

The Karaites of Lithuania: Feature

Origins and arrival in Lithuania



The Karaites (singular: Karaite) are a community whose roots date back to the 8th century in Babylonia (modern-day Iraq), when a dissident Jewish religious movement rejected the authority of the Talmud, recognising only the written Torah. Over the centuries, some of these communities migrated to Crimea, where they became deeply integrated into the culture of the Turkic peoples of the steppe, notably adopting a Turkic language which became their mother tongue.

It was at the end of the 14th century that the Karaites first arrived in Lithuania. In 1397, Grand Duke Vytautas the Great brought back several hundred Karaite families from Crimea following his military campaigns in the region. He settled them mainly in Trakai, his seat of power, as well as in Vilnius and Halych (now in Ukraine). Vytautas granted them considerable privileges: they were entrusted with the guarding of Trakai Castle, an elite military post, and enjoyed a degree of legal and religious autonomy that was rare for the time.



A unique community within the Jewish world



The Karaites of Lithuania differ from Rabbinic Judaism — the form practised by the vast majority of Jews worldwide — in several fundamental respects.

On a religious level, their central difference is their rejection of the Talmud. Whereas Rabbinic Judaism relies on an 'Oral Torah' transmitted through centuries of commentaries and rabbinic laws compiled in the Talmud, the Karaim recognize only the written text of the Hebrew Bible (the Tanakh). They interpret the sacred texts directly and personally, without the intermediary of a rabbinic tradition.

Culturally and linguistically, the Karaim of Lithuania are even more distinctive. Their traditional language, Troki Karaim (named after Trakai in Polish), is a Turkic language, belonging to the same family as Turkish, Tatar, and Kazakh — and not a Semitic language like Hebrew or Yiddish. This language is now critically endangered, with only a few native speakers still alive.

In terms of identity, the Karaim of Lithuania have often asserted a distinct identity from that of their Ashkenazi neighbours, emphasising their Crimean-Turkic origins as much as their religious heritage. This distinction had dramatic and controversial consequences: during World War II, the Nazi authorities hesitated over their status, and after reports from rabbinical experts and Karaim themselves affirmed their separation from the Jewish people, the Karaim were largely spared from the Holocaust, unlike the Ashkenazi Jews of Lithuania who were almost entirely exterminated.

This leads to practical differences in the observance of Shabbat, dietary laws (kashrut), prayers, and religious holidays.



Trakai, the heart of the community

The town of Trakai, some twenty kilometres from Vilnius, is a living symbol of the Karaite presence in Lithuania. The Karaites lived there on a specific street, *Karaimų gatvė* (Karaite Street), lined with traditional houses featuring three windows — one for God, one for the family, and one for Grand Duke Vytautas, according to local tradition.

The town is home to a kenessa (a Karaite place of worship), still in use, as well as the Karaite Community Museum. Trakai is also known for *kibinai*, small puff pastry turnovers filled with meat or cheese, a traditional Karaite dish that has become a true Lithuanian culinary institution.



Current situation



Today, there are only a handful of Karaites left in Lithuania. Their numbers are estimated at fewer than 300 people across the country, concentrated mainly in Trakai and Vilnius. Their language is classified by UNESCO as critically endangered. Despite their small numbers, the community strives to keep its traditions alive through cultural associations, educational initiatives and heritage tourism in Trakai.

The Karaims of Lithuania thus represent one of the rarest ethnic groups in Europe — a people at the crossroads of the Turkic East, the biblical faith and Lithuanian history, whose cultural survival is today a matter of both memory and identity.

Sources: *Lithuanian historical heritage, ethnolinguistic research on Turkic languages, the Karaite community archives in Trakai.*