

A BRIEF SURVEY OF PRESENT-DAY KARAITE COMMUNITIES IN EUROPE

Emanuela Trevisan Semi

SINCE the turn of the present century, demographers and anthropologists have shown great interest about the Karaite communities of Europe.¹ These groups were limited in number and they obeyed strictly the rules of exogamy and homogamy,² while living for centuries in host societies which had other dominant religions. Protestant writers had considered since the seventeenth century the Karaites to be 'rational' Jews — in contrast to the Rabbinic Jews whom they labelled as 'superstitious' and whom they therefore viewed as 'Pharisees'.³ Even nowadays, there remains among some social scientists and other scholars a serious curiosity about the structure and beliefs of Karaite communities after their desperate fight for survival during the Second World War, when they argued forcefully that they were not Jews 'racially' and therefore not to be dealt with as 'genetic' Jews by the Nazi and fascist or Vichy French authorities.⁴

In the course of several centuries, the Karaites developed defence mechanisms which showed some similarities with those adopted by the Marranos (the Jews who officially converted to Christianity since the time of the Spanish Inquisition, while secretly continuing to observe some Jewish rituals and other practices); those mechanisms, as well as their ability to exhibit some of the characteristics of the host society, enabled them to survive in several countries of varying cultural and national structures.

This paper is based on the data I collected when engaged in fieldwork among the Karaites of Poland and Lithuania in 1989 and among those living in France in 1991. The word 'Karaite' is derived from the Hebrew term *ba'alei mikra* ('those who read' — that is, those who read the written Old Testament text). Indeed, the Karaites strictly adhere to the principles and practices set out in the Scriptural text and they refuse to recognize the validity of the oral law as recorded in the Talmud. They therefore also do not observe the principles and practices set out in the Talmud, since the text of the latter is based on the oral law. In Eastern Europe, these *ba'alei mikra* insist on referring to themselves as *Karaim* and they object to the term 'Karaite'. This is

because in the past, Rabbinic Jews in Eastern Europe made sarcastic play of the fact that in the group's language *kara-it* means 'black dog'.⁵

The Karaites nowadays continue generally to define themselves mainly in contradistinction to Rabbinical Jews whom they often considered to be their 'enemies' through the centuries. They have evolved an image, or rather a stereotype, of Rabbinic Jews as inferior beings. For example, they are at great pains to stress the peculiar (alleged) practices of those Jews; the Karaites of Lithuania claim that Rabbinic Jews bury their dead in a sitting position and that their pronunciation of the Hebrew language is weird. They clearly refer to the Ashkenazi style of pronouncing Hebrew and apparently ignore the fact that Sephardi and Oriental Jews utter Hebrew words in the same way as the Karaites do.

The Eastern European Karaites also claim that they have no Jewish characteristics whatsoever and instead stress the similarities between their own practices and those of the Muslims — such as removing footwear before entering their places of worship — as well as the similarities with Christian traditions, since also like the Christians they tend to celebrate many feast days within the intimacy of their families rather than in a house of prayer. This is particularly true of the Karaites of Eastern Europe who, since the end of the eighteenth century, and under the influence of Abraham Firkovich (the famous Karaite bibliophile and archaeologist), have maintained that the 'racial' origins of the Karaites are distinctly not Jewish and that the Karaites are descendants of the Khazars. However, it should be noted here that such firm denials of any affinity between Karaites and Rabbinic Jews have been expressed mainly by Karaite leaders and that several decades ago it was already noticed that rank-and-file Karaites were much more moderate in their attitude to Rabbinic Jews.⁶

Most of the Karaites who live in Europe nowadays are descended from the branch of Karaism which has flourished since the sixteenth century in Lithuania, Galicia, and the Crimea. According to a 1985 survey, there were then in Poland 100 Karaites and 24 half-Karaites (children of mixed marriages where one of the parents was Christian); they lived mostly in Warsaw, Gdansk, and Krakow.⁷ According to the 1970 Census report to the USSR, there were then in the Soviet Union a total of 4,571 Karaites; they lived mainly in Lithuania (Vilnius, Troki, and Kaunas), in the Crimea, and in the old Karaite centre of Panevezys. Only a few individuals were left in the town of Halicz (in the Ukraine), which had been for centuries an important place of Karaite settlement. It may be that there are still in Vienna or elsewhere in Austria some Karaites who have remained there after seeking refuge with the Tartars in the flight from the Crimea when the Nazis were defeated in 1944.⁸

KARAITE COMMUNITIES IN EUROPE

France has had Karaite citizens since the second decade of the present century, when some 300 fled Russia and sought refuge after the Revolution of 1917. After the Suez war of 1956 (also known as 'the Sinai campaign'), hundreds of Egyptian Karaites emigrated to France and their numbers were augmented by a few Karaite households from Istanbul. There are also several isolated individual Karaites and some Karaite families in Switzerland and in Italy. In this context it is worth noting that the Karaites of Egypt, in very sharp contrast with those of Eastern Europe, claim to be the true and original (unmixed) descendants of the Jews from the era of Jeroboam the First.

The leaders of the Karaites in Europe nowadays are a very old *hazzan* (cantor) who in 1989 lived in Breslaw, some turcologues in Poland, and a few historians of Karaism in Poland and in France. In the Soviet Union the various communities have their own local dignitaries. The last *hakham* (equivalent to a rabbi) in Eastern Europe lived in Troki and died in 1961; he was Seraja Szapszal. In France there is no Karaite *hakham*. Two old Karaite Egyptian leaders live in Switzerland; the majority emigrated to Israel and to the United States.

The Karaites of Eastern Europe speak a language which is akin to a sub-group of Turkish and which they call Karaim; that language has an admixture of borrowed Hebrew, Arabic, and Persian terms; its written form used to be in Hebrew characters until the turn of the present century but it later followed the roman alphabet. Karaim is claimed to be a fundamental part of modern Karaite identity and it is a source of pride for the Eastern European Karaites, since the language is seen as tangible proof that they are part of the Turkic ethnic group, and especially that they are indeed the descendants of the Khazars. They find no difficulty in equating the use of a language with the ethnic or 'racial' identity of other speakers of that language. It is such an attitude which must have led the intellectual Karaites of Eastern Europe to concentrate their interest since the beginning of the present century on linguistic studies.⁹

The Karaites of Egypt, however, had no knowledge of Karaim, as spoken and written by their correligionists, but always used the Hebrew and/or Arabic languages. The Karaites who went to French or Italian schools in Egypt acquired these additional languages.

There are nowadays in Europe about 6,000 members of the two main branches of Karaism — those of Eastern European settlement and those of Egyptian origin who came to France after 1956. Although they may appear to be radically different from one another in several respects, they have in fact many important elements in common — not only in the realm of religious beliefs and practices but also in their life-style. They use the same calendar to mark their festivals (the calendar of the Karaites in Israel, who are of Egyptian origin) and they also freely intermarry — for example, a member of an Eastern

European community may take as a spouse a Karaite of Egyptian origin.

Moreover, the various dispersed Karaite groups in Europe have something else in common: a general aptitude to merge unobtrusively in some segment of the wider society, to be as inconspicuous as possible. For example, the Karaites of Egyptian origin now settled in France pretend to belong originally to the Rabbinic Egyptian Jewish community in that country while in reality, in the privacy of their homes, they continue to observe their traditional Karaite practices and rituals; but *vis-à-vis* the French authorities, the French Gentile citizens and French Jews, they pass as members of the much larger Jewish community of Egyptian origin.

If a theoretical ladder is drawn to represent the degrees of observance of Karaite principles, one should put at the top of the ladder the community of Egyptian Karaites in France; in the middle, those now living in Poland; and at the very bottom, those in Lithuania and in the Crimea. No data are readily available about the Karaites of Panevezys in Lithuania; according to the Italian enquiry of 1934,¹⁰ it seems that they had become less acculturated before the Second World War to the process of Polonization which affected other Karaite group (especially as far as the Karaim language was concerned). Instead, the community apparently retained more than any other Karaite groups in the Soviet Union its traditional rites and observances. As for the Karaites of the Crimea, I have no available fieldwork data and only contradictory reports from Polish and Lithuanian Karaites whom I interviewed.

The Karaites of the Soviet Union have been deprived for several decades of their religious texts and of the Old Testament; they have not been able to observe freely and openly their rituals, even in the privacy of their own homes; and they have had to live and survive in an atheistic culture — to survive by appearing to conform to that dominant culture. As a consequence, they have perhaps inevitably lost nearly all the elements of their religion and of their culture. It is to be hoped that fieldworkers will now be given the opportunity to report in the near future on the situation of the Karaite citizens of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that one of the religious practices which has survived among some Soviet Karaites is that of the celebration of the Passover; they refer to the festival as the *haggadah*, retaining the name of the text of the Passover celebrations and using it to refer to the actual period of the festival. They also bake *matzot* (the prescribed unleavened bread) in their own homes: they call that bread *tinbil*; and they also eat bitter herbs — but apparently do not know the religious bases of such practices.¹¹ Not only do they not have ready access to the text of the Old Testament, but they also have no copies of their own particular version of the *haggadah* (which is very different from the *haggadah* of Rabbinic Jews). Since they have also not had the benefit of

KARAITE COMMUNITIES IN EUROPE

religious instruction, they have no reference points to guide them about the origins of their old religious traditions and beliefs. On the other hand, they have retained a fairly lively interest in Karaism generally. Meanwhile, since the Soviet Union recognizes the existence of various nationalities in the country, the Karaites can claim to constitute a national group.

When I was in Vilnius in 1989, I discovered that the Karaites who wish to preserve a 'pure' Karaite lineage or pedigree take as their first spouse a fellow Karaite from their own community and wait until offspring of the union are born. Once such an unsullied line of descent has been formally established, they feel free to divorce and to choose another spouse who is not a Karaite but who is more to their liking as a marriage partner.

Following the establishment of various 'national' centres in Vinius, such as the Jewish centre and the Tartar centre, the city's Karaites founded recently their own establishment, which aims to preserve Karaim (their own language) and their own culture. For example, it has recorded various aspects of Karaite folklore, including tales, proverbs, and lullabies. The folkloric items which have been particularly preserved are those which are akin to the customs and traditions of Turks and Khazars. Even the Karaite museum in Troki, which was established some years before the Second World War, has preserved exhibits and artefacts which are mainly of Oriental manufacture or of a Turkish character; they could be described as being of only general interest, since there are no religious objects apart from the single case of an oil lamp which used to be in the Karaite synagogue in Damascus. It is worth noting that the museum has no objects with a Hebrew inscription — neither in Hebrew characters nor in roman transliteration. That fact surprised me since in 1989 in Warsaw I saw in a Karaite private house a great many objects which used to be in various Karaite synagogues in the Crimea and which bore Hebrew inscriptions. There are also Hebrew inscriptions on gravestones in Karaite cemeteries. I saw one such inscription on a tombstone in the old cemetery of Vilnius (which dates from the middle of the nineteenth century and which is separated from the Tartar graveyard only by a small ditch), and many others in the old Troki cemetery.

That old Troki cemetery was consecrated many centuries ago; in it, there lie buried victims of the plague which ravaged the Karaite communities of Lithuania in 1710; most of the inscriptions in that cemetery are in Hebrew until the third decade of the present century. However, those gravestones dating from the second half of the nineteenth century until the turn of the twentieth have under the Hebrew words a Russian or Polish inscription.¹² Next to that old cemetery, a new one was consecrated in 1935; most of the inscriptions there are in Russian, Lithuanian, and Karaim. The ground is strewn

with small glass pebbles in order to smother weeds: no other more direct methods of weed eradication are employed because according to Karaite tradition, a cemetery must not be maintained: it must be left to revert to nature.

The Karaites who are now in Poland (and whom I described above as being half-way up the ladder of traditional observance) came to that country in the present century. They are the descendants of Karaites who emigrated from the Crimea after the First World War, of Eastern European Karaites who had come before the Second World War to study (especially medicine, engineering, and law) at Warsaw University, and of other Karaites who had served in the Polish army in exile during the Second World War and had married Lithuanian Karaite women. Many of the present-day Karaites in Poland have now married non-Karaite spouses in a civil ceremony.¹³

There has been a continuing tradition, still in force, for a special scholarly interest in the Turkish language and in the Karaites' own language, Karaim. This is well in evidence in the Institute of Oriental and Hebraic Studies of Warsaw University.

Karaites in Poland are also well represented in the liberal professions.¹⁴ Members of the older generation (those who are past their fifties) have not forgotten the old religious customs and traditions and they speak nostalgically about those which used to be observed — such as the ceremonies relating to a circumcision or to a religious wedding.

The Karaite cemetery in Warsaw, which is near an Orthodox Christian graveyard, was consecrated only about a century ago. The oldest inscription is dated in the 1890s.¹⁵ The person buried under that tombstone was from the Crimea and the inscription is in Russian characters. The other gravestones have inscriptions in Polish and in Karaim (in roman characters). On some graves, there are sculptured designs of twigs or of cups from which a small flame issues. I have not seen such devices in any other Karaite cemetery, either in Europe or elsewhere. (I have visited the Karaite cemeteries in Jerusalem, Cairo, and Istanbul.)

In Poland, the Karaites are recognized by the authorities as a religious association and they are governed by the Statute of the Karaite Religious Union, which regulates civil as well as religious matters. The members of the Karaite clergy, consisting of the *hakham*, the *hazzan*, and the *ochuwczu* (a sort of sexton) are officially recognized by the Statute and are expected to deal with the organization of religious instruction as well as the upkeep of the synagogue and of the cemeteries. The *hazzan* must also deal with the solemnization of marriages, and the burial services.¹⁶

Among young Karaites, there is evidence of a renewal of interest in aspects of Karaism: in the late 1970s, a young man published a booklet in Polish about Karaism entitled *Coś* ('something').¹⁷ Karaite meetings

KARAITE COMMUNITIES IN EUROPE

are also organized in Warsaw and the proceedings are held in the Karaim language; the most popular meetings are those which are concerned with Karaite folklore — as is the case in Lithuania.

As for France, the case of the Egyptian Karaites who have settled in that country is of particular interest to those who have studied the process of 'Marranisation' and its manifestations. In Egypt, the community referred to its members as 'Karaite Jews' — Israélites Caraïtes — and were also described by the Rabbinic Jews of that country as 'Juifs Caraïtes'. However, when these Egyptian Karaites emigrated to France and settled there, most of them claimed to be Egyptian Rabbinic Jews and attended services in Sephardi synagogues. When I carried out fieldwork in France this year (1991), I noted that the Karaites of Egyptian origin strive to merge into the background as far as possible and in so doing lead a sort of double life. Karaism has no *bar-mitzvah*, no laying of phylacteries, no *mezuzoth*, and no ritual bath for 'family purity'. However, young boys of the community now prepare for a *bar-mitzvah* and carry out the rite while *mezuzoth* are affixed on the door jambs of their homes. Here it must be stated that young Karaites resent having to study for their *bar-mitzvah* and complain about it in the privacy of their homes.

Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) does not always occur on the same day in both the Rabbinic and the Karaite calendars. When it does not, those Karaites who work for Rabbinic employers fast on both days. On the occasion of their own holy day, in such a case, they assemble quietly in their own homes to carry out the traditional Karaite rituals. The Karaites of Egyptian origin resident in France tend to take fellow-Karaites as spouses. In some cases, the latter are residents of the United States, Turkey, or Israel and they have been introduced by close or distant relatives of Egyptian Karaite families who had emigrated to those countries. Sometimes, a Karaite will marry a Rabbinic Jewish partner in a ceremony conducted according to Rabbinic rites. In such cases, it may well be that the officiating Rabbi is not aware (or prefers not to be aware) that one of the partners is a Karaite. In Rabbinic Judaism, a Karaite is not acceptable as a spouse for a Jewish bride or groom and Karaite divorces are not considered to be valid procedures according to Rabbinic *halakhah* (religious law).¹⁸

The Karaites of Egyptian origin in France prefer to mix with French Jews who are not very observant and who are not familiar with all the traditions of Judaism in various countries; this enables them to get away with the fiction that their practices are those which were current among Egyptian Rabbinic Jews. For example, they go so far as to invite non-Orthodox French Jews to their own Karaite Passover celebrations, asserting that their rituals are those of Rabbinic Jews — although they do not have on their *seder* table the platter with the prescribed items of food. Moreover, the Karaite Passover *haggadah* consists only of Psalms

and the three blessings (on unleavened bread, bitter herbs, and wine); some households have a *haggadah* text, with a French translation, which was printed in Cairo in 1940. Thus, the Karaites of Egyptian origin who have settled in France have managed to merge openly into the Sephardi strand of the pluralistic society of French Jewry while secretly preserving their own identity as non-Rabbinic Jews and quietly observing as much as possible their own traditional religious practices. The *hakhamim* of the Egyptian Karaites chose to emigrate to Israel or to the United States, so that the members of the community who settled in France have no qualified religious leaders; they felt closer to Rabbinic Jews than to French Christians and therefore decided simply to say that they were Jews of Egyptian origin.

The Karaites of Eastern European origin resident in France all seem to have merged into French society. Those still in Eastern Europe, who had denied since the eighteenth century the existence of any link between themselves and Rabbinic Judaism, eventually merged into the religiously devout Polish wider society as well as into the militantly atheistic culture of the Soviet Union. This truly remarkable ingenuity and successful strategy has resulted in the fact that the various Karaite communities are seen, whatever country they live in, as being conservative and conformist groups. That may well be why the stereotype of a Karaite in Europe since the seventeenth century¹⁹ has been that of a loyal, trustworthy, and hard-working citizen.*

* This article has been translated by Judith Freedman.

NOTES

¹ See Samuel Weissenberg, 'Die Karäer der Krim' in *Globus*, vol. 84, no. 1, 1903, pp. 139–55. See also Alexandre Baschmakoff, *Cinquante siècles d'évolution ethnique autour de la mer noire*, Paris, 1937, pp. 152–64 and Corrado Gini, 'I caraimi di Polonia e Lituania' in *Genus*, vol. 2, no. 1–2, 1936–37, pp. 20–22. On the Karaites of Egypt, see Elda Luzzatto, 'I caraiti egiziani' in *Archivio per l'Antropologia e la Etnologia*, vol. 83, 1954, pp. 81–131.

² The rules of marriage among the Karaites are based on a literal interpretation of Genesis 2:24 which specifies that man and wife will become one flesh. Accordingly, Karaite religion considers that husband and wife become blood relatives, and by extension so do the kinsmen and kinswomen of one's spouse become blood relatives and hence forbidden marriage partners at some future date. See Leon Nemoy, 'Karaites' in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 10, Jerusalem, 1971, column 780.

³ See the references to John Dury (1596–1680) and to Johann Rittangel (1606–52) in the article by Richard Popkin, 'The Lost Tribes, the Karaites and the English Millenarians' in *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1986, pp. 213–27; a reference to Gustav Peringer (1651–1710) can be found in an article by Simon Szyszman, 'Gustav Peringer's Mission bei den Karäern' in *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, n.s., vol. 27, no. 2, 1952,

KARAITE COMMUNITIES IN EUROPE

pp. 215–28. See also Jacques Basnages, *L'Histoire et la religion chez les Juifs*, vol. 2, Rotterdam, 1707, pp. 433–78.

⁴ See the article by Philip Friedman, 'The Karaites under Nazi Rule' in Max Beloff, ed., *On the Track of Tyranny*, London, 1960, pp. 97–123; Warren P. Green, 'The Nazi Racial Policy Toward the Karaites' in *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1978, pp. 36–44; Shmuel Spector, 'The Karaites in Nazi-occupied Europe Seen Through German Documents' (in Hebrew) in *Peamim*, no. 29, 1986, pp. 90–108; and by Emanuela Trevisan Semi the following two articles: 'L'oscillation ethnique: le cas des karaïtes pendant la seconde guerre mondiale' in *Revue de l'histoire des Religions*, vol. 206, no. 4, 1989, pp. 377–98; and 'The Image of the Karaites in Nazi and Vichy France Documents' in *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, vol. 32, no. 2, December 1990, pp. 81–94.

⁵ See Tadeusz Kowalski, *Karaimische Texte im Dialect von Troki*, Krakow, 1929, p. viii.

⁶ That moderate attitude is revealed in the findings of the research carried out by Corrado Gini and his team in 1934 (sponsored by the Comitato italiano per lo studio dei problemi della popolazione) among the Karaite communities of Poland and of Lithuania — communities which I myself reported on, in my *Gli ebrei caraiti tra etnia e religione* (Rome, 1984, pp. 72–75). See also Libmann Hersch (who was a member of Gini's team), author of 'Les langues des inscriptions funéraires au cimetière karaïme de Troki' in *Genus*, vol. 2, no. 3–4, 1937, pp. 266–68.

⁷ See Roman Freund, *Karaites and Dejudaization*, Stockholm Studies in Comparative Religion, no. 30, Stockholm, 1991, p. 100.

⁸ See Spector, *op. cit.* in Note 4 above, p. 102.

⁹ This was particularly so in the case of Ananiasz Zajaczkowski, Alexander Dubinski, and Simon Szyszman.

¹⁰ See Corrado Gini, *op. cit.* in Note 1 above, p. 16; see also Elisabetta Gottardo, *Le Comunità caraita contemporanee in Lituania e Polonia*, unpublished MA thesis, University of Venice, 1984–85, pp. 35–37 and 218–24.

¹¹ For a more detailed analysis of the celebration of the *Seder*, see my recent article, 'Le seder non mesuddar dans la Pâque des Karaïtes contemporains. Une analyse du processus de transformation' in *Cahiers d'études juives*, vol. 3, 1991.

¹² They were studied by Hersch (*op. cit.* in Note 6 above) who saw them as evidence of the process of rejection of the Hebrew language which was taking place among the Karaites of Eastern Europe.

¹³ See Freund, *op. cit.* in Note 7 above, pp. 99–100 and Gottardo, *op. cit.* in Note 10 above, pp. 76–78.

¹⁴ See Gottardo, *op. cit.* in Note 10 above, p. 76. She found, in 1981, that of the 120 Polish Karaites whom she identified, 46 had a University degree and a further nine were university students. I have no precise comparative data for other Karaite communities in Europe, but I noted a similar tendency in Lithuania while the Karaites of France were more inclined towards commerce.

¹⁵ Only the figures 189– are legible: the last number is effaced, worn away.

¹⁶ Gottardo, *op. cit.* in Note 10 above, has reproduced the statute in full and provided an Italian translation (pp. 154–66).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

EMANUELA TREVISAN SEMI

¹⁸ See Micael Corinaldi, 'The Problem of Divorce by Judicial Decree in Karaite Halakhah' in *Dine Israel*, vol. 9, 1978-79, pp. 101-44.

¹⁹ One of the first accounts which so described the Karaites was by John Dury, who had related the descriptions given to him by Johann Rittangel; the latter had lived for long among the Karaites of Turkey and apparently also among those of Lithuania: see Popkin, *op. cit.* in Note 3 above, pp. 218-20.