Karaims have been living in Lithuania for about six centuries and are considered ‘original inhabitants’ of the country (see National Minorities in Lithuania. Vilnius: Centre of National Researches of Lithuania, 1992). The Karaim group, which is an officially acknowledged religious community, gets support from the state for the development of its culture. Its religious and administrative leader is the so-called Ullu Hazzan, a title now held by Jozef Firkovich. The Karaim Religious Society is the main administrative organ of the community and the legal owner of the community properties. The Lithuanian Karaim Cultural Society is responsible for taking care of the cultural heritage. The community has about 250 members. There are other Karaim communities, namely in Russia, in the Ukraine, both in the Crimea and in Halich, and in Poland. Most of the Lithuanian Karaims live in Vilnius, Trakai.

The most important task of the Karaim communities today is the revitalisation of community life. The Karaim organisations make efforts to create opportunities for young Karaims to learn their history, religion, language and traditions.

1. The Karaim national identity

Karaims consider themselves to be descendants of Kipchak Turkic tribes who once lived in the tribal union of the Khazar empire between the Caspian Sea and the Dnieper estuary. They were later divided into three main groups. One group remained in the Crimea. Another group moved to Galicia, and a third group left for Trakai at the end of the fourteenth century. The three groups developed their own dialects.

By the end of the 17th century there were about 30 Karaim communities in eastern Central Europe. Their number was, however, drastically reduced as a result of epidemics and wars in the 18th century. Karaims gained support from the administrative and political authorities of their respective countries. They were given privileges, and their independent status as a religious community was acknowledged.

The shifting political map of Europe shaped the fate of the Karaim people. The Crimean communities belonged to Tsarist Russia and later to the Soviet Union. Halich was a part of Galicia, which belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, but after World War I it came under Polish rule, as did Trakai and Vilnius.

World War II changed the political situation again. The Karaims became citizens of the Soviet state, a change which had serious consequences for them. The traditional Karaim settlements were weakened. Many Karaims left for Poland or countries in the West. The collapse of the Soviet Union has again created...
a chance for the scattered communities to revi-
talise their activities.

2. The Karaim religion

Karaims are believers of the Old Testament. Their religion does not recognise the post-
biblical tradition incorporated in the Talmud and the later rabbinical works. The beginnings
of this religious movement can be traced back to the 8th-11th centuries. Today there are
two main groups of believers: the Turkic (= European) Karaims on the one side and the
Oriental (= Non-Turkic) Karaites on the other side. Turkic-speaking Karaims differ from
Oriental Karaites with respect to their ethnic and cultural identity.

The Karaim house of worship is called
kenesa. There are today two functioning
kenesas in Lithuania, one in Vilnius and one
in Trakai.

3. The Karaim language

Karaim is a Kipchak Turkic language. Elements
of folklore and material culture such as tales,
proverbs, riddles, folk-poetry, and names of
dishes also remind us of the Turkic origin of
the Karaims.

Karaim is today an endangered language.
The only community that has preserved its
language up to now is the one in Lithuania.
There are about 50 people who can still use it
in everyday conversation.

The maintenance of their mother tongue is
the most urgent task facing the Karaims today.
The former Ullu Hazzan, Mykolas Firkovich
(1924-2000), published a textbook containing
a grammar and texts for children. A project
aiming at the documentation of the spoken
language has been carried out with the financial
help of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.
A multimedia CD has been published by the
Tokyo University of Foreign Studies to help
young Karaims to learn about their language.

Until the 20th century Karaim literacy was
based on the knowledge of Hebrew, the holy
language. Hebrew characters were also used for
writing Karaim. In the later period, the orthog-
raphy was based on the writing systems of the
countries in which the Karaims lived, i.e. Polish
in Poland, and Russian in Tsarist Russia and the
Soviet Union. After Lithuania gained its inde-
pendence in 1990, the Karaims adopted a new
orthography based on the Lithuanian one. The
best dictionary is written in Cyrillic, with Polish
and Russian equivalents. The only comprehen-
sive grammar is in Russian. The most important
religious texts have recently been published by
Mykolas Firkovich in Lithuanian orthography.

4. Swedish-Karaim contacts

European Protestants took an early interest in
the Karaim belief. A number of western schol-
ars visited the Karaims in order to discuss ques-
tions of religion. In 1690, the Swedish professor
Gustaf Peringer was sent by king Charles XI to
the Karaims in Lithuania and Poland. In his
work Epistola de karaitis Lithuaniae, he com-
mented upon the Karaim language and quoted
as a sample the first verses of Genesis.

5. Karaim literature

A significant secular literature started to de
velop in the 19th century. The inter-war period
was for the Karaims, just as for the other Baltic
nations, a time of national upheaval, also with
regard to the conscious cultivation of their mother tongues. Karaim intellectuals became aware of the necessity to develop a literary language and published periodicals in Karaim. There are still some Karaims writing literary works in their language. A new theatre play written in Karaim was performed in 1997 in Trakai.

**Sample of a manuscript of the Karaim Bible (Ps 83: 15–16)**

Henryk Jankowski
Translated into the north-western or Troki/Trakai dialect of Karaim.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turkic</th>
<th>Territory</th>
<th>Number speakers</th>
<th>Earliest written records</th>
<th>Cross-ethnic communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>† Karaim</td>
<td>Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>16th c.</td>
<td>di- or triglossia, Turkic and/or Slavic communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(†) Tatar</td>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>17th c.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>† Khazar (6th–10th c.)</td>
<td>Ukraine, ?Poland</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**English translation** (King James’s Bible 1611/1769):

[1–2] So persecute them with thy tempest, and make them afraid with thy storm.
[3–5] Fill their faces with shame; that they may seek thy name, O LORD [forever].

**Transcription:**

[1] Alej kuvhun alarny tavuľuj byla, da vicho-ruj
[3] jeńgilliktiań, da kolsunlar Šemijini, ey H!
[5] jeńgilliktiań da kolsunlar Šemijini, ey H!
[6] Ujatly bolsunlar da alhasansynlar dunjaha diejƒ [...]

(for technical reasons, two dashes above two gimels, marking a fricative [γ], were disregarded)

**Selected, transcribed and rewritten in formal Hebrew characters by Henryk Jankowski**
Contacts de langues et de cultures dans l’aire baltique – Contacts of Languages and Cultures in the Baltic Area, Mélanges offres à Fanny de Sivers, 1996, M. M. Jocelyne Fernandez & Raimo Raag (eds). Uppsala: Centre of Multietnic Research

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