz it was not without significance that he himself was also married to a non-Karaite woman.

²⁵ *Drugi Powszechny Spis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dn. 9.XII 1931 r.*, table No. 11, 27.

smaller place with a larger Karaite population (122 inhabitants in 1939²⁶) where the idea of *felix Austria*, i.e. the peaceful coexistence of various religions and ethnicities under Habsburg rule, made Karaite-Rabbanite tensions less pronounced, and also unlike in Trakai and Lithuania, where Karaites were more “recognizable” and thus less exposed to the risk of being mistaken for Rabbanical Jews, the Karaites in Lutsk tended to avoid any association with Jewry.²⁷

In order to differentiate Lutsk Karaites as clearly as possible from Rabbanites, especially in the eyes of the town’s Christian community, Mardkowicz suggested a number of far-reaching changes in the liturgy so as to adjust the external form of the services more in line with Western culture (i.e. Christian customs and rituals, although Mardkowicz did not express this literally).²⁸ Apart from such revolutionary ideas as introducing instrumental music and a choir as well as offerings of flowers into daily services, his main suggestion was to eliminate Hebrew altogether from both the liturgy and the children’s education programme.²⁹ Having noted that “the long-drawn-out reading of prayers in an incomprehensible language (nowadays, very few of us can understand Hebrew) is a mechanical and arduous operation capable of disturbing any spiritual mood”,³⁰ he called for completely new prayers to be composed in Karaim only as well as for a prayer book to be published that would contain prayers in Latin script with translations into Polish.

Abkowicz’s viewpoint on this matter was diametrically opposed to Mardkowicz’s. Born and brought up in the conservative environment of Troki, and

²⁶ Eszowowicz, J. (2002). Halyc’ka karaïms’ka hromada v XX st. In L. Novohatko et al. (Eds.), *Karaïmy Halycha: Īstoriâ ta Kul’ura / The Halych Karaïms: History and Culture*. Ĺviv–Halyč, 6.

²⁷ This tendency became apparent as early as the 1790s, when the Lutsk community submitted a petition to the Four-Year Sejm claiming that they have nothing in common with Rabbinical Jews and demanding that they not be regarded as Jews. See: Witkowski, R. (2007). Odezwa Karaïmów łuckich w czasach Sejmu Wielkiego, *Almanach Karaïmski*. Vol. I., Wrocław, 57–58. In 1914 a Lutsk Karaite hiding behind the acronym R. F-č (most probably Romuald Firkowicz, b. 1894) emphasized the non-semitic origins of the Karaites, who according to him consist “90 per cent of Mongolian blood and other non-semitic races” and called for a new ethnonym which would distance them from “semitism”; see: Nęotložnyj vopros (An urgent question). *Sabah* 1914, No. 1, 13.

²⁸ He submitted an extended list of proposed reforms under the title “Kilka uwag w sprawach karaïmskich” (Some Remarks on Karaite Matters) to Shapshal in January 1929. LMAVB F. 143–466 fol. 5 recto – 9 verso.

²⁹ In his 1929 proposal Mardkowicz made no mention of the issue of teaching Hebrew; however, in an article published three years later he called for Hebrew to be completely removed from children’s education, regarding teaching it as detrimental to “national feelings” and even going so far as praising the custom of not sending girls to school: “Thank God they stayed at home and under their mothers’ supervision learned how to be true Karaite women”. See: Basahasynnda aziz jiwniń (On the threshold of the Holy House), *Karaj Awazy*, 1932, 2 (4), 23.

³⁰ LMAVB F. 143–466 fol. 6 verso.

being grandson of a hazzan (although not a descendant of a traditional clergy family), Abkowicz considered knowledge of Hebrew to be one of the most important attributes of an educated Karaite. Proud of his skills in this language³¹ and, as was mentioned above, unable to teach in Karaim he could not imagine religious education without Hebrew classes.³²

The actual course of the feud between Abkowicz and Mardkowicz remains unknown. However, from the few references made to the dispute we find in Abkowicz's correspondence with Szapszał we can infer that Mardkowicz did not allow his sons to attend classes conducted by Abkowicz³³ and soon asked him to leave a flat he provided for the new hazzan in his father's old house at 25 Karaimska Street on the pretext that he was going to sell this property.³⁴ For his part, Abkowicz took the liberty of making malicious comments about Mardkowicz, for instance when reporting to Szapszał that the amount of money raised as the *tzedaka* (alms) was small, he ironically claimed that the amount would have been higher if Mardkowicz's idea of installing a harmonium had been implemented. After being offended in a personal confrontation with Abkowicz and some members of the community supporting the hazzan,³⁵ Mardkowicz resigned all his duties on the Community's Board³⁶ and henceforth refused to take part in any official activities. He decided to fully dedicate himself to writing and publishing instead.

³¹ Personal notes preserved in Abkowicz's private archive in Wrocław show that indeed he had a good command of this language.

³² Immediately after his arrival Abkowicz endeavoured to organize religious lessons for Karaite pupils of public schools in Lutsk. Although the school year had already begun the education authorities in Volhynian district authorised as an exception to the rules 3 hours of classes a week and allocated for this purpose 18 zloti monthly as the hazzan's salary. Since children attended different schools, the lessons were provided in the form of a Sunday school. Abkowicz's letter to Szapszał dated December, 20, 1929, LMAVB F. 143-161 fol. 8 verso. Given the hazzan's frequent trips to Troki, religious education was most probably not provided on a regular basis in Lutsk. In early 1939 some parents were surprised to see grades for religious education on their children's certificates whereas no lessons had been given by Abkowicz, who had already left Lutsk in the summer of 1938. LMAVB F. 143-1064-1, fol. 1 recto.

In 1931, Sergiusz Rudkowski, the newly elected Chairman of the Board of the community at the time, came up with the idea of inviting two Karaite primary school teachers, namely the Samuelowicz sisters, Dorota and Lina, to Lutsk to establish a Karaim kindergarten there. However, this undertaking failed due to bureaucratic hurdles. For more details see: Sulimowicz, A. (2015). A Failed Attempt to Teach the Karaim Language in Lutsk in the Interwar Period. *Karaite Archives*, Vol. 3, 141-152.

³³ BWLAN F. 143-161, fol. 12 recto.

³⁴ BWLAN F.143-161, fol. 9 recto.

³⁵ Personal correspondence: Anna Dubińska Nowicka, 1990. The informant who was a child at the time was not able to give any details.

³⁶ Letter of resignation dated May 4, 1929, AKCL VII.02.05.

This moment should be considered a turning point for Lutsk as a cultural centre, if only because as a consequence of this standoff all local activities aimed at promoting education and culture would no longer be the product of the joint efforts of the community as a whole, but rather the result of the passion and involvement of one individual.

Encouraged by Professor Kowalski's visit a few years earlier and inspired by the latter's work on the Trakai dialect Mardkowicz hit upon the idea of editing a dictionary of the southern dialect. The position of the Karaim language in Lutsk had weakened significantly by the beginning of the 20th century. It appears that to a large extent it had already been replaced by the surrounding languages, namely Russian and Polish. In his description of the local community he visited in 1908, Józef Smoliński, a Polish ethnographer and historian of art, remarked that the "the older generation [of Karaites], as well as the younger people, especially the women, speak perfect Polish, without any foreign influences".³⁷

Given this state of affairs the main task was to encourage the Lutsk Karaites to try to express their thoughts and feelings in their native language by providing them with suitable tools: a Polish-Karaim dictionary and a grammar.

However, these plans had to be modified when Mardkowicz launched another project: "Biblioteczka Karaimska" ("The Karaim Library"), a series of short stories intended primarily for children and young people. The religious texts, most of which were readily available in the Karaim language, were not seen as appropriate reading material for contemporary Karaites. There was a need for literature that was accessible, diverse, and which would encourage readers – especially in the younger generation – to develop an interest in the language. The first booklet in this series, "Elijahunun Ucuru" ("Adventures of Eliyahu"), an adaptation of a tale from One Thousand and One Nights, appeared in the spring of 1930.

This event required refashioning the original dictionary. There was now a need for a Karaim-Polish one, which would enable those Karaims who did not speak their language well to understand the published materials. To broaden the circle of users to include foreign scholars, Mardkowicz decided to add explanations in German, too. These changes put back its publication by a few more years. Finally, the first booklet, "Słownictwo karaimskie – Karaj Sez Bitigi" ("Karaim Vocabulary – Karaim Dictionary"), containing titles A, B, C, D, and part of E, appeared in September 1933, while the second part with the remaining entries, together with the complete edition containing a total of 4417 entries, came out one and a half years later.

The grammar of the southern dialect, written at the request of Mardkowicz by Ananiasz Zajączkowski, a pupil of Kowalski at the time and a professor of Turkish Studies *in spe*, was published in 1931.³⁸

³⁷ Smoliński, J. (1912). Karaimi i ich bożnica w Łucku. *Ziemia*, No. 8, 116.

³⁸ Zajączkowski, A. (1931). *Krótki wykład gramatyki języka zachodnio-karaimskiego (narzecze Lutsko-haliczkie)*. [A Concise Grammar of the Western Karaim Language (the Lutsk-Halicz dialect)], Lutsk.

Mardkowicz went on to publish further booklets in the “Biblioteczka Karaimska” series. These included: “Birthei keklernin” (‘Seed of Heavens’, Lutsk, 1931), a somewhat sentimental story of a Karaim boy and his journey to the Holy Land; “Aj jaryhynda” (‘In the Light of the Moon’, Lutsk, 1933), a historical novel about the Turkic origins of the Karaims; and a romantic tale entitled “Aziz Tas” (‘Holy Stone’, Lutsk, 1934). These were all penned by Mardkowicz himself. He tried to draw the reader’s attention to the ethnic origins of the Karaites, stressing their affinity with the Turkic peoples. He also highlighted the significance of their religion, which had enabled them, in spite of the passing centuries, to maintain their distinct identity. It is worth noting that the main purpose of these works in the Karaim language was not only to preserve the language, but also to encourage Karaites to develop an interest in their own past.

He was also the author of three booklets in Polish: “Synowie Zakonu” (‘Sons of Scripture’, Lutsk 1930), “O Iliasz Karaimowiczu, zwierzchniku wojsk zaporoskich” (‘About Iliasz Karaimowicz, the Commander of Zaporozhian Army’, Lutsk 1931), “Ogniska Karaimskie” (‘Karaite Centers’, Lutsk 1932, 1934, 1936), and “Szkice Karaimskie” (‘Karaite Sketches’), which was a supplement to the 10th issue of *Karaj Awazy*. The basic aim of these publications was to provide Polish society with information on the Karaites and to promote a positive image of them. However, they also played an important role in educating Karaites in their history and traditions. Without a doubt, they contributed to a greater national awareness of and a pride in the Karaim language as well as a greater desire to preserve it.

Interestingly, one of Mardkowicz’s first publications was a collection of paraliturgical hymns entitled “Zemerler” (Lutsk 1930) – edited for the first time in Latin script; it may be considered an embodiment in printed form of the ideas he expressed in his list of proposed reforms.

Mardkowicz’s career as an editor and writer was not confined solely to the publications mentioned above. His *opus magnum* was “Karaj Awazy” (‘Karaite Voice’), a magazine edited in the Karaim language. In total, twelve issues appeared between 1931 and 1938. Their content was very diverse: stories, articles on history, works and biographies of Karaite poets, translations of Polish poetry into Karaim, nursery rhymes and riddles, humorous pieces, as well as information on social and cultural life in Karaite communities in both Poland and abroad. Most of the published materials were penned by Mardkowicz himself, and were often unsigned. In the second half of the 1930s he concentrated on poetry, publishing a number of works: “Halic”, dedicated to the Halicz community and a collection of works under the common title “Janhy jirlar” (‘New Songs’) in 1937, “Szelomit. Jiry ułtu siwerliknin” (‘Szelomit. Song of Great Love’) in 1938 and “Tozdurhan birtik” (‘Spilled Grains’), a collection of quatrains on various subjects in 1939.

Although his publications were written in the southern dialect, which was not easily understandable to Karaites living in the northern communities, Mardkowicz’s editorial work and writings had a significant impact on Karaite cultural activities in Trakai and Vilnius, and even in Panevežys in the Republic of

Lithuania. In 1930 the “Bir-Baw” Association of Karaite Youth in Trakai launched its own magazine called “Przyjaciel Karaimów” (“Friend of the Karaites”). The first issue had a Polish title and its content was also in Polish. However, subsequent issues that appeared in 1932 and 1934, i.e. when Mardkowicz’s “Karaj Awazy” had been already published, bore the Karaim title “Dostu Karajyn” and contained mostly Karaim texts.

It is worth noting here that Mardkowicz’s idea of publishing a prayer book in Latin script was partially realised in 1938 when Szymon Firkowicz, the *ultu hazzan* of Trakai and a close collaborator of Szapszał’s edited “Kołtchařar. Krótkie modlitwy karaimskie” (“Kołtchařar. Short Karaite Prayers”).³⁹

Mykolas Tinfavičius, a Panevežys Karaite and editor-in-chief of the magazine “Onarmach” (Kar. ‘development’), wrote in the editorial to the first issue of the latter (published in 1934 in Kaunas) that Mardkowicz had been his inspiration: “Abaily Aleksandr Mardkovič birisiń ergialiarindian beklejd čahyrmachba: – Tiri bolsun bastyrhan karaj sioziu! Tierań učtular üriagimizgia bu siozliari syjly bašlavčunun da erniak bieriuvčuniuń, kajsy iši była kiorgiuzdiu kiorkiuń basturhan karaj siozniuń da ačty anar azat jol. Bu ol kiorkliu jol była bizdi klejbiz barma.”⁴⁰

Although Mardkowicz’s efforts failed to motivate the Karaites of Lutsk to be more involved in cultural life,⁴¹ members of the community were conscious of the importance of his work and eventually came to appreciate it. In 1932, he was made an honorary citizen of his native community⁴² and in 1937 the Halicz Karaites conferred on him a similar status.

³⁹ It contained only a selection of basic prayers. A complete prayer book in Latin script was not published until the end of 1990s when Mykolas Firkovičius edited *Karaj dińlilianiń jalbarmach jergialari*. Vol. 1 *Ochumach üčiuń kieniesada*, Vilnius 1998. Vol. 2 *Ochumach üčiuń adieř vahdalarynda*, Vilnius 1999.

⁴⁰ “Concluding one of his articles, honourable Aleksander Mardkowicz raised the clarion call: Long live the printed Karaim language! The words of this wise man, who made the first step, were deeply embedded in all our hearts. His works showed the beauty of printed Karaim words and cleared the way for them. We also intend to continue down this path”. Čyharuvču [Michał Tynfowicz] (1934), *Ochuvčularha, Onarmach*, issue 1, 1.

⁴¹ With the exception of Sergiusz Rudkowski (1873–1944), who had already had become involved in socio-cultural projects before World War I. In 1914, he launched a Russian magazine in Lutsk called *Sabah* (kar. ‘morning’). Unfortunately, only one issue of the periodical appeared before the war put an end to its existence. In the 1930s he published four leaflets: “Krwawe echo Humania na Wołyniu (Rzeź Kotowska 1768 r.)”, Lutsk 1932 (‘Bloody echoes of Humań in Volhynia. The Kotów Slaughter of 1768’, which described the destruction of the Derażno and Kotów Karaite communities by Ukrainian rebels), “Tutuwlamahy Karajlarnyn Łuckada” (‘The settlement of Karaites in Lutsk’, Lutsk 1933), as well as two humorous tales: “Dostłar. Satyr kotarmak tirlikten jizip-ahhan” (‘Friends. A funny story taken from life’, Lutsk 1931) and its continuation published in 1939. He also published his own poems and stories in *Karaj Awazy* and *Mysł Karaimska*.

⁴² *Życie karaimskie w Polsce – Łuck. Mysł Karaimska*, Vol. 10 (1932–1934), 120.

Mardkowicz's achievements as a writer and editor were exceptional. An output comprising fourteen small brochures and twelve issues of a magazine edited over the course of nine years might not seem to amount to much. Yet we must remember that they were the work of one man who was neither a professional editor nor a writer by trade and yet nonetheless was able to find the time and energy to produce creative work that would only be of interest to a handful of people. The revival of the Karaim language and culture that took place in the interwar period was in great part thanks to Aleksander Mardkowicz's endeavours. He showed that Karaim could not only be used in liturgy but also as a means of expressing many different aspects of life in the modern world. There are thus surely few who would disagree with the Polish turkologist and renowned Karaim specialist Henryk Jankowski when he argues: "The most credit for propagating Karaim should undoubtedly go to Aleksander Mardkowicz."⁴³ Although Mardkowicz did not manage, as he intended, to prevent the disappearance of the language, he was at least able to slow it down. Moreover, by writing and publishing texts in his native dialect he preserved for future generations what was left during his own lifetime.

⁴³ Jankowski, H. (2012). Literatura krymskokaraimska. *Przegląd Orientalistyczny*, Issue 1–2 (241–242), 67.