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1 Introduction to Karaim and Krymchak

Karaim and Krymchak are languages belonging to the Kipchak branch of the Turkic language family. Karaim was once spoken by Karaite communities in the Crimea, Poland, Ukraine and Lithuania, but now is spoken only by a few families in Lithuania. It is a highly endangered language. Krymchak was spoken by Rabbinic Jews in the Crimea prior to 1941, but is now an extinct language.

The East European Karaite population is estimated to have been around 3,800 in the late 18th century (Kupoveckij 1983: 76). Over the course of the 20th century the Karaite population in Eastern Europe underwent a marked decline, so that now there are only about 1,100 in the Crimea, and fewer than 300 in Lithuania and Poland, with a total population of no more than 5,000 worldwide (for further details, see Kupoveckij 1983; Ješvovyč 2002; Adamczuk, Kobeckaitė, and Pilecki 2003).

The Krymchak population has followed a similar trajectory. The estimated population of Krymchak speakers increased from approximately 800 in the late 18th century (Kupoveckij 1983: 82, 83) to about 8,000 by 1939, but during World War II 5,500 people were exterminated by the Nazis (Kupoveckij 1983: 86). The 1959 census showed 1,500 Krymchaks (Kupoveckij 1989: 64), and the last Soviet census of 1970 to mention Krymchaks counted 1,053 individuals (Kupoveckij 1983: 86). According to Kizilov (2008: 66), there were only 204 Krymchaks in the Crimea in 2002, while about 600–700 lived in Israel (2008: 68, 71), where most of them migrated after 1990. Polinsky (1991: 130), who conducted fieldwork among the Krymchaks in the 1980s, reported that all native speakers were over 70 years old.

1.1 Karaim

The Karaim language comprises two main dialect groups, Eastern (also called Crimean) and Western. The population of East Karaim speakers had originally migrated to the Crimea in the 13th century, mainly from Greek-speaking Byzantium, to which they had arrived in the early 12th century, from Arabic-