

## HOMAGE TO THE LAST SPEAKERS OF HALICH KARAIM

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**Abstract.** The article pays homage to the last fluent speakers of Halich Karaim. Two of them lived in the traditional settlement, the Karaim Street in Halich. A further speaker moved to Trakai and stayed there for the rest of her life with her sister. Thanks to favorable circumstances all of them could communicate in their daily life in Halich Karaim and maintain their full competence in their community language. Common to them all was their concern about the future of the language and their strong determination to transmit their linguistic competence to others, and especially to the younger Karaim generation.

**Keywords:** Turkic languages, Halich Karaim, language maintenance, language death, language documentation

Every lost word means yet another lost world  
*Far unutulyan sez bard yanuz bir unutulyan dunya*  
(Peter Austin, Hans Rausing Endangered  
Languages Project, SOAS London)

### The aim of the paper

The last speakers of Halich Karaim could actively use their vernacular in daily communication with at least one competent speaker. This fortunate circumstance guaranteed a functional prerequisite for the long-term sustainability of their linguistic competence throughout their lifetime. Common to them all was their concern about the future of Karaim and their strong determination to transmit the language to others, especially to the younger generation.

As these speakers were relatively isolated, they did not have any direct contact with potential learners. They had to avail themselves of documentary means, i.e. documenting the language in one way or another. Their documentary efforts could be realized by working with a linguist, who carried out field research and produced audio and video recordings, linguistic analyses,



Sabina Zajączkowska (1912-2003) and  
Severina Špakovska



Janina Eszwowicz (1931-2003)

and vocabularies. If a native speaker had the necessary skills to produce his or her own teaching material, (s)he could self-compile vocabularies, grammars or phrasebooks. This will be illustrated by the examples of Janina Eszwowicz and Amelia Abrahamowicz, two of the last full-fledged speakers of Halich Karaim, who made use of the available possibilities to document their community language.

Halich is a town in Galicia, in western Ukraine, about 150 km south of L'viv (Lwów, Lemberg). The largest town in the vicinity is Ivano-Frankivs'k, formerly Stanislaw, in Karaim *Tasli sayar* 'Town [built] of Bricks'. At the turn of the last century, Halich belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then it belonged to Poland, and later it was annexed by the Soviet state. For more about the history and status of the Halich community in the 20th century, see, for example, articles in the volume Novočaško et al. (eds.) *Halych Karaims: History and Culture* (2002).

Radical political shifts shaped the Karaim community's communication habits and their multilingualism. In addition to the heritage language Karaim, Slavic languages such as Russian, Ukrainian and Polish were also used. The elder generation also learned German and the holy language Hebrew at the *midraš*. In Halich, the Hebrew script was used in religious, administrative and private contexts; see, for instance, Németh (2011), Sulimowicz (2016). For more about the spoken Halich Karaim language, see, for ex-



Ada Zarachowicz (1929–2015)



Amelia Abrahamowicz (1929–2015)

ample, Grzegorzewski (1903), Csató (1998, 2002), Csató (2023), Csató & Johanson (2016), and the references there.

The Halich Karaims once had an impressive prayer house, a *kenesa*, on the Karaim Street, but it was pulled down in the 1980s to make way for a new apartment building.

A handful of community members managed to hide the most important objects such as the Torah and the *yexal*, ‘Ark’, also called *mizbaḥ*, and furtively send them to the Crimean Karaim community (Eszwowicz 1999). Thereafter, they could only pray in their private homes. On rare occasions, a learned Karaim visitor could read the *ḫummas* ‘Hebrew Bible’, written in Hebrew characters, to them. For more about the Halich community see Kizilov’s comprehensive study with its abundance of references (2009).

## The last Karaim speakers in Halich

In the 1990s, when I used to visit the small Karaim community in Halich, there were still three Karaim women who were competent in Karaim: Janina Eszwowicz (1931–2003), Ada Zarachowicz (1929–2015), and Sabina Za-  
jączkowska (1912–2003). Their last names are written here in Polish orthography, as they themselves preferred (see Sulimowicz 2004).

The most fluent speaker, Janina Eszwowicz, described the situation in Halich at that time in the following way:

Text 1. Janina about the Karaim in Halich

*Yalüstä katesanes eđi kibiři dunya.*

‘In the old days there were many Karaims in Halich.’

*Eđi kibiři er kiřilär, katın kiřilär eđi kibiři, ulanlar, ıgıt elän.*

‘Many men, many women, children and young people.’

*A tserivdän son Yalüstiki karaylar keđlär Esavlarya, Trořka, Kırımıya.*

‘After the war, the Halich Karaims emigrated to Poland, to Trakai, and to Crimea.’

*I kaldı antsak on adam Yalüstä, ekki adam Stanislavda.*

‘And only ten people remained in Halich, and two in Stanislav [Ivano-Frankivs’k].’

*Karayısa aytır eđlär Taslı sayarda.*

‘The Karaims used to say *Taslı sayar* ‘Town [built] in Bricks’.

*[Yalüstä] olturadı on adam, bir er kiři i toyuz katın kiři.*

‘Ten people live in Halich, one man and nine women.’

*Far bir uže kartrak.*

‘They are now all old.’

*Biřdä bard kartrak kart katın kiři kaysılar uže seksen yıl artık bolur. Zayantskovska Sabina.*

‘We have an old woman here who is more than eighty years old. Sabina Zajanczkowska.’

*Anın eri eđi karındası professor Zayantskovski.*

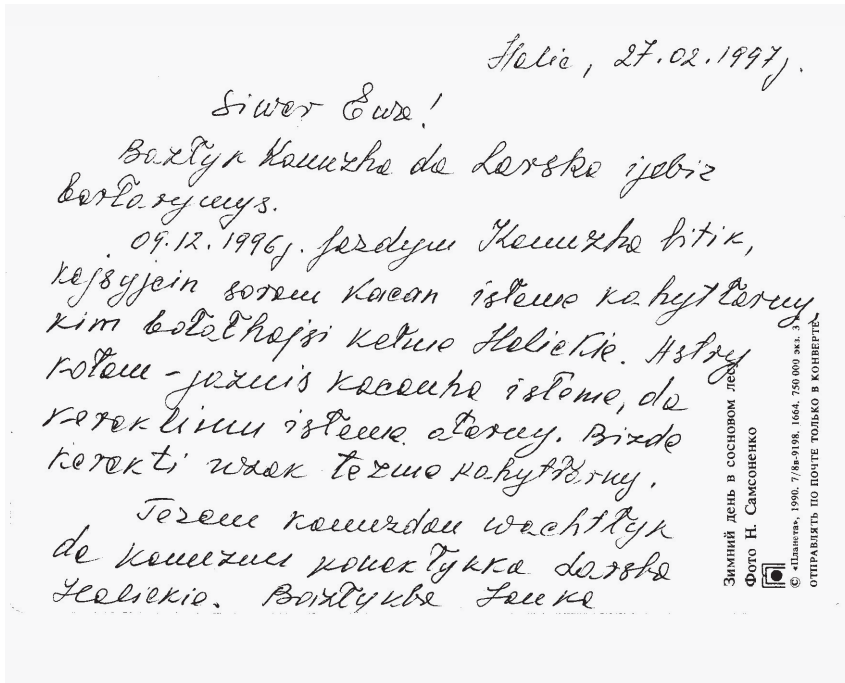
‘Her husband was Professor Zajanczkowski’s brother.’

Eva: *I niřdı fırlık Yalüstä?*

‘How is life in Halich?’

*Usondı yaz bicin Ukraina. Sondı usol eži Galüstä. Avur.*

‘The same as in the whole of Ukraine. It is also so in Halich. Difficult.’



The postcard from Janina Ešvovič to Éva Á. Csató

After Sabina Zajączkowska died in 2003, Janina could speak Karaim only with her friend Ada Zarachowicz, who lived nearby on the Karaim Street. The other Karaims living there and in Ivano-Frankivs’k, did not possess active language proficiency.

Janina Eszwowicz could write Karaim in the Polish-based Latin orthography, which was introduced at the beginning of the 20th century. See, for example, Janina’s letter, which she wrote to me in 1997.

#### Text 2. Halich Karaim letter in Polish-based Latin script (1997)

*Siwer Ewa!*

*Bazłyk Kanuzha da Larska ijebiz barlarymys. 09.12.1996 j. jazdym Kanuzha bitik, kajsycin soram kacan isleme kahytlarny, kim bolal’hajsi kelme Halickie. Astry kołam – jaznis kacanha isleme, da kereklimu isleme alarny. Bizde kerekti uzak tezme kahytlarny. Tezem kanuzdan wachtylyk de kanuznu konaklykka Larsba Halickie.*

*Bazlykba Janka*

*'Dear Eva! Many greetings to you and Lars from all of us. On 9. 12. 1996, I wrote a letter to you, in which I asked when I should prepare the papers so that you would be able to come to Halich. Please write which date I should prepare them for and if it is necessary to prepare them. Here one has to wait a long time to get the papers. I am waiting for news from you and for your and Lars' visit to Halich. Greetings, Janka.'*

Janina made great efforts to revitalize Karaim life in the town or at least to preserve some reminders of the old community. She began raising money for the renewal of the fence around the old Karaim cemetery in Halich. For more about this cemetery with its richly ornamented tombstones see Yurchenko et al. 2000. She was also involved in saving the Karaim houses on the Karaim Street. Read her story below.

Text 3. Halich Karaim text in Turcological transcription: Janina Eszwo-wicz. Recorded by Éva Á. Csató.

*Bileši, Paŋi Eva, bizde, karaylarda, bard yali astrī ullu kayyimiz.*

'You know, Eva, we, Karaims, have a great problem now.'

*Bu oramnī kleydler ka<sup>w</sup>satma.*

'They want to destroy this street [the Karaim Street in Halich].'

*Axtardlar kenesanī, kleydler axtarma bar karay yiwlerŋi i kondarma bunda ullu yi<sup>w</sup>ler.*

'They have demolished the *kenesa* and now they want to tear down all the Karaim houses and build new high apartment buildings here.'

*Nu, uspu vereŋl'iyi itsiŋ karay oramnīn men yazdīm Krīmya, anda bardī deputat Verχovniy Radada, Koχen, i ol yazdī biīk Verχovniy Radaya.*

'I had written to Crimea about this misfortune happening to the Karaim Street. There lives Kohen, a delegate to the *Verkhovna Rada* 'Supreme Council', who wrote a letter to the Supreme Council.'

*Yazdlar biīk Esavlardan karaylar, keldī andan karu<sup>w</sup> administraciyaya Ivano-Frankovskka.*

'The Polish Karaims wrote a letter. A reply came to the administration in Ivano-Frankivsk.'





Kenesa in Halič

*Biyge Volkoveckiyye, kim buyurmayaylar kondarma bunda ullu yi<sup>w</sup>ler i kim usol plannī kondarmakka işleyeydler..., kim usol plannī kondarmakka skorektovatkiyler.*

‘[They wrote] to Mr. Volkovetskiy that no high apartment buildings should be built here and that they should make construction plans [...], that they should revise the construction plans.’

*Neñdi berdler karı<sup>w</sup> Biyye Koşenye, men bilimim.*

‘I do not know what they answered to Mr. Kohen.’

*Ale bilem bu yalitskiy ayaraşlardan, kim bunda koyallar ullu yi<sup>w</sup>ler.*

‘But I have learned from the local leaders that they intended to build high apartment buildings here.’

*Karaylar itsin uspu astrī çor.*

‘This is a disaster for the Karaims.’

*Usunun itsijn kim sondayī sayıntsi... sondayī sayıntsi karaylar itsin tasbolur.*

‘Because the last reminder ... the last reminder of the Karaims will be wiped out.’

*Kenesanı kavsatlar, axtardlar, axtarıllar yanuz yiwlerjı.*

‘They tore down, demolished the kenesa, and will even demolish the houses.’

*Nemede kalmast.*

‘Nothing will remain.’

*Men aytam alarya, bu yalitskiy biylerye ne kendedler Galicbe, kim bunda kibişi vekler úirıldler karaylar kim uspu bolalmıyd bolma.*

‘I tell the leader in Halich, who governs the town, that Karaims have lived here for many centuries and that this cannot happen.’

*A alar aytadlar kim Kiyiwde aylar kim uspu bar yiwler kondaryan dıvil yırak dzamanda.*

‘But they answered that they learn from Kiev that these houses were built not a long time ago.’

*Nu, baslayında oramnın bardı yiw ekiıtsı yiw to ol kondaryan astrı yırak dzamanda.*

‘Well, at the beginning of the street, there is a house, the second house, it was built a long time ago.’

*Men kerdim yazıs işçin Karaimskaya Žizn fotografiya karaimskiy ulitsanın i usol ikki yiw bard.*

‘I have seen in the journal *Karaimskaya Žizn* ‘Karaim Life’ a photo of the Karaim Street which shows this second house.’

*Usol bir... usol ekiıtsı yiw bard yazyan fotografiya işsin.*

‘That house appears on this photo.’

*Men isanam kim uspu bar yiwler — katsanes yomaklaredler meyim anam — kim uspu bar yiwler turdlar yanuz do usunu netsik kiwdi karay oramı.*

‘I think that all these houses ... my mother used to say that all those houses stood there before the Karaim Street burned down.’

*A karay oramı kiwdi min toıuz yiz onitsıtsı yıldı.*

‘The Karaim Street burned down in 1913.’

*Bunda edı ullu serefa i kibişi karay yiwler kiwdler ale usol ezi orunda, usol ezi yiwler kondardlar karaylar ekiıtsı for.*





Karaims and their families living in the Karaim Street with the author of this article.

‘It was a great fire and many Karaim houses burned down, but at the same place, the Karaims built up the same houses again.’

*Alay kim barıba ki<sup>w</sup>medler usol yi<sup>w</sup>ler, kaydas ki<sup>w</sup>đi iđtsi yiw<sup>n</sup>in, kaydas kaysis yi<sup>w</sup> bulay ino teredzeler ki<sup>w</sup>dler a kaldıyi kaldı.*

‘It was so that the houses did not burn down completely. In some places the roofs burned down, in some other houses only the windows, but the rest survived.’

*Biđin oram kim ki<sup>w</sup>ğey i nemedede kalmayay to yođtu.*

‘It is not true that the whole street burned down and nothing remained.’

*Uspu yi<sup>w</sup>ler arasın bard astrı kart yi<sup>w</sup>ler, karay yi<sup>w</sup>ler.*

‘There are very old houses among these houses, Karaim houses.’

*Alay kim bolayd yaksı kim uspunu netsikes kutkarma ğor kollardan.*

‘It would be desirable to save them somehow from evil hands.’

*Kerek kim kimes, kimde bardı ađdı ğalı kim Verğovniy Radada uspu seđni iđirıyey.*

‘Somebody is needed who has the power to bring up this issue in *Verkhovna Rada* ‘Supreme Council.’

*A ežge ĭirl’i ne?*

‘And what otherwise?’

*Kim bolalat bolusma? Ino Verhovniy Rada.*

‘Who can help? Only *Verkhovna Rada* ‘Supreme Council’.’

This tiny community was strong enough to support the documentation and research on the Halich Karaim community. In 2002, Janina Eszwowicz organized an international conference *Караїми Галича: Історія та культура*. She contributed a paper to the proceedings *Halych Karaims: History and Culture* published in the same year (Eszwovicz 2002). Janina supplied rich information about the community, which could not have been accessed without her help. She assisted both the Polish Karaims and researchers such as Mikhail Kizilov (2009) and myself. She organized and prepared the establishment of a Karaim museum *Muzey Karaims’koyi Istorii Ta Kul’tury*, which was opened in 2003 with the assistance of Ivan Yurchenko. For more detail about the museum, see Kizilov (2009: 320).

Today the voice of the Karaims cannot be heard any more in Halich. The last speakers, Janina Eszwowicz and her friend Ada Zarachowicz, have passed away. In other parts of the world, there are still some Halich Karaims who can remember at least some words in the language.

## The Last Halich Karaim Speakers in Trakai

A highly respected Halich Karaim, Amelia Abrahamowicz (1929–2015), lived in Trakai together with her sister Sabina. The two sisters spoke Halich Karaim with each other. As far as I know, this was the last home in which Halich Karaim was spoken in daily life. When Sabina died, Amelia remained alone and did not have anyone to talk to in Karaim. The few Karaims in Trakai who could still use their vernacular spoke a different variety of Karaim. Because of these linguistic differences, Amelia communicated with them in another common language, either in Polish, Russian, or Lithuanian. For more about her see Abrahamowicz-Pilecka (2015).

In the last years of her life, Amelia Abrahamowicz wrote an over a hundred pages long and still unpublished phrasebook with the title *Разговорник*

галичского диалекта караимского языка ‘The Halich Dialect of the Karaim Language’. The Halich Karaim expressions are written in Cyrillic, Hebrew and Polish-based Latin scripts with Ukrainian, Russian, English, and Polish translations. For example:

Halich Karaim: *Мэн клэйм иврэнмэ сэзлэмэ, йазма, ухума карайца.*

*Men klejm iwrenme sezleme, jazma, uchuma karajca.*

מֶן כְּלַיִם אִינְרֵנְמֵ אֶזְלֵמֵ. יֶזְמָא. וּחֻמָּא קַרַיְצָא

Translations:

Ukrainian: ‘Я хочу научиться говорить, писать, читать по-караимски.’

Russian: ‘Я хочу научиться говорить, писати, читати по-караїмськи.’

English: ‘I want to learn how to speak, write, read in the Karaim language.’

Polish: ‘Chcę nauczyć się mówić, pisać, czytać w języku karaimskim.’

Sabina’s son and her granddaughter Nataliya Abramovič live in Russia, far away from Trakai. As they both know Halich Karaim they could help Amelia to compile this phrasebook. Nataliya has an excellent competence in the language and has co-authored a Halich Karaim grammar and dictionary. This represents a highly respectable achievement. Her books were published by the International Institute of Crimean Karaims in 2008 (Mireev & Abramovič 2008).

## Conclusion and acknowledgement

We all owe great thanks to the last speakers of Halich Karaim who made great efforts to preserve their language for the future. They loved their heritage and let Alexander Mardkowicz’s words (1930) define the meaning of their old days:

*Tut ez dijinyi ta šiv ez šezinyi. Tānri sana bolusur!*

‘Hold to your own religion and love your own language. God will help you!’

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