

IDENTITY IN TRANSITION: THE CASE OF POLISH KARAITES IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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Rezumat: Identitate în tranziție: cazul caraïților polonezi în prima jumătate a secolului 20

Articolul aduce în discuție eforturile elitei comunității karaite de a forma o identitate colectivă modernă polonezilor caraïți din prima jumătate a secolului XX. Scopul acestui articol este acela de a dezbate motivele apariției nevoii de transformare a identității colective, reconstruind semnificațiile acesteia și modalitățile de realizare. O atenție deosebită este acordată comunicării dintre liderii caraïți și ideilor lor de origine karaită referitoare la religie și limbă, considerate drept elementele de bază ale auto-percepției karaite.

Abstract: *The article discusses the efforts of Karaite community elite to form a modern collective identity of Polish Karaites in the first half of the 20th century. The aim of this paper is to discuss the reasons why the need to transform the collective identity appeared and reconstruct the means and ways it was done. The special attention is paid to the communication among Karaite leaders and their ideas of Karaite origin, religion and language, which were considered to be the core elements of Karaite self-perception.*

Résumé: Identité en transition: le cas des Karaïtes polonais dans la première moitié du 20-ème siècle

L'article ci-joint met en discussion les efforts de l'élite de la communauté karaïte de former pour les Polonais karaïtes une identité collective moderne dans la première moitié du XX-ème siècle. Le but de cet article est celui de débattre les motifs de l'apparition du besoin de transformation de l'identité collective, tout en réédifiant ses significations et ses manières de réalisation. On accorda une attention tout à fait particulière à la communication entre les leaders karaïtes et à leurs idées d'origine karaïte concernant la religion et la langue, considérées comme les éléments fondamentaux de l'auto-perception karaïte.

Keywords: *identity, Poland, Karaites, Seraja Szapszal*

INTRODUCTION

Karaites lived in Eastern Europe as a community within community – identified by others as Jews, they named themselves as Jews as well, but they still perceived and felt their difference from Rabbinic Jews. Modernization of the community had strengthened their feelings of ethnical identity, which led to the formation of two different identities – Jewish and Karaite. The formation of the last one was highly influenced by political changes in their home country. Russian imperial policies pursued towards Jews in the 19th c. led Karaites to reconsider their relationship with Jewishness. Gradual but consistent estrangement from Judaic tradition in order to avoid the restrictions applied to Jews formed the background for the formation of modern ethnical identity of Karaites in the 20th c.

Since the 18th c. both social and mental gap between Karaites and Jews increased steadily. Karaite Spiritual Board (Rus. *Karaimskoje Dukhovnoje pravlenie*) was established in Tauria¹ on the 3rd of March, 1837 (by the old calendar). It marked the emergence of the schism between the Rabbinic Jews and Karaites.² There are numerous studies, which reveal Karaites' refusal of elements associated with Hebrew tradition. Roman Freund³ aptly named this process as dejudaization. He discussed such actions as refusal of Hebrew language and orthography, which allow us to talk about rational, thought-out strategy constructing a modern self-image of Karaites. Similar efforts are presented by Philip Miller⁴, who analyzes diplomatic attempts of the Crimean Karaites in order to consolidate their social differences from Jews, and Mikhail Kizilov, who probably made the most comprehensive research on this issue, and dedicated his recent study to the analysis of the Galician Karaites' case.⁵ Despite the growing interest to examine the development of national Karaite self-identity, it is difficult to talk about a single, aggregated field in Karaimic studies both in academic and geographical spheres. This is due to two existing approaches in Karaite studies, which distinction is clearly visible for more than a century.

There is an existing tradition to study the history of Karaites in the context of Jewish studies. It is mostly common between Western and Israel researchers⁶, but this

¹ A similar Spiritual Board was established in Trakai (Troki) in 1863.

² Philip E. Miller, *Karaite Separatism in Nineteenth-Century Russia: Joseph Solomon Lutski's Epistle of Israel's Deliverance*, New York, 1993, p. XV.

³ Roman Freund, *Karaites and dejudaization. A historical Review of an Endogenous and Exogenous Paradigm*, Stockholm, 1991.

⁴ Philip E. Miller, *op. cit.*

⁵ Mikhail Kizilov, *The Karaites of Galicia: An Ethnoreligious Minority Among the Ashkenazim, the Turks, and the Slavs, 1772 – 1945*, Leiden, 2008.

⁶ Dan D. Y. Shapira, *Tendencies and Agendas in Turkic-Karaite and Karaite – related studies in Eastern Europe in 20th Century* in “PINKAS: Annual of the Culture and History of East

kind of generalization is very conditional in the context of globalization. This avenue of approach allows us to look at the Karaites in the broader context of Jewish history and explore the history of this community as an integral part of it from the ancient times until today. The same can be said about the Karaites, who lived in Eastern Europe and were related to Rabbinic Jews not only by religious tradition, but by common jurisdiction of Vaad, legal and fiscal liabilities to State – The Grand Duchy of Lithuania.⁷ In the study of later periods of Karaite history this approach enables researchers to reconstruct the formation and development of modern ethnical identity of Karaites – the works of R. Freund,⁸ M. Kizilov,⁹ Ph. Miller¹⁰ show that the search of Karaite ethnical identity began with the dissociation of any links with Jews, so both the community history before this process, which began in the 19th c., and after it, encourages researchers to locate their works in the context of Jewish studies.

The second avenue of approach, which, due to the specificity of the activities of Karaite community, is mostly supported by researchers in Eastern Europe,¹¹ is related with the transformation of Karaite identity. Researchers tend to accept the

European Jewry”, no. 1, Vilnius, 2006; Nathan Schur, *History of the Karaites*, Frankfurt am Main, 1992; Dan Shapira, *Avraham Firkowicz in Istanbul (1830 – 1832). Paving the Way for Turkic Nationalism*, Ankara, 2003.

⁷ Jacob Mann, “Karaica”, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature*, no. 11, Philadelphia, 1935; Jurgita Šiaučiūnaitė – Verbickienė, *Žydai Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės visuomenėje: sambūvio aspektai*, Vilnius, 2009; Idem, *Ką rado Trakuose Žiliberas de Lanua, arba kas yra Trakų žydai*, in “Lietuvos istorijos studijos”, no. 7, 1999.

⁸ R. Freund, *op. cit.*

⁹ Mikhail Kizilov, *Between the Jews and the Khazars: the formation of the ethnic identity and historical views of the East European Karaites in the general context of European history from the late eighteen century until today*, in “Pinkas: Annual of the Culture and History of East European Jewry”, no. 2, Vilnius, 2008; Idem, *Social adaptation and manipulation with self-identity: Karaites in Eastern Europe in Modern times, Karaites in Eastern Europe in the Last Generations, Proceedings of the First International Karaite colloquium*, Jerusalem, 2008; Idem, *The Arrival of the Karaites (Karaims) to Poland and Lithuania: A Survey of Sources and Critical Analysis of Existing Theories*, in “Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi”, no. 12, 2003/2004; Idem, *Faithful Unto Death: Language, Tradition, and the Disappearance of the East European Karaite Communities*, in “East European Jewish Affairs”, Vol. 36, No. 1, London, 2006; Idem, *Karaites in North-Eastern Europe: The Karaite Community of Troki between the Two World Wars, Orient als Grenzberreich. Proceedings of the Deutscher Orientalistentag*, Wiesbaden, 2007; Idem, *Karaites through the Travelers’ Eyes. Ethnic History, Traditional Culture and Everyday Life of the Crimean Karaites According to Descriptions of the Travelers*, New York, 2003

¹⁰ Philip E. Miller, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Algirdas Baliulis, Stanislovas Mikulionis, Algimantas Miškinis, *Trakų miestas ir pilys*, Vilnius, 1991; Stefan Gąsiorowski, *Karaimi w Koronie I na Litwie w XV – XVIII wieku*, Cracow – Budapest, 2008.

theory of Karaite Khazarian origins, and apply it in their studies.¹² Because of its limitations – the critical application of this approach to the Karaites history before the 20th c. is logically almost impossible – the Karaite studies are not sufficiently developed in this region. And in the last decades this approach attracts even less adherents – with an exception of more of descriptive nature, journalistic initiatives¹³, which are supported by Lithuanian Karaite community. While the Khazarian approach is rather critically assessed by the academic community.

In this article, the efforts of the leaders of Karaite community to form a modern ethnical identity of Karaites in the first half of the 20th c. will be discussed. The aim of this article is to reveal the motives, which influenced the direction of identity formation, and the means by which it was constructed, as well as the particular symbols, on which the modern ethnical identity of Karaites was based. The array of the sources, which enables the reconstruction of this process, consists of the correspondence of S. Szapszal, stored in his archive, the manuscripts of his articles,¹⁴ documents of Karaite community presented to the Polish Ministry of Religious Affairs and Education¹⁵ and Karaite periodicals *Myśl karaimska*¹⁶ (Vilnius, Poland) and *Onarmach*¹⁷ (Panevėžys, Lithuania). While discussing the formation of Karaite identity we need to distinguish three significant segments, which understanding changed the most – language, religion and origin.

¹² The articles written by S. Szapszal himself are the most notable. Their manuscripts are stored in the library of Lithuanian history institute, F. 4. Also worth mentioning – the works of Tadeusz Kowalski, for instance, *Turecka monografja o karaimach krymskich*, in “*Myśl Karaimska*”, t. 2, Vilnius, 1929, note. 2. See more: Dan D. Y. Shapira, *Tendencies and Agendas in Turkic – Karaite and Karaite – related Studies in Eastern Europe on 20th Century*, in “*Pinkas: Annual of the Culture and History of East European Jewry*”, Vol. I, Vilnius, 2006, p. 210-241.

¹³ Halina Kobeckaitė, *Lietuvos karaimai*, Vilnius, 1997.

¹⁴ Lietuvos mokslų akademijos Vrublevskių biblioteka [The Wrublewski library of Lithuanian Academy of Science] (further LMAB), *Rankračių skyrius* [Manuscript collection] (further – RS) F. 143: A letter from Emanuel Kobecki to Seraj Szapszal, b. 364; A. Mardkowicz to S. Szapszal b. 466, 467, 127; S. Bobowicz to S. Szapszal, b. 182, 511; Zarach Zarachowicz to S. Szapszal, b. 511, 723, 724; In the Manuscript department fund (F.7) of Lithuanian Institute of History Library (further - LIIB).

¹⁵ *A provision of the Karaite legal status bill in Poland (1921-1922)*, LMAB RS F. 143, b. 364; *A provision of the Karaite legal status bill in Poland (1928)*, Lithuanian Central State Archive (further – LCVA) F. 51, Ap. 4, b. 117, b. 400.

¹⁶ “*Myśl Karaimska*” [The Karaite Thought], was published in the period of 1924 – 1939 in Polish, Vilnius, ed. Ananjasz Rojecki (1924 – 1929), Ananjasz Zajaczkowski (1929 – 1939) (published – twelve issues).

¹⁷ “*Onarmach*” [Progress] was published in the period of 1934 – 1939 in the Karaite language, Panevėžys, ed. Mykolas Tinfovičius (Tinfavičius) (published – three issues).

I. DRAWING THE BOUNDARIES: *WE* KARAITES AND *THEY* JEWS

Despite the pre-existing economical disagreements between Jews and Karaites, neither one nor the other called themselves otherwise as Jews until the 7th decade of the 19th c. Moreover, both groups claimed that they are the believers of true Judaism.¹⁸ With the establishment of the spiritual board of Karaites, two communities, which belonged to the tradition of Judaism, were separated, and the Karaism was recognized as a separate, unique religion. However, it would not be entirely accurate to agree with Ph. Miller, which claims, that “from the moment when the Crimea was subordinated by Russia in 1783, a part of the Karaite community wanted to distance a not only from the Rabbinic Jews, but from the Jewry in general.”¹⁹ The Karaite aspiration to distance themselves from Rabbinic Jews is testified by both Simcha ben Salomon Bobowicz, who became the first Karaite hakham after the establishment of the Karaite spiritual board and instantly in 1827 made an effort to obtain the withdrawal of military obligations for Karaite community²⁰, and his father, Salomon, who travelled to Saint Petersburg in 1795 in order to obtain an exemption from the restrictions imposed on Jews and Karaites. However, both in the end of the 18th c. and in the 19th c. all Karaite attempts to establish their independence from Jews were mainly directed outwards, i.e. above all the community aimed to reveal their differences from Rabbinic Jews to the authorities in order to dispose discriminatory restrictions applicable to Jews. These efforts had a little impact on the community life, in a sense that it did not aim to change the Karaite self-perception, only to present it in a way, which would please the authorities and help Karaite to achieve their objectives. This is evidenced by the extant historical sources, in which the majority of Karaites still associated themselves with the nation of Israel and traditions of Judaism – *Epistle of Israel's Deliverance* by Joseph Solomon Lucki was originally written in Hebrew around 1840. In addition, the work had been written in biblical style.²¹

The turning-point of the Karaite self-perception was the beginning of the 20th c., which correlated with the leadership of S. Szapszal.²² His personal features and

¹⁸ Jacob Mann, *op. cit.*; Philip E. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. XV.

¹⁹ Philip E. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. XVI.

²⁰ Since 1791 Jews were permitted to reside only in the zone of settlement; a double taxation system introduced in 1794; an introduction of conscription of recruits in 1827 – while emphasizing their differences from Rabbinic Jews, Karaites expected the abolition of these restrictions.

²¹ Philip E. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. XVI.

²² Seraj Szapszal was born in Bakhchsarai in 1873. He moved to study in Saint Petersburg in 1894 and got married to Vera Issakowicz Ogiz in 1909. S. Szapszal was a professor of Oriental languages in the University of Saint Petersburg, also was a member of various academic associations. In 1915 S. Szapszal was elected as a hakham of Russian Karaites and took community activities – collected documents, established a library, brought back

abilities directed his communal activities toward the formation of Karaite ethnical identity, which was based not only on religious tradition, but on their origins as well. A qualitatively different process, which was directed not only outwards, but to the community itself, had started. It transformed the self-perception of Karaites and on its basis it formed the attitude of dominant society towards this ethnical group. Probably, there were two main stimuli of this turning-point: the first one had remained the same as in previous centuries – to secure favourable living conditions for community, and the second one – growing sense of ethnic identity, which encouraged defining their uniqueness and draw the boundaries between *themselves* and *others*. In this case, *the other* was the Rabbinic Jews, with whom Karaites had a strong connection based on religious tradition. So it is not surprising, that the formation process of the modern ethnical identity of Karaites began with a coherent refusal of Hebrew elements in religious tradition, language and the perception of their origins.

The historiographical discussion about the influence of Haskalah on the formation of Karaite self-consciousness did not provide unanimous conclusion so far. R. Freund tends to think, that the process of acculturation, which was encouraged by the Jewish enlightenment movement, had an influence on the changes of Karaite community self-perception, directing them towards dominant society, for instance, the “westernization” of personal names etc.²³ As for the Karaites of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, it is very hard to identify the dissemination (or lack of it) of Haskalah ideas, because of the low density of communities and their estrangement in social and political matters. Although, it cannot be ruled out that ideas expressed by intellectuals in Vilnius, which was already known as one of the Haskalah centres in Eastern Europe in the end of 18th c. – the beginning of 19th c.²⁴, were known to local elite of Karaite communities. However, this assumption requires further detail studies.

I.2. Language and its reforms: Hebrew versus Karaite

J. Fishman, who analyzed the important link between the language and

many manuscripts to Saint Petersburg. It is assumed that exactly this time was the turning-point of Karaite self-perception. The activities of S. Szapszal were terminated by the First World War, and he started working again only in 1927, when he became the chief religious leader of Polish Karaites and settled in Vilnius. He held this position until 1940. In 1929 he became a member of Polish Academy of Sciences, and after ten years he was awarded a honorific of professor of Vilnius University. Until the end of the 5th decade of the 20th c. he formed and established the ideology of modern ethnical identity of Karaites. In 1961 S. Szapszal died in Vilnius, and here he was buried in the joint cemetery of Karaites and Tatars. LMAB RS F. 143, b. 404; LCVA F.51, Ap.4, b. 117, l. 1-2.

²³ Freund, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²⁴ For more detailed information about the Haskalah movement in the region see: Marcin Wodzinski, *Haskalah and Hasidism in the Kingdom of Poland: A History of Conflict*, Oxford, 2005.

ethnicity, stated, that “language is not only a conscious factor but may become a primary cause, a rallying cry, a prime concern and a perceived first line of defence.”²⁵ In the beginning of the 20th c., when S. Szapszal became the leader of Russian Karaite community (and later on – of Polish Karaite community), the transformation process of Karaite identity started with the changes of language use in the community. The Hebrew language was the higher language used for literature and liturgy in the Karaite community and the orthography was the alphabet of Karaite language. So it was not only a sign of belonging to the Jewry, but also a way to express the Jewishness. While speaking about the connection between the religion and language, Fishman argues, that “the link between language and religion (what would be religion without language?) not only sanctifies ‘our language’ but helps to raise language into the pale of sanctity even in a secular culture.”²⁶ The process of the formation of modern ethnical identity of Karaites shows, that Karaism was inseparable from the Hebrew language, so the rejection of this language significantly weakened religious traditions within the community. At the same time the weakening of religious faith strengthened the importance of Karaite language to the identity of community. S. Szapszal used the language as the main argument in the development of his theory about Karaite Khazarian origins. It also helped to establish the image of the Crimea as the historical homeland in the Karaite self-consciousness. In one of his first articles²⁷ after becoming the chief religious leader of Polish Karaites, S. Szapszal emphasized both directly and indirectly the importance of Karaite language to self-perception of the community – “Karaites are almost from the same origins as Tatars, and they preserved their own Turkic language, which they are still using both in daily life and religious prayers.”²⁸ As it is shown in the previous quotation, the chief Karaite leader, while presenting his community to the Polish government, clearly identifies Karaite language as the only one used between Karaites, in addition of course to the Polish language, which usage is implied by the language of this document itself. S. Szapszal took the same position not only in his letter to the Polish Ministry of Religious Affairs and Education²⁹, but in his other texts as well – both public and academic ones.³⁰

The leaders of Karaite community also understood the link between liturgy and language, so they began to consider how to strengthen the religious feelings in the

²⁵ Joshua A. Fishman, *Language and ethnicity in minority sociolinguistic perspective*, Clevedon and Philadelphia, 1991, p. 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ S. Szapszal, *Memoriał*, 1927 - 1928, Vilnius (it is assumed, that this document was addressed to the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Education), LCVA, F. 51, Ap. 4, b. 117, l. 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 3 v.

²⁹ A letter from S. Szapszal to the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Education, The 29th of November, 1928, Vilnius, LCVA, F. 51, Ap.4, b. 400, l. 23 (typewriting)

³⁰ *K voprosu ob istoričeskoj sviazi Litvy s tiurkskimi stranami i narodami*, 1955, Vilnius, LIIB, F. 4, b. 208, p. 1-10 etc. (typewriting)

community and to make a simultaneous change from Hebrew to Karaite language in the liturgical rites. Aleksandr Mardkowicz³¹, one of the leaders of Luck community, on the 23rd of January, 1928 wrote a letter to S. Szapszal, and indicated the need to abandon “the Hebrew language, because everyone prays in it, but just the minority of community members understands it”. (...) Therefore, taking into account the needs of community, it would be appropriate to translate prayer books to Karaite language and, it would be welcomed to provide its text in Polish as well. In addition, prayer books should be printed in Latin alphabet³² (*Underlined by the author - D. T.*). It is obvious, that the author of these words linked the needs of community not with the Hebrew language, but with the Karaite language. He was not the only person, who was worried about this connection between language and religion and its importance to the self-consciousness of Karaite community. After a decade, in 1938 Samuel Bobowicz also contacted S. Szapszal, and called to the attention the question of Hebrew language and its incompatibility with the self-perception of Karaites. S. Bobowicz differed from his predecessor, because of the rigidity and assertiveness of his ideas. Bobowicz stated, that a person “cannot pray to God in incomprehensible language, because then the participation in worship services becomes an obligation, rather than the gratification of spiritual needs. We do not consider ancient Jewish language as our own; this language is dead, inorganic and unpleasant to our generation (*underlined by the author – D.T.*).”³³ It is obvious, that Karaites have identified themselves with Hebrew language in liturgy and other areas of life less and less. Although Szapszal himself did not leave any direct speeches regarding the use of Hebrew language in liturgy, but his opinion about the relationship between Karaite and Hebrew languages is clearly reflected in the Karaite language reform initiated by S. Szapszal himself. His academic interests contributed to this process as well – S. Szapszal was a well-known orientalist and actively participated in the scientific discussions with turkologists, who found the interest in Karaites in the 19th c., because their language belonged to the Turkic language group.³⁴ Due to the specifics of

³¹ Aleksandr Mardkowicz (1875-1944) – the leader of Karaite community in Luck, poet, publicist, active member of community. He was writing in Russia, in a journal published in Moscow – “The life of Karaites” [“Karaimskaja Žizn”], and later, on the 3rd decade of the 20th c., he became a pioneer of Karaite press – he was the editor of newspaper [The voice of Karaites] “Karay Awazy” and published his articles in another newspaper – “The thought of Karaites” (“Myśl Karaimska”).

³² LMAB RS F. 143, b. 466, l.5-10, 1928.

³³ LMAB RS F. 143 b. 511, l. 2-6. Samuel Bobowicz was about fifty years old in 1938, and it means that he could have been born at the last decade of the 19th c. Although, there are no more data found on his person, it is possible, that he could have been related with Simcha Bobowicz, who carried out a successful mission to Saint Petersburg in 1827.

³⁴ Dan D. Y. Shapira, *A Jewish Pan-Turkist: Seraya Szapszal (Şapşaloğlu) and his Work Qirim Qaray Türkleri (1928)*, in “Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungariae”,

Karaite language and anthropological features of the Crimean Karaites, the majority of researchers both in Europe and later in Russia, tended to ascribe Karaites to Turkic origins. The Crimean Karaites were acknowledged as a separate religious group in 1837, and they tended to rely on these considerations, which presented them as an extraordinary and unique nation with a deep historical tradition. Therefore it is not surprising, that in this atmosphere S. Szapszal began the Karaite language reform, tried to cleanse it from the interference of Hebrew words and terminology, changing them to Turkic language, thus weakening the Karaite connection with Jewishness. At the first glance these changes might look insignificant – usually just one or two letters differ in the word, but actually it changes word's structure significantly. For instance, a word hakham (Hebr. *Wiseman*), which describes the chief religious leader, was changed to hakhan, because then it sounds more like the word Khan, meaning the chief leader of Tatars. Similar changes were implied to the names of months – regular Hebrew names were changed to Karaite language.³⁵ R. Freund bases his opinion on findings of Tadeusz Kowalski, and states, that Karaites used Hebrew terminology until the year 1927³⁶, however, the archival documents, gathered during research, show, that terminology with many Turkic elements has been widely used in official documents of the Polish Karaite community at that time.³⁷

So in the first half of the 20th c. Karaite community has experienced significant linguistic changes, which influenced their self-perception as well – Karaites had no longer associated themselves with Hebrew language, and this affected the further denial of other Jewish elements in the religious tradition. In the beginning of the 20th c. the interior of Trakai kenesa has changed – the decoration of the ceiling, the Star of David, was removed, and traditional décor elements of synagogues – table entries of Decalogue in Hebrew – were eliminated from the interior as well.³⁸ And in Vilnius kenesa, which was built in 1911, the religious symbols were changed with secular ones – the spire was adorned by the Karaite coat of arms, which spread widely and became a symbol of the community. Like a litmus paper it reflects the essence of Karaite ethnical identity ideology - allegories of Khazarian origins and the Crimean historical homeland.³⁹

Only after the refusal of Hebrew features, which were traditionally associated with Jewish community, it became possible to move on to the next important step in

No. 58 (4), 2005, p. 349-380.

³⁵ About the changing of Hebrew month names to Karaite language, see: Roman Freund, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

³⁶ Roman Freund, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

³⁷ The project regarding the legal status of Karaites, LCVA F. 51, Ap. 4, b. 400 etc.

³⁸ M. Kizilov, *Karaites in North – Eastern Europe ...*, p. 37.

³⁹ It is unknown when exactly the Karaite coat of arms was introduced, but it had probably happened before the building of Vilnius kenesa. Later it was used in the documents of Karaite community and had a symbolic and representative function.

shaping of identity – the search of new identity features, its conceptualization and consolidation.

II. CONSTRUCTION OF MODERN ETHNICAL IDENTITY OF KARAITES

II.1. Transformation of origin: Semites versus Khazars

In discussions about Karaite origins, which started in the end of the 18th c. – the beginning of the 19th c., Karaites were associated with Jews, who supposedly moved to the Crimea after the destruction of the first temple in Jerusalem.⁴⁰ A little later, at about the third decade of the 19th c., in order to convince the government of Russian Empire and Orthodox Church officials, that Karaites did not participate in the murder of Christ, they started looking for the Karaite connections to the Sadducees.⁴¹ While none of these theories were entrenched, because of obvious chronological irrationalities,⁴² the story of Karaite absence in deicide spread widely and established itself in the society.⁴³ However, growing interest in Karaites, their origins, language and ethnography, encouraged the solution of the origins question. Moreover, the officials of Russian Empire, even after the establishment of Karaite Spiritual Board, did not stop to take an interest in this community.⁴⁴ Avraham Firkowicz (1786 – 1874), who was entrusted by the Crimean Karaite community to collect evidence about Karaite past, introduced a new version of Karaite origins. According to him, Jews were the ancestors of Karaites; they have lived in the Black Sea region since Biblical times and had converted pagan Khazars to Karaism. Newly converted

⁴⁰ Philip Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴² Such an interpretation is at odds with the chronology of Karaism genesis – Karaism was formed in the 9th-11th centuries, so there was no way, that Karaites would have been one of that lost tribes of Israel.

⁴³ In the middle of the 19th c. Władysław Sirokomlia, who was wandering in Trakai, talks about Karaites and that “they are not burdened as Talmudic Jews by the death of the Righteous, because they had left Jerusalem before the torture of Christ. They are not defiled by the mistakes of Talmud, since they were not there, when Christ was tied and crucified.” See. Vladislovas Sirokomlė, *Iškylas iš Vilniaus po Lietuvą*, Vilnius, 1989, p. 58.

⁴⁴ Soon after the decree of 1837, Russian Empire started to question the validity of privileges granted to Karaites. In 1839 the General Governor of Taurica, Michail Voroncov (1782-1856), sent a letter to Karaite spiritual board in Taurica. In this letter he asked for information about Karaite origin, traditions, customs and their differences from Jews. The text of this document suggests that without the convincing evidence regarding the authenticity of Karaites, those granted privileges and new status may be rescinded. See. O. Belyi, *Obzor arxivnyx dokumentov po istorii karaimskoj obščiny Kryma v pervoj polovine XIX veka, Krymskij muzej (1995 – 1996)*, c. 114.

Khazars have developed their communities in Jerusalem, Damascus etc. during their migration to South in the 10th-11th centuries.⁴⁵ Despite controversial assessments of Firkowicz, this theory became very popular in the Empire. It should be noted that in spite of Khazarian element presented in the search of Karaite origins, it was generally recognized, that Karaites originated from Semites.

The 19th c. discussions about the origins of Karaites are perfectly described by one of the first Russian orientalists, who were interested in ethnogenesis of Karaites as well, V. V. Grigorjev:

“We will pay attention only to the fact, that Tatar language [and it’s] dialect, which is used by *Russian Karaites*, does not contain even the slightest resemblance to Jewish words or other traces of that language, which would have been used by their ancestors, if they were Jews. Also, facial features and expressions of *our* Karaites do not have that striking national Jewish [feature], which instantly enables us to distinguish the child of Israel from any other human being (...) *Our* Karaites, even if they really are Jews, once blended with Turkic nations and this mixing had to have been permanent since the early ages (...) or, which is more *unbelievable*, (...) they are not Jews at all, but descendants of those Turks – Khazars, who professed the Law of Moses and ruled the Crimea in the 8th-11th c.”⁴⁶ (*Italics by – D. T.*)

The essential turning-point of Karaite self-perception was the 20th c. – S. Szapszal, who at that time implemented reforms of Karaite language, began to form the theory of Karaite origins from Khazars, which he presented in his academic and journalistic articles as “Karaites in Lithuania”⁴⁷, “Khazars and their language”⁴⁸, “On the question of Karaite ethnogenesis”⁴⁹, in letters to the Polish Ministry of Religious Affairs and Education and public speeches. S. Szapszal provided the answers to the questions, which were important to the community – about the origins of Karaites, their history, language and religion – without which the modern self-perception of Karaites could not have been formed.

S. Szapszal summarized his own ideas in the article *On the question of Karaite ethnogenesis (K voprosu ob etnogeneze karaimov (prodolzhenie issledovanie “Chazary i ich jazyk”))*⁵⁰, in which he represented the new conception about the

⁴⁵ Philip Miller, *op. cit.* p. 8. More about these attempts see: Mikhail Kizilov, *Social adaptation and manipulation with self-identity...*

⁴⁶ V. V. Grigorjev (the title is not given), 1846. This article was prepared for the magazine of Internal Affairs. LIIB F. 4, b. 127, l. 6 (quoted by С. Шапшал, *К вопросу об этногенезе караймов...* Free translation from Russian language (D. T.)). It is true, that Szapszal did not tend to agree with this opinion, but he did not doubt the authenticity of these words.

⁴⁷ Серая Шапшал, *Караимы в Литве*, LIIB F. 4, b. 181; LMAB RS F. 143, b. 825.

⁴⁸ Серая Шапшал, *Хазары и их язык*, LMAB RS F. 143, b. 828.

⁴⁹ Серая Шапшал, *К вопросу об этногенезе караймов*, LIIB F. 4, b. 127; LMAB RS F. 143, b. 831.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

origins of Karaites. Its starting point was the kinship of Karaite language with the Turkic languages and their centuries-long history in the Crimea, as well as the theory developed by A. Firkowicz about the connection between Karaites and Khazars. Khazars – mystified, now extinct but once very powerful tribe – was regarded in the considerations of S. Szapszal as “a suitable candidate for the ancestry”, which presented an opportunity both to create a magnificent image of Karaite past in the collective consciousness and to break free from Jewishness once and for all. According to Szapszal’s theory, Karaites settled in the Crimea in the 10th c. BC, there they converted local Khazars to pre-Talmudic Judaism.⁵¹ Those Khazars, who accepted Karaism, were named as the ancestors of Karaites. It is important to pay attention to the fact, that the conception of S. Szapszal had a significant difference from the attempt of A. Firkowicz, who tried to introduce Khazarian element to Karaite history and self-perception. A. Firkowicz idea about the origins of Karaites from the ancient Jews was abandoned – Khazars became the ancestors of Karaites.⁵² The essential aspect of this transformation is that it enabled the escape from Karaite Semitic origins and brought them closer to Turkic ancestry idea: “Khazars as the nation have no connection to Jews, only because of religion they were called Jews”.⁵³ During the development of Karaite Khazarian origins theory S. Szapszal relied on the data of anthropological fieldwork⁵⁴. His relationship with the available information was rather specific – although mentioned researchers did not have common opinion regarding the origins of Karaites (there were found similarities with Jews, Tatars, Bashkirs and others). A. Bashmakov presented very controversial findings⁵⁵, which S. Szapszal interpreted as an unambiguous proof of Karaite Khazarian origins.⁵⁶

However, after the spread of S. Szapszal conception, which stated that Karaites have originated from Khazars, it has not immediately established itself in the collective consciousness of Karaites. This was the result both of the incompleteness of this conception (it was finally formulated only in the 5th decade of the 20th c.) and

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, l. 11. However, the new academic studies prove, that Khazars actually adopted Talmudic Judaism and until their mysterious extinction they had not have any contacts with Karaites.

⁵² *Ibid.*, c. 50.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, c. 15

⁵⁴ In his article S. Szapszal discusses 9 anthropological expeditions in both the Crimea and Poland, during which it was attempted to figure out the origins of Karaites and their relationship with Jewishness.

⁵⁵ Bashmakov argues, that Crimean Karaites, as well as Tatars, are kind of indigenous people of Crimean peninsula. As in *Серая Шапшал, К вопросу об этногенезе караимов...*, с. 10. The author quotes a book written by Bashmakov, *Cinquante siecles d'evolution ethnique autour de la Mer Noisre*, Paris, 1937.

⁵⁶ “All authors have to unanimously admit, that Karaite type is different from Jewish and vice versa, [and] is undeniably closer to Turkic [type].” But at the same time Szapszal states, that Karaites had been Israelites before resettling in the Crimea.

relatively short period of time, which was not enough for the definitive establishment of modern Karaite identity. So next to the Karaite origins theory, presented by Szapszal, there was another theory, distant from ideas of both Firkowicz and radical Szapszal. It is describe in the mentioned article by A. Mardkowicz, "The sons of law" (*Synowie zakonu*, 1930), which was written in Polish during his time in Luck, and later, in 1934 published in Lithuanian in the journal *Onarmach*, carried by Karaites of Panevėžys.⁵⁷ It can be assumed, that it is no coincidence, that this article was printed in this journal in Lithuanian, especially since it is the only text in this journal (there were only three issues of it), which is printed not in the dialect of Trakai Karaites. As the author of this text states in the original manuscript, "regarding the growing interest in social issues in Polish society, we release this short book about Karaites. We aim to share some knowledge with wider society about that modest and quiet nation, which is reluctant to manifest their existence."⁵⁸ Neither the editor of *Onarmach*, Mykolas Tinfavičius, nor the translator of this text (name and surname are left unknown) did not write the foreword or even a note in Lithuanian, which would explain the reason behind publishing of this article, so it is considered, that it was successful achieving the mentioned aim of the author and was adapted to the Lithuanian public. This text provides both the Karaite attitude towards themselves based on three attributes – language, religion, origin,⁵⁹ and the knowledge, which was considered worthy of sharing with society. The article of A. Mardkowicz, named "The sons of law", is divided to several smaller chapters and subsections, which discuss Karaism, it's relationship with Christianity and Judaism, Karaite language, origins and their communities in Poland and Lithuania. Here are some key insights made by A. Mardkowicz:

Origin. "From the incest of Turks and Semites and long-term merger of various nations arose a new element – the Crimean Karaites."⁶⁰ It is clear, that the author's attitude towards the Karaite origins reflects some aspects of S. Szapszal's conception – Karaites are derived from Crimean territory and identified with the nations of this region, although they still preserve several features of Semitic origins. Notwithstanding the named connection between Karaites and Semites, the author expresses a negative attitude towards Jews. Karaites are presented as a contrast to Jews; author uses anti-Semitic statements, which are "borrowed" from unknown author⁶¹: "Despite many general anthropological similarities between Jews and

⁵⁷ Aleksandr Mardkowicz, *The sons of law*, in "Onarmach", Panevėžys, 1934 (a one-time publication), p. 8-16 (translation from Polish),

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵⁹ "A different origin of Karaites is proved by their language, character and religious liturgy", *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁶¹ Statements, which negatively describe Jews, are quoted with the quotation marks, but the source is not identified.

Karaites, there are facial features, which distinguish them. These are well-known Jewish facial features, so-called *ghetto face*. We do not find this particular ghetto expression in the faces of Karaites.”⁶²

Religion. “Two factors influenced the Karaism: religion and ethnicity. So the name “karaite” describes not only the faith of these people, but indicates a certain, different from others, ethnicity.”⁶³ Karaism “for a long time was the only mark, which indicated the difference between Karaites and other Israelites.”⁶⁴ “From here came the name “*karaite*” – from the Hebrew word “*karai*”, which means *the one who is reading*”⁶⁵. Karaism developed “in the all lands, where Israelites were found (...) The propaganda of Karaism, going North in the direction of ancient people, between the Black and Caspian seas, found a good soil in Armenia, Dagestan, Georgia, the Crimea and Byzantium.”⁶⁶ The author reflects Karaite dissociation from Judaism and Jewishness, which already happened, and emphasizes the growing link between religion and origins (“ethnicity”), which is common to modern ethnical self-perception of Karaites.

Language. Karaite language “which since ancient times was the language of Karaite ancestors, now displaces the Hebrew language, which was usually used in church liturgy. The ancient Karaite poets used the Hebrew language as the language of literature as well.”⁶⁷

Though differently from previously discussed articles by S. Szapszal, “The sons of law” by A. Mardkowicz does not present unambiguous position, which would support the theory of S. Szapszal. It reflects changes in self-perception that have already occurred and showed an increase in pro-Turkic orientation, mainly in the fields of religion and origins. However, despite the apparent identity shift towards the formation of modern ethnic self-consciousness, attitude of Karaites in Panevėžys, who published the article of Mardkowicz, could be called as obsolete in comparison to the self-concept of Polish Karaites. In the first publication of Karaite community newspaper *Myśl Karaimska* in Poland (1924) there was a review by A. Rojecki for the article “Karaites in Poland” (*Karaici w Polsce*) prepared by Mejer Bałaban. This reviewed article was published in monthly newspaper for Jewish literature, art and science, “New life” (*Nowe Życie*), edited by M. Bałaban himself in Warsaw.⁶⁸ Although the content of this article caused an anger of the reviewer, it is obvious, that

⁶² Aleksandr Mardkowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁶⁸ Ananjasz Rojecki, *Karaici w Polsce (o artykule Dr. M. Bałabana)*, in “*Myśl Karaimska*”, t. 1, z. 1, Vilnius, 1924, s. 3-4. A book by the same name, “*Karaici w Polsce*”, was prepared by A. Bałaban as well.

a certain polemic discussion (if only in journalistic and academic circles) existed between Jews and Karaites. According to A. Rojecki, M. Bałaban stated, that “Karaites always had ambitions to claim, that they are the real Jews”.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, the author of the review disagrees, arguing that “Karaites are the only believers of the Old Testament [not Torah! – Underlined by the author – D.T.] without its later appendix (...), and they have never claimed to be called Jews and they never will, because [they] are not Jews (Karaites differ from them both with religion and ethnography), so they do not have such right.”⁷⁰

In the process of creation and development of ethnicity, origin became one of the most important of its elements. Origins, blood relations with ancestors can be negative, re-created, can be only assumed, mythical or real, but due to their quality to provide a community with continuity and longevity, it often determines the collective behaviour of the community. The Karaite community is not an exception – the question of origins became the object of their communal discussions and the most significant indication of their modern ethnical identity.

The results of Karaite identity transformations in the first half of the 20th c., especially the link between origins and language, are visible in academic society as well. Symon Szyszman makes references to Tadeusz Kowalski, who stated, that Karaite origin from Khazars is acknowledged by the fact, that Karaite language formed in the territory between Caspian and Black seas, where prospered the culture of Khazars.⁷¹ This enabled S. Szyszman to make an assumption, that Karaites maintained the Khazar culture.⁷² While arguing about the Karaite origins from Khazars and/or Chuvash, S. Szyszman as well as Szapszal finds additional arguments in anthropometric studies of Karaites.⁷³ So it can be stated, that during the 20th c. the historiographical school of Karaimics was formed. It maintained the legitimacy of modern Karaite identity, which was inspired by the ideas of S. Szapszal.

II.2. Transformation of homeland symbol

When Szapszal began to consolidate the theory of Karaites originating from Khazars, historical homeland question became also important to Karaites. In the Karaite religion the land of Israel was considered as a historical homeland, but due to the formation of ethnical identity and the aspiration to distinct themselves from Jews, this image had to be replaced. The first source, where S. Szapszal discusses this issue,

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ T. Kowalski, *Turecka monografia o karaimach krymskich*, in “Myśl Karaimska”, t. 2, sąs. 2, Vilnius, 1929, p. 3-5.

⁷² Simon Szyszman, *Karaizmas*, Vilnius, 2000, p. 76.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

is already mentioned “Memorial”. There, after the short introduction of Karaite history, S. Szapszal states, that Karaites derived from the Crimea⁷⁴. Similar position was taken by A. Mardkowicz, who saw a direct relation between historical Karaite homeland and their origins. The author associated Karaites with the Orient and in order to reason his opinion, he emphasized a clear contrast between the Crimea and the land of Israel, from which originated those, according to the author, who were doomed to wander and live in different places, where they (the Jews) will always remain unwelcomed strangers. Therefore, for Karaites the holy land of Israel – “is not the true ancestral homeland, which they had never seen, but imagined and only known from the Bible”, in other words, an allegory of homeland.⁷⁵ However, this approach has not been the dominant one – during the year 1929 Halich community leader Zachar Zacharowicz created a poem for a communal celebration⁷⁶, in which the land of Israel is glorified and Karaites are called its children.⁷⁷

However, after the establishment of Khazarian origins theory in the Karaite consciousness, the significance of the Crimea grew steadily – historical homeland no longer had been associated with religious tradition, it started to be linked with origins, in other words - its image had become an element of secular ethnical identity. Its positions were strengthened by the fact, that the Crimea itself was the provenance of actually existing Karaite community, so the historical homeland was tangible and visualized. These links between Karaites and the Crimea are also recognized in the reform project presented by S. Bobowicz⁷⁸. In addition to religious reforms it presents the “national issue of Karaites” and links it with the consolidation of the Crimea as a historical homeland.

A symbiosis of two images formed in Lithuania – the Crimean image, which was developed by S. Szapszal, who himself was born and grew up in the Crimea, and the image of Trakai, which was closer to Lithuanian communities. The previous image was expressed in the poems of Karaite poet, Simon Kobecki (1865-1933). His collection of poetry “Irlar” (“Songs”) was published in Cyrillic printed Karaite language, and was the first printed secular book in this language.⁷⁹ It consists of 25 poems, which, according to Ananjasz Zajączkowski, reflect the life of Karaites, their ethnical and cultural feelings.⁸⁰ S. Kobecki describes the surroundings of Trakai and

⁷⁴ *Memorial*, LCVA, F. 51, Ap. 4, b. 117, l. 3-3v.

⁷⁵ Aleksandr Mardkowicz to Seraja Szapszal – F. 143, b. 466, l. 8v, 1929, Luck.

⁷⁶ For the newest publication of the poem, see. M. Kizilov, *The Karaites of Galicia ...*, Appendix no. 3.3, p. 393.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ A letter from S. Bobowicz to S. Szapszal, LMAB RS F. 143, b. 182, l.1-8

⁷⁹ Ananjasz Zajączkowski, “*Pieśni*” Kobeckiego, *Osobne odbicie z czasopisma “Myśl Karaimska”*, t. I, z. IV – V, Vilnius, 1928, l. 1.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

its nature in his poems “Dominican Hill” and “Spring”.⁸¹ In his most popular poem “*Jukla, uvlum, jukla*” (“Sleep, son, sleep”) S. Kobecki glorifies two Karaite “holy places” – Zion or the Holy Land and Trakai. The distinction made between these two places is expressed in such words „Let the Zion be the purpose of your hopes/ and Trakai – the object of your thoughts”⁸². These lines aptly describe the separation of religious and secular homelands, and mark the changes in the self-consciousness of the community. It seems, that already in the 4th decade of the 20th c., the Crimean image established itself in Lithuanian Karaite community as well. Albeit indirectly, it is also mentioned in the poem *Batyr bijin tamaša aty* (“The magic horse of the Grand Duke”, 1933)⁸³ by Simonas Firkovičius.

Duke, You are – the only one, like the Lord in heavens!

*We heard in the old country of Solchat*⁸⁴,

*That the flocks of kipchaks*⁸⁵ *in the north dense forest*

*Are laid down by your hand, strong and spirited.*⁸⁶

(...)

The Great Vytautas looked out from the castle window,

And said to the women in Karaite language... (Underlined by the author – D. T.).

This short fragment from the poem expresses the essential characteristics of modern ethnical identity of Karaites – the established theory of the Khazarian origins, the legend of ancestral homeland in the Crimea and Karaite language as an identity mark of the community. The focus on the historical homeland question made by Karaite poets and community activists is not a casual matter. In the consciousness of the community it is associated with the origins and the blood relationship with the

⁸¹ The unique works of Simonas Kobeckis reflect the Karaite worldview in the 19th c. His poems were influenced by various languages – Hebrew, Polish, Turkish, Russian and Arabic. Borrowings from these languages indicate, that the Karaite language was still alive and intensely used in the end of the 19th c. In the 20th c. S. Szapszal started to reform Karaite language and these borrowings from other languages were changed to Turkish words only, so the language of S. Kobeckis poems is very important from the linguistic point of view. We can see a parallel between the change of language and identity – elements of other cultures have been eliminated both from Karaite language and self-consciousness of the community.

⁸² “*Syjon niech będzie celém twej nadziei, a Troki – przedmiotem twej myśli*” (translation to Polish language by Ananjasz Zajączkowski), from: Ananjasz Zajączkowski, “*Pieśni Kobeckiego*”, *Osobne odbicie z czasopisma „Myśl Karaimska”*, t. I, z. IV – V, Vilnius, 1928, l. 1.

⁸³ The poem both in Karaite and Lithuanian languages is published in: Halina Kobeckaitė, *Lietuvos karaimai*, Vilnius, 1997, p. 115-118.

⁸⁴ Solchat – a territory in the Crimea.

⁸⁵ Kipchaks – one of the former nations of the Golden Horde, who lived in the Crimea.

⁸⁶ Simonas Firkovičius, *Batyr bijin tamaša aty* [The magic horse of the Grand Duke], in Halina Kobeckaitė, *Lietuvos karaimai*, Vilnius, 1997, p. 116.

ancestors. In other words, it is an integral part of the origin question, which was very relevant in the construction of the modern ethnical identity of Karaites. Thus, the transferring of the historical homeland to the Crimea strengthened, legitimated and consolidated theory, which emphasized the Karaite origins from Khazars, both in the collective consciousness of the community and the surrounding society.

II.3. Religion: reform attempts in the secularising community

S. Szapszal took seriously the adaptation of language and history to the new identity ideology, but left behind another significant element of Karaite self-perception – religion. Paradoxically, he, formally the chief religious Karaite leader, hesitated to start religious reforms.⁸⁷ The issues of religious reforms in the Karaite community are not consistently discussed in historiography – both M. Kizilov⁸⁸ and R. Freund⁸⁹, who did a research on this issue, mostly concentrated on the refusal of Hebrew symbols and terminology in the Karaite liturgy and paid less attention to the development of the ideas regarding religious reforms. It is important to notice, that the need for religious reforms, realized by the intellectuals of the community, was influenced by both ideological and practical reasons. The first ones were determined by the established need to differentiate themselves from Jews, while the second ones were determined by the evaporating religious faith of Karaites and growing secularization, which was a threat for Karaite self-perception and survival of the community.

Although, S. Szapszal have not initiated or implemented religious reforms himself, he created preconditions for the emergence of such ideas in the Karaite community. Shortly after becoming the chief Karaite religious leader, he represented his own interpretation of Karaite religion – “Karaites confess the Old Testament in its primary purity, alike the Christian Church. Anan (*Anan ben David – auth. comment*) accepted Jesus Christ as the [God] sent prophet, and declared Muhammad as the prophet as well.”⁹⁰ Moreover, for the first time he introduces the collation of Karaite religion and Islamic tradition – he compares mufti with hakham, imam with khazan, muezzin with samashti, although these parallelisms would not be adequate in religious practice.⁹¹

⁸⁷A. Mardkowicz and S. Bobowicz introduced their separate religious reform projects to S. Szapszal, but these reforms remained unimplemented (see. further).

⁸⁸ Mikhail Kizilov, *Social adaptation and manipulation with self-identity...*

⁸⁹ Roman Freund, *Karaites and dejudaiization...*

⁹⁰ *Memorial*, LCVA, F. 51, Ap. 4, b. 117, l. 3

⁹¹ LCVA F. 51, Ap. 4, b. 117

The need for religious reforms was realized in the third decade of the 20th c. – A. Mardkowicz, the author of “The sons of law”⁹² and one of the leaders of community in Poland, in 1928 wrote a letter to S. Szapszal suggesting the reform project for Karaite religion. However, as it can be seen from the subsequent correspondence of S. Szapszal and a subsequent project of Samuel Bobowicz, the reforms proposed by Mardkowicz were not implemented. In contrast with already mentioned S. Bobowicz, who initiated similar reforms on the 4th decade of 20th c., Mardkowicz mentioned that reasons, which encouraged changes in the religious rituals, are more connected with the need to adapt in Slavic environment than with the distancing themselves from Jews (even though this motive is also important). The author proposed two projects, which should have helped Karaites to adapt to the surrounding environment. The first one - to move the celebration of the seventh day of the week from Saturday to Sunday, arguing, that “in the conditions, in which we live now, not Saturday, but Sunday is the seventh day”, so where worship takes place only once a week, they should be moved from Saturday to Sunday.⁹³ The second issue, directly linked with the traditional requirements of Judaism, was named by the author as *the hat issue* (“*kwestja czapkowa*”). Stating that, “from some Karaites’ perspective, walking without covering your head [with hat] is pleasant for surrounding environment”, he suggested to discuss this issue, although did not find it of a big importance.⁹⁴ Mardkowicz suggested some exotic ideas as well, for instance, to revive the sacrificial traditions of Biblical times only by replacing a lamb with flowers and burning of incense.⁹⁵

As we can see from his proposals, the ideas of A. Mardkowicz were strongly influenced by the surrounding society and a need to adapt to it. As predicted by the initiator of these ideas, his reform project met a strong resistance in the community – one of the leaders of Halich community, Zachar Zacharowicz, wrote a letter to S. Szapszal on the 4th of August, 1928, stating, that these propositions made by Mardkowicz caused a great dissatisfaction in Halich community - Karaites considered these reforms as non-ethical and immoral, although the author of the letter, defended A. Mardkowicz for his good intentions.⁹⁶

Although the first attempt to reform Karaite religion and adapt it to the modern age failed, the need for changes remained in the community. However, a decade had passed before the second reform project was proposed. It was constructed by Samuel

⁹² Aleksandr Mardkowicz, *The sons of law*, in “Onarmach”, Panevěžys, 1934 (a one-time publication) p. 8-16.

⁹³ A. Mardkowicz to S. Szapszal – F. 143, b. 466, l. 8v

⁹⁴ A. Mardkowicz to S. Szapszal – F. 143, b. 466, l. 6

⁹⁵ A. Mardkowicz to S. Szapszal – F. 143, b. 466, l. 5.

⁹⁶ LMAB RS F. 143, b. 511, A letter from Zarach Zarachowicz to S. Szapszal about the resentment of reforms proposed by A. Mardkowicz in the Karaite community.

Bobowicz⁹⁷, who at that time lived in the emigration in the United States of America. In the November of 1938 he wrote a letter to S. Szapszal, in which he outlined his reform proposals for religious life of the community.⁹⁸ In his letter he indicated the main reasons, why these changes are necessary. Those reasons included the preservation of Karaite self-consciousness, which depended on the answers to important issues of the community, and the possibility to achieve main goals of the community. Those goals are not identified, but the contents of this letter suggest, that author has in mind Karaite adaptation in unpredictable and menacing environment (the First World War and the Russian revolution have recently passed, uneasy nationalistic feelings were in the air) and the necessity to assert their differences from Jews.⁹⁹ Hence, the need to consolidate ethnical self-perception of Karaites was clearly understood and expressed. In addition to his proposal to refuse to worship in Hebrew, he also presented a unique understanding of religious holidays, which was undoubtedly influenced by the Karaite Khazarian origins theory, which was already well-established at that time. So Bobowicz states, that “we do not accept celebrations, which are reminiscent of the expulsion of the Jews from Egypt, because our ancestors were not there, they were not expelled from there, and so we do not consider it as our celebrations.”¹⁰⁰ (*underlined by the author – D. T.*)

Although both S. Bobowicz and A. Mardkowicz considered Hebrew language, used in the liturgy, as the main object of the religious reforms in the Karaite community, other ideas of S. Bobowicz relatedly departed from the ones expressed by his predecessor. Despite the different ideas both authors had similar intentions – A. Mardkowicz sought to adapt Karaite religion to the changed circumstances by introducing new rituals, while S. Bobowicz led by similar purpose wanted to eliminate Jewish elements from Karaite liturgy. The only difference is that the first one was proposing specific actions, and the second one – ideas, which should have led to changes.

It is worth mentioning, that both A. Mardkowicz and S. Bobowicz presented their individual ideas about Karaite religion, traditions and the need to adapt to new, changing living conditions in the modern society, to S. Szapszal hoping for his approval, support and initiatives to implement these projects. As the S. Bobowicz states in his letter, “All these issues make us worry and we rely on your strong will, because as many of us have speculated, this issue is of a very important and urgent

⁹⁷ Samuel Bobowicz was about fifty years old in 1938, and it means that he could have been born at the last decade of the 19th c. Although, there are no more data found on his person, it is possible, that he could have been related with Simcha Bobowicz, who carried out a successful mission to Saint Petersburg in 1827.

⁹⁸ A letter from S. Bobowicz to S. Szapszal, LMAB RS F. 143, b. 182, l. 1-8.

⁹⁹ A letter from S. Bobowicz to S. Szapszal, LMAB RS F. 143, b. 182, l. 2.

¹⁰⁰ A letter from S. Bobowicz to S. Szapszal, LMAB RS F. 143, b. 182, l. 3.

nature.”¹⁰¹ The assumption can be made, that S. Szapszal played an important role in these discussions about reforms, because only he, as the chief religious leader of Karaites, had a possibility to start their implementation. Paradoxically, he remained reticent in the decision making process regarding the religious questions, because academic activities were closer to his heart.¹⁰² His relationship with reforms, proposed by A. Mardkowicz and S. Bobowicz, was rather passive – in the first case the community itself revolted against reforms and in the second case – events were influenced by the Second World War. Therefore, it remains unclear, what was the response of Karaite community to the latest reform proposal, which remained not implemented. However, the crucial mental fractures for the revealing of the process of formation of Karaite self-perception had already occurred. And despite the living in the different countries, the Karaite intellectuals were working together when considering issues important for the survival of Karaites.

Conclusions

Although the Karaites of Eastern Europe were aware of their differences from Rabbinic Jews, until the 19th c. this issue rarely left the field of religious discussions. In the 19th c., in the background of the Jewish question policy carried out by Russian Empire, Karaites declared their dissociation from Jews on religious basis as well, but taking into account the pragmatic aims – to improve their social status in the Empire. Though Karaites asserted their isolation from the Rabbinic Jews, they still associated themselves with religious tradition of Judaism, Jewish origins.

The 20th c. was a turning-point for the self-perception of Karaites. It was influenced by both rational reasons – integration in society, higher social status and integration in it, and mental sensations – a steadily growing gap from Jewishness, secularization and the emergence of the sense of ethnical identity. The activities of the chief Karaite religious leader, S. Szapszal, had the most significant influence on the formation of modern self-perception of Karaites. After becoming the leader of community, S. Szapszal turned his activities towards 1) full delimitation of Karaite self-consciousness from Judaic tradition and 2) the introduction of new elements of identity and its consolidation in the self-consciousness of the community. He reformed Karaite language – changed the Hebrew terms into Turkic, and then on the basis of Karaite language tried to justify the theory, which traced the origins of Karaites from mystical Turkic tribe. In this way S. Szapszal completely abandoned the previously dominant perception about Jewish Karaite origins. Charisma, leadership and diplomatic experience served to S. Szapszal – his theories found a

¹⁰¹ A letter from S. Bobowicz to S. Szapszal, LMAB RS F. 143, b. 182, l. 1-8.

¹⁰² M. Kizilov ambiguously states, that S. Szapszal were completely ignorant of religious affairs. See Mikhail Kizilov, *The Karaites of Galicia...* p. 340.

support among the community leaders, through them the ideology of modern ethnical identity of Karaites was established among other members of the community as well. Until the middle of the 20th c. S. Szapszal formed a clear, complete, logical ideology of ethnical identity, which was based on alleged connection between Karaite language, origin and religion. The dissemination of this ideology through the community leaders, the press and propaganda oriented towards the surrounding society, has managed to establish itself not only in their community and surrounding society, but in an academic environment as well.