

SAVING A DYING LANGUAGE

Dr. Michał Németh of the Jagiellonian University explains how a peek inside someone's closets can help stop a culture from disappearing and how altruism can facilitate the development of a niche branch of science.

ACADEMIA: You've received an ERC grant for research into the Karaim language. What does your project involve?

MICHAŁ NÉMETH: The project has many aspects, but the core is formed by historical and linguistic research. As a researcher dealing with historical linguistics, an Orientalist and also a Turkologist, I'm especially interested in saying as much as possible about the history of Karaim. It is a very poorly studied language whose written sources are equally poorly known. Over the past several years, largely thanks to the engagement of my associates, I've had the opportunity to "take a peek inside people's closets" as part of a project funded by an NCN grant – I've reviewed Karaim manuscripts held in private collections, kept on shelves in the homes of people who live in Poland.

Are there many of them?

Karaims form a small minority that has inhabited the territory of Poland for several centuries. Despite its small size, it has produced a relatively large number of intellectuals. In the 20th century, there were quite a lot of Turkologists of Karaim origin. After World War II, they helped create the emerging Polish community of Oriental scholars. I mean such people as Ananiasz

Zajączkowski, Włodzimierz Zajączkowski, Aleksander Dubiński, and Józef Sulimowicz.

How did you make contact with the community?

I was invited by two individuals of Karaim origin who were simultaneously experts on the field, namely Dr. Anna Sulimowicz, a Turkologist at the University of Warsaw, and Mariola Abkowicz, president of the Polish Karaim Association, one of the two associations of this type in Poland. I'm of Karaim origin, too. I grew up chiefly in Hungary, but I was also treated as one of them.



DR. MICHAŁ NÉMETH


**Michał Németh,
PhD**

studied Hungarian and Turkish philology at the Jagiellonian University, where he began working immediately after graduation. In 2011, he defended his doctoral dissertation in Turkology. In 2015–2018, as a fellow of the Humboldt Foundation, he carried out research at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz in Germany. He was the principal investigator in two major research projects financed by Poland's National Science Center (NCN). He has authored several dozen research papers in several languages. His research focuses on the Turkic language of the Karaims – adherents of Karaism. He has received a grant from the European Research Council (ERC) for the project "(Re)constructing a Bible: A new approach to unedited Biblical manuscripts as sources for the early history of the Karaim language."

michal.nemeth@uj.edu.pl

All this made it easier for me to establish contact with what is a rather closed ethnic group. Also, there was a favorable climate for research. It was clear that the Karaim language was dying, that it needed to be treated as special. In addition, it turned out that there were a handful of Turkologists in the Karaim community who wanted to do something about that.

When access to private collections became possible, it turned out that they were extremely valuable. For example, we came across the oldest translation of the Torah into Karaim. It had been sitting on someone's shelf for years, and the owner admitted

that he had wondered since childhood what that manuscript contained. Although he was a Karaim, he could not decipher it, because it was written in the Hebrew alphabet, a script that Karaims no longer know.

What religion do Karaims follow?

Karaism. It is a branch of Judaism that rejects the Talmud. For Karaims, the Hebrew Bible is the only source of knowledge about moral law. So it could be said that they are in a sense more orthodox than other Jews when it comes to sources of religion.

But let's get back to linguistic issues – the situation of the Karaims was similar to that of the Ottoman Turks. In the Ottoman Empire, knowledge of Arabic was quite common in certain groups for centuries, and that was because the adoption of Islam also entailed the adoption of Arabic as the language of the religion and the Arabic alphabet. The same holds true for Karaims – their religion was “bundled together” with the alphabet, because it was necessary to read the Hebrew Bible in the original. It wasn't until the 20th century that the Hebrew alphabet was replaced completely by the Latin alphabet and the Cyrillic script. World War II sped up the detachment of Karaims from the sources of their tradition, and knowledge of the Hebrew alphabet, which had been handed down from generation to generation, disappeared. We're talking about a community that adhered to a religion similar to Judaism yet ethnically came from the Turkic peoples, so Karaims were excluded from the Ho-

tions. Research methodology is clear: if we want to say something about the earlier condition of languages, for example their proto-language, by using the method of comparative historical research, we should compare languages from the same period. Karaim could not be compared against the oldest sources of the most closely related languages, because the oldest Karaim sources came from the 19th century. We could say that our project introduces the Karaim language into historical linguistic research in the field of Turkology.

In addition, there will be a full version of the Bible needed by the Karaims to practice their religion.

That's correct. Since Karaim is listed in UNESCO's “Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger,” I do not have the luxury of studying it in isolation from the cultural needs of the community that uses it. I decided to address this problem comprehensively, and in order to finance research on such a scale, I had to ask Brussels for support.

There is no edition of the Hebrew Bible that Karaims could use in practice. There was one edition in 1841 – the full Tanakh, except for the Books of Chronicles (1 and 2). However, it was printed in the Hebrew alphabet and in... well, that's actually a good question – what was the language of that edition of the Bible? In simplified terms, I can say that it is Crimean Karaim, also called eastern Karaim, yet even in that sense it's not homogeneous in linguistic terms. That's because it emerged on the basis of manuscripts from different periods, written in different dialects, and therefore as a result of the work of many translators. That was accompanied by certain stylistic tendencies, attempts to style this text in line with certain Crimean-Ottoman standards, which back then enjoyed high prestige.

That version, even if it were available, was written in the alphabet that Karaims don't know, and even if they did, it is in a dialect of Karaim that has been long extinct and remains incomprehensible to today's Polish-Lithuanian Karaims. It needs to be said that the language of the Lithuanian-Polish Karaims (called western Karaim) is divided into the northern dialect and the southern dialect. Those who speak the north-western dialect will also understand the south-western dialect. But eastern Karaim (Crimean Karaim) is so different from western Karaim that the Polish-Lithuanian Karaims have difficulty understanding Crimean texts.

That's why I concluded it was worth continuing work on producing editions of Karaim sources. We have a certain list of manuscripts that definitely need to be so edited, because they're of greatest importance. When I was applying for an ERC grant, I knew of 100 sources. But we were so excited to find new, fascinating sources that this number quickly rose to 150 even before the interview in Brussels. Analyzing

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locust, because the Germans distinguished between ethnic Jews and Karaims. Even so, it took courage to teach the Hebrew alphabet in Karaim schools (called “midrashim”) in the period of occupation. That's why we now have manuscripts written in a language that Karaims don't know and in an alphabet they can't read. It turned out that there were plenty of valuable manuscripts whose content remained unknown. Hence my research.

Does your project focus not just on history?

By studying these manuscripts, we will also contribute to the development of Turkology. The Karaim language was used for centuries in non-Turkic-speaking territories, so it retained numerous native archaic characteristics. For this reason, it is extremely valuable for historical and general comparative research. That has always been clear, but historical sources were only poorly known, so linguistic Karaim data could only be taken into account with certain methodological limita-

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them would require a great deal of work. Therefore, we wanted to approach the editing work wisely, so we will first edit the manuscripts of the greatest linguistic value, regardless of what they contain. After that, we will select manuscripts to finally have the whole of the Bible in the dialect of today's Karaims. The ultimate goal is to get a full version of the Hebrew Bible in all three dialects. We will create a certain collage, because this will be a full version of the Bible yet based on manuscripts copied in the period between the 17th and 20th century.

If a language is archaic, this means that it has not changed very rapidly, right?

Yes. Old-Polish texts are difficult to understand for modern Polish speakers, aren't they? But Karaims don't find it very difficult to read analogous sources from the 18th century. Icelanders can read Icelandic sagas without problem, because their language has been used on their island for hundreds of years, it has barely changed. Isolation favors preservation, it limits change.

The language of Crimean Karaims was influenced by the language of the Turks, because Karaims were constantly in touch with the Ottoman Turks, who spoke a similar language. The Polish-Lithuanian Karaims did not have the opportunity to contact peoples who spoke similar languages, so their language is largely archaic. That's why I can take an 18th-century text and edit it, knowing that it will be understandable to most of the Karaims who currently use the language. My task as a linguist involves providing members of this community with a tool for restoring an element of their culture, in this case reading the Bible, which serves as a basis for both their religion and their identity.

Later, I'd like to encourage linguists and biblical scholars to study more closely those translations of the Bible. As part of our project, we will create a quite advanced research tool – a number of critical editions in a database based on the Semantic Web technologies, so far practically unused in philology. In order to create this database, I have invited outstanding experts from Uppsala University to work with me.

Today, the greatest recognition is garnered by research in the exact sciences, chiefly medicine and technology. How did you manage to convince the ERC that the issue of the Karaim language was so important?

The ERC grants are exceptionally researcher-friendly, which means research-centric. They don't necessarily need to have any direct applications in the practical sense. I don't think I convinced the ERC to finance my project only because it had not only linguistic but also cultural aspects, but that surely helped. Wherever we can, we should also use scientific research to extend

the life of cultures, and I feel that it is still possible to offer some help in this respect. Someone once asked me, probably in an attempt to play the devil's advocate, why I studied Karaim, if the community would soon become extinct, anyway? And wouldn't the Karaims themselves prefer for us to translate Agatha Christie's books instead of the Bible? I replied that the Bible was a foundation of Karaim culture. Also, I believe that if there's even one user of this language left, it is worth putting an effort into saving it. A doctor can't say, "Why should I save this old man, if he's going to die soon anyway?" That's exactly the point – as long as there is an inkling of chance that this language can be saved or its life can be extended, we should make every effort to make sure this happens.

How did you come up with the idea of applying for an ERC grant?

As a researcher, I know exactly what I want, which does not necessarily hold true for me in my private life. When I took an interest in Karaims, I reviewed the sources and saw that we could say nothing about the language from the 15th or 16th century. In order to do so, we had to know more about what happened in the 19th century and for the two centuries that preceded it. When I was writing my master's thesis, I analyzed texts from the 20th century. As part of my doctorate, I attempted to reconstruct the spoken (not literary) variant of the north-western dialect from the 19th century. I started working on manuscripts, I conducted phonological and phonetical research. At some point, I realized that I wanted to study the corpus of older languages comprehensively in the future. For this purpose, I gradually built my competence. As part of my Humboldt Foundation fellowship, for example, I worked on religious songs based on the Tanakh to better understand biblical texts.

When I knew I wanted to continue to work on biblical texts, I began to explore funding options. I heard about the ERC from several independent sources, and I soon started to go to courses organized by the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Contact Point in Kraków. That was how I met Ms. Ewa Kuśmierczyk and found out that she was in charge of the PAS "Excellence in Science" Department.

During the courses organized by the Department, it was clearly emphasized that an application for an ERC grant had to be very well prepared, and writing it took almost a year. Indeed, that was an enormous amount of work, but I wasn't alone. Experienced people read my applications and advised me what I should bring into focus, drew my attention to what was incomprehensible. I received altruistic help, and that's something rare these days.

INTERVIEW BY JUSTYNA ORŁOWSKA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAKUB OSTAŁOWSKI