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# FAMOUS COLLECTORS: FACTS AND ASSESSMENTS

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## ABRAHAM FIRKOVICH AND THE KARAITE COMMUNITY IN JERUSALEM IN 1864\*

The Karaite movement of Judaism was founded by ‘Anan ben David in Mesopotamia in the middle of the eighth century A.D. Its tenets were rejection of the Talmudic oral tradition, a return to the Bible, the Old Testament, as the sole source of Divine Law, and repudiation of the authority of the exilarchic and Gaonic leadership. The Karaite reformation was able to appeal also to other antinomian, “sectarian” groups which had existed on the fringes of Judaism through the ages and which possibly had connections with the Second Temple period [1].

Karaite settlement in Jerusalem started in the ninth century. The Karaite quarter was located in *Ṣelá’ ha-‘élef* (Joshua 18:28) — *Hārat al-Mušāraqa*, probably to the south-east of the Temple Mount — where the city of King David had stood. According to Karaite tradition, in 755 Anan built a synagogue in Jerusalem, where Karaite synagogue still bears his name. However, it is probable that the present synagogue located in the Jewish quarter dates back to a period after the destruction wrought by the Crusaders, who in 1099 brought to an abrupt end the first Golden Era of the Karaites in Jerusalem [2].

The date of the return of Karaites to Jerusalem is uncertain. However, the Karaite synagogue of Anan within the city walls was probably founded fairly soon after the city was sacked, since in the thirteenth century it was still possible to occupy deserted plots of land and buildings in the city. Since that period a small Karaite community has been living in Jerusalem with only minor interruptions, especially in the vicinity of this underground synagogue. It is reported that the synagogue was repaired and partly rebuilt twice in the nineteenth century, in 1837 and 1864 [3]. We shall soon return to the subject of the later reconstruction.

The number of Karaites in Jerusalem has never been considerable and the same holds true with regard to all of their settlements [4]. In the sixteenth century they had their own quarter (*Maḥallat al-Qara’in*) opposite the Western Wall; however, their number did not exceed 10% of the

number of Jews in the city. This favourable period was followed by rapid decline, and in 1641 they are reported to have numbered 27 living in 15 houses in Jerusalem. Irrespective of better contacts with other centres of Karaism and immigration to Jerusalem, the figures remained on the same level, in tens, until the middle of the twentieth century, i.e. until the Karaite *‘aliyya* from Egypt. According to the reports of different Western visitors in the nineteenth century, the number of souls vacillates between six and fifty and that of the households between one and fourteen [5].

A rumour once circulated in Jerusalem that, due to a curse, the number of Karaite males in the city would never reach 10, i.e. the number required to form a *minyān* necessary for public prayer [6].

The famous Karaim scholar **Abraham Firkovich** (1787—1874) arrived in Jerusalem on October 5, 1863. This *grand tour* which extended until March 1865 was Firkovich's last visit to the Near East. During journeys to several lands during these years he collected with great success the majority of his second collection of Hebrew, Arabic, Judaeo-Arabic and Samaritan codices, manuscripts and manuscript fragments as well as other antiquities. The collection consists of more than 15,000 items. It was acquired in 1876 by the Imperial Public Library in St. Petersburg; at present the library bears the name of the National Library of Russia [7].

The collection also houses the personal archive of A. S. Firkovich, where a great number of letters received by him are kept as well as copies of letters sent by him. The majority of the correspondence is written in Hebrew, while a few letters are in Karaim, the Turkic native language of Firkovich, his relatives and the East European Karaites (Karaims) in general. On the basis of Firkovich's letters we can learn a great deal about the situation of the Karaim community in Jerusalem in those days. In addition, Firkovich gives a detailed report of his building activities for the benefit of the tiny community as well as of his “Zionistic” plans for the future of his brethren in the Holy City [8].

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