

WHO WERE THE KRIMCHAKS ?

**- A vanishing remnant of rabbinic Jews
by Israel Rubin^a**

Note: This is a work in progress)

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^c The words Krymchaki (pl), Krymchaks (pl); Krymchak (sing.) are synonyms for the term Crimean Jews or Jews of Crimea. Krimchatski is the language spoken. Sometimes referred to as 'Judeo Crimean-Tatar' or 'Krymchaki-Tatar')

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I Certificate of Name Change ‘Rabbeinu’ to ‘Rubin’

****The Krymchaks¹ - An Introduction**

The Krymchaks are a Jewish ethnic and linguistic society dating back at least to the time of the Bar Kochba revolution(132–135CE) ². This rapidly vanishing remnant of the Jewish people settled in Crimea, a peninsula (now part of the Ukraine) bordering on the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. The arrival of the Jews to the Crimean peninsula was

associated with the Greek efforts to populate the fertile coast of the Black Sea at least two centuries before the common era. Coming from an Hellenistic culture these Jews were Greek in language, customs, and social life. They had a formative effect upon the religion of their neighbors as evidenced by traces of Jewish monotheistic influence. Historians are split on whether these Jews came from Asia Minor or via the Caucasus through Taman³ peninsula. The latter theory would date the arrival of the Jews into Crimea at the 7th to 6th centuries B.C.E. the time of the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions of Israel.⁴ . Encyclopedia Judaica notes, “.... the settlement of the Jews in these regions (of Crimea) has come down from the Hellenistic period. Ruins, recordings, and inscriptions on tombstones testify to the existence of important Jewish communities in the Greek colonies on the Black Sea shores, Chersonesus near Sevastopol, Kerch, and other places”. The Jewish Encyclopedia notes “that organized Jewish communities existed there (Crimea) long before the destruction of the Temple. “Crimea definitely had Jewish population more than 2000 years ago. The earliest documented settlement based on recently discovered excavations confirm a Jewish presence at least as early as the first century B.C.E.⁵ . Whatever

their origins, these Jews together with the later Khazars of Crimea, formed the so-called Krymchaks, the first type of Jews to live in Crimea”⁶

Archeological findings suggest that non-Jewish slaves once freed combined with the Jewish community. Tradition has it that those who converted were unconditionally accepted into the Jewish fold. Non-converts lived amongst the Jews, but were not permitted to intermarry..

With the passage of time the indigenous Krymchaki Jews absorbed waves of Jewish immigrants: post-Expulsion Sephardim, as well as very early Greek-speaking Jews, Khazars, Jews from the Caucasus and from the Crimean Italian colonies settled by Genoa and Venice, Ashkenazim, During subsequent centuries additional waves of immigrants came including Ghurdzhi (Caucasian) Jews) and Mizrachi (Jews from Persia).

****What Happened to the Krymchaks and Where are They now ?**

By 1941, the Krymchaki as a distinct ethnic group was on the verge of complete assimilation within the surrounding Russian population. The glue that kept the Krymchaki people together was their lingering recollection of a proud culture and the social order that had been battered and bruised through the past centuries. They had survived pain and sorrow for almost two millennia and maintained their cultural identity. The scourge of Communist enforced assimilation knocked them down but did not extinguish their flame. That last blow was struck by the brutality of the Nazi massacre. What few Krymchaki remain alive are but a faint shadow of what was once an illustrious ethno-linguistic group living peacefully in a homeland that was as close to a Diaspora “Gan Eden” as possible.

An estimated 500 ‘authentic’ Krymchaks currently live in the former Soviet Union, mostly in Crimea with the rest in other parts of the Ukraine, Russia, Georgia and Uzbekistan. There are perhaps another 200 who live in America and Israel. Many of the latter intermarried with other Jews (and probably some with non-Jews as well). Of those living outside of Crimea probably

fewer than 50 have retained or preserved their Crimean identity.

Regrettably the unique character, the distinctiveness which so marked the ancient Crimean Jewish ethnic society is no more. It disappeared gradually during my life-time.. We were powerless to prevent the gusts of change from robbing us of our tradition. Now, as we grasp at straws of remembrance , we eat Krymchaki foods, listen to, or hum, Krymchaki melodies and recite the Passover Hagadah with the same chanting melodies that we heard from our parents and grandparents. The longing is there-- unsatisfied by the evocative foods, customs and melodies. We reminisce from time to time, but the recollection gets dimmer as memory fades away.

****Krymchaki and Their Neighbors**

Prior to the Russian Annexation of Crimea 1772-1783 the Krymchaki called themselves *Srel Balalary* (sons of Israel), while others called them *Yehudi* (Jew). The sovereign rulers of Crimea made no distinction and called both the Krymchaki and the Karaites *Yehudiler* (Jews). From the mid 1850s on they chose to be called

Krymchaki to differentiate themselves (who were Rabbinate Jews) from the Karaites who also lived in Crimea, and also to make a distinction between the Ashkenazi Jews who had begun to settle in Crimea. The Karaites originated in Baghdad, Iraq and settled in Crimea in 1397. Their rejection of the Oral Law (the Mishnah and the Talmud) as the basis for Halacha and their exclusive reliance on the Tanach set them apart from Krymchaks and other Rabbinic Jews. While maintaining a belief in the One and Only G-d, the Karaites categorically rejected later rabbinic interpretations. Each individual Karaite was free to interpret the Written Torah as he wished.

Both the Krymchaks and the Karaites were a minority in Crimea. The majority were Crimean Tatars, descendants of a mix of Turkic and non-Turkic people who colonized the area. Historians note the immigration of a non-Turkic element (Alans, East Slavs, Romanians, Byzantine Greeks, Crimean Goths, Circassians) that intermarried [but not with the Jews] and were assimilated into the Turkic majority of Bulgars, Khazars, Petchenegs and Cumans. Despite the fact that the Krymchaks preceded both the Tatars and the Karaites by at least a millennium, they remained a

minority ethnic group in Crimea. The Crimean Tatars embraced Islam in the 13th century. From then on Crimea, the Turkic-speaking Muslim state, emerged as a powerful player in Eastern Europe. At its zenith at the close of the 17th century, Crimea boasted 1600 mosques and religious schools.

The Crimean Tatars called the Krymchaks *Zuluflu Chufutlar* (Jews with earlocks), while they called the Karaites *Zulufsuz Chufutlar* (Jews without earlocks). The Krymchaks, Karaites and Crimean-Tatars all spoke a similar dialect of Turkish. While the Krymchaks understood the spoken word of the Tatars and Karaites, the latter were unable to fully comprehend the Krymchaki language. That is because the Krymchaks intermingled post-biblical Hebrew and Aramaic into their vocabulary. The Krymchaki language was written with Hebrew letters until the 1920s, when Stalin forced the Krymchaki to use Cyrillic characters.

Demographic data suggests that the Krymchaki population rarely exceeded 15,000. The main centers of population within Crimea were Feodosiya⁷, Belogorsk⁸, Kerch, Simferopol and Sevastopol. Following the Bolshevik revolution a small but steady stream of

Krymchaki began streaming to Palestine and America. My father and paternal grandparents, along with an extended family of almost 200 souls came on Aliyah to Palestine in 1920. Family records suggest that while some Krymchaki⁹ emigrated to Palestine and to America following the Bolshevik revolution, most remained in Crimea only to be decimated by Hitler on December 11, 1941. It is estimated that there are less than ten Krymchaki in the world, mostly elderly, who are able to speak Krimchatski (the Krymchaki language) today.

Most of the Krymchaki who emigrated to Palestine adopted the Sephardi prayer rite, although a Krymchaki synagogue operated in the Tel Aviv area until 1981. The Krymchaki who emigrated to the USA attended Ashkenazi synagogues mainly because there were so few Sefardic synagogues around.

****More on the Origins of the Krymchaki**

The Origin of the Krymchaki is mired in controversy. Jerome¹⁰ in his commentary on Obadiah (verse 20) reports, on the authority of his Jewish teacher Hananiah that, according to a tradition prevalent among the Jews,

the Assyrians and Babylonians conveyed their Jewish captives to the coasts of the Black Sea.”¹¹

Archaeological findings confirm the existence of Jews in Crimea as early as the first century C.E. and to an orderly Jewish society in the late 4th to 5th centuries. Jews may have made their entry into Crimea from regions beyond the Caucasus Mountains and the shores of the Black Sea. “Traditions and legends connect the arrival of the Jews in Armenia and Georgia with the Ten Lost Tribes (721 B.C.E.) or with the Babylonian Exile (586 B.C.E.).”¹²

First century documents found in Crimea mention the freeing of slaves by their Jewish owners. Additional inscriptions on tombstones from that early period were discovered in the south-eastern part of Crimea. These formal pieces of writings mention the obligations imposed on the freed slaves to attend synagogue on a regular basis and remain under the guidance of the Jewish Kehilla (Community). As a result of the conversion of the liberated slaves to Judaism, the Jewish community grew. Biblically ordained and scrupulously followed, treatment of slaves owned by Jews was extremely benevolent. They never suffered from persecutions or limitations of any kind.

Interestingly enough there were non-Jews (Sebomanoi?) observing the seven Noachide Laws who sought to join the Jewish communities. Tombstones of the 3rd and 4th centuries reveal Hebrew epitaphs alongside Greek inscriptions. Hebrew names and symbols demonstrate Jewish presence.

Monuments uncovered in Kerch, where my father and grandfather were born, point to a Jewish presence going back to the 2nd Century C.E. Other findings reveal remnants of other synagogues (built in the 4th century), a Jewish cemetery dating to the 17th century, and tombstones in the form of an open book and fragments of marble tombstones with Hebrew inscriptions. Other Jewish artifacts, especially those from the Medieval Kingdom of Khazaria (652-1016) may be found at the Kerch State Historic Cultural Preserve. There is a synagogue in Kerch built in 1869, currently housing Chesed Malka and a Jewish community center.

Documents from the 2nd and 3rd centuries describe the movement of the Jews along the southern coast of Crimea. In the late 4th century, Jerome wrote about Jews in the Bosphorus Kingdom. Traditionally they included descendants of families who had been exiled

by the Assyrians and the Babylonians, as well as of imprisoned warriors of Bar Kochba. Jewish communities existed in many of the Greek colonies along the shores of the Black Sea. Sporadic Jewish colonization of Crimea continued with the expulsion from Eretz Israel by the emperor Hadrian following the war led by Bar Kochba (132-135). The Jews who were brought to Crimea by the Greek colonization in the second to first centuries B.C.E. spoke a version of the “Dead Sea Scroll Hebrew” which corresponded to the Hellenistic and Roman Periods before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. This Hebrew was of much later period than the "Biblical Hebrew" of the tenth century B.C.E. to 2nd century B.C.E. and preceded the Mishnaic Hebrew of the 1st to the 3rd or 4th century C.E.

Some cities in Crimea had a Jewish majority as early as the 670s. Byzantine efforts at forced conversion of Jews in the next two centuries produced additional waves of migration to the southern coastal cities of Crimea¹³. The original Jewish settlers grew as immigrants from the Sassanid dynasty of Persia and later within the Islamic world fled persecution. From their inception until the 13th century these Hellenized Jewish communities of

the Bosphorus Kingdom maintained their separate identity as orthodox Jews and Talmudists. Their language of ritual, literature and social life had not changed much through more than a millennia. Through the ages these Greek-speaking Jews interacted with the non-Jewish local population by learning prevailing Turkic languages from the invading hordes. By the 13th century a dialect of Turkish was the medium of communication between peoples of different languages. Over the centuries the lingua franca was a mixture of Greek, and Turkish, possibly including Italian with Provençal, French, Spanish and Arabic, all formerly spoken on the eastern Mediterranean coast. For a long period of time the hub of cultural history was the Mediterranean Sea area encompassing the interconnected empires of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome. The earliest recorded accounts place Greek influence (Homer) at the 8th–7th century B.C.E. and carry on through the growth of Christianity and the decay of the Roman Empire (5th century C.E.). The closing stages of this ancient “classical culture” at 300-600 C.E. merges with the Early Middle Ages (500-1000 C.E.). It was during this period that the Jews of Crimea came together as an ethnic group, although not yet called Krymchaki. The formation of the Krymchaks as

an ethnic group began much later in the 13th to 14th centuries on the Crimean Peninsula and the process was completed by the end of the 19th century.

****Turmoil in Crimea**

Crimea's access to the Black Sea played a significant role throughout the history of Western Asia and Eastern Europe. The coastal areas were an opening into Eastern Europe. With its various ports it facilitated trade and its grazing lands were of prime economic importance. The Black Sea spelled supremacy for those who controlled it. Losing control to an adversary meant a decline in dominance and influence. Little wonder then that throughout the centuries Byzantium, Kiev Rus, the Golden Horde, Lithuania, Poland, the Ottoman Empire and Muscovy have all struggle to control the Black Sea.

The Jews of Crimea suffered through several centuries of horrendous turmoil, disorder and disruption as powerful alliances of steppe warriors occupied Crimea. There were Goths-- East Germanic tribes who, in the 3rd and 4th centuries, harried the Roman Empire. This was followed by the Huns-- an early confederation of Central Asian equestrian warriors, mostly Turkic

nomads. The Huns were not an homogenous race, but were an ethnic fusion of Eurasian clans. The Huns appeared in Europe in the 4th century, occupying Crimea and other areas north of the Black Sea. With their superior weaponry, highly skilled military movements, their hit-and-run tactics the Huns achieved control over several well-organized rivals. The Huns exacted taxes from the Crimean Jews and from others and plundered the prosperous cities along the shores of the Black Sea. The defeated Goths fled seeking refuge elsewhere in the Roman Empire. Not to be forgotten were the Bulgars , a semi nomadic people, probably of Turkic descent originally from Central Asia. The success of the Hun invasion at the beginning of the 4th century swept many Bulgars from their settlements in Central Asia to migrate to the fertile lands along the shores of Crimea. These tall Caucasian-Mongoloid people were able to communicate with the Jews who spoke a somewhat similar Turkic dialect. With the passage of time, some of these Bulgars left Crimea and moved on with the Huns towards Central Europe.

The various invasion of Crimea, especially those of Huns in the 370s hastened the dehellenization of the Crimean Jews, substantiated by the tombstones of the

period, usually without inscriptions of names but with Jewish symbols such as the seven-branches candelabrum. The Byzantine invasion of Crimea in the 6th century was yet another pounding of the Jews. Byzantine records confirm the presence of Jews in the area. In the Taman region of Crimea Jewish tombstones of the 6th–8th centuries have been excavated. During the 7th century many Jews fled from the Muslim and Persian wars and settled in Crimea and the Caucasus. There they created constituencies which during ensuing years carried on relationships with the hubs of Jewish learning in Babylonia and Persia. In the middle of the 7th century Khazars occupied most of the Crimean peninsula. The Khazars were a nomadic tribe who combined with part of the Bulgar empire (650 C.E.) and subsequently occupied and controlled a large territory as far as the Black Sea and Crimea¹⁴. The arrival of the Khazars on the Black Sea marked the start of their interaction with Greek political and cultural influence. By 700 C.E. Khazar influence extended to Bosphorus and Phanagoria. From then on Crimea, as well as the Volga and the Caucasus, came to be linked to the Khazar regime.

From the mid-9th century enemy incursions and invasions by the Byzantine Empire enfeebled the power of the Khazars in Crimea. In 940–941, at the instigation of the Byzantine Empire, the ruler of Kiev initiated hostilities against the Khazar state. Despite its weakness the Khazars were victorious and recaptured the southern and south-western parts of Crimea up to Cherson. Time and again the Byzantine Church tried to convert the Crimean Jews to Christianity. All their efforts failed. Some 600 years earlier documents from the 2nd and 3rd centuries mention a significant rebellion in the year 300 by Jews in the Crimean city of Cherson protesting attempts at enforced to Christianity.

Records indicate (1096 C.E.) that the Byzantine emperor Alexei I directed that all Jews be expelled from the city of Cherson and their property be confiscated. These cast out Jews settled in those parts of Crimea not under Byzantine control. In less than 65 years the exiled Jews were back in Cherson as reported by Benjamin of Tudela¹⁵ in the 1160s. He noted the existence of a community of Rabbinic Jews in the town of Sogdia which was an important Crimean port. Crimean Jews in those years were part of the Greek speaking Romaniot community.

Accounts from a noted traveler¹⁶ confirmed the existence of Jewish groups in the region of the Azov Sea in 1175. He noted that their customs were similar to those of the Karaites. During this period Crimean Jews preserved contacts with their fellow Jews in the Islamic countries and in the Byzantine Empire.

In 1240 the Golden Horde (Mongols and Tatars¹⁷) conquered the Crimean peninsula along with much of what is now Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Kazakhstan, and the Caucasus. Initially the Mongol conquerors of the Pontic territory (the steppe region north of the Black Sea) endorsed religious freedom. However, that changed when the third Mongol/Tatar ruler, Berke, converted to Islam in 1258. He attempted to pressure the inhabitants of Crimea to convert to Islam. There are no records to indicate whether he was successful.

Shortly thereafter (From 1260¹⁸ until 1470) the Republic of Genoa seized control of the southern coast of Crimea gaining command of Crimean commerce for two hundred years. Crimea now became a focal commercial center drawing many Jewish migrant from

the such countries as Persia, Asia Minor, Egypt, Italy, and later on Spain. During this period of Jewish population growth many Romanite Jews put down roots and merged with the Krymchaki. With so many different ethnic and religious groups in Crimea in the early 1400s, there was bound to be friction and hostility. Attempts at forced conversions of the Jews to Christianity and the plunder of property heightened the conflict. The reigning Genoese tried to calm the strain and in 1449 they published an edict confirming the rights of all inhabitants and ethnic groups ,including the Jews, to practice their own religion Soon thereafter the Genoese regime issued additional decrees protecting Jews from any infringement or disturbance in their internal dealings . This marked a short period of freedom until the Turkish troops conquered the important Crimean city of Kaffa in 1475.

Already in the 13th century some of the Crimean Jews spoke Turkish. The Torah was translated into Krimchatski (the language). In 1449 the Tatars proclaimed Crimea as their sovereign Khanate preserving it as a major caravan trade center until 1783. From 1475 until the late 18th century Crimea came under Ottoman (Turkish) rule. The Turks tried to

convert the inhabitants of Crimea to Islam. It is likely that Muslim persecution and conversions reduced the Jewish population over the centuries. The important seaport town of Kaffa (now Feodosiya), became a center of Crimean Jewish¹⁹ life for centuries before the Ottoman conquest's took control. The Jewish population consisted of immigrants from Italy (Lombrozo, Piastro), from the Mediterranean Sephardic Diaspora (Konort, Tabon), from Turkey (Izmirli, Stamboli), and from the mountains of Georgia (Gurji). Almost all these immigrants were rabbinic Jews. From the 13th to 15th centuries Sary Krym was the governing headquarters of khans of the Golden Horde. Sary Krym was a main caravan hub connecting the territories of earliest Russian dukes, the Volga province and Central Asia. Well before the Turkish conquest of Crimea (1475) Krymchaki merchants from Kaffa were conducting trade and commerce between the Russian duchess, the Volga area and Central Asia. As such they established good working relationships with both the Russians and the Muslim Khans. YIVO²⁰ records reveal the role of Krymchaki in mediating between the court of the Crimean Tatars (Khans) in Sary Krym and the Grand Duke of Moscow, Ivan III. "One of these Jews, Chozya²¹ Cocose (Kokos), a

merchant, mediated in 1472–86 the negotiations between the Grand Duke of Russia and the Crimean Khan, Mengly-Girei. Part of the correspondence was written in Hebrew. Centuries of Tatar rule resulted in a considerable orientalizing of the Crimean Jews: to a great extent they adopted the language, customs, and traditions (but not the religious practices) of the Moslem Tatars”.

In the 16th century Jews were granted some privileges including permission to emigrate to the Polish-Lithuanian kingdom. This too, depleted the area of many Krymchaki, seeking a less oppressive area.

**** Humiliation Under Moslem (Tatar) Rule**

Until the annexation by Russia of Crimea in 1783, the Muslim (Turkish) Crimean regime (Khanate) controlled the daily lives of the Jews as well as the Karaites and Christians (Greek and Armenians). The Moslems granted Christians and Jews religious freedom so long as they paid a special protection poll tax (*jizyah*). There were other humiliating symbols of second class

citizenship, common to all conquered populations living under Muslim rule. Under the Crimean Khanate the Jews were compelled to live in separate districts and were treated as people of the dhimma (non-Muslim subjects protected by the state) who were required to pledge loyalty to the Moslem regime and pay a poll tax. In return the Krymchaki were granted freedom of religion and worship and they and their property were protected. In addition they were granted some degree of judicial autonomy. While the Krymchaki were often publicly humiliated, there seems to be no record of blatant aggressive persecution.

The Krymchaki and other non-Muslims were compelled to turn over ten percent of their bread to the Moslem establishment; make available living accommodations, food, and horses to employees of the Muslim regime. Krymchaki were expected to furnish a portion of the cereals from their grain warehouses and were obligated to pay commerce and customs duties, pay a form of inheritance tax, pay property taxes on certain transactions, and pay a tariff on vineyards. Sale of alcoholic beverages to Muslims was banned. The height of Synagogues and tombs were restricted to being lower than Mosques and Muslim tombs.

Krymchaki and other non-Moslems were prohibited from riding on horses. Most degrading was their duty to carry the Moslem Tatars across puddles, mud and slush (there were no paved walks or roads in those days). Despite the crushing shame, life for the Krymchaki went on as best as possible.

Presaging the Kapos (Nazi appointed Jewish enforcers of Nazi edicts) the Crimean Tatar regime appointed a lay leader of the Jewish community who was tasked with the strict fulfillment of numerous duties imposed by Tatar Moslem regime. This leader (*kaya*) represented the Krymchaki to the Tatar administration. He was assisted in each city and town by a Gabbai (called a *gabeleji*) whose role was to collect the various taxes and levies and to turn them over to the *kaya* who in turn gave the money to the Tatar administration. These *gabeleji* also collected communal taxes for the Jewish poor.

**** The Radhanites**

The Radhanites (*holchei Rusyah* in Hebrew) were Jewish merchants who dominated trade between the Christian and Islamic worlds during the early Middle

Ages (approx. 600–1000 C.E.). They frequently traveled through Khazar regions and the lands of the Slavs²² making their way to India and China. They traded in slaves, textiles, hides, spices, and arms. The Roman Empire created a trade network which embraced much of Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and parts of India and China. With the decline of the Roman Empire, it was these mercantile Jews who sustained the trans-Eurasian trade. In the footsteps of these merchants came Talmudists and rabbis who provided the lifeblood of religious observance for the Jews of Crimea. Through their efforts religious leaders in Crimea were able to pose questions to their brethren in Babylonia and the Holy Land. Regrettably Responsa from this period are lost. Some believe that Jewish merchants such as the Radhanites, who visited Khazar territory on a regular basis may have been responsible for more than just trade and industry. As financial envoys and couriers, trusted by both the Christian and Islamic worlds, they clearly exerted important economic and political influence on the Khazars, perhaps even facilitating their conversion to Judaism.

****The Khazars**

In the late 8th–early 9th century, the Turkic Khazars who ruled Crimea and the far east of Europe converted to Judaism, used Jewish personal names, spoke and wrote in Hebrew, were circumcised, had synagogues and rabbis, studied the Torah and Talmud, and observed Hanukkah, Pesach, and the Sabbath. Odds are that some of the newly converted Khazars merged there with the original Krymchaki community and with those Jews who fled the Byzantine Empire. The Khazar civilization was marked by a degree of open-mindedness rare for any society in the medieval period. Merchants and visitors came from all over Asia and Europe.

The Khazar conversion to Judaism may have been triggered by a dream or vision. But the actual acceptance of the religion of Israel followed a debate between representatives of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam held by the Khazar king Bulan. Tradition has it that Bulan expelled the idol worshippers and shamanists who practiced sorcery. As a result of another dream or vision he conducted a military expedition south of the Caucasus. The booty from that

battle was used to sanctify religious objects (tabernacle, ark, candelabrum, etc.), apparently still preserved at the Leningrad Museum. Judaism became the official “state religion” in 730-40 C.E. It appears that the ruling and wealthy class, and the king’s household adopted and practiced the Jewish faith. The populace, as a whole, continued with their old practice of idolatry and shamanism. Nevertheless, with the passage of time, the Khazar ruler cracked down on pagan practice including the ancient pagan custom of burying personal possessions along with the body. These votive deposits meant to smooth the deceased's journey into the afterlife were banned as were the ceremonies associated with them.

Arab and Turkish records confirm that the Khazars were known by the surrounding kingdoms as Jews. Nevertheless there appears to have been little contact with other centers of organized Judaism (Iraq, etc). The Khazars were definitely not Karaite but, based on available writings of the time, the rabbinic authorities took little interest in the Khazars. This selective inattention may have been due to their limited and deficient observance of Halachic codes. Arab

geographers of the day commented that the retention by many Khazars of various pagan (shamanist) customs violated monotheistic law.

The Encyclopedia Judaica²³ notes “that in the oldest Russian writings of a legal character there are Hebrew, mostly biblical-Talmudic, elements, and that these go back to Khazar times. Thus the fact that early Russian codes, including the Zakon sudni liudem ("Law for the Judging of the People"), contain traces of Mosaic and Talmudic legislation, is due not to contact with the Catholic West, as has been maintained, but to the influence of the Jewish Khazars. Yet whether the introduction of Mosaic and Talmudic elements into Russian codes was influenced by the Khazars cannot be proven, especially as Khazar Judaism was never very strong.²⁴

Recently, some Krymchaki scholars have speculated that Krymchaki are the descendants of the non-Semitic converted Khazars, but, to my knowledge, no serious genealogical records exist pointing to Khazar ancestry of today's Jews. My research contradicts this recently

published²⁵ theory. The Jews of Crimea preceded the Khazars by at least 500-600 years.

No one knows to what extent the Krymchaks inspired the Khazars to convert to rabbinic Judaism. What is suspected is that during the period of Khazar rule, intermarriage between Krymchaki Jews and converted Khazars may have taken place. It is also credible that the Krymchaks took in many Khazar refugees during the decline and fall of the Khazar kingdom. Some researchers claim that there were others such as the Kipchaks who converted to Judaism who also spoke the Turkic language and possibly these too may have been absorbed by the Krymchaks.

****Emergence of A Distinct Ethnic And Linguistic Group**

Recurring persecution and forced conversion in the Byzantine Empire²⁶ triggered waves of Jewish refugees who contributed to the growth of the Jewish population in Crimea. Continual connection and exchange with Byzantine Jewry helped shape Jewish religious observance in Crimea. The positive impact of the Jewish refugees enabled the Crimean Jews to upgrade

and maintain normative Halachic practice. It was thanks to this revitalizing setting that the so-called "Crimean Rite" was elaborated.

During the course of their history the Krimchaks took in migrant Jews not only from the Byzantine Empire but also from Babylonia and the Khazar kingdom, Italy, and the Caucasus, as well as Ashkenazi Jewish slaves captured by the Tatars. Later Krymchaki absorbed many who fled from Russian pogroms in other parts of Tsarist Russia.

It was not until the 14th–16th centuries that the Krymchaks crystallized into a distinct ethnic and linguistic group. What kept them united was a deep faith in G-d, the Torah and Krymchaki culture. Krimchatski, the Crimean Tatar language which they spoke, known variously as Krymchak-Tatar or Tatar-Krymchak, was an admixture of Tatar-Turkic and post biblical Hebrew and Aramaic enabled them to maintain a strong national identity. Interaction with the various non-Jewish invading hordes was facilitated by Krimchatski (the language) which was 90% Turkish. The remaining 10% was Hebrew and Aramaic shielded

the small Krymchaki community from non-Jewish influence.

It is a mistake to view the various non-Jews who settled in Crimea as being a socially and culturally homogeneous people. They were not. Modern research shows that each of the large confederations of steppe warriors who conquered and settled in Crimea (such as the Scythians, Xiongnu, Huns, Bulgars Avars, Khazars, Cumans, Mongols, etc.) were unions of multiple ethnicities such as Turkic, Yeniseian, Tungusic, Ugric, Iranian, Mongolic and many other peoples. Essential to a good understanding of Krymchaki history is an appreciation of the changing milieu which marked the development and maturity of the Krymchaki ethnic group. The Jewish community was divided among those who prayed according to the Sephardi, the Ashkenazi, and the Romanioti rites. Only in 1515 were the different styles united into a distinctive Krymchak rite by Rabbi Moshe Ha-Golah, a Chief Rabbi of Kiev who had settled in Crimea.

The collapse of the Khazar kingdom in the late tenth century did not affect the continuation of religious or communal life of the Crimean Jews. By the early

thirteenth century the Jewish populace of Crimea strengthened and united into a proto-kehilla. Some accounts assert that this was a community of Greek-speaking Jewry in the eastern Mediterranean area known as Romaniots. I cannot find support for this position as the chief language in the 10th century Crimea was a Turkic dialect not Greek.

Documented evidence from 1278 confirms the presence of both Rabbinate and Karaite Jews . Later evidence (1459) points to Jews living in another Crimean city (known since 1610 as Chufut-Kale (Yids' Castle) near the Tatar capital of Bakhchisarai. For years both Karaites and Rabbinate lived in Chufut-Qale . For reasons unknown, in the 18th century the Rabbinate Jews moved elsewhere leaving behind them the Karaite inhabitants. Towards the end of the 19th century the Karaites also vacated Chufut-Kale. Hebrew inscriptions dating from the late 15th -16th centuries in a nearby abandoned town, demonstrate to a Jewish presence there as well. Mangup, northeast of Sevastopol was also inhabited by Jews at least as far back as the 13th century. Records from the Turkish conquest of the area in 1475 confirm this Jewish presence.

Slavery in early medieval Europe was relatively common, having its roots at the end of antiquity. Although slavery waned towards the mid- and end of the Middle Ages in most parts of Europe it never completely disappeared. Slaves were traded openly in most cities of Western Europe with most slaves sold to buyers in the Middle East. The town of Kaffa in Crimea was called the capital of the medieval slave trade. The loss of Crimea by the Ottoman Empire was a bitter economic blow. The Ottomans were deprived of a continuous and plentiful source of quality Slavic slaves. Jews were also involved in the slave trade, but only an insignificant number of Krymchaki were drawn in to this slave commerce. By way of contrast, Krymchaki functioned as mediators in ransoming Jews, including Eastern European Ashkenazi Jews held captive by the Tatars. Some of these ransomed (mostly Polish) Jews settled among their rescuers.²⁷ Incidentally, Jews of Ashkenazi extraction, began to settle in Crimea primarily for economic reasons, no less than to escape repression in East Europe. In the 18th century many adopted Crimean surnames to facilitate their assimilation into the Krymchaki culture. Though a minority they did not succeed in intermarrying with the

Krymchaki community until the beginning of the 20th century. One of those ransomed by the Krymchaki (in 1482)²⁸ was a “pre-Lurianic” Talmudic expert, originally from Kiev, Rabbi Moshe ben Yakov Ha-Goleh (See below: “Rabbinic Scholars”).

By the end of the 16th century the foremost center of Jewish life shifted inland to Karasubazar (now Belogorsk). Other cities in Crimea had significant Krymchaki populations, but For the ensuing 300 years up to the Bolshevik revolution, the pulse of the Krymchaki social and economic activity was in Karasubazar.

One researcher states that “in 1650, 300 survivors of the Chmielnicki pogrom in Ukraine were captured by Crimean Tatar slave traders; the Istanbul Ashkenazi community paid the ransom to free them”.²⁹ That same researcher asserts that “In a twist of history, in 1854, some 400 Ashkenazi Jewish families from Kerch migrated to Istanbul, when the Ottoman Empire began the Crimean war against Russia”. In fact my family tradition has it that many Krymchaki also sailed across the Black Sea hoping to seek refuge in Turkey. My paternal grandmother’s parents—indigenous

Krymchaki - were among those who fled Crimea. My paternal grandmother, Shamachatana^d Zengin was born in Izmir, Turkey. Following the end of the war in 1856 most of the Krymchaki, including my grandmother, returned to Crimea. Upon her return she married an indigenous Krymchak, Shimshon Rabbeinu.^e

It would seem that between the 16th and 17th centuries the Krymchaki envisioned themselves as a separate Jewish group with respect to new Jewish arrivals to Crimea: Ashkenazim, Sephardi Romaniots, Gurdji (emigrants from Georgia or from the Caucasus in general), and emigrants from the Near East or from Persia (the Mizrachis). Thanks to their known hospitality the Krymchaki quickly incorporated these newcomers who subsequently assimilated quite easily. By the 19th and early 20th centuries one would be hard pressed to trace their origin, were it not for small divergence in their ritual practices, behavioral patterns or in family stories. As an example, until the late 19th

^d The name Shamachatana has an interesting origin. It came from the Hebrew “Simchateinu” which means “our joy”. According to a study done by the Ben Zvi institute, Krymchak usage differs from Classical Hebrew for some of the Hebrew letters. For example, the letter shin marks only the sound “sh”; there is no ‘S’ sin^d. Thus my grandmother’s name, Shamachatan is really a corruption of Simchateinu. It has been shortened in the 20th century to Shamach, a fairly popular name given to Krymchaki girls.

^e My grandfather changed the family name from Rabeinu to Rubin in 1930, ten years after making aliyah. Regrettably many German Jews who had settled in the Haifa area decades before were biased against non-Ashkenazi Jews. In 1868 German Templars established Haifa's German Colony and in 1879 German and other Western European Jews began to settle in the city. To obtain employment ‘oriental’ Jews changed their surnames. See Appendix I for a facsimile of the Certificate of Name Change issued by the British Mandatory Authority,

century there were differences in behavior between the Krymchaks and some of the newcomers. Krymchaki used to sit on carpets spread on the floor during the synagogue service, while some of the newcomers prayed sitting on benches. Pronunciation of Hebrew was another way to differentiate. Those coming from the Middle East (Mizrachi Jews) pronounced the Hebrew words differently than the way Krymchaki pronounced Hebrew. Our family, the Rabbeinu, still kept the memory that their ancestors had come to Crimea following the Bar Kochba Revolt. Other family clans similarly maintained oral traditions of their origins. Some came from Spain, Italy, Turkey or Persia. As I was growing up I heard references to some Krymchaki as “franks or frenko”. These were non-derogatory labels indicating that these Sephardim among the Krymchaks came from European rather than the Middle East or North Africa. Only at a relatively late period—in the end of the 19th-beginning of the 20th century—did they begin to call themselves Krymchaki . The name *Krimchaks* (the Crimean Jews) first appeared in official Russian sources in 1859.

****Surnames³⁰**

The oldest use of family or surnames is unclear. The practice amongst Krymchaki was to add a descriptive term to identify individuals or families. These 'name-terms' might denote some personal attributes, profession, place of origin, parentage, or clan affiliation. Indigenous Krymchaki bore names such as: Rabbeinu (our family name), Rofeh, Shemesh, Ne'eman, Gibor, Chacham, Pesach, Purim, Ben Tovim, Shalom, Rebbe, Kohen, Levi, Mizrachi, Ashkenazi , etc. Surprisingly the original Greek-speaking settlers (before the common era) had hereditary surnames. These were uncovered on tombstones in Crimea: Pappos (1320 in the city of Feodosia); Paroseni (1646 in the city of Chefut-kalla) and others. Well before the recent interest in genealogy, the Krymchaki had a well-established tradition of tracing ancestors of different origin. Surnames were a valuable means of tracing origins. As late as the 16th century Greek and Italian names were still widely used by the Krymchaki. Krymchak surnames as Kaia and Kokos were already known among the Crimean Jews from the fifteenth century The name Bakshy (cousins of mine] has been known among the Crimean Jews from the 18th century. From a linguistic point of view, Kokos is probably

Turkic in origin. Other typical Krymchaki surname of Turkic origin are: Demergi, Kaia, Kalpaktshi, Kiyumji,

When trying to use surnames (family names) to trace one's ancestral origin, it is important to keep one fact in mind: Until the late 18th or early 19th century, very few Jews had surnames at all. Instead of surnames Jews traditionally used patronymics or matronymics preceded by 'ben' son of or 'bat' daughter of, for identification. A boy is named at his Brit Milah. A girl is named in synagogue shortly after birth. But these personal names were not inherited in the same way as modern surnames are. My Hebrew name is Yisrael – Aharon ben Eliahou, Eliahou being my father's name. My mother's name was Rivka bat Yisrael-Aharon (Yisrael-Aharon being my maternal grandfather's name)..

Permanent hereditary last names were mandated by European governments to enable better control and record-keeping of their Jewish citizens. The decree began in the 1780s and 1790s in the Austrian Empire (which controlled Poland); in Germany, in 1797; in tsarist Russia, in 1804 (some say 1845). Ashkenazi Jews used a variety of methods to choose a surname.

Some merely added a suffix to their father's name (Meyer-son; Chaim-ovitch). Kohanim chose Cohen, Kahn, Kagan; and Levites chose Levy, Levine. But many took the name of their professions, by which they may already have been known locally: Thus, Yakov the slaughterer became Yakov Schechter; Izzy the tailor became Izzy Schneider; Chaim the shoemaker became Chaim Schuster; Some arbitrarily fabricated names: Blum (for blossom) or Goldsmith, Goodman, Goldstein, and Zilberman, the silversmith. Some names were related to places: For example: Berlin-er, Frankfurt-er, Pol-sky, Ruman-sky, Grodni, etc. Even some Krymchaki names were crafted from descriptors. Thus Zengin (my paternal grandmother's maiden name) meant the wealthy one. Krymchaki with Italian-Sefardic origin include: Lombrozo, Piastro, Manto, Konorto, Trevgoda, Abarben , Tschepitsha, Angeilo, Konfino and Konorto. Those traceable to the Caucasian Mountains include: Gurdzhi, Abayev. Those traceable to Asia Minor³¹ have such names as: Tokatly, Izmerli, and Honbuli. Krymchaki with an Ashkenazi origin came with names such as: Berman, Varshavsky, Vineberg, Luria, Zeltzer and Fisher. The indigenous Krymchaki

****Religious Life**

Prior to the annexation by Russia of Crimea all Rabbinate Jews in Crimea merged with the Krimchak community. A separate Ashkenazi community materialized only in the late 1800s, early 1900s. Elsewhere we discuss the Minhag Kaffa which facilitated the fusion of the various strands of Rabbinate Jewry. The impact of Jewish mysticism on Krymchaki was insignificant , but they were aware of Kabbalah and the Zohar.

Until the mid 1800s the Krymchaki were tolerant of the Karaites. Their relationship was correct, but not warm. In fact interaction between the groups was never social or religious, but limited to trade and commerce. The break with the Karaites began in 1795, when they bribed the Russian authorities to exempt them from the double taxation imposed upon the Rabbinate Jews, and again in 1828, when they obtained exemption from compulsory military service. The Karaites renounced all connection with Jews and Judaism, and stopped using the name "Hebrew". Many of the arguments used by the Karaites were spurious and their posturing and petitions were always accompanied by substantial hand-

outs to high-ranking persons. They achieved full civic liberty in 1863, which was officially confirmed again in 1881 by the well-known anti-Semitic minister Nicholai Ignatieff. Freed from the anti-Jewish laws of the Russian Empire, many Karaites abandoned the Krymchaki regions of Crimea and moved to areas prohibited to Jews.

Each Krymchaki city had a well structured religious hierarchy. At its head was the *rebbe* (rabbi), who also functioned as a *Mohel* (circumciser) and as a *Shochet* (ritual slaughterer). Under him were the teachers of the Bet Midrash (Talmud Torah schools) and the *Chazzan*. The *Chazzan* doubled as a teacher in the Bet Midrash and served the *rebbe* in a variety of assignments. The *gabai*'s role (as distinct from the *gabeleji*) was to oversee the running of the services. His helper was the *Shamash* who took care of the holy artifacts, the prayer books, the kindling of lamps, heating, cleanup, etc.

Krymchaki *cheders* existed for centuries throughout Crimea. Boys from the age of five would be brought to the teacher's house and were taught in a single group regardless of age. Teachers were paid from communal funds. The boys were taught the Hebrew alphabet and

how to read Hebrew and Krimchatski (the language) which was written in Hebrew letters. They would learn Chumash and how to recite prayers in Hebrew. The language of instruction was Krimchatski (the language). By the age of 9 they were taught Mishna. Sometime after the 18th century, Krymchaki set up the equivalent of Yeshivot which they called Talmud Torahs. These were for older boys who were expected to work a full day and then study Torah in the late afternoon or evening. The pedagogical system up to the age of Bar Mitzvah called for reading out loud to each other and learning by rote. For most Krymchaki boys their formal religious education ended at age 13. There were a few, very few, exceptional students who would learn on a one to one basis with the rabbi . In this respect the Krymchaki were far behind Sephardi and European Ashkenazi boys who, in large numbers, started to learn Talmud (Mishna, Gemara, and additional commentaries) well before the age of 13.

In 1902 a different type of Talmud Torah was founded in the Crimean capital of Simferopol financed by the Ashkenazi Jews of Saint Petersburg. In 1911 a larger Crimean Talmud Torah building was established in 1911 in Karasubazar. In both of these schools religious

subjects were taught in Krimchatski (the language) along with Hebrew. The secular subjects were taught in Russian. Its founder and headmaster was Sak-Yuda Kaya (Isaak Samuilovich Kaia; 1887–1956), who was the first Krymchak to graduate (in 1909) from the Vilna Teachers Institute

**** Rabbinic Scholars.**

Due to the havoc wrought by the numerous invasions of Crimea, many records and writings were lost. Among those that survived were religious writings by some rabbinic scholars and *poskim* amongst Crimean Jewry. Prominent was **Abraham Kirimi**, a Crimean rabbi of the 14th century³². In 1358 he composed a wide-ranging Hebrew commentary on the Torah called *Sefat Emet*, (Language of Truth). ", which disproved Karaite interpretations that ran counter to normative rabbinic understanding. The Encyclopedia Judaica³³ mentions another Talmudic scholar, **Rabbi David Lekhno**, (d. 1735), "... living in the Crimean community of Karasubazar (Belogorsk). A leader of the Karasubazar community, Lekhno was also respected by the Karaites of Crimea. His extant works include an introduction to *Mahzor Minhag Kafa*, which contains information on the way of life of Crimean Jewry; a book on Hebrew

grammar; and *Devar Sefatayim* (Word of the Lips), a history of the kingdoms of the Tatar khans in Crimea and *Mishkan David* (David's Abode), a book on Hebrew verbs and synonyms. His descendent lives in Givatayim, Israel.

One of those ransomed by the Krymchaki (in 1482)³⁴ was a “pre-Lurianic” Talmudic expert, originally from Kiev, **Rabbi Moshe ben Yaakov** of Kiev, known as Moshe ha-Gole (the Exile; 1449-1520). In 1495, he composed an innovative work containing essentials of conjectural, contemplative and practical Kabbalah based on the insights and perceptive teachings of the Ramban (Rabbi. Moshe ben Nachman). “Pre-Lurianic” because its focus was somewhat different from the teachings of the Holy Arizal, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria of 16th century Tsfat. This remarkable East European Ashkenazi Jewish scholar had studied in Constantinople (Turkey) and apparently familiar with the same Turkic language spoken by the Krymchaki. He was well received and respected by the Krymchaki. The Jews of Crimea were split between those whose liturgy followed the Romanioti, the Sephardi and the Ashkenazi rites. Rabbi Moshe ben Yaakov recommended to the Krymchaki that they adopt a new

liturgical rite that came to be known as *Nusach Kaffa*. This arrangement represented a middle ground between the *Nusach Romaniot* (Italian Rite), the original Crimean Jewish liturgy and those who had arrived in the past century or two. By 1515 the different liturgical modes were united into a distinctive Krymchak rite.

The testing ground was in the city of Kaffa whose Rabbinate Jewish community consisted of a sizeable minority of so-called latecomers. The transition was smooth and shortly afterwards all Rabbinate Jews of Crimea accepted the newly crystallized Krymchaki Nusach Kaffa. The launch of this new Nusach in the 16th century not only marked the ritual homogenization of Krymchaki Jewry but facilitated the emergence of a newly integrated Krymchaki society distinguished from all other Rabbinate communities by both language and liturgy. The original Hellenistic Jews together with Romanite Jews who settled in Crimea, now paved the way for the acceptance into its fold of Jews from the Ottoman Empire, of Ashkenazi Jews from East Europe, of immigrants from Italy, from the Mediterranean Sephardic Diaspora and from the mountains of Georgia. In a real sense the 16th century may be regarded as the formative age of the Krymchaki -- a

unique and remarkable community of Rabbinate Jewry with a 1500 year-lineage. In the mid 17th century a "Collection of prayers and liturgical songs" was published in the Krymchaki language, parts of which were subsequently incorporated in the 18th century prayer books. Some attribute it to a Krymchak author, **Rabbi Moshe Mevorach**.

While the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment movement and ideology which began elsewhere within Jewish society in the 1770s) swept much of Europe in the 18th century , initially it barely touched the lives of the Krymchaki who lived in small poor communities. These craftsmen and small farmers had a full day, working very long hours interspersed with prayers and family obligations. They came home hungry and tired unable to focus on the whirlwind that had begun to engulf the rest of Europe. The more educated of the Krymchaki listened to the stories from the many merchant-traders who frequented Crimean ports and cities. Even those who understood that an innovative intellectual movement was spreading in Europe were fearful of the secular views that might adversely affect their way of life. Even so the Krymchaki were not immune to the

stirrings of these new ideas. The intensity and power of the *Haskalah* movement infiltrated into Crimea in the early 1800s. The magnetic attraction of secular studies conflicted with the deep-rooted value of Torah study. The older Krymchaki were faced with a challenge: Acceptance of *Haskalah* meant preempting religious subjects. Krymchaki religious leaders rejected secular studies which tended to turn youth away from religious observance of Torah and Mitzvot. The tide wave was too strong. Young Krymchaki increasingly turned away from devotion to Judaism. Less than fifty years later assimilation in language, dress and manners became more noticeable. No doubt the growth of the *Haskalah* movement resulted in large part by the policies of the absolutist rule of the Russian Tsar during the 18th century, which robbed the Krymchaki religious leadership of its power of coercion (e.g. issuing a *Cherem* [ban]). Commerce between wealthier Krymchaki brought them in contact with non-Jewish Russian circles, creating an opening for them to move away from traditional orthodoxy and way of life. So too, were Krymchaki peddlers who often journeyed beyond Crimea. Unlike other European Jewish peddlers, Krymchaki tradesmen were unable to speak Yiddish and thus avoided the welcoming oasis of the

local Yiddish speaking synagogue. Left to themselves, and lacking the communal network of their home milieu they were open to influence by Haskalah. An early characteristic of linguistic assimilation was the learning of Russian and the Cyrillic alphabet.

Following centuries of harassment by the majority Tatar population, the Tsarist pogroms and material deprivation, and now the threat of further erosion of religiosity by the Haskala movement, Krymchaki rabbis became quite concerned. In 1867, wishing to stem the tide, they invited **Rabbi Chaim Hezekiah Medini** to come to Crimea from Turkey to become the chief rabbi of the Krymchaki community, then headquartered in Karasu-Bazar. Fluent in Turkish, he was able to communicate freely with the Krymchaki whose native tongue was Turkic interspersed with post-biblical Hebrew. Growing up, I heard many stories about Rabbi Medini, who was my great-grandfather's rabbi. He served as the chief rabbi of Crimean Jewry from 1867 to 1900, after which he returned to Eretz Israel. He was offered the position of Rishon L'Ziyon (Sephardic Chief Rabbi) but turned it down and founded a yeshiva in Hebron. He was born in Jerusalem in 1832 and died in 1904 at the age of 72.

During his tenure as Chief Rabbi of Crimea, Rabbi Chaim Hezekiah upgraded the religious and cultural level of the Krymchaki , even though the process injected a Sephardi component to its halachic observance. He initiated changes in some of the Krymchaki customs, eradicating many of the non-Jewish mores and traditions adopted from their surrounding Tatar neighbors. He was instrumental in establishing a number of schools and a yeshiva. He succeeded in shaping the spiritual life of the community according to the strictly Orthodox Jerusalem Sephardic blueprint. The Krymchaki were not Sephardic, yet they did not object to Rabbi Medini's standards of religiosity because he was tolerant and open, yet at the same time humble and compassionate. Even the non-Jews (Karaites, Tatars and Christians) respected him and looked upon him as a man of saintliness and a wonder worker. Many Krymchaki continued to use the Kaffa liturgy even as Rabbi Medini introduced Sephardic liturgy. Because of their great respect for him and his open-mindedness the inauguration of Sephardic liturgy failed to create any open tension amongst the Krymchaki.

He is best known for his classic 18 volume halachic encyclopedia, called *Sedei Chemed*. Studied to this day in many higher Yeshivot, “It contains rules of Talmudic and halachic methodology, an alphabetical list of the various laws, and responsa. In addition, it contains bibliographical research and articles on the lives of Jewish scholars and of the history of Eretz Israel. At the beginning of Volume 14 is his lengthy ethical will which reflects his lofty spiritual and moral stature”³⁵.

He thoroughly shattered the claim that the Krymchaki were descended from the Karaites. He was a passionate Zionist. His many writings applaud the high merit of settling in Eretz Israel, the coming of the Messiah, and on sustaining the poor in Eretz Israel. His books won for him acclaim from the whole Jewish world. He was asked to respond to many religious and halachic issues. No doubt his ardent Zionism triggered my grandparents’ aliyah to Palestine.

Rabbi Medini advocated for the publication of some sacred texts in the original Hebrew, accompanied by a Krymchaki (Judeo-Crimean Tatar) translation. I am fortunate enough to have inherited one such volume, a 100+ year old Hagadah. On each facing page of the

Hebrew Hagadah is the Krymchaki translation in Hebrew characters. Its introduction is written by Rabbi Medini.

****Customs**

Centuries of living amongst the neighboring Crimean Tatars certainly affected the everyday life of the Krymchaki, but not to the extent that it ran counter to the values so dear to Krymchaki culture. Ethical living was taught at an early age and was contagious. Krymchaki lived a life guided by Halacha (as they understood it) and shaped by the *minhagim* (Customs, community practices) of their ancestors especially with regards to life-cycle events and rituals. Performing mitzvot and charitable deeds took top priority. Care for widows and orphans, for the poor and destitute was ingrained in the mind-set of every Krymchak from an early age. Beggars were unknown amongst the Krymchaki. The organized community arranged for the poor to receive firewood, flour, candles and food. My own grandmother would spend Thursday nights baking and cooking for the indigent in the community. The Challot and other items were placed on the doorsteps of the poor prior to dawn so as not to embarrass the

recipients. A communal (outdoor) oven contained huge cauldrons Chamin (Chulent with meat, potatoes, barley and hard boiled eggs) specifically set aside before the onset of Shabbat for the poor to partake.

“The Krymchaks used to live in small communities, based on blood relationship, which were called “d’jemaat”. Many social issues were resolved with the aid of the community’s Kahal HaKadosh” rabbi. The communities were marked by a certain sense of economic self-dependence – certain property was owned in a collective manner: some houses, shops and manufacture workshops, the income of which made up the capital, which allowed for supporting the poor. The wealthy shared their profits with the poor. Lists of the needy were made. On Thursdays each poor person was given money, coal, wood, bread, flour and various other items. The expenses of funeral for the poor were covered by the community, marriages of poor girls were arranged, while indigent child-bearing women, widows and orphans were sustained. The latter were given apartments in communal houses.”³⁶

The Krymchaki who lived on the south coast were well known for their skill in gardening, their honesty, and

their work habits. Until the 19th century, Krymchak living conditions were similar to those of the Tatars. Flat roof, one level houses were surrounded by low fences to keep in their animals. The interiors were always kept clean and organized. Furniture as we know it was rare. The floor was covered with rugs on top of which were scattered large cushions. Rugs were also hung on the bare walls. Especially before the 19th century, meals were served at low tables with the diners sitting on the rug covered floor.

In 1847, Count M. Vorontsov, the Novorossiysk governor general, said the following about the Krymchaks³⁷ “The Krymchaks lead a quiet form of existence, occupying themselves for the most part with handicraft, making saddles, sewing hats, refining cotton-thread etc. Very few of them are engaged in trade, most of them are, generally speaking, of an honest disposition and their family life is orderly.” Furthermore he writes: The Krymchaks are for the most part of a tall stature, of a swarthy skin, stately and slender. They are polite and affectionate. They have a very simple and temperate way of living. A Krymchak would deprive himself of most basic necessities of life but would keep his word, trying hard to return a debt in

time. They do not have the slightest inclination towards usury or swindle, and they avoid petty squabbles and litigious behavior. Their devotion to the family hearth is very strong in them. The purity of their dispositions of character is always exemplary everywhere they might be. A Krymchak family presents itself as a patriarchal family, literally speaking, in which the father, being its head, enjoys unlimited power and his wife and children obey him without questioning in any way. Generally speaking, respect for the elder family members is undisputed.”

Protocol and good manners were taught from an early age. Etiquette dictated that the most senior member of the family be served first, followed by the rest ordered by age. Meals began with prayer recitation and concluded with prayer. Male Krymchaki greeted each other by shaking hands. Guests were treated cordially. Respect for older people was an ingrained trait. Amongst the Krymchaki hand-kissing was the universal way of greeting old people. This centuries-old ritual was a sign of respect. The older person would extend his or her hand with the palm facing downward. The younger person would then bow towards the offered

hand and touch the knuckles with his lips, while lightly holding the offered hand. After kissing the hand, the younger person would draw the hand and touch his own forehead.

It was the practice of engaged couples to approach the most senior member of the Krymchaki clan for a “beracha” (blessing) prior to the wedding. In our extended clan, Esther Purim, (born Esther Piastrov) was the oldest. Everyone called her Babushka (Russian for grandmother). She died at the age of 114 . The woman was truly a saint. My wife and I remember approaching her prior to our wedding in November 1959. She blessed us both in Russian and Krimchatski (the Turkic language used by the Crimean Jews). When our two daughters were still toddlers, we brought them to Babushka for a blessing. Those blessings were very precious to us. But more than that, we sensed that it

gave Babushka pleasure to bestow such blessings on us.



The Crimean judge Sumarokov, who wrote an essay on the Krimchaks in 1801, speaks of their customs. He states that polygamy was practiced among them until the middle ages. It was rare thereafter until the 18th century when it stopped altogether. Contrary to popular opinion monogamy was the rule and not the exception. Polygamy was practiced to some extent by some Jews from biblical times. There does not appear to be any record of Talmudic rabbis who practiced polygamy.. At the beginning of the eleventh century, the foremost German rabbi was known as Rabeinu Gershom ben Yehuda. He banned polygamy in France and Germany. This revolutionary ruling became binding for all Ashkenazi Jews and established a significant cultural rift between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jewry.

Practically speaking, by the time of the ruling, polygamy was rarely practiced throughout the non-Sephardi world despite its permissibility in the Mishna and Talmud.³⁸ It is reported that the Sephardi Jews (of Spain, Italy, North Africa, the Middle East, and Yemen) and Krymchaki continued to practice polygamy for a long period after that time well into the 14th century. After the 14th century polygamy was extremely rare except in Yemen and possibly other scattered locations.

The Crimean judge Sumarokov³⁹ wrote in his 1801 essay that the Krymchaki continued an age-old customs in their marriage ceremonies. “The marriage festival begins, two or three days before the actual wedding, with the formal removal of the bride's wardrobe to the house of the bridegroom. On the eve of the wedding the groom and his nearest relatives repair to the bride's house, where feasting is continued until dawn. The wedding ceremony is performed in the morning. At daybreak the procession starts for the synagogue, where the intimate friends of the bridal pair walk around them seven times with roosters in their arms while the rabbi is reading the prayers. At the end of the ceremony the newly wedded couple must remain in their room for seven days, no strangers being admitted.”⁴⁰

Krymchaki Girls married at an early age (my grandmother married at age of 15). Marriages between close relatives, such as an uncle and his niece⁴¹, were permitted. There were no records of divorces among Krymchaki. Widows could never remarry because a husband and wife were considered inseparable also after death.

****Physical Appearance**

The Krymchak's physical features differed from those of the Ashkenazi Jew of Russia. Most were darker in complexion. Unlike the Tatars, neither the Krymchaki men or women shaved their heads. Their hair was cut regularly, but the men and boys took care not to cut their peyot (carefully curled earlocks). The women imitated their Tatar neighbors by painting their fingernails and palms yellow and apply rouge on their faces and dye their eyelids.

****Dress and Mannerisms**

In general, the Krymchak traditional outfits were similar to those worn by Crimean Tatars. Political and economic upheavals triggered a change in costume as well as in their culture. Apart from religious observance they adapted many Tatar customs and manners. Krymchaki clothing during the middle ages was influenced not only by the clothing worn by their non-Jewish neighbors, but also incorporated dress styles brought by travelling merchants. Men wore an "arkbaluk" , a bluish cloak drawn together at the waist by a broad belt adorned with silver. Many of the men had a small dagger attached to the belt. Some, had a portable copper ink-well with the other items for writing.⁴² . The men's pants were simple straight-legged, open-bottom style, loose but not too baggy. At times the trouser bottoms were tucked into stockings which were knotted just below the knee. In the winter time they wore leggings which were fastened to a trouser cord . During cold weather the Krymchaki would wear extra layers on the upper body or a padded or fur-lined coat and padded leggings. Krymchaki boots had a high flap coming up over the knee. Work boots

were made of sturdy leather. Boots for Shabbat and holidays were made of finer, softer leather. The lighter boots had a strap which was affixed to an inner belt under the coat in order to support the tops. Headwear consisted of a chalma, or a black kalpak [traditional triangular Tatar felt cap]. In addition they wore a shirt (sometimes embroidered), trousers, belts and boots.

“Traditional men’s outfits consisted “of a broad and long shirtsleeve with straight backs dressing gowns and a camsole.. In winter men dressed in fir coats (tun) and sheepskin coats (tulup). Men’s headgears are tyubeteykas, round fur caps, malahay, and hats in summer and spring; felt and fir hats in winter (burek). Bukhara dressing gowns were also popular (chapan) and scarves, as outer clothing had no high (sic) and turn down collars.”⁴³

Women wore a one-piece dress, sometimes embroidered and hat decorated with pearls. Married women and girls wore “bright-colored pantaloons and pointed, embroidered slippers”⁴⁴. Brocades were popular for those who could afford it .Their head-gear was much like the Turkish "chalma.

“Traditional female clothes have much in common with men’s clothing. The main parts were a long shirt (kulmek) and trousers (yshtan). Female clothing was richly decorated with embroidery and trim. Women also wore camisoles made of velvet and an apron. A special element of Tatar women’s clothing was a “kalphak”. The Tatar women had a variety of headgears: different kinds of shawls (yaulyk), ear-flaps, etc. The Tatars also wore leather boots (kata, chitek, kevesh) and multicolored shoes. Young women also wore breast ornaments made from corals and coins. The Tatar girls usually, especially in summer, walked with an uncovered head, the adult girls and women always carried cotton shawls”.⁴⁵

The picture⁴⁶ below shows a Tatar “woman wearing a velvet hat, embroidered with gold pieces, a pearl necklace, and a silver belt, which indicate her high social standing. The long, white or off-white scarf was traditionally worn by all women. The black headgear of the man in the middle is called "kalpak," made of lamb skin, is still worn by Crimean Tatar men today.



The picture below shows a young Krymchaki couple in traditional dress.



****Occupation and Trade**

Little can be gleaned about the occupations of the Crimean Jews of the 1st and 2nd centuries B.C.E. They were probably small merchants, traders and craftsmen.

First century tombstones reveal that they held governmental positions and served in the army. Prior to the 10th century Krymchaki were engaged primarily in silk processing, fabric-dyeing, and trade. When the Turks took control of Crimea they changed the trading routes causing many Krymchaki merchant traders to lose their livelihood. Many Krymchaki increasingly turned to crafts and agriculture. Records reveal that many Jews in the cities of Mangup and Chufut-Kale focused on leather tanning, mountain vegetable gardening, and growing grapevines, especially for winemaking. To protect themselves and their property from the intrusion of local feudal lords, the Krymchaki obtained written credentials by paying the ruling government a form of “protection tax”.

From about the 10th century on, the Krymchaki were primarily artisans (furriers, hatters, smiths, jewelers, saddle makers, and tanners). Under the Tatars they were forced to live in what we would now call a Ghetto, a constrained Jewish quarter of a number of compactly populated streets. When Russia annexed Crimea in 1783 the Tatar-Moslem restrictions were lifted. The humiliation and degradation imposed by the Moslems gave way to Tsarist decrees unfavorable to Jews.

Unlike the Karaites, the Krymchaks were subjected to the full impact of anti-Jewish restrictions throughout the Pale of Settlements. Different taxes and travel restrictions were imposed, but the official stance was somewhat more benevolent. Except for the emergent ascendancy of leather and fur-related crafts, the Tsarist rule did not result in any transformation in the social and economic structures of Krymchaki life. These leather and fur-related crafts included saddle making, harnesses and other equipment for horses, shoe and boot-making, and especially the fabrication of Cossack-style hats made from black lambskin. Interestingly the Russian rulers never suspected the Krymchaki of disloyalty, in contrast to the Crimean Tatars who were constantly under suspicion of disloyalty. Nor were the Krymchaki viewed as commercial competitors, as were the Greek and Armenian inhabitants of Crimea.

The 1800s saw many Ashkenazim from Ukraine and Lithuania settling in Crimea. The climate was superb, the land fertile and the sea was swarming with a vast variety of fish. But most importantly the official Tsarist anti-Jewish repression of the Pale of Settlements was less severe in Crimea. The Ashkenazim viewed the Krymchaks as lagging behind the progress and

development of Eastern Europe. In their eyes many Krymchaki were illiterate and superstitious. The newly arrived Ashkenazi settlers may have been right. The Krymchaki were a small ethnic group, engaged primarily in handicraft. They did not seek secular education and until after the Bolshevik Revolution could not boast a class of intellectuals. But they were gifted in other ways. (See the section on 'Customs'). Yet something about the Krymchaki and their way of life appealed to an increasing number of Ashkenazim who intermarried with them.

****Under the Tsars**

The history of the Jews under the Russian Tsars has been widely published elsewhere. Here we will focus on just one emotionally dreadful decree. In 1827 Tsar Nicholas I decreed compulsory military service for all Jews. "Jewish Children, called Cantonists, as young as six years old were conscripted in the Tsar Nicholas I's army. The overarching themes of these children's youth and themes of these adolescence were forced conversion and suffering. Their term of army service was 25 years. They were yanked from home and hearth and trusted into physically cruel, religiously coercive

and emotionally devastating circumstances. Nicholas used his army as conversionary tool. His goal was blatant: to convert Jewish children to Christianity. His more specific tools were torture and suffering.”⁴⁷ Many young Jews chopped off part of their trigger finger to avoid being drafted. The decree lasted from 1826 to 1855. The Encyclopedia Judaica notes that the Czarist “authorities did not disturb those living in the territories conquered from Turkey in 1768 (Crimea and the Black Sea shore) and even unofficially encouraged the settlement of additional Jews in these territories.” This may have been true at first, but towards the end of Tsar Nicholas I's rule, the decree was enforced against the Krymchaki community as well. With the advent of the Crimean War the tragedy of military conscription was intensified. Quotas were increased by 300% and the "Chappers" (snatchers) were permitted to seize boys as young as 9-10 years old and hand them over to the army.

****The Early Soviet Era**

The Russian Revolution of 1917 with the ensuing civil war ravaged Crimean society. The battles between the

Red Army, the White Movement and the Green Army resulted in the deaths of many Krymchaki. Almost 800 left Crimea for America, Palestine and Turkey. Many others succumbed to the famines of the early 1920s and the early 1930s, triggering additional emigration.

Communist edicts in the 1920s foreshadowed the human cost of starvation, repression and extermination of those who opposed, or were suspected of opposing, the Communist seizure of power in Russia. Krymchaki, although not involved in the revolution felt the sting of the terror, torture, famine, mass deportations and massacres .

As we assess the grim legacy of Soviet Communism on the Krymchaki society, we take note that the Krymchaks were largely apolitical and played no role in the Bolshevik Revolution nor in Russia's Early Soviet Regime. Contrast this with the “disproportionate and probably decisive role that other (Russian Jews) played in the infant Bolshevik regime, effectively dominating the Soviet government during its early years”.⁴⁸ This “taboo” subject is especially significant since “Jews have never made up more than five percent of the country's total population”

Initially, Stalin steered clear of a frontal confrontation with the indigenous “oriental” population. Krymchaki were considered part of this largely Moslem underbelly of the Soviet Union. Until the late 1920s Stalin avoided harassing the population’s ingrained religious practices. The year (1920) when my paternal grandparents left Crimea for Palestine (along with a large extended family), Yeshivot and Cheders were still educating Krymchaki children unperturbed by the Communist ideological objective to eliminate religion elsewhere in the Soviet Union. The main target of the anti-religious campaign in the 1920s and 1930s was the Russian Orthodox Church, but synagogues and Yeshivot were not spared. Teaching of Torah, circumcision, ritual slaughtering and baking of Matzoth were all banned except in Crimea and other areas with large Moslem populations. Jews in those areas escaped the brutal police repression against the practice of religion. The Communist regime confiscated church property, ridiculed religion, harassed believers, and propagated atheism in the schools.

The late 1920s and early 1930s marked a shift in the Soviet tactics in Crimea. Indirect efforts to wean the Krymchaki away from a religious life began in 1921. The Soviets established a network of Communist-

inspired secular schools. To penetrate the populace instruction was in Krimchatski (the language) . By the end of the 1920s attacks on Judaism, widespread throughout the Soviet period, extended to Crimea making the organized practice of Judaism very nearly hopeless.

Also in 1921 the Soviets created a program of literacy courses for Krymchaki adults to enable them to read and write Russian. A year later the Soviets launched a community club in Simferopol enabling amateur theatrical groups to perform. A few years later similar clubs were established in Kerch and other cities of Crimea. By 1928 the center of Krymchaki life shifted from Karasubasar to Simferopol and Kerch. The late 1920s and early 1930s saw the emergence of Soviets collective farms (*kolkhozes*). Krymchaks were compelled to work in collective farms and factories. While not too many Krymchaki were involved in individual or family farming, the forced collectivization campaign turned into a violent stampede during 1928. Stalin set up two *kolkhozes* in Crimea where Krymchaks were obliged to work in ethnically mixed communal farms with Russian as the only language of communication. As a result, an ever-increasing number

of Krymchaki discarded their ancestral Krymchaki language (Judeo-Crimean Tatar) in favor of Russian. In the mid 1920s it was forbidden to use Hebrew characters to write in the Krymchaki language. All such writing had to be in Cyrillic characters. Krymchaki clubs and schools, the theatrical performances, the interaction with Russian workers on the collective farms, the ban against Hebrew characters all contributed to the collapse of the Krimchatski (the language) and to the supremacy of Russian among the Krymchaki. Indeed the only noteworthy Krymchak poet of the period between the two World Wars, Major (Red Army) Yakov Chapichev (1909–1945) wrote in Russian.

All these efforts to lure the younger Krymchaki into Russian culture succeeded. Following the 1917 Revolution Krymchaki were sucked into the social and demographic vortex that weaned them away from their ancestral ethnic and linguistic culture. Krymchaki were obtaining a high level of secular education. University graduates in fields of medicine, and engineering and education disengaged themselves from the Krymchaki community and moved to the major cities. After World War II had ended with more than 6,000 Krymchaks

killed by the Nazis, the Soviets deported the Crimean Tatar to Central Asia . They were suspected (an in fact many did) of cooperating with the Nazis. Many Krymchaki were mistakenly expelled as well.

The hostile official Soviet anti-Semitism of 1948 to 1953 caused a faction of Krymchak academics and intelligentsia to consider ways of shaking off the taint of being Jewish. Their application in 1950 to the Supreme Soviet and the Ministry of the Interior to change their identity from “Ivrei” to “Krymchak” was approved. Their internal passports no longer shows them as Jews, but as a separate ethnic entity, Krymchaki.⁴⁹

As recently as 1989 a Soviet Census shows that less than 40% of the Krymchaki declared Krymchak to be their mother tongue, and these were all elderly. The rest declared Russian to be their mother tongue. Four factors contributed to the decline and virtual disappearance of the Krymchaki language, culture and heritage. (1) The complete Russian acculturation of virtually all Krymchaks under Soviet rule; (2) Krymchaki who graduated from university relocated to the major cities; (3) intermarriage primarily with non-Jewish Russians; and (4) emigration from Crimea to

other parts of the Soviet Union, to America and to Palestine/Israel⁵⁰. The Communists succeeded in breaking the bonds that kept the Krymchaki community as a distinct ethnic group. For centuries prior to the Bolshevik revolution, other Jewish ethnicities merged with the indigenous Krymchaks, adopting the Krymchaki culture and language, intermarrying with the Krymchaki and eventually becoming almost indistinguishable from the original Krymchaki except for some physical features. The Soviets extinguished that process.

****The Nazi Period**

Very few Krymchaki were able to leave Crimea when the Nazi troops occupied Crimea in October 1941. Of the 40,000 Crimean Jews killed by the Nazis, 6,000 were Krimchaks. The Nazis wasted no time in making the peninsula *Judenrein* (free of Jews). Between November 15 and December 13, 80% of the Krymchaki were slaughtered. Not one Karaite was killed. Hitler was assured by the commandant of Einsatzgruppe D that the Karaites were not Jews and should be spared. An anonymous poem in Krimchatski (the language)

describes the extermination of the Krymchaki of Simferopol, and grieves over “the death of my people,” challenging future generations to remember those who perished. All able-bodied Krymchaki fought in the Soviet army and in partisan units. Many perished, including my two cousins, both pilots in the Soviet air force and the poet Yakov Chapichev who was a Major in the Red Army (1909–1945).

That collective memory finds its expression each December 11 with a commemoration of the massive extermination of its people by Hitler. To this day, each year since 1945 Krymchaki gather in Simferopol and other Crimean cities and in Israel. The ceremony is called a T’kun (short for the Hebrew *tikun yom ha-zikaron* -institution of the day of commemoration). On that day what remains of the Krymchaki in Crimea and in Israel gather to pray for the souls of those killed. The commemorative tribute combines a somber recitation of Kaddish with a more upbeat ceremony where Krymchaki songs are sung and poetry recited in the Judeo-Crimean Tatar language – a language not spoken or understood by most in attendance, and traditional Krymchaki foods are eaten.

****Language**

Researchers claim that Krimchatski⁵¹ (the language) was a version of the Crimean Tatar⁵² language. All languages change continually. Over a period of almost 2,000 years the Krymchaki language has undergone what experts term, “diachronic change”. As mentioned earlier, the indigenous Jewish settlers of Crimea, remnants of the Bar Kochba Revolt, spoke a Post-Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic.⁵³ It is beyond the scope of this article to delve into how changes in society influence language. Needless to say the Judeo-Crimean Tatar language spoken by the Krymchaki over the past several centuries probably has little in common with the original language of the second century settlers.

Krimchatski (the language) differs from the Crimean Tatar dialect in its pronunciation and vocabulary. Krimchatski pronunciation is based on the dialect spoken by the Crimea Tatars who lived in the northern steppes. The Tatars of the southern coastal area spoke a slightly different dialect. The Krymchaki vocabulary contains 5-10% post-biblical Hebrew. It is not too extreme to say that the death knoll to the Krimchatski (the language) was the mass changeover to the Russian

language imposed by Stalin in the 1920s. The few elders who use Judeo-Crimean Tatar as their vernacular are dying and the youth have no knowledge of it. Incidentally for almost 2,000 years (until late 1920s) the Krymchaki used Hebrew characters while the Tatars used the Arabic script.

The Krymchaks transformation from a Jewish ethnic group to a nationality is an unknown story to most. The process of creating a national language and ethnicity for the Krymchaki was shaped by the way in which the various ethnic groups interacted with the Krymchaki and with one another as wave after wave of immigrants settled in Crimea, some by way of invasion, others by more peaceful means. When asked whether I am Ashkenazi or Sephardi, I respond that I am neither. I am a Krymchak descendant from a long-lineage of Krymchaki. I have learned in an Ashkenazi Yeshiva, prayed most of my life in Ashkenazi synagogues, and founded the Sephardic Center of Mill Basin (Brooklyn, N.Y.) and grew up in a home where my parents spoke Russian and Hebrew to me, and where my father spoke to his parents (who lived with us) in the Judeo-Crimean Tatar” language.

****Krymchaki Poetry**

Over and above religious observance and Torah studies, Krymchaki created a rich folklore expressed in the many legends, songs, riddles, and proverbs, written by hand in Hebrew letters and passed from one generation to another. Foremost was the stress on oral recitation of poetry, on music (singing and instrumental), dancing and ethnic foods. The poetry and music of the Krymchaki was reflective of their shared experiences over the centuries. It was the medium that linked one Krymchak to another, in each generation and with past generations. Their poetry had a special magic to it. It conveyed deep and profound feelings of the heart and soul. There was something evocative and expressive about it. Public readings of poetry at all gatherings, both large and small, enabled them to share these emotions with friends and relatives. These expressions of Krymchak culture were meant to be recited orally, often within families, and were recorded in a *jonk* (handwritten compilation) extending over several generations. Each new generation expressed in poetic form their joys and struggles of life, the good and the bad. These anthologies of love or passion, of

friendship, sadness or life in general both assuaged and enhanced their deepest memories.

The Krymchaki understood the transformational power of poetry. They may not have been intellectuals but they recognized the potential of their oral readings to inspire and encourage the human heart. The words and images of any given poem resonated with its participants at an emotional level. From the time of King David's Psalms (and perhaps even earlier) poetry has spoken to a common need of the human heart and soul--the need to be inspired, to find meaning in life. By means of these poems Krymchaki experienced strong spiritual connections to things around them and to their past. Many carefully handwritten *jonks* are in existence today treasured by their families, even though few understand the language that they were written in. The shift from Krimchatski (the language) to Russian escalated from the 1920s to the 1930s. Some poems began to appear in Russian. The only noteworthy Krymchak poet of this period, Yakov Chapichev (1909–1945) wrote in Russian.⁵⁴ An unidentified poem in Krimchatski (the language) recounts the extermination of the Krymchaks of Simferopol,

grieving over “the death of my people,” insisting that those who perished should not be forgotten.

Through the joys and misfortunes of Crimean Jewry this genre of poetry has effectively connected one Krymchaki heart to another. In so doing it linked families from one generation to another, and the larger Krymchaki society from one era to the next. As Krymchaki culture fades away so will this seemingly archaic art form. Krymchaki literature, apart from folklore, were primarily translations of Hebrew religious texts to Krimchatski (the language).

Ludmila Bakshi, who prepared the text accompanying the recently released CD, “The Folklore of the Krymchaks” [© 2004 PD (634479816291)] says that the “Krymchaki endowed us with an abundant musical legacy. In its captivating monophonic melodies, ornate rhythms and emotional expression one could sense a mixture of the Turkic, the Arabic and the Jewish. The Krymchak musicians had played on their k’avalas (reed-pipes, fifes), kemana (type of violin) and daryo (tambourine) the melodies of the “haitarm” dance, which the entire Turkic-speaking indigenous population of Crimea knows, sings and dances to”.⁵⁵

**** FOODS AND DRINKS⁵⁶**

Lamb and rice were staples of the traditional Krymchaki diet. Krymchaki baking featured a wide array of pastries, especially meat pies, which, besides beef or lamb and onions, could contain hard-boiled eggs, rice, and raisins. Another traditional dish was Chibureki, or deep-fried lamb dumplings described below

▪Meals

- Bread – regular or sourdough; flatbreads and griddle cakes
- Katlama- fried flatbread.
- Pilaf, a dish in which a rice is browned in oil, and then cooked in a seasoned broth. It sometimes contains a variety of meat and vegetables.
 - Yogurt. Made mostly from sheep's milk.
 - Shishkebab. Prepared with meat or mutton (sheep meat)
 - Chibureki Meat turnovers, with filling of ground or chopped meat, and onions. Filling enclosed between two layers of dough and deep fat fried.

- Pastel and Kubeteh – A kind of meat pie filled with chopped meat [sometimes small chunks of lamb] or chicken, and rice. Filling is enclosed between layers of dough and baked.
- Shorvah (Soup) A thick potage prepared with meat and vegetables supplemented with noodles and kasha (buckwheat groats).
- Pilmän – Vareniki (ravioli) served with broth. . It is a form of boiled pastry filled with either meat or cheese curds (but never combined) sometimes with seeds and peas
- Balish - an ancient meat and kasha (buckwheat groat) dish baked in a pot.
- Tutırma – kishke (intestine) filled with millet, barley or rice and fatty pieces of meat
 - Meat is preserved for future use by salting it down in brine and by flavoring it with strong spices, including hot peppers and allspice
- Amin U’Marta- Eggs – Hard boiled chicken eggs baked. In Chamin (Chulent) from Friday afternoons to the Sabbath meal on Saturday after Synagogue services.
- Eggs – Boiled or fried in a number of styles
- Kapchonka & Laban- considered a delicacy
kapchonka was a salt-cured, air-dried whitefish that is

processed uneviscerated (with the guts left inside the fish).

▪**Desserts.** Fruit and vegetable turnovers, "pekmez" (grape molasses), "kaymak" (thick cream), "halva," "lokma," etc.

▪**Drinks.** Wine, vodka, arak (a strong alcoholic beverage with anise flavoring), "Ayran" (diluted yogurt), "sherbet" (liquid portion of fruit compote or stewed fruit, with sugar), diluted "pekmez" (grape molasses); brewed honey wine which tastes like beer..

Typical Recipe

Pastel (Individual portions of Meat Pie)

Dough ingredients

2 eggs

a pinch of salt

2½ cups flour

Filling ingredients

1 pound ground beef chuck

1 onion, finely chopped

1 clove garlic

1 teaspoon salt vegetable oil for frying

Directions

Make dough:

Beat eggs. Add sugar, salt, and flour. Knead until smooth and pliable.

Wrap the dough in wax paper and chill overnight before making into pies.

Make pies:

Combine salt, garlic, chopped onion, and ground meat.

Remove about a quarter of the dough from the refrigerator at a time, keeping the rest of the dough chilled.

Roll each quarter of dough into a 12-inch cord.

Slice each cord into six pieces, rolling these smaller pieces between the palms of the hands to form balls. Flatten the balls slightly.

On a surface dusted with flour, roll each into a circle about 3½ to 4 inches in diameter.

Spread 1 tablespoon of the meat mixture on each circle of dough, leaving a 1-inch border around the edge. Gather the dough upward all the way around, forming a round, flat pastry. Leave a hole about 1-inch across on top.

Cover finished pies with a cloth to prevent dough from drying.

Heat about ½ inch of vegetable oil in a large skillet. Cook the pies, with the hole side down, in the oil. Cook a few at a time without crowding them in the skillet, for approximately 15 minutes, or until golden brown. Makes 24 pies.

. A Cherished Heritage Fades Away**

Against our powerful emotions we resign ourselves to the passing away of the world that once was —The Krymchaki. It is vanishing before our own eyes, slipping away as it forsakes us. We struggle against relinquishing it, but we are too few in number to prevent it from abandoning us. Those of us who still wistfully cling to our Krymchaki heritage cherish its legacy even as it sneaks out in a nostalgic exodus-like departure We are left high and dry as this cherished heritage fades away.

Appendix:

I. Certificate of Name Change from Rabbeinu to Rubin
(10 February 1930)

R/7053.

No. 4051

Certificate of Change of Name.

شهادة تغيير اسم
תעודה לשנוי שם

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT:-

شهادة بان :-
וזאת לעדה :-

(SURNAME) REBINO
In capitals)

רבין

اسم العائلة (با حروف كبيرة)
שם המשפחה (באותיות גדולות)

(OTHER NAMES) SHIMSHON
In capitals)

שמשה

اسماء اخرى (با حروف كبيرة)
שמות אחרים (באותיות גדולות)

of HAIFA

חיפה

في

a Subject of RUSSIA

רוסיה

من

and resident in Palestine has applied for and been granted permission

الاطن. بمطابقين قد طلب تغيير اسمه واذن له بان يغير اسمه الى :-

to change his name to :-

القاطنة (طلبت) اسمها) لها (تغير) اسمها)

(SURNAME) RUBIN
In capitals)

רבין

اسم العائلة (با حروف كبيرة)
שם המשפחה (באותיות גדולות)

(OTHER NAMES) SHIMSHON
In capitals)

שמשה

اسماء اخرى (با حروف كبيرة)
שמות אחרים (באותיות גדולות)

by which names alone he will henceforth be known.

و بهذا الاسم يعرف (او تعرف) فيما بعد
بشخص واحد وكذا (تسمى) בשמות آله دوماً

Particulars of wife and children under sixteen years of age:-

تفاصيل الامراء والاولاد الذين دون السادسة عشرة من عمرهم
وتسعة اوردت الهاشمية والاطنين شام كغيل فחות م 16 سنة.

ORIGINAL NAMES.	الاسماء الاصلية	NOW CHANGED TO.	تغيرت الان الى :-
Wife REBINO SHAMCHATANA	شامخاتانا رבין	RUBIN SHAMCHATANA	רבין שמخاتאנה
Children " SHMUEL	שמעל	" SHMUEL	שמעל



Jerusalem.

ירושלים.

المركز
המקום

Date 10th February, 1930.

כ"ב שבט, חתר צ"א.

التاريخ
החתי

CHIEF IMMIGRATION OFFICER.

مدير مصلحة الهجرة والسفر
מנהל מחלקת העליה וההגירה.

-
- ¹ The words Krymchaki (pl), Krymchaks (pl); Krymchak (sing.) are synonyms for the term Crimean Jews or Jews of Crimea.
- ² The **Bar Kochba** revolt (132–135CE) against the Roman Empire was a second major rebellion by the Jews of Judaea Province
- ³ The Taman Peninsula is a peninsula in the present-day Krasnodar Krai of Russia. It is bounded on the north by the Sea of Azov, on the west by the Strait of Kerch and on the south by the Black Sea.
- ⁴ Sargon II, during the course of conquering much of what is now known as the Middle East, defeated the Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC and sent its inhabitants into exile. This presaged future Greek and Roman conquest and, later, the Crusades. Van De Mieroop, Marc (2005). *A History of the Ancient Near East*. Blackwell Publishing. ISBN 0-631-22552-8.
- ⁵ Based on inscriptions on tombstones in Crimea
- ⁶ From NUPI Centre for Russian Studies
- ⁷ Known then as Kaffa
- ⁸ Known then as Karasu-Baza
- ⁹ Krymchaks and Krymchaki are interchangeable designations for the rabbinic Jews of Crimea
- ¹⁰ Jerome (ca. 347 – September 30, 420) was a Christian apologist known for translating the Five Books of Moses directly from the Hebrew Tanach, rather than from the Greek Septuagint translation of the Bible.
- ¹¹ As to the inscriptions and monuments found in the vicinity of Kertch and Yenikale see Harkavy in "Yevreiskiya Zapiski," published by A. Pumpyanski
- ¹² Encyclopedia Judaica
- ¹³ Yivo researchers note an influx of Jews escaping forced conversion in Byzantine controlled areas bordering Crimea.
- ¹⁴ The advance of the Khazars to the Black Sea and Crimea area appears to be mentioned also in the "Reply of Joseph".
- ¹⁵ In 1159, Benjamin of Tudela, was a medieval Spanish and explorer who traveled through Europe, Asia, and Africa. His extensive education and knowledge of many languages facilitated his 14 year journey marking him as a leading figure in the history of geography and Judaism in the 12th century. He preceded Marco Polo by a hundred years.
- ¹⁶ the traveler Pethahiah of Regensburg
- ¹⁷ The terms Tatars or Tatars are applied to nomadic Turkic peoples who, themselves, were conquered by Mongols and incorporated to their horde. They mainly composed of Kipchaks.
- ¹⁸ Some say from 1315 to 1475
- ¹⁹ The term, "Crimean Jewish" or "Jews of Crimea" always refers to rabbinic Jews and not Karaites in this article
- ²⁰ YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the preeminent center for the study of East European Jewry and Yiddish.
- ²¹ Probably short for Yechezkel
- ²² These merchants were understood the Slavonic language.
- ²³ Douglas Morton Dunlop in the Encyclopedia Judaica
- ²⁴ see Baratz's "Collection of Works on the Question of Hebrew Elements in Ancient Russian Literature"—in Russian—vol. I, Paris, 1926–27, vol. II, Berlin, 1924; also LMon Baratz, Sur les origines MtrangIres de la plupart des lois civiles russes, Publications de l'Institut de Droit ComparM de l'UniversitM de Paris (Iire SMrie), 52, Appendice.)
- ²⁵ Igor' Veniaminovich Achkinazi, *Krymchaki: Istoriko-etnograficheskii ocherk* (Simferopol, Ukr., 2000); Aleksandr Aibabin, *Etnicheskaia istoriia rannevizantiiskogo Kryma* (Simferopol, Ukr., 1999);
- ²⁶ beginning in the early 720s and continuing in 843, 873–874, 930, and 943
- ²⁸ In fact he was taken captive by the Tatars twice. First in 1482 when he and his family along with other Jews were carried off in captivity to Crimea. Upon gaining his freedom he returned to Kiev. In 1495 he and other Jews were taken captive again to Crimea where he spent the rest of his life writing commentaries, kabalistic works, a Hebrew grammar, etc. a
- ²⁹ JTA article about the Jewish community in Kerch (Kertch), Crimea dated ???
- ³⁰ Based on the study of Krymchaki by Prof. Wolf Moskovich and Dr. Boris Tukan, published in Pe'amim (1982) by the Ben-Zvi Institute
- ³¹ Asia minor (Anatolia) is the geographic region bounded by the Black Sea to the north, the Mediterranean Sea to the south, the Aegean Sea to the west, and the bulk of the Asian mainland to the east. It comprises most of modern Turkey.
- ³² Even though he was not a Karaite, he studied under Aaron ben Joseph the Karaite
- ³³ Article about Lekhno, David by Yehuda Slutsky

³⁴ In fact he was taken captive by the Tatars twice. First in 1482 when he and his family along with other Jews were carried off in captivity to Crimea. Upon gaining his freedom he returned to Kiev. In 1495 he and other Jews were taken captive again to Crimea where he spent the rest of his life writing commentaries, kabalistic works, a Hebrew grammar, etc. a

³⁵ Encyclopedia Judaica article by Abraham Ben-Yaacob

³⁶ The Folklore of the Krymchaks (Music CD)

³⁷ Report dated April 27, 1847 to the Russian Ministry of Interior (as quoted in Folklore of Krymchaki Music).

³⁸ See Ketubot 91a, 93a, 93b; Ketubot Ch. 10; Sanhedrin 21a; Yevamot 65a; refer also to Deut. 17:14-17

³⁹ Jewish Encyclopedia article by Herman Rosenthal, Chief of the Slavonic Department of the New York Public Library, New York City

⁴⁰ It appears that Sumarkov confused the concept of a Yichud Room with the practice of Sheva Brachot. Right after the Chupah, the bride and groom go to a "private" room" where they spend a short period of time together. The marriage is not consummated there. The gesture fulfills an Halachic condition in the nesu'in phase which requires the groom takes his bride to a private area. The Sheva Brachot is a tradition of nightly celebration with the young couple for the week after the wedding

⁴¹ Today we frown on such marriages because of genetically induced medical problems of the offspring. The Talmud, however [Yevamot 62b] not only permits but encourages one to marry his sister's daughter. Medieval sages sought to limit this practice.

⁴² Jewish Encyclopedia article by Herman Rosenthal, Chief of the Slavonic Department of the New York Public Library, New York City

⁴³ Umichukranian web site

⁴⁴ ibid

⁴⁵ Umichukrainian web site

⁴⁶ Courtesy of SOTA, Research Center for Turkistan and Azerbaijan, located in Haarlem, The Netherlands

⁴⁷ The Cantonists: The Jewish Children's Army of the Tsar
by Larry Domnitch

⁴⁸ Journal of Historical Review, "The Jewish Role in the Bolshevik Revolution and Russia's Early Soviet Regime" by Mark Weber

⁴⁹ . Those of us who have not suffered the brutal repression of the Soviet Union should not pass judgment.

⁵⁰ Soviet policies prohibited the emigration of Jews from the mid 1920s until the 1980s

⁵¹ Throughout this article wherever Krimchatski (the language) is mentioned it means the "Judeo-Crimean Tatar" language.

⁵² Itself belonging to the Kipchak Group of the Turkic Branch of the Altaic Language Family.

⁵³ Recall that Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 B.C.E. followed by the mass deportation to Babylonia

⁵⁴ He was a high ranking Red Army officer, who was discharged from the army during the Great Terror (1938) but was later reinstated. He was killed in action fighting the Nazis and was posthumously awarded the highest military distinction, the title of the Hero of the Soviet

⁵⁵ This CD contains recordings of melodies and instrumental folk-tunes performed by M. Lombrozo, E. Levi, S. Lombrozo, L. Hafus and M. Hafus. They are taken from various sources. Some of the recordings present here are by performers who are no longer living: M. Lombrozo and E. Levi. Some of the songs were recorded by me in Simferopol (performed by S. Lombrozo and L. Hafus). A certain amount of songs has been taken from the collection of V. M. Lombrozo (who for many years had been the director of the Krymchak's cultural and educational society "K'rymchakhlar"). For the most part these are lyrical songs about love, about the pain of separation, about the bygone youth. This CD is the very first - and possibly the very last - release of the music of the Krymchaks". The list of songs appears at the endnotes⁵⁵ and may be heard on <http://cdbaby.com/cd/solydrecords>

⁵⁶ Courtesy of *Inci Bowman* who prepared a summary of the Crimean Tatar diet a century ago based on a Russian publication, *Priroda i Luydi*, Vol. II, published in 1879. A Turkish translation of the section on foods, "100 Yil Once Kirim Tatarlari," by Mahmut Tahir appeared in [EMEL](#), a journal published in Turkish in Ankara, Turkey. (No. 170-171, 1989, pp. 41-42.)