

# Towns as Areas of Ethnic Communication and Competition

## *The Case of Karaites in Trakai/Troki and Vilnius/Wilno/Vilna in the Seventeenth to Twentieth Centuries*


In one of the previous chapters, Grzegorz Myśliwski showed how various ethnicities coexisted within the boundaries of the city of Kraków. He focused on strategies of cooperation and rivalry between ethnic groups which tried to keep or strengthen their ethnic identities without emphasizing the close connection with the space in which they lived. But territory is not only a space with certain boundaries. It may also be an area inhabited by a particular ethnic group different than the state's dominant society, which sees this particular territory (region, town, etc.) as their own space, where they experience, express, and embed their unique identity. The group identifies themselves with this place and sees it as their homeland, no matter its actual political belonging. The notion of belonging to a certain territory and vice versa is a core element of modern national identity of most ethnic groups and nations. Therefore in this chapter I will examine the use of territorial arguments in the ideological struggle between Jewish groups, which led to the formation of modern nationalism in one of them — the Polish Lithuanian Karaites. I will use the concept of territorialization, as elaborated by Giorgio Shani,<sup>1</sup> and examine how it works among non-dominant groups in the Christian society of eastern Europe. I will argue that the dominant society has an important role in the territorialization of certain areas by non-dominant groups, even though this territorialization is symbolic and ideologized.

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<sup>1</sup> Shani, 'The Territorialization of Identity'.

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## Introduction

The Jews are usually seen in the historiography as an easily migrating group, and their relationship with a certain territory, except that of the Holy Land, is seldom discussed, especially in ideological contexts. There are studies about their coexistence in Christian societies, their legal and social status,<sup>2</sup> relations with noblemen and certain states or rulers,<sup>3</sup> but not much is known about their ideological and cultural relations with the territory in which they lived. In this context, the works of Bernard Weinryb are of high importance, where the author analysed the arrival legends that were common in European Jewish communities.<sup>4</sup> I will focus on the case of the Karaites and their relations with the particular towns that belonged to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (later, the north-western region of the Russian Empire, Poland, and again Lithuania), that of Vilnius/Wilno/Vilna<sup>5</sup> and Trakai/Troki, their role in the formation of a modern national Karaite identity, its connection with Jewish self-perceptions, and the role of Polish society in this process. The thesis of the chapter is closely connected with the main subject of the volume: How did an ethnic minority maintain and strengthen its identity living within the network of social relations with the politically and demographically dominant ethnicities? How did the Karaites manage to define and secure 'their' place on Earth — not only metaphorically — and to save themselves from the disastrous consequences of their long-lasting inconsistency with the interests of the dominant ethnicities in their territory?

## Trakai/Troki in the National Narrative of Lithuanian Karaites

The discussion of the settlement of Trakai/Troki focuses on two main groups: the dominant Christian society and the Jewish community, which was divided into two parts — the Rabbinic Jews, who were a considerably larger part of the community, and the Karaite Jews, who, despite their small number, were very active in communicating with both Rabbinic Jews and the Christians. Both Jewish communities tried to solve mutual disagreements by involving the government and local courts to solve matters. In this communicative scheme, Christian society, as the dominant one with power concentrated in their hands, were the intermediaries between both Jewish communities.

The first and the most long-lasting conflict between the two was for the right to reside in the small town of Trakai/Troki, about twenty kilometres away from the capital Vilna. Trakai/Troki is the first known settlement of Karaites in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL). The discussion of the circumstances of their arrival is

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2 Verbieckienė, *Žydai Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės visuomenėje*.

3 Rosman, *The Lords' Jews*.

4 Weinryb, 'The Beginnings of East'.

5 In this paper I will use the name Vilna through the whole paper to stress its importance in the Jewish environment, to which the Karaite community also belonged.

still ongoing in the historiography, but it is clear that soon after the establishment of the community the town became the administrative and religious centre of the Karaites. Despite the facts that the Karaites were constantly migrating and forming small temporal communities mainly in the northern part of the country and that the economic situation in Trakai/Troki was often very poor, especially after 1665 when it was devastated by the war, this town was constantly inhabited by the Karaites and it never lost its importance as the administrative centre of all the Karaites of the duchy (at least officially).<sup>6</sup>

As early as 1646 the Trakai/Troki Karaite community gained a privilege from the Polish king Wladislaw IV Waza which prohibited Rabbinitic Jews from settling in the town (reconfirmed several times in the nineteenth century).<sup>7</sup> At first it was only a means of regulating economic relations between the two groups, but later in the nineteenth century it became an ideological tool that helped the Karaites to form their own ethno-national identity.

From being a purely economic issue in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was later transformed into an ideological fight for a territory, which did not belong to these communities but through virtual territorialization became an imagined homeland for the Lithuanian Karaites. I will use the term 'territorialization', which is usually used to describe an act of organizing as a territory, like it was used by Giorgio Shani in his paper on the territorialization of Sikh identity.<sup>8</sup> Even though the Karaites could not have any territorial claims physically, they needed to have them at least symbolically. This was necessary for their ethnic national identity, which was formed by the adaptation of emerging national sentiments among ethnic groups in the Russian Empire. In the fourth decade of the nineteenth century, the Crimean Karaites began to search for their history under pressure from the Russian authorities. In the north-western part of the empire this process began a decade later but had the same reasoning — the Trakai/Troki Karaites had made a claim to have a better social and economic status than that of the Rabbinitic Jews. This process of separation, motivated by the search for better financial prospects and prestige in the dominant society, led to a consistent separation from Jewishness — from the people of Erets Israel. If Israel was not the homeland the Karaites wanted to associate themselves with, they needed a territory to replace it. Growing secularization in the community at the end of the nineteenth century did not require them to relate it to their religious tradition. Rather on the contrary, the notion of a separate ethnicity required other qualities from that of the territory: as in the case of other forming nationalisms in eastern Europe (Lithuanian, Polish), the priority was given for the

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6 The preconditions for such an image of the city were formed in 1441 when Karaites of Trakai/Troki were granted the Magdeburg law, which gave the Karaite settlement an exceptional status in the GDL.

7 *Lietuvos magdeburginių miestų privilegijos ir aktai*.

8 'Central to this nationalist narrative is the territorialisation of Sikh socio-political identity in the homeland of the Punjab. As early as 1946, the SGPC committed itself to the "goal of a Sikh state" and therefore, the territorialisation of the Sikh qaum. The Sikh people needed a state of their own to "preserve the main Sikh shrines, Sikh social practices, Sikh self-respect and pride, Sikh sovereignty and the future prosperity of the Sikh people": Shani, "The Territorialization of Identity', p. 13.

antiquity of the community, its long and glorious history. On the other hand, it was also characteristic of the early Jewish historiography in the region. The case of Trakai/Troki shows how the claims of a historical homeland were embodied in the Polish-Lithuanian Karaite community.

It was not only the privilege of 1646 issued by Wladislaw IV Waza which prohibited Rabbinitic Jews from settling in the town of Trakai/Troki. The Lithuanian Vaad (Jewish self-governing institution) also issued regulations, securing the Karaite right to dwell in the town and keeping the Rabbinites away from it. At the time the prohibition was issued, Trakai/Troki was a small, economically undeveloped place, and the regulation of the Jewish population prevented them from harsh competition in carrying out business. The Karaites were successful in ensuring that the prohibition against Rabbinites living in Trakai/Troki lasted for nearly three hundred years, until the nineteenth century. The resolution of the Governing Senate, issued in 1829, shows that the Karaites managed to 'prove their exceptional right to settle in Trakai/Troki and to carry out business, which is not allowed for Rabbinites.'<sup>9</sup> It was argued that taking into account the fact that the privileges, granted by the Polish kings starting from 1646 (when the prohibition against the Rabbinites was first issued) up until the privilege of 1776, had always existed and were never cancelled, their existence would be approved.<sup>10</sup> However, the Jewish legal and social situation in the nineteenth century was very different than that of the past. The so-called Jewish Statute, issued in 1804, prohibited Jews from living in villages. Consequently they began to migrate to nearby towns, and Trakai/Troki, which previously had not been a very attractive place for Rabbinites to settle, became their point of destination; taking into account the existence of the Pale of Settlement and the growing Jewish population, there was not much they could choose from.<sup>11</sup> The contradiction between the prohibition against Rabbinites settling in Trakai/Troki, issued by the Governing Senate in the third decade of the nineteenth century, and the provisions of the statute, encouraging Jews to move to the towns, had to be resolved by the Vilnius Supreme Court, which had to announce its decision to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Department of Spiritual Affairs of Believers of Other Faiths.<sup>12</sup> No matter its decision, the Governing Senate confirmed this prohibition again in 1835, probably because of the release of a new Jewish statute in the same year.<sup>13</sup> The decision stated that Rabbinitic Jews had to abandon the town of Trakai/Troki in one year, those who had owned some property in five years, and those who have contracts after the end of them.<sup>14</sup> There were fewer than two hundred

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- 9 A right granted to Karaites to live and trade in Trakai/Troki, *Sbornik starinnych gramot*, p. 251 (6 September 1829).
- 10 *Sbornik starinnych gramot*, p. 252.
- 11 The Pale of Settlement was established by the law of the Russian Empire and functioned between 1791 and 1917 in the western territory of the state, where permanent residency by Jews was allowed. It was forbidden for Jews to live in the empire outside this territory.
- 12 *Sbornik starinnych gramot*, p. 252.
- 13 The Jewish legal status was confirmed on 13 April 1835, *Sbornik starinnych gramot*, p. 354.
- 14 *Sbornik starinnych gramot*, pp. 354–55.

Rabbinite Jews living in Trakai/Troki at that time (and around six hundred Karaites).<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, such a small case was designated to the Governing Senate, one of the highest administrative and legislative bodies in the empire. It is obvious that for both the Karaites and the government the case was not just about making the Rabbinites leave Trakai/Troki. For the Karaite community, it was a chance to demonstrate their power and prestige, while for the government it was one of many ways of solving the Jewish question: they saw the Karaites as better Jews, who did not have features attributed to the Rabbinites and recognized as evil by the dominant society, the government, and the Orthodox Church: adherence to Talmud or distinct dressing. The Karaites didn't speak Yiddish in everyday life, which was called *jargon*, and what was most important, they were not associated with deicide like the Rabbinite Jews. By securing a privileged position for the Karaites, the government demonstrated to the Rabbinites what they could expect by 'showing their willingness to change themselves.' However, the measures set up by the Governing Senate probably did not work, because after one year it was repeated once again and approved by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the emperor.<sup>16</sup>

It seems that the competition for dominance in the town had to be over in the middle of the nineteenth century. Due to the efforts of Christian burghers and the Vilna civil gubernator Pochvistjev, who were seeking the return of the Rabbinites, the question of permitting them to live in the town of Trakai/Troki was re-examined once again.<sup>17</sup> The leaders of the Karaite community continued to defend their position seeking to, as they declared, protect themselves from persecution for their religion (!) and misfortunes that appeared together with the Rabbinites.<sup>18</sup> This time, the decision was favourable for the Rabbinites: in 1862 they were allowed to live in Trakai/Troki.<sup>19</sup> At the very end of the nineteenth century, there were 377 Karaites and 1112 Rabbinites living in Trakai/Troki.

It seems that this last decision on the right to dwell in Trakai/Troki had settled the matter and finished the discussion between those two communities. However, the exceptional right for the Karaites to live in Trakai/Troki (though abolished in 1862) remained important for the Karaites in an ideological context, especially when the Karaites were trying to rethink their history at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the national historical narrative of the Karaites, Trakai/Troki became an important argument which proved their long historical past; it also became a territory of their own, which they managed to take over, at least symbolically, and incorporate in their historical narrative as the local homeland of the Karaites. The importance of Trakai/Troki and the notion of belonging to this place for centuries were demonstrated in an article by an unknown author, published in 1911 in the Karaite journal *Karaite Life* (Rus. *Karaimskaya zhizn*). It was printed as a reaction to an article in the Jewish

15 Author unknown, 'Iz istorii Trokskich karaimov', p. 29.

16 Repeated permission for Jews to live in Trakai/Troki, *Sbornik starinnych gramot*, p. 394 (1836).

17 Vilnius, Lietuvos valstybės istorijos archyvas (hereafter, LVIA), F. 378 BS, ap. 1847, b. 436, l. 137–41.

18 LVIA, F. 378 BS, ap. 1847, b. 436, l. 148–56.

19 LVIA, F. 378 BS, ap. 1847, b. 436, l. 216.

journal *Jewish Antiquity* (Rus. *Evereiskaya starina*), where a (Jewish) author discussed the development of the right of Rabbinites to settle in Trakai/Troki.<sup>20</sup> The Karaite author claimed to reconstruct the 'real' or correct picture of Karaite relations with the Rabbinite regarding this question. I will not go into an in-depth analysis of the content of this article, which lists the privileges of the Karaites to live in Trakai/Troki and prohibitions against the Rabbinites to do so, ending up with the aforementioned decision of 1862, which was conducive to Rabbinite Jews. Most importantly in this article, the Karaite author tries to stress the antiquity of the Karaite community in Trakai/Troki and the longevity of the tradition forbidding the Rabbinites from dwelling there, which had been recently discontinued. The fact that such a text appeared in the Karaite press fifty years after the judgement shows that the symbolic struggle with the Rabbinites for an ideological takeover of the place was still going on, even without an active participation of the Rabbinites in it.

Together with the efforts to get legislative confirmation of their monopolist right to live in Trakai/Troki, the Karaites used other means to demonstrate that the town belonged to them. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the glorification of Trakai/Troki as a cradle of the Polish-Lithuanian Karaites flourished with the appearance of secular Karaite poetry. Szymon Kobecki (1865–1933), Szymon Firkowicz (1897–1982), Michał Tynfowicz (1912–1974), and some other less-known amateurs devoted their lines to depict the beauty of their homeland, which, however, was limited to the town of Trakai/Troki and its surroundings. This proves only that the Karaites did associate the beginning of their history with this town, and it was both their personal homeland and the homeland of their nation, as they had called themselves at that time.

The question may arise, why did the Lithuanian Karaites not associate themselves with the territory of Crimea, from which they claimed to be brought to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and settled in Trakai/Troki? Indeed, with the activities of Seraja Szapszał (1873–1961) — the communal and spiritual leader of the Polish Karaites in the interwar period — especially from the fourth decade of the twentieth century, Crimea started to be presented as a cradle of the eastern European Karaites, who claimed to be the descendants of the Chazzars. S. Szapszał managed to combine those two places into one narrative, providing a concept of two homelands — the Crimea was associated with the beginning of all east European Karaites, whereas Trakai/Troki remained a local cradle of Polish Karaites. Elaboration of this narrative weakened the importance of Trakai/Troki, and local Karaite authors even tried to combine those two places in their poems.<sup>21</sup>

Nonetheless, although the Karaites did not manage to preserve their exceptional right to dwell in Trakai/Troki, they gained, at least symbolically, a territory, which began to be associated exclusively with their community. They could create a virtual homeland, which they lost by separating themselves from the people of Israel. The land of Palestine, which for centuries was their lost homeland, became less and less home-like as long as the Karaites were trying to dissociate themselves from all other

20 Author unknown, 'Iz istorii Trokskich karaimov', p. 24.

21 Troskovaitė, 'Lenkijos ir Lietuvos karaimų savivokos formavimas', pp. 167–91.

Jews. Alongside this, the prohibition against Jews settling in Trakai/Troki had another no less important meaning: it meant the higher status and the better image of the Karaites in the eyes of the dominant society in comparison with those of the Rabbinite Jews. We can presume that the growing prestige of Trakai/Troki Karaites, even if it comes to a small number of people in a tiny little place like Trakai/Troki, could strengthen their sense of separateness from Jewishness and a notion of their separate ethnic identity.

Through the mediation of a particular town, the Karaite community managed to draw identity boundaries between them and the 'Others' — the Rabbinite Jews. The imperial government (including local and state authorities) by repeatedly issuing this prohibition let the Karaites exploit Trakai/Troki as a virtual homeland for their community and strengthened the formation of their national identity. It can be argued that it was also because of the successful symbolic occupation of Trakai/Troki that the Karaites managed to create a form of nationalism. This was based on the same elements as that of the regional nationalisms of the Poles and Lithuanians — the common origin and language, and the territory, which in the case of the Polish-Lithuanian Karaites was the small town of Trakai/Troki, where they claimed to have lived for centuries and presented themselves as the first autochthonous inhabitants.

### **The Role of the State in Territorializing Vilna and the Formation of it as the Centre of the Modern Karaite Community**

The case of Vilna was completely different from that of Trakai/Troki. Vilna started its history as an increasingly attractive cultural and economic centre, as the letters of the Lithuanian Grand Duke Gediminas (1275–1342), which were sent from Vilna in the fourteenth century, demonstrate; he invited all peoples who were involved in crafts and trades to come and dwell in the city. It became a focal point for the migration of different ethnic and confessional groups and from the very beginning was everybody's city — that is, every ethnic or religious group, be it Poles, Jews, Old Believers, or other, had an image of their own Vilna. It may seem that for the Karaites, who established themselves in the neighbourhood of Vilna at the beginning of the fifteenth century, it could have been a potentially perfect area for the development of their economic activities and cultural life, especially in the seventeenth century and later, when Trakai/Troki ceased to be an attractive place for the Karaites to live and communal migration to other cities of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania began. But contrary to what might be expected, they chose to migrate northward to the private towns of the magnates Radziwiłłs (Lit. Radvilos) — Birże (1602/1603) and Nowemiasto (1658), and the surrounding areas of Poswol and Poniewież (1676). Vilna did not become a desirable place for Karaite migration until the beginning of the twentieth century even though it was comparatively close to their maternal place of residence (Trakai/Troki), which was also a capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It seems that the community appeared in Vilna in the nineteenth century, but it was rather small — in 1869 there were fifty-seven Karaites in the city. However,

in the early twentieth century the community grew considerably to approximately a hundred Karaite families.<sup>22</sup>

Modernity brought Karaites with a different attitude to the former capital city of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. After 1919 Vilna became a part of Poland, and this political shift coincided with the growing Karaite interest in it. The emergence of Vilna as the centre of the secular ethnic Karaite community began in the second decade of the twentieth century, with the appearance of communal printing and other cultural activities there. At that time, the Karaites in Vilna already had an established community — they maintained a prayer house and a communal building in Zwierzyniec (Liet. Žvėrynas),<sup>23</sup> and were building a synagogue (*kenesa*) in the area. For that purpose, donations were gathered from the Karaites of Vilna and other places. In 1914 the building was erected, but the interior was not finished until 1923.<sup>24</sup> The community was growing and in the interwar period consisted of about 120–250 persons.<sup>25</sup> Already in the 1920s the city became the most significant Karaite community in Poland — the concentration of educated and active intellectuals, who often occupied themselves in trade, manufacturing, engineering, law, etc.,<sup>26</sup> and were ready to use part of their income for communal purposes, brought the Vilna community to the leading position among Polish Karaites, especially in relation to Poland's governing institutions.

Undoubtedly, the role of the governing institutions, both local and state, played a significant role in the territorialization of Vilna by the local Karaite community. The Polish government understood that the ethnic diversity of the state's borderlands was an obstacle to its cultural and mental inclusion into the state and the promotion of the loyalty of its inhabitants to the Polish government. Here the interests of certain minorities and the government met — such groups as the Karaites and Muslim Tatars, who never dominated in this city, gained support, both financial and legal, from the government, who encouraged them to establish their cultural centre in Vilna and helped in this way to territorialize it.

However, the Polish Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education (Pol. Ministerstwo Wyznań Religijnych i Oświecenia Publicznego), responsible for the state's policy towards religious minorities, did not realize at first what benefit such a small group like the Karaites might bring to the state. In a reply to an unknown curator on 5 February 1925, the ministry comments on the letter sent by the Halicz Karaite leader Jan Grzegorzewski, asking for financial support to the community, that

22 Cohen-Mushlin and others, eds, *Synagogues in Lithuania*, p. 242.

23 Cohen-Mushlin and others, eds, *Synagogues in Lithuania*, p. 242; *Karaimskoje slovo*, the reverse of the title page.

24 *Karaimskoje slovo*, p. 23.

25 Different numbers are indicated in the sources and historiography — a report on a Karaite communal meeting gives the number of 120–30 Karaites living in Vilna in 1927 (see Vilnius, Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas (hereafter, LCVA), F. 51, ap. 4, b. 79, l. 14), while the publication *Karaimi Wileńscy w okresie międzywojennym*, p. 20, gives a number of 250.

26 For example, in the meeting of the Vilna Karaite community on 13 March 1927, the community's board (*zarząd*) was elected. It included the president, lawyer Izaak Zajączkowski, the vice-president, Lieutenant-colonel Noe Robaczewski, citizen Jozef Lopatto, and railway official Emanuel Aronowicz. Letter to Vilna *wojewoda*, LCVA, F. 51, ap. 4, b. 79, l. 70.



there is no real reason [to allocate funds] because the Karaite nation is very small and does not demonstrate any signs of Polish patriotism, which could justify exceptional exclusiveness [of them].<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had a different opinion and more far-sighted insight, saying that

a favourable treatment of the needs of the Karaites can bring great benefits to the Polish state. Although they are small in number, Karaites may be small but real executors of loyal deeds on the benefit to the state in the territory of Kresy.<sup>28</sup>

In the long run, this position, expressed by the ministry, would gain more and more importance in the mutual relations between the Karaites and the Polish state. The positive attitude to the Karaites, demonstrated by state institutions, mainly meant support to the Vilna community, which was recognized as representative of all Polish Karaites. It was mainly due to the fact that it was the only institutionalized Karaite community in Poland in early 1920,<sup>29</sup> when the mutual communication began. The fact that the Karaites were associated with Vilna by the Polish authorities is illustrated by the plans of the Ministry of Religious Affairs to establish a Department of Oriental Languages, History, and Culture at the Stefan Batory University in Vilna, arguing that the Polish Oriental communities — Karaites and Tatars — were concentrated there.<sup>30</sup> Needless to say, such a policy had a positive impact on the territorialization of Vilna by the local Karaite community.

As in the case of Troki, the state institutions played an important role in the ability of a particular minority group to appropriate a certain territory and begin to be associated with it. The Vilna Karaites gained the support of both local and state authorities in territorializing the city in exchange for loyalty, demonstrated by this community, to the Polish state. Even the last chapter of the law on the Karaite legal position in the state states that this law must be adopted taking into account, among other reasons, the loyalty demonstrated by the Karaites to the Polish state.<sup>31</sup>

## The Territorialization of Vilnius: A New Ideological Centre of Modern Karaites and their National Ideology

If in the aforementioned case of Trakai/Troki, the ideological and cultural fight took place among Karaites and Rabbinite Jews, even if without the intensive participation of the latter, Vilna turned into a centre of collision within the Karaite community between

27 A letter to a curator, 5 February 1925, Warsaw, Archiwum Akt Nowych, Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education (hereafter, ANN, MSRIOP), syg. 1461, l. 87.

28 ANN, MSRIOP, syg. 1461, l. 87. *Kresy* is the Polish term describing the eastern borderlands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and then interwar Poland.

29 ANN, MSRIOP, syg. 1461, l. 255–56.

30 The minutes of the general Karaite meeting, 11 June 1927, LCVA, F. 51, ap. 4, b. 79, l. 30<sup>v</sup>.

31 Law of Polish Karaite Legal status, ANN, MSRIOP, syg. 1463, l. 449.

religious orthodoxy on the one hand, presented by one of the Vilna Karaite leaders, Elias Jutkiewicz, and the advocates of modern ethnic Karaite identity, dissociated with the tradition of Judaism, led by macenate Izaak Zajączkowski, on the other.<sup>32</sup>

Sometimes the conflict turned into harsh discussions between the representatives of these ideological groups, such as in the elections of Karaite delegates to the general assembly of Polish Karaites, which had to elect the chief Karaite *hacham* in 1927. The voting for the assembly was rather a formality as the elected delegates of a particular community had to present the collective opinion of the group in question, while the real election battle took place in local Karaite settlements. The discussions around the elections of *hacham*, the role and tasks of this institution, the possible candidates, and the appointment of the electors represented the collision of these two ideologies within Karaite communities, especially that of Vilna. The success of any of these groups could have led to the territorialization of Vilna and the ideological dominance over other Karaite settlements.

The vivid example of the ideological fight for domination in Vilna was reflected by a clerk (reporter) of Vilna, Voivode R. Wulc.<sup>33</sup> In his report, Wulc gave a short summary of the meeting, concentrating on the general atmosphere and dissenting opinions among Karaites, concerning the institution of *hacham*, its responsibilities, possible candidates, and qualifications needed. It must be noted that the institution of *hacham* was quite new, established in the Russian Empire in 1837 as the highest official within the Tauria Karaite Spiritual Board.<sup>34</sup> The Karaites of Lutsk, Vilna, Trakai/Troki, and other settlements within the territory of the empire were subordinated to this institution and its leader. However, in 1869 a similar institution was established in Trakai/Troki,<sup>35</sup> which, though, had been active before that date, and the Karaites from the north-western region were subjected to it. However, I do not possess data about the election of the Trakai/Troki *hacham* in the period under discussion. It may have happened that the Trakai/Troki *hazzan* was occupying this position, and in this case the election of *hacham* in 1927 was a new experience for the Karaite communities under consideration. Getting back to the Wulc report, being an outsider among the Karaites, he had brought several important insights, with which he characterized both groups. Firstly, he referred to two clearly identifiable groups.<sup>36</sup> The first, as was already mentioned, guided by I. Zajączkowski, consisted mainly of young Karaites, described by the author as linked to the state ('jest bardziej [ ... ] państwową'), meaning probably loyalty to the state and integrational notions, and considering position of the *hacham* as a political figure and secular communal leader. I. Zajączkowski, as the leader of this group and the candidate in the election of the delegate from the Vilna community to the general assembly of Polish Karaites, had openly declared in this meeting that he would vote for S. Szapszał. The second group identified by Wulc consisted of elder,

32 Report (date not indicated), LCVA, F. 51, ap. 4, b. 79, l. 41; also LCVA, F. 53, ap. 23, b. 726, l. 55.

33 LCVA, F. 51, ap. 4, b. 79, l. 41. Voivode is the Polish government representative responsible for government of a voivodship, the basic territorial unit of the interwar state.

34 The legal status of Tauria Karaite clergymen, *Sbornik starinnych gramot*, p. 401 (3 March 1837).

35 Bairašauskaitė, 'Apibrėžimo ir tapatumo kolizija', p. 31.

36 In the source: 'podział obecnych na dwie grupy dał się odrazu zauważyć', LCVA, F. 51, ap. 4, b. 79, l. 41.

religious, and orthodox Karaites, led by Elias Jutkiewicz and Vilna *hacham* (*sic!*) Feliks Małecki.<sup>37</sup> This group would have preferred to have the *hacham* as a religious leader and authority within the community, which was understood, as Wulc had noted, as a national minority ('mniejszość narodowa'), or a Karaite minority ('mniejszość karaimska').<sup>38</sup> Though it is not clear what was the meaning of these perceptions, it may present a cautious position of these Karaites, aiming to preserve clear cultural and, more important, religious boundaries as a minority, separating them from the rest of Polish society. Attributing the term *hacham* to Feliks Małecki shows the use of this term according to the tradition of Judaism, where the term describes a wise and highly educated person, usually in religious matters, a sage.<sup>39</sup> Naturally, it did not correspond to the understanding of this position among the adherents of the first group, led by I. Zajączkowski.

The meeting described brought conflict between these two groups: as was mentioned, I. Zajączkowski openly supported Szapszał's candidacy to the position of Polish Karaite *hacham*, whereas E. Jutkiewicz spoke up for a certain compromise and suggested having Szapszał as a secular communal leader and establishing a religious position for F. Małecki.<sup>40</sup> Wulc sees this as a political manoeuvre, seeking to attract part of the votes of I. Zajączkowski's supporters. However, this initiative failed after I. Zajączkowski was elected as a representative of the Vilna community. Responding to this, F. Małecki refused to work together with the future *hacham*, who was not a religious leader and canon connoisseur; two members of the revision committee, responsible for legitimate elections, resigned from their positions supporting F. Małecki and E. Jutkiewicz.<sup>41</sup>

In October 1927 in the general meeting of the Trakai/Troki Karaite community, a delegate to a general assembly of Polish Karaites was elected as well. The elected Emil Kobecki, a director of the Supreme Chamber of State Control (Pol. Naczelna Izba Kontroli Państwa) and his substitute Józef Zajączkowski, director of a bank, were obliged to represent the local community's vote in the election of the Karaite *hacham*. The president of the Vilna Karaite community, I. Zajączkowski, publicly announced that E. Kobecki would give his vote for the candidature of S. Szapszał to the position of Polish Karaite *hacham*.<sup>42</sup> As we can see, I. Zajączkowski was active in promoting Szapszał's candidature to the position of Polish *hacham* in both Trakai/Troki and Vilna communities, and in both cases was successful to secure two votes from their representatives in favour of Szapszał during the coming elections. However, this seems to be against the regulations of elections which were accepted by the representatives

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37 LCVA, F. 51, ap. 4, b. 79, l. 41.

38 LCVA, F. 51, ap. 4, b. 79, l. 41.

39 See *Thesaurus Dictionary*.

40 LCVA, F. 51, ap. 4, b. 79, l. 41.

41 LCVA, F. 51, ap. 4, b. 79, l. 41.

42 'Mr Zajączkowski had declared that Mr Kobecki [...] will give his vote [in favour of] Mr Szapszał in the general Karaite assembly electing the *hacham* of all Karaite communities in the territory of Poland', LCVA, F. 51, ap. 4, b. 79, l. 46.

of all Polish Karaite communities at the general meeting in Halicz on 11–12 June 1927, which stated that each delegate gives his vote individually in secret ballot.<sup>43</sup>

The ideological advantage of the supporters of Szapszal was clearly noticeable during the election assembly and the ballot itself as he was the only candidate to vote for. It meant that intensive propaganda, carried out among Karaite communities by I. Zajączkowski, helped the Vilna community to expand their ideology and power among all the Karaite settlements and began its entrenchment in Poland's Karaite communities. From the moment of the election of Szapszal to the position of chief Karaite leader, and the setting up of the *hacham* institution in Vilna, it meant that ideologically Vilna was territorialized as the centre of the new secular ethnic Karaite identity and that the opposing part of the community, led by orthodox religious leaders, was pushed away to the periphery of communal life. However, it seems that this ideological split remained in existence during the whole interwar period, though the group of modernists were constantly gaining more financial and cultural power among Karaites and were better represented in the dominant society.<sup>44</sup>

By analysing the minutes of the Vilna Karaite meetings, we can trace the moment when the balance of ideological powers had changed. Back in 1926 and before, both I. Zajączkowski and E. Jutkiewicz were taking leading positions in the Vilna Karaite communal administration: in that year E. Jutkiewicz was elected to the administrative board by forty votes, while I. Zajączkowski received twenty-five.<sup>45</sup> The first was nominated as president, the second as vice-president of the community.<sup>46</sup> We may presume that E. Jutkiewicz was seen as a communal leader by the Karaites, especially in the circles closely related to the *kenesa*. He was constantly trying to keep the religious leaders and officials (*gabbaim* and *shamashim*) within the administration of the Vilna Karaite community, including by giving them positions as honorary officials, as in the communal meeting on 9 October 1923, when E. Jutkiewicz proposed to include the *gabbaim* of the community in the Administration of Vilna Karaite Association, granting them a right to vote.<sup>47</sup> However, on 13 March 1927, just before the elections of the *hacham*, harsh discussions took place on the election of the community's administration in the meeting of Vilna Karaites. E. Jutkiewicz questioned the procedure, and after the second round of voting, he remained unelected to any official position in the community.<sup>48</sup> This change, however, does not mean that E. Jutkiewicz was completely pushed aside from the communal life of Vilna Karaites — he continued to be an active member, especially concerning the financial issues of the Karaites. However, on the eve of *hacham* elections he was not able to participate in decision making as he had before.

43 Annex to the minutes of the meeting, No. 2, LCVA, F. 51, ap. 4, b. 79, l. 32.

44 Troskovaitė, 'Lenkijos ir Lietuvos karaimų savivokos formavimas', ch. II.

45 Minutes of Vilna Karaite meeting, 7 January 1926, in *Karaimi Wileńscy w okresie międzywojennym*, pp. 45–46.

46 Minutes of Vilna Karaite meeting, 23 January 1926, in *Karaimi Wileńscy w okresie międzywojennym*, pp. 42–43.

47 Minutes of the meeting of Vilna Karaite religious community, 9 October 1923, in *Karaimi Wileńscy w okresie międzywojennym*, pp. 29–37.

48 Minutes of the meeting of Vilna Karaite religious community, 13 March 1927, in *Karaimi Wileńscy w okresie międzywojennym*, pp. 52–55.

## The Society of Lovers of Karaite History and Literature as a Means of the Territorialization of Vilna: The Creation of a Centre of National Karaite Identity

The idea of establishing a Society of Lovers of Karaite History and Literature (Towarzystwo Miłośników Historii i Literatury Karaimskiej)<sup>49</sup> and promoting its activities was already a second stage of the entrenchment of secular national ethnic Karaite identity and at the same time the territorialization of Vilna as its centre. The idea came to S. Szapszał in 1931, and in April 1932 the first organizational meeting of the society took place in Vilna, in the house of the Vilna Karaite community. It seems that ideologically, organizationally, and structurally the society was organized like the Vilna Karaite community — a general meeting of all members, administration, and the Revision Committee operated there.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, as most of the members of this society were of Karaite origin, they were also active in the Vilna community. Not surprisingly, on 24 April 1932 in the first organizational meeting of the society, two candidates were nominated to the position of president — the already well-known I. Zajączkowski and E. Jutkiewicz. The latter withdrew from the election, so I. Zajączkowski occupied this position, holding at the same time the analogous position in the Vilna Karaite community.<sup>51</sup> However, it is important that the idea of this society was to expand its activities (and promoted ideology) to the whole territory of Poland and to attract representatives of Karaite settlements in Halicz, Luck, and Trakai/Troki to join its activities, which they did.<sup>52</sup> The society was also directed at the strengthening of Karaite national identity — the term *nation* was attributed to Karaites already in the first meeting of the society in April 1932.<sup>53</sup> The content of this identity was revealed in Szapszał's speech, dedicated to the establishment of the society — he had stressed the importance of 'our past, our history [ ... ] language, [ ... ] and ethnography [of] our *nation*.'<sup>54</sup> It was a new stage in communal life and its self-perception — the already existing Karaite journal *Karaite Thought* (Pol. *Mysł Karaimska*)<sup>55</sup> was perceived as a platform for Karaites to 'get acquainted with ourselves and to introduce to our countrymen our tiny

49 The idea of the establishment of this society probably belongs to S. Szapszał, but the organizational work was done by Elias Jutkiewicz, who began this initiative in December 1931, informing Karaite settlements in Trakai/Troki, Luck, Halicz, and Warsaw, and presented the project of the statute; see *Karaimi Wileńscy w okresie międzywojennym*, p. 136, n. 3. For more on the society, see Gąsiorowski, 'Towarzystwo Miłośników Historii i Literatury Karaimskiej'.

50 Statut Towarzystwa Miłośników Historii i Literatury Karaimskiej: *Karaimi Wileńscy w okresie międzywojennym*, Annex, pp. 198–201.

51 The minutes of the first organizational meeting of the Society of Lovers of Karaite History and Literature, 24 April 1932, *Karaimi Wileńscy w okresie międzywojennym*, p. 137.

52 *Karaimi Wileńscy w okresie międzywojennym*, p. 137.

53 *Karaimi Wileńscy w okresie międzywojennym*, p. 138.

54 The minutes of the first organizational meeting of the Society of Lovers of Karaite History and Literature, 24 April 1932, *Karaimi Wileńscy w okresie międzywojennym*, Annex, pp. 142–43.

55 *Mysł karaimska* was a scientific, literary, and social journal devoted to the Karaite community in Poland, published in Polish, with insertions in Tiurkic (Karaite), from 1924 to 1947.

nation'.<sup>56</sup> Probably this was one of the reasons why after the establishment of the society, the journal became a part of it.<sup>57</sup> The elaboration and representation of secular modern national self-identity was a shift in the community's development, which required other strategies and activities than the maintenance of religious self-perception perceived by most of the Karaites at the beginning of the century. However, this new trend within the community was very successful: Vilna became associated with the modern Karaite community. On 16–17 May 1932, the Second Congress of Orientalists took place in Vilna, instead of previously considered Lviv/Lwów, because 'Vilna is the centre of our Karaite and Tatar [communities] and has beautiful Oriental traditions'.<sup>58</sup> It seems that the ideological power and influence of the society was constantly growing. As the minutes of its meetings shows, the number of its members was significant — they were attended by up to one hundred individuals, which mean that the organization managed to attract many Karaites but also people of other origin.<sup>59</sup> Such well-attended meetings usually were academic in nature, presenting lectures on different topics of Karaite history, language, and culture. They were often presented by Karaites themselves, like S. Szapszał, A. Zajączkowski, and others. Most of them were later published in the journal *Karaite Thought*, in this way reaching an even broader audience.<sup>60</sup>

The activities of the society involved, though to a lesser extent, E. Jutkiewicz as well. Being an adherent of the religious and traditional side of the Vilna Karaite community, he became involved in the cultural mainstream of the society's activities, promoting, in this way, the national Karaite identity as well. It may well be true that he had mitigated his position because the group of enthusiasts of modern ethnic national Karaite identity was constantly growing and gaining more and more power among Karaites and support from dominant society, be it governmental powers, scholars, or other groups. It may also be true that such people as E. Jutkiewicz tried to balance his position by making a compromise between religious and ethnic national identity. For example, on 22 April 1935, E. Jutkiewicz announced a proposition to use the Tiurkic (Karaite) language in the meetings of the society instead of Polish and to strengthen the teaching of their mother tongue among Karaite youth and adults.<sup>61</sup> Another reason for the moderate position

56 Pol. 'poznawanie siebie samych i zaznajamianie naszych współziomków z tem, czym jest nasz skromny naród', The minutes of the first organizational meeting of the Society of Lovers of Karaite History and Literature, 24 April 1932, *Karaimi Wileńscy w okresie międzywojennym*, Annex, p. 143.

57 The minutes of the first organizational meeting of the Society of Lovers of Karaite History and Literature, 24 April 1932, *Karaimi Wileńscy w okresie międzywojennym*, p. 136.

58 Pol. 'Wilno jest ośrodkiem naszych Karaimów i Tatarów i że posiada piękne tradycje orientalistyczne', Vilnius, Lietuvos mokslų akademijos biblioteka, Rankraščių skyrius (hereafter, LMAB, RS), F. 143–947, l. 10, 12, quoted from *Karaimi Wileńscy w okresie międzywojennym*, p. 144, n. 12.

59 On 15 October 1932 (58 attendees), on 2 April 1933 (about 100), on 9 December 1933 (71), on 13 October 1934 (about 100), 18 April 1938 (68). See *Karaimi Wileńscy w okresie międzywojennym*, pp. 151, 154, 157, 160, 184.

60 See, for instance, the minutes of the meeting on 13 October 1934, *Karaimi Wileńscy w okresie międzywojennym*, pp. 160–61.

61 The minutes of the first organizational meeting of the Society of Lovers of Karaite History and Literature, 22 April 1935, *Karaimi Wileńscy w okresie międzywojennym*, p. 166.

demonstrated by Jutkiewicz may have been growing anti-Semitic notions in Europe and in Poland, which could have affected the growing imbalance between traditionalists and modernists among Karaites. For example, Samuel Bobowicz in his letter to S. Szapszal, sent on the eve of the Second World War, flatly stated that 'during the ages we were marked with blackness of Jewishness [...] we have to turn away from Jewishness once and for all so that all nations would recognize this.'<sup>62</sup> Clearly, such a position was influenced by the fear of the Nazi ideology and politics. Though S. Bobowicz lived abroad and was not a member either of Vilna or of any other Polish Karaite community, it may well be true that such notions existed among the local Karaites as well.

During about twenty years of intensive Karaite activities in Vilna, the city began to be associated with this community as their administrative and cultural centre. It was shaped by a range of communal organizations and certain landmarks that indicated how the city (also) belonged to the Karaites. The local Karaites managed to create a complete territorialized community, where the central role was played by the society, the journal *Karaite Thought*, and the institution of Polish Karaite *hacham* — the most important communal, political, and cultural figure for Polish Karaites. The city's territory was marked by the erection of the Vilna *kenesa*,<sup>63</sup> which was the community's religious centre but also served as a monument for modern ethnic Karaite identity: a clear indication of such intention is the Karaite coat of arms, put as the main symbol of their identity on its dome peak.

The first half of the twentieth century marked a golden age for Polish Karaites, and this important period of time became associated with the city of Vilna and activities that were taking place among local Karaites. At that time, the Karaites were associated with Vilna as much as they were with Trakai/Troki, with only a time distinction between two: the first was associated with the establishment of the Karaites in Poland, its historical past, and the second with its contemporary flourishing and revival of Karaite culture. However, in the course of time, neither in the Soviet period nor later, Vilnius did not become a part of the Karaite historical narrative: when the independence of Lithuania was declared in 1990, the Vilna period began to be remembered as the place of cultural flourishing by the Karaite community, but the place itself was not actualized and not included in the plot of Karaite historical legend.

## Conclusions

The twentieth century dramatically changed the role of Vilna in the Karaite community, which finally became an actual communal centre, leaving the Trakai/Troki residence aside and changing its dominance as the religious and cultural centre of Lithuanian

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62 Letter from S. Bobowicz to S. Szapszal, 1938, LMAB, RS, F. 143, b. 182, l. 2.

63 Its erection began in 1911 under the architect Michail Prozorov. In two years the walls were built and the roof was finished, but further works were interrupted by World War I. Work was restarted in 1921, and after two years it was opened for the Karaites.

and Polish Karaites. It was in the twentieth century when Trakai/Troki entrenched its image as the historical homeland of local Karaites, but at the same time it lost its importance as an actual centre of the community. In other words, it became a virtual and ideologically elaborate image of a homeland, rather than an actual focal point of their lives. With the emergence of the Karaite community in Vilna in the beginning of the twentieth century, the need to lay down roots in the city's environment grew stronger. Cultural activities, the birth of national self-identity, and the growing ideological power of its adherents made the Karaites more visible in the environment of Vilna, which was mainly dominated by Jews and Poles. It became a centre for Polish Karaites administratively, culturally, and ideologically because of the creation of the institution of the *hacham*, the establishment of the journal *Karaite Thought* and the Society of Lovers of Karaite History and Literature, and other activities, which created, maintained, and promoted a Karaite national identity. However, these intensive activities brought the Karaites to a paradoxical situation: Vilna became a Karaite cultural centre and a place of formation of the community's modern national self-identity largely thanks to cooperation with state authorities and avoiding conflicts with other ethnic communities. But despite its importance to contemporary Karaite leaders, Vilna was never included in the plot of their historical narrative, which was formed around images of the Crimea and Trakai/Troki: the first understood as a cradle of eastern European Karaites, and the second as a local derivation of what can be called a historical homeland.<sup>64</sup>

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64 On the historical narrative of Lithuanian Karaites, please see Troskovaitė, 'Is There Only One Homeland?'



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