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THE BEGINNING OF KARAIMS' SETTLEMENT
IN THE GRAND DUCHY OF LITHUANIA
ACCORDING TO KARAIM WRITTEN SOURCES
IN HEBREW LANGUAGE



The present paper deals with the presumed date of the arrival of the Karaims in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL). It is dedicated to the 615th anniversary of the settlement of Tartars and Karaims in the GDL. This date brings us back to the years 1397–1398. But was it the real and accurate date, or just a conclusion from old traditions basically common to both communities?

The paper is based on an oral report which was presented during the international scientific conference “Turks’ History and Culture in Lithuania” which took place in Vilnius on the 29th-31th of May, 2013. Its goal is to present a brief review of these Karaim traditions as they appear in written sources in the Hebrew language. As is well known, till the end of the 19th century the Karaims in Lithuania used two languages in their intra-communal life: their everyday spoken Mother-tongue was the Karaim, a branch of Turkic-Kipchak languages. I believe that all their oral traditions were presented and delivered for generations in this Karaim language, as well as their popular songs, legends, proverbs, etc. However, together with this spoken language, the preferable language of the liturgy, of literature, memoirs, all kinds of communal documents, agreements and contracts, and even private correspondence – all this huge amount of written evidences that reached our days was composed in Hebrew. Actually, the Hebrew language was the language of the Karaims’ education system, and every educated and learned Karaim knew and used Hebrew. Even all writings in the native Karaim language were presented in Hebrew letters.

So, how do the Karaims traditions concerning their arrival from the east to this area of Northern Europe appear in their Hebrew compositions? It should be emphasized again: we speak about traditions that not necessarily fit in with the accurate facts. Unfortunately, we do not have at our possession any original document that proves the exact date of the Karaims’ arrival in Lithuania.

In the first decade of 19th century the Khakham, the spiritual leader of the local community of Halich in Galicia Josef Leonovich sent a letter to Moshe Tenenboim, a Rabbanite Jewish scholar in Tarnopol. In his letter, Leonovich brings a fragment from a story that his father – a well-known Khakham as well, Abraham Leonovich – copied from some archive in Lvov. And this is what they write:

¹ Leonovich J. A letter to Moshe Tenenboim // Ha Neshet (Hebr.). Lvov, 1865. No. 15.

"בשנת אלף רי"ח למספר הנוצרים (1218) הדוכוס הגדול של דוכסיות ליטא וויטולד בהחלצו למלחמה על הקדרים על מלכות קרים שלל גדול ושביה גדולה לקח והביא עמו למדינת ליטא ואמר להם להוסד ולהבנות במקום הנקרא טרוק וקרא שם המקום בשם עיר חדשה בנתנו להם חריות גדולות והושיב במקום ההוא עוד ש"ל (330) בעלי בתים והשאר הושיבם בפוניוויז קנ"ג (153) בעלי בתים".¹

"In the year 1218, the Grand Duke of the Duchy of Lita (Lithuania) Vytold made war with the Kadarim (viz. Tartars) in the Kingdom of Krim (Crimea), took from there a lot of captives, brought them to the state of Lita, and said them to settle and to build houses in the place called Trok. He called the place New City, and granted them enormous privileges. 330 Families settled in that place, and the remaining were settled in Poniviezh, giving them the same rights like in that New City."²

Mordekhay Sultansky (1772–1862) in his book "Zekher Tsadikim" (Remembrance of Pious People) wrote in 1838:

"ויהי בשנת תתקע"ח לאלף החמישי שהיא שנת אלף רי"ח (1218) לנוצרים הדוכס הגדול של מדינת ליטא הנקרא בשם ויטולד יאגללו בן המלכה בונא בהחלצו למלחמה נגד הטרטרים שבמלכות קירים ובנצחו אותם נפל לקירים ולקח שלל רב ושביה גדולה מהטרטרים ובצאתו משם לקח ונהג גם מן הקראים אשר בסולכת הנקראת קירים ישן תפ"ג (483) בעלי בתים הנקרא בלשונם פאמיליע והביא אותם לארצו ויסד וישב מהם ש"ל (330) בעלי בתים בעיר טרוק ארבע פרסאות מעיר ווילנע בנתנו להם קרקעות וכתבי חריות גדולות ואת השאר היינו קנ"ג (153) בעלי בתים הושיבם ויסדם בעיר פונעוז ... ובשנת חמשת אלפים ויש מאות ליצירת עלמא, שהיא שנת אלף רמ"ו למספר הנוצרים (1246), אותו הדוכס ויטולד הנזכר ... בהחלצו בשנה הנזכרת שנית למלחמה על חיל הטרטרים, אשר יצאו מקירים ופשטו בארץ פולין לשחתה, כפי מנהגם תמיד, ובנצחו אותם בארץ מולטניע על יד האגמים השחורים, הנקראים בלשון פולין צרנע בלוטא ... נפלו גם אז לקירים ושללו שלל גדול, ובשוב המלך הוא לדרכו לקח מן הקראים אשר בסולכת עוד ש"פ (380) בעלי בתים ויושב ק"פ (180) מהם במדינת גאליציע בעיר העליץ על נהר נסטר ... והנשארים מהם,

² The mention of Poniviezh and the New City (עיר חדשה) is anachronistic: in both places the Karaims settled only in the beginning of the 17th century.

מאתים בעלי בתים ישבם ויסדם במדינת וואלין בעיר הנקראת קרסנא גורא (הר יפה) על ההר מעבר לנהר סטיר נגד מבצר לוצקא..."³

According to M. Sultansky, "In the year 1218, the Grand Duke of Lithuania Vytold Jagello, the son of Queen Bonna, made war with the Tartars in the Kingdom of Krim (Crimea), and after defeating them brought from there many Tartar captives. Coming back to his country, Vytold carried with him also 483 Karaim houseowners (families) from the city of Sulkhat. He settled 330 of them in Trok, and another 153 in Poniviezh. Further on, in the year 1246, Vytold fought again with the Tartars, and this time he brought 380 Karaim families and settled 200 close to the castle of Lutsk, and 180 in Halich".

As you can see, both of them tell us more or less the same story, with the same a-historical data.

The next author was Avraham Firkovich (1781–1874), the best known Karaim in Eastern Europe. In his book "Avney Zikkaron" (Stones of Memorial, printed in 1872), A. Firkovich brings stories very similar to these of M. Sultansky⁴:

"בשנת 1218 (תתקע"ח לאלף החמישי) וויטולד דוכוס הגדול של ליטא ערך מלחמה על הטטרים והשג באי קרים ונלחם וישב שם ויקח עמו מקרים 483 משפחות קראים ויוליכם לליטא ויצו לבנות להם עיר ויקרא אותה טראק החדשה ויתן להם כתב חירות ושדות ואדמה ויושיבם בעיר ההיא 330 משפחות, ואת יתר 153 משפחות הושיבם בעיר פוניוויז, בנתנו להם כתב חירות ואדמה, כמו לאחיהם שבעיר טראק. בשנת 1246 וויטולד זה חבר מדינתו על מלכות פולין, בנתנו בתו לאשה למלך וולאדיסלאוו ממשפחת יוגעלו בן בונא המלכה. ויעלו לצבא על הטורקים והטטרים ובנצחם אותם אצל צארני בלוטי בארץ מולטוניא 64 אלפים, בט"ו לחודש סנטברי בשנה ההיא, ושמונהם על קרים ויקחו מאתיים (200) משפחות קראים, ויוליכום למדינת וולין ויושיבם בהעליץ ואת יתר מאה ופילו (180) משפחות בקראסני אצל נהר סטיר קרוב למבצר לוצקא. ויתן להם נחלת שדות וקרקעות למידת מיל וחצי סביב סביב"⁵

"In the year 1218, Vytold, the Great Duke of Lithuania, made war with the Tartars... reached the island of Crimea, and took with him from Crimea 483 Karaim families, and

³ Sultansky M. Zekher Tsadikim. Warszawa, 1920, p. 107.

⁴ It should be stated that M. Sultansky's book was published by S. Poznansky only in 1921, long time after A. Firkovich wrote his version. Probably both had in front of them the same tradition, most likely the oral one.

⁵ Firkovich A. Avney Zikkaron. Vilna, 1872, p. 252.

brought them to Lithuania, where he built for them a new city called the New Trok ... in the year 1246 this Vytautas connected his state with the Kingdom of Poland by giving his daughter as a wife of the King Vladislav from Yageilo family, the son of the Queen Bonna... etc.”

Again, exactly the same a-historical data. It seems that all of them, J. Leonovich, M. Sultansky, and A. Firkovich, were totally unaware of the Lithuanian history and used the same sources for their writings. But what were these sources? It is hard to know by now whether they had in front of them written sources or based on oral traditions. Anyway, we have in our possession a few documents, such as communal appeals, memoirs, and private correspondence, prior to M. Sultansky and A. Firkovich.

The Karaims' marriage contract *Kettubbah* which was signed in Troki in January 1400 is considered to be the oldest Karaims' document proving their existence in the region:

"ביום ... לחדש שבט שנת חמשת אלפים ומאה וששים לבריאת העולם ... אנחנו מונים וסופרים פה בתחום ליטא בממשלת האדון החסיד ויטולד יחי לעד אמן. ביום הזה בא כ"מ משה ... לפני הזקנים עדת הקראים ויאמר אליהם ... נשאתי וקדשתי מרת לאה בת כ"מ עזרא להיות לי לאשה ..."⁶

“In the month of Shevat in the year 5160 (1400) that we count from the creation of the World ... in this place in Lita (Lithuania), under the Government of the Merciful Lord Vitold, may He live forever, Amen ... in this day came Moshe son of ... in front of the Elders of the Karaim Community, and said to them ... here I married and betrothed Lea daughter of Ezra to be my wife...”

What seems to be most close to the presumed date of the Karaims' arrival to Troki we find in the genealogical list of the Karaim Vojt and famous physician Ezra Ben Nisan (1596–1666)⁷.

"בשנה השנית לביאת אבותינו פה טרוקי מארץ מדי מעיר סולכת הוליד אדוננו מ"ר שמואל סגן המשכיל חברו של אדוני אבי כמ"ר שמחה מורזא בהנהגת העדה

⁶ This document was published by Jacob Mann in his “Texts and Studies” (New York, 1931, p. 1122) and since that was quoted by many scholars. Mikhail Kizilov has recently stated that the “early date of this document and the reference to Vytautas had been inserted by a later hand. This *Kettubbah* dates to a much later period, most likely to the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries” (*Kizilov M. Plague in Lithuania, desolation in Jerusalem: two poems in the Karaim language from Tadeusz Kowalski's archival collection // Judaica. 2009. No. 65 (3), p. 193–209*).

⁷ J. Mann brings this document in his book, p. 1178, and quotes also a remark made by A. Firkovich that he copied this list in Troki in 1854 from an ancient one. This comment makes the whole document to be suspicious in scholars' eyes.

יצ"ו את אהובנו כמ"ר משה בשנת הק"ס (1400) ויגדל משה הלוך וגדל עד
 כי היה שר קפיטן בחצר אדוננו המלך כזימיר יגילון יר"ה משנת הרי"ו. והוא הרים תפארת
 ישראל כי בקש מאת המלך י"ל ויאשר את כתב החירות הנתן לאבותינו מאת הדוכוס ויטולד
 החסיד נ"ע".

"In the second year of the arrival of our ancestors here in Troki ... from the city of Sulkhat... was born our beloved Moshe in the year 1400." This date bring us back to 1398.

In the year 1688, the Karaim community of Troki sent a letter of complaint to the Jewish council in Brisk (Brest). In their appeal, the Karaims write that the Jews of Vilna refuse to return the Karaims' documents of privileges, borrowed some 35 years ago. In this context, the Karaims stress their antiquity in Troki:

"נוסח הכתב ששלחו מק"ק טרוקי לק"ק בריסק בהיות הוועד ... הן לכאורה נראה שנאת ק"ק
 ווילנא ואיבתם כי רבה היא זה כבר משלושים שנה וחמשה שנים משנת השצב"ל (1632) כאשר
 הלון מקהלת טרוקי קיימים והחזיקו עד עתה שנת התךח"ל (1668) ואינם רוצים להשיב
 שמסבה זו השיגו בגבולינו לרשת את הקיומים שלנו ובהם לעשות מחיות ושאר מיני הכנסות
 להם ולבניהם אחריהם ואולם ירושת אבותינו ונחלתנו ואחוזתנו שמארבע מאות שנה ויותר
 טרחו קדמוננו להרחיב גבולם בטרוקי הואילו מנהיגי ק"ק ווילנא לעקר ולשרש את שארית
 פלטתינו מעל קרקעות גבולותיהם".⁸

"The heritage of our ancestors, and our estate, and our property, that for four hundred years and more our ancient ancestors made an effort to enlarge their territory in Troki". As we can see, this brings us back to the 13th century.

Benjamin son of Eliahu (Duvan) from Gozlev in the Crimea made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1785. Coming back to his homeland, he wrote about a Karaim from Troki, "Zarakh son of Abraham, the distinguished physician", who joined him in this journey. And this is what he says about the Troki Karaims:

"ובשנה זו בא לארץ קירים לעירנו ישראל א' מקק ליטוא יע"א מעיר טרוקי ושמו זרח בן

⁸ Mann J. Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature // Karaitica with 4 facsimiles. Cincinatti, 1931–1935 (reprinted in 1970 in New York). Vol. 2, p. 865.

אברהם הנכבד הרופא ז"ל ועירו כמו דרך ד' מאות שעות לעירנו, וכבר הם כמו חמש מאות שנה ויותר היו בארץ קירים ארץ סלכאת הנקרא אסכי קירים".⁹

“And in this year (1785) came to our city one Son of Israel from Litva from the city of Troki, and his name is Avraham ben Zarakh the physician, and his city (Troki) is far away from our city four hundreds hours to go, and they (live) there like five hundred years and more, (coming) from the land of Kirim, the land of Sulkhath, called Eski Kirim”. And here again, his data go back to the 13th century.⁹

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up our subject, we can conclude as follows:

- a. The written Hebrew controversial data as to the time and circumstances of the beginning of the Karaims' settlement in the GDL are based probably on some oral traditions. I would like to remind that the first written account of Tartars and Karaims coming to Lithuania during Vytautas days was made by Jan Dlugoszi in his “Annales” only in the end of the 15th century, some generations after the mentioned events. J. Dlugosz records a Tatar legend which tells us about the Grand Duke Vytautas bringing back thousands of Tatars with their families after a victorious battle¹⁰ – very similar to the Karaim legend. This oral tradition was written by the Lithuanian Tartars by themselves in “Risale-yi Tatar i Leh” only in the 16th century¹¹.
- b. These traditions reflect the controversial tendencies in Karaims' attitude to their past: on the one hand, there was a strong desire to prove their antiquity in the region, maybe on the grounds of their complicated relations with the Jewish community. On the other hand, new communities coming in the GDL wanted to be connected to the image of such a distinguished ruler as Vytautas the Great.
- c. Similar traditions can be found among other two eastern communities in the GDL – the Tartars and the Armenians. Taking into account their close geographical origin, their relatively close spoken dialects, and their neighbourhood in the new homeland, there is also a possibility of mutual

⁹ Neubauer A. Aus der Petersburger Bibliothek, Beitrage und Documente zur, Geschichte des Karaerthmus. Leipzig, 1866, S. 124.

¹⁰ Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė J. The Tatars // The Peoples of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Ed. by G. Potašenko. Vilnius, 2002, p. 73–82.

¹¹ Tyszkiewicz J. Tatarzy na Litwie i w Polsce. Warszawa, 1989, s. 147.

influence in creating close or even mixed traditions related to their past. It is important to mention that the Karaims and the Armenians were urban communities, in a constant economic struggle with the local citizens, and therefore it was important to prove their antiquity and status in the region.

- d. As we know, some Tartars reached the Lithuanian territory in the 13th–14th centuries as allies of the Lithuanian Princes who used their military skill against the Crusades¹². These early Tartar groups in Lithuania were pagan Tartar tribes fleeing Islamization, who sought refuge in the pagan Lithuania.¹³ Maybe with these Tartar warriors from the Golden Horde came also a few Karaim families, serving as traders, craftsmen and horse suppliers for these Tartars. These Karaims did not establish new settlements of their own in Lithuania, but maybe their early arrival there is still reflected in the above-mentioned traditions.

¹² *Гришин Я.* Польско-литовские татары: наследники Золотой Орды. Казань, 1995, с. 5.

¹³ *Harviainen T.* The Karaites in Eastern Europe and the Crimea // *Karaite Judaism*. Ed. by M. Polliack. Leiden, 2003, p. 644.