

SIMON FIRKOVIČ AND HIS ROLE IN PRESERVING THE KARAIM LANGUAGE

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Abstract. Lithuania is a unique place in the world where the Karaim language is still alive. Living in Lithuania for 625 years, Karaims have spoken their mother tongue at home and in their families, also used their language in religious service, and learned it at school. The Senior priest of Trakai community Simon Firkovič (1897–1982) played an important role in fostering and preserving his native Karaim. He was elected to that position in 1922 and served there for 60 years. The article looks into his activities in two strands: him working for the community in his religious and teaching duties as well as being a poet and writer, in a more individual vein following his vocation to cultivate, safeguard, facilitate, and nurture Karaim identity.

Keywords: Trakai, Simon Firkovič, Senior priest, Karaim community, Karaim language, Karaim identity.

The Senior Priest Simon Firkovič (1897-1982) was one of the most prominent figures of Karaim culture in the 20th century. He was elected to that position in 1922 and served there for 60 years until the end of his life. He spent all his life in Trakai, in the same house on Karaimų str. 42. During his long spiritual ministry, the Senior Priest Simon Firkovič not only held all the religious services, but also was a public figure in many areas: a teacher of religion and language, initiator and playwright of the amateur Karaim theatre, a poet, translator, and an earnest defender and guardian of the Karaim identity, especially the Karaim language. How could one person accomplish this?

Taking into account all his efforts to preserve the native language we can delineate two fields of his activities – one with the community, and another – his individual field. First, let us consider the religious services held for the community. Simon Firkovič never abandoned his role as a senior priest. When it became unsafe to attend services in the kenesa, the Karaim temple, he held services at his home. Here, at his home, religious services were held, all Karaim couples were secretly married, and new-borns were



The senior priest Simon Firkovič with pupils in 1932



Simon Firkovič



Simon Firkovič in Trakai in 1965

blessed. Firkovič accompanied all the deceased Karaims with a prayer to their place of eternal rest in the cemeteries of Trakai, Vilnius or Naujamiestis near Panevėžys. He took great risks, secretly performing his priestly duties while conducting ceremonies and Holy services even when the conditions were extremely unfavourable. All prayers were spoken in the Karaim language. Fortunately, the liturgical heritage of Simon Firkovič is preserved in audio records made by his nephew Mykolas Firkovičius (1924–2000). Recorded by Mykolas Firkovičius himself, these records and liturgies in a pure form of the Karaim language are the main sources for contemporary services in *kenasas*.

Second, the importance of Simon Firkovič's pedagogical work cannot be underestimated. After returning in 1920 from Crimea where the Trakai community spent some years in forced exile, he initiated the reopening of the state primary school for Karaim children (established first in 1576) and the establishment of a Karaim kindergarten in Trakai. Here all subjects were taught in the Karaim language. The primary school fully functioned until 1923 when it was closed down by state authorities, because of the lack of children. Simon Firkovič wrote letters to the authorities petitioning to reopen the school. The school was not reopened, but it was allowed to conduct religion and language lessons. Simon Firkovič fought for the number of lessons in the state primary school and later extended teaching of religion and language in the parish school, which functioned in Trakai until the Soviet occupation in 1940.

We cannot restore the picture of how the school functioned, because none of us actually attended it. We can only imagine how it worked by relying on the stories told by our parents and relatives. Unfortunately, I have not found any drafts of Simon Firkovič's lessons, but indirectly we have evidence that, as a teacher, he was very exacting. It is obvious that people, who attended the lessons at that time, spoke Karaim at home. They were fluent in their native language and did not need to start every year only by learning how to say "*kiuń jachšy*" (Hello) and or "*nie bolas?*" (How are you?) They could learn more complicated subjects such as translations of the Bible, prayers and so on. The lessons of religion and prayers have always been conducted in the Karaim language. The language skills of the students were well developed and they could take part in the third endeavour undertaken by Simon Firkovič: the theatre.

He was the founder and the playwright of the amateur Karaim theatre, which became very popular in the community. Being an excellent psycho-

logist and having a brilliant sense of humor, Firkovič succeeded in writing several pieces for amateur theatre which reflected everyday activities as well as revealing human character. While writing these theatre pieces, Simon Firkovič wanted, moreover, to educate his community, to show how to preserve moral values and the good name earned by Karaims in previous centuries. The stories of those plays were typically simple comedies, constructed from episodes of everyday life. The audience could easily recognize who was who. Sometimes the person watching the play could eventually understand his vices such as hypocrisy, laziness, gossip, or other weaknesses. These were excellent lessons and they sometimes brought some shame to neighbors, but generally, they provided just a rich source of enjoyment. The sketches by Simon Firkovič were written in the ordinary spoken Karaim language. Today they have special historical value – they contain many nice words, proverbs, and examples of folk wisdom that have disappeared from our spoken language.

The performances of these pieces were quite popular and even today they are still reproduced on the stage during various occasions in Trakai. For example, the sketch “Dostu üvniūn” [The friend of home] was performed at the celebration of the 600th anniversary of the Karaim settlement in Trakai. The performers who could speak their mother tongue were as enthusiastic as their parents and grandfathers in Trakai before the Second World War.

Another field of Simon Firkovič’s activities to be highlighted relates to the private time he spent in the silence of his study throughout his life. Relying on his excellent knowledge of the native language, Simon Firkovič prepared a card file of Karaim lexicography, which was extremely useful when publishing the Karaim-Russian-Polish dictionary (*Караимско-русско-польский словарь*, Moscow, 1974). Regretfully, the name of Firkovič was not mentioned among the compilers of the dictionary. Perhaps future scholars will investigate these cards and use them for new dictionaries.

The majority of the cards that are in Simon Firkovič’s archive reflect his deep love for Karaim folklore. He collected proverbs and sayings throughout his life. In the first place, they had been written on small pieces of different-sized paper. The collection contained 304 proverbs and sayings which, in 1974, were presented by the collector to the nephew of his wife, turcologist Alexander Dubiński (1924–2002), a prominent scholar at the University of Warsaw. Dubiński published them in 1976 in Poland, in the magazine *Rocznik orientalistyczny* (Dubiński 1976). They were reprinted later with the Russian translation in the book *Caraimica* (Dubiński 1994, p. 235–248),

together with the collection of other articles of Prof. Dubiński. The Karaim proverbs have traditional national values encoded in them, as proverbs do in the folklore of all nations. In both proverbs and sayings, human virtues are emphasized and vices are condemned. Almost all the Karaim proverbs consist of two semantically arranged and often rhymed parts, for example: *Toj ašty – siož artty* (The wedding is over, the gossip increased), *Jat katyn - učuz altyn* (Stranger's wife is cheap gold), *Az ašym – tynč bašym* (Little food/property – a peaceful mind), *Bart jeri – bart jemi* (If you have land, there will be food as well).

The proverbs are called *Ata siožliari* (Father's words) in Karaim. Symbolically this title expresses their meaning, –the ability to express a concentrated wisdom that has been accumulated by one's forefathers. For Karaims, these proverbs represent a rich source of their mother tongue. Some years ago they were used by Prof. Mehmet Aca from Turkey, who discovered similarities between the Karaim proverbs and those of Turks from Anatolia. I personally used them as examples in the book by Prof. Elizabeth Piirainen (1943-2017) from Germany. She collected sayings and proverbs, which had been used in 180 European languages as well as in other continents. She tried to compare the sayings and their meanings and underlined the fact that, on many occasions, the sayings are equivalent despite the difference in languages and their location. Fifty-seven (57) sayings in the Karaim language, found mostly thanks to Simon Firkovič's collection, are included in Piirainen's book *Widespread Idioms in Europe and Beyond. Toward a Lexicon of Common Figurative Units* (Karaim idioms, 2012).

Finally, we should also consider the poetry. Simon Firkovič was the most famous and the most productive of the Karaim poets. He began writing poems in his youth and continued to compose them even while he was a senior priest. He wrote an impressively enormous number of poems. Many of them demonstrate simplicity both in versification and themes. His poetry revolves around his broad interests and the totality of life: the nature of Trakai, its beauty, the castle, islands, waterways, species of fish, and his longings for Trakai. The romantic past of the former capital city of Lithuania is, of course, actively presented here. Other topics in the poetry include social gatherings, specialties of Karaim cuisine, didactic lessons for the young, love ballads, and the beauty of the stars. All images reflect his attitude toward the grandeur of life. Writing about life with a deep love Simon Firkovič preserved and used diminutive forms, which have not remained in the other Turkic languages, for example, *Kujaščech jadady da jyrach astrandy* (Little

sun got tired and sheltered itself far away); *Tiursiuniuñdia kybynčėchnyn čyhadyr aj mijychlary* (In the face of a little kybyn the moon's mustache is getting shape). His poems for children are full of such kind diminutives: *chyjarčėch, jamhurčėoch, balyčėch, ašlyčėch, üvčėok* (little cucumber, little rain, little fish, little grains, little house).

Even a love poem typically begins with some warm words for Trakai castle, its islands, or lakes. In his rhymes, Firkovič passes on fundamental Karaim traditions to future generations by nurturing respect for the traditions and advocating the preservation of Karaim national identity.

The bulk of Firkovič's poetry belongs to the lyrical genre, but there are also satire, irony, and didactic pieces. Many of his poems have become songs. Firkovič also rhymed two historic ballads – *Warrior (Alankasar)* and *Grand Duke's Wonderful Horse (Batyр bijniñ tamaša aty)*, referring to the name of Vytautas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania (1392–1430), that is closely connected to the history of Karaims.

Prof. Tadeusz Kowalski (1889-1948), a professor at Jagiellonian University in Kraków (Poland), who examined Karaim language in 1925–1935 and published a book *Karaimische texte im Dialekt von Troki* (1929), underlined the peculiarities of the Karaim versification where there is no need to look for rhyme, – the problem is how to avoid it, since similar grammar forms are often used for rhyme. The other singularity is the accent – usually all words have a stress on the last syllable. This kind of versification creates some problems for translators of Karaim poetry into other languages while trying to keep the same rhyming structure. For example,

Bijikriak baštan borčlar

Üvčėokniu-die tarttylar...

Da kačan bulej boldu

Katynym-de kutuldu

(As the debt has grown so big/The house needed to be mortgaged.../And when it happened/ Also my wife left me).

In Simon Firkovič's poems, we find multiple examples of such kind of rhyme as in the poetry of other Karaim poets. But despite all peculiarities, poems of Simon Firkovič have been translated into Lithuanian by many poets in creative ways. Thanks to their efforts almost all pieces written by Simon Firkovič have become a significant part of Lithuanian culture and have been published in the bilingual (Karaim and Lithuanian) anthologies

of Karaim poetry: in 1997, *Čypčychlej učma Trochka /ĭ Trakus paukščiu plasnosiu...*), edited by Karina Firkavičiūtė, and in 2015, *Bir kiuń èdi.../Buvo tokia diena...*, edited by Halina Kobeckaitė and Karina Firkavičiūtė. These publications make that part of Karaim cultural heritage more accessible, both for readers and interested scholars. Thanks to bilingual publications the presence of the Karaims in Lithuania is more manifest and has become the subject of works of other writers and scholars, thus demonstrating that Lithuania is proud of having in its history and culture such an exotic strain.

There has always been unity among diverse cultures living in Lithuania. It is, therefore, not surprising that Karaim poets translated the literature of other nations into their mother tongue. Many such translations were done by Simon Firkovič. He translated poems of Russian poets Aleksander Pushkin, Michail Lermontov, Semion Nadson, Nikolaj Nekrasov; Polish – Adam Mickiewicz; Lithuanian – Judita Vaičiūnaitė and Maironis; Ukrainian – Taras Shevchenko, to name a few. Most of them were first published in the above-mentioned anthology of his works *Bir kiuń èdi.../Buvo tokia diena* in 2015. The value of the translations into the Karaim language is tremendous because it shows the deep potential for poetic translations and proves how well poetry served the preservation of the native language. In a way, the poetry also confirmed and established the fact that the Karaim language is a living language and takes its place among other world languages.

An exceptional type of Karaim poetry is the *Lament* [*Syjyt jyrj*], which is usually composed for a particular deceased person and recited at the side of the coffin before moving it to the cemetery. Laments have very strict rules of versification and use the same melody. Every verse consists of 11 syllables. These laments narrate the life and achievements of the deceased. Their last verses express sympathy for relatives and family left behind. The same type of laments (*Syjyt jyrjar*) are composed and used by other Turkic nations such as Karatchays, Turks, and Azeris. Simon Firkovič created 33 laments for different persons. Despite strict rules, in every lament the author shows the individuality of the deceased and his activity in the community. All laments written by Simon Firkovič were collected from manuscripts by his nephew Mykolas Firkovičius and distributed between the members of the community as a self-printed [savilaida] book in 1970.

As the vice-chairman of the Karaim Religious Board and the senior priest Simon Firkovič was a patron of various Karaim youth organisations stimulating young generations to learn their customs and history, to speak their native language, and to participate in the performances. He used to

participate in the activities of the Society of Karaim History and Literature Lovers, delivered lectures about Karaim culture and history, and maintained relations with Karaim communities in other European cities.

Simon Firkovič was also interested in linguistics, especially in Turkology, and his private library contained dictionaries of many Turkic languages. He was happy to greet his guests in Karaim, in particular those of other Turkic nations, and be understood as well as be able to understand those other languages. Moreover, he took great care to preserve the purity and clarity of the Karaim language. From this point of view, it is interesting to take a closer look at his speech at the meeting of the Society of Karaim History and Literature Lovers in 1935. He analysed the letter written in 1877 by the highest priest Boguslav Kaplanovski to the community. Simon Firkovič counted the loanwords used by the author, such as *duchovienstvo*, *moget'*, *dbatiet'mia*, *staracciet'mia*, *wynagrodiet'kiań*, *pracasy* stating that he used 27 loanwords because he wanted to be understood by the members of the community who used these words in their spoken language. Simon Firkovič understood that sometimes it is impossible to avoid loanwords because words for technical matters do not exist in Karaim. However, he didn't want to accept people using such Polish loanwords as *ozera*, *słowik*, *pluh*, *borona*, *pola*, *wyspa*, when there are native Karaim words with the same meaning: *giol'*, *sanduhač*, *saban*, *tyrnauč*, *tiuž*, *otrač*.

In the thirties, the Turkish Language Institute (Türk Dil Kurumu) was in the process of reforming the Turkish language. Likewise, Simon Firkovič put forward an idea of creating similar institution for the Karaim language with the goal of preserving its purity.

Because of all his work and activities on behalf of the Karaim community and their mother tongue mentioned above, the senior priest Simon Firkovič is considered to be the pride of the Karaims. He played a unique and irreplaceable role in the preservation of the Karaim community, its vitality, religious traditions, and the language in Lithuania, especially after World War II, when he was the singular highest official and legal Karaim priest and representative of the Karaims in Europe.

Conclusions

It is essentially impossible to overestimate the impact of Simon Firkovič to the culture and history of the Karaim people. Everything we say might be inadequately too little. One can only boldly agree with the famous Lithuanian

linguist Prof. Zigmas Zinkevičius (2025–2018) who had many personal associations with Simon Firkovič and called him the patriarch of the Karaims. He can be proudly placed next to the highest priest of the community Prof. Hadži Seraja Chan Šapšal (1873-1961). Both of them are the key persons thanks to whom the Karaim community and Karaim language is still alive in Lithuania.

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