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Crimean Karaim Manuscripts in the Józef Sulimowicz Collection

Abstract

This paper provides a brief review of the manuscripts originating from the Crimea and constituting a part of the collection of Karaite manuscripts assembled in the 1950s and 1960s by the Turkologist Józef Sulimowicz. An inventory list that is currently being compiled comprises 96 such items. However, this number may change as in many cases no precise information on their provenance is available and it will require a more detailed analysis to determine the origin of some of the documents. This part of the collection includes manuscripts with a religious and secular content, written in Karaim and in Hebrew. As far as the Karaim manuscripts are concerned, the *mejumas*, i.e. collections of popular literature, and a 17th century translation of the Bible are particularly worthy of attention. The physical condition of the manuscripts is not infrequently poor since they might have been stored in lofts or basements before they came into the hands of Józef Sulimowicz. In 2012 the Association of Polish Karaims launched a project to restore and preserve Karaim manuscripts. Financed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of Poland the project made it possible to complete the conservation of the twenty most valuable items in the collection, including the above-mentioned Bible translation. In 2015 two other Crimean manuscripts are due to undergo restoration and subsequently digitalization, which will make them accessible to researchers.

Keywords: Karaite manuscripts, Karaim language, Crimean Karaim, Karaites of Crimea, *mejumas*

A collection of Karaim manuscripts gathered together by the Turkologist Józef Sulimowicz (1913–1973) is the largest of its kind in Poland. Since Sulimowicz was a Polish Karaite born in Halicz, the presence in his collection of manuscripts from this community and other communities located in Poland and Lithuania (Łuck, Troki, Wilno) seems

quite natural and self-explanatory. However, it also includes numerous items originating from Crimea. Until recently, the exact content of the collection has remained unknown, even though an attempt was made back in the 1960s to compile a catalogue of Karaim manuscripts in Poland (Dubiński, 1985: 24). A new project aimed at assembling data on all available Karaim manuscripts remaining in private hands in Poland was launched in 2012 by Michał Németh from Jagiellonian University, in collaboration with Mariola Abkowicz from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, and the author of this paper.¹ This undertaking has provided us with a steady supply of new data on the Crimean materials collected by Sulimowicz.²

In order to better understand Sulimowicz's endeavours as a collector of caraimica and his particular interests in Karaite manuscripts, some facts about his life should be taken into account.³ Józef Sulimowicz was among the first students to attend Professor Ananiasz Zajęczkowski's Turkology Seminar in the newly opened Institute of Oriental Studies at the University of Warsaw. It was during his time as a student in the 1930s that, inspired by Professor Kowalski's call to preserve and study old documents (Kowalski, 1935–1936: 13), Sulimowicz began to show an interest in old books and manuscripts (Dubiński, 1985: 20). He had first become acquainted with them in his early years, as there were numerous printed and handwritten old prayer books in the *kienesa* (Karaite prayer house) in Halicz as well as in many houses of Karaim families. However, his interests in this field were not limited solely to materials from Western communities or to Karaim materials. While on a scholarship in Istanbul in the summer of 1936, he also acquired a number of Ottoman manuscripts (Majda, 1967: 139) whereas in Dobrudja he collected samples of the Tatar language and popular literature. He chose as the topic of his Master's Degree thesis an analysis of a Turkic translation of the Pentateuch published in Gozlev in 1841. In the autumn of 1939 he was due to defend the thesis and, thanks to his personal contacts with Hadji Seraya Shapshal, take up employment at the Karaim Museum that Shapshal had founded in Troki to house his collection of caraimica and orientalia.

The outbreak of World War II regrettably put an end to all these plans. Sulimowicz was conscripted into the Red Army in 1941 and in 1944 redeployed to the Polish First Army. He remained in the military after the war, eventually being promoted to the rank of colonel. In 1960 he was appointed director of the Central Library of the Army, a position that perfectly suited his interests in old books and manuscripts (Sulimowicz 2013: 8).

At that time Sulimowicz stepped up his efforts to collect Karaite manuscripts, books and documents brought to Poland by those Karaims who had decided to leave their traditional settlements in the east and resettle in the west within Poland's new borders. He had never given up on the idea of completing his studies, hence his efforts as a manuscript collector were inextricably bound up with his interest in the Karaim language, especially its eastern dialect. In 1968, after he had managed with the help of his former teacher,

¹ Project financed by the National Science Centre of Poland (Narodowe Centrum Nauki), grant number DEC-2011/03/D/HS2/00618. The author benefited from this grant.

² For Lutsk manuscripts in the collection see Sulimowicz (2015).

³ For a more comprehensive biography of the collector see Sulimowicz (2012, 2013).

Professor Ananiasz Zajączkowski, to resume his studies, he selected Crimean Karaim once again as the subject of his Master's Degree thesis, after the completion of which he was finally awarded his Master of Arts in Turkish philology in 1969. This time, however, it was not the translation of the Pentateuch of 1841 he analysed, but rather a translation of penitential prayers into Karaim included in *Seder ha-Haftarot* printed in Crimea in 1734.⁴

Although the collector's main focus of interest were items written in Karaim, he also collected all available Karaite manuscripts, books and documents in Hebrew, Polish and Russian. Therefore, his collection consists of items very different from one another in terms of their type and origin. For obvious reasons the manuscripts of the Polish Karaims (from Halicz, Łuck and Kukizów) make up the majority of the collection, but several items originating from Lithuania (predominantly manuscripts from the interwar period) are also included, as well as – surprisingly – numerous manuscripts from Crimea. An inventory list that is currently being compiled contains 96 such items. However, we should expect this number to increase as in most cases no precise information on the provenance of documents is available and it will require a more detailed analysis to determine the origin of some of them.

In the late 1950s and in the 1960's Józef Sulimowicz travelled on several occasions to Crimea either as a member of official delegations of the Polish Army or as a tourist. There he made contact with a number of Crimean Karaims, including Semita Isaakovna Kushul (1906–1996), Boris Kokenay (1892–1967), Yaakov Borisovich Kara from Eupatoria, Yosif Kefeli and Mikhail Yosifovich Sappak from Simferopol, and others. We learn from the collector's personal notes that he visited and interviewed members of the Karaite communities in Eupatoria, Simferopol, Bakhchisaray and Theodosia. "I was given or I bought a number of interesting items" – he wrote later (Sulimowicz 1961–1962). Although this particular note probably mainly concerns items of material culture that he was also collecting at the time, it is very likely that he additionally came across old documents and books regarded as useless by their owners (the poor and dirty condition of some of these items together with signs of paper degradation caused by prolonged exposure to high levels of humidity indicate that they might have been stored in lofts or basements). On the other hand, the scholarly tradition of collecting books – Abraham Firkowicz (1786–1871), Abraham Yufudovich Michri (1830–1917) are good examples of such people – might still have been alive among Crimean Karaims at the time J. Sulimowicz visited them, thus making it easier to convince people to hand over their manuscripts.

Regrettably, neither an inventory list nor a catalogue were ever assembled for this part of the collection. Therefore, not only is its exact content still largely unknown, but precise information on the provenance of particular items is also not available. In very rare cases Sulimowicz wrote down the name of the donor and the year. Nor does the content of most manuscripts provide complete information on the scrivener or the place and date of their compilation. Linguistic features as well as the penmanship (the Crimean

⁴ Sulimowicz, J., "Materiał leksykalny krymskokaraimskiego zabytku językowego (druk z 1734 r.)", part I: *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 35, 1 (1972), 37–76; part II: *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 36, 1 (1973), 47–107.

Karaim semi-cursive is very characteristic and is easily distinguishable from the one used by Western Karaims) allow us to establish Crimea as the place of origin of manuscripts, but no more precise localization is possible.

The inventory list of the collection is still far from complete and the aforementioned project aimed at assembling data on all available Karaim manuscripts which remain in private hands in Poland and compiling a comprehensive catalogue of them all is currently focused primarily on Western Karaim manuscripts. Consequently, I thought all the more worthwhile to present at least a brief and general description of the Crimean Karaim manuscripts held in this collection.

This description comprises items written between the 17th and 20th centuries, with the oldest manuscript dating from before 1693 and the last having been composed in the mid-1960s. However, manuscripts dating from the 19th century constitute the vast majority of this part of the collection. Items in Hebrew script are the most prevalent as only a few of the 20th century documents are written in Cyrillic. The use of Arabic script is attested in only one of the items that have so far been added to the inventory list, but in a few of them we can find single words, names or numbers noted in this writing system. Identifying the language of the manuscripts requires a detailed analysis, which is not always possible when compiling an inventory list. Therefore, I have limited myself to the general observation that the Sulimowicz collection includes manuscripts written in at least two varieties of Crimean Karaim as distinguished by Jankowski (2008: 162), i.e. Turkish Karaim (Crimean Turkish) and Tatar Karaim (Crimean Tatar), as well as numerous items in Hebrew. The language of one manuscript, namely of the oldest manuscript mentioned above which is a 17th century translation of some of the Books of the Bible (inventory No. JSul.III.02), appears to have preserved certain Kipchak Karaim features, but further study is needed to analyse and evaluate the linguistic material of this manuscript.⁵

In terms of its content the collection features a wide variety of items. Noteworthy is the fact that when set alongside its Western Karaim counterparts, which consist almost exclusively of Bible translations and prayer books containing various prayers and religious poems, the Crimean part of the collection seems to comprise a relatively larger number of manuscripts of secular and popular content which makes them even more valuable.

The *mejumas*, a specific type of Crimean Karaite manuscript that encompasses various products of popular literature, such as songs, riddles, tales and stories, constitute the largest group of this kind. Almost every Karaite family had such a manuscript in their possession (Šapšal 1918: 13, Kokenaj 1933: 14). The total number of examples preserved to date remains unknown. Aqtay informs us that ten *mejumas* are kept in the Karaite prayer house collection in Eupatoria (Aqtay 2009: 27). There are also a certain number of them in the Szymon (Szemaja) Firkowicz collection stored in the Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences in Vilnius. On the other hand, Sclare (2003) did not mention them in his survey of Karaite manuscripts found in public and private collections in Europe,

⁵ The presence of Kipchak features has been observed in other Crimean Karaim Bible translations (handwritten or printed). See: Jankowski (1997, 2015), Šapira (2013), Németh (2015).

America and Israel. Two critical editions of *mejumas* have recently been published by Aqtay (2009, *mejuma* of Yosef Qılcı) and Çulha (2010, the Katık *mejuma*).

The Sulimowicz collection includes 18 *mejumas* or manuscripts which can be classified as belonging to this group:

Inventory No.	Place of origin	Date	Scribe	Folios	Remarks
JSul.I.06	unidentified	Second half of the 19 th cent.	Unidentified	34	Incomplete <i>mejuma</i> (at least the first 29 folios are missing).
JSul.I.21	unidentified	1900s (?)	Taymaz* (?)	331	
JSul.I.22	unidentified	1861–1869	Benyamin ben Yiçhak Pirig	75	Probably the oldest <i>mejuma</i> in the collection.
JSul.I.23	Theodosia	Second half of the 19 th cent.	Mordehay (?) Taymaz	77	
JSul.I.24	unidentified	1883–1880	Babay Çoruf	131	Some folios are missing.
JSul.I.25	unidentified	Second half of the 19 th cent.	unidentified	45	Text: folio 1 r–18 v
JSul.I.26	Nikolaev	1868–1876 (1889)	Yufuda İlyiç Kogen-Ekmekçi	272	
JSul.I.27	unidentified	Second half of the 19 th cent.	Sultan Pirik	8	Fragment of a <i>mejuma</i>
JSul.I.27a	unidentified	Second half of the 19 th cent.	Benyamin Pirik (?)	12	Fragment of a <i>mejuma</i>
JSul.I.28	Theodosia (?)	1864	Azariya ben Helel ben Naḥamu Baboviç	299	According to a note of J. Sulimowicz, the manuscript was acquired from a person called Kalmuk from Theodosia.

* In the manuscripts the names of scribes are given (if given at all) in Hebrew script. However, in JSul.I.26 and JSul.I.48.6 they appear in Cyrillic. In the table the names are presented in the form and transcription applied in the supplement to Aqtay and Jankowski (2015).

Inventory No.	Place of origin	Date	Scribe	Folios	Remarks
JSul.I.29	Theodosia	1873	Şemuel ben Moşe Cumuq	220	
JSul.I.32	Theodosia (?)	Second half of the 19 th cent.	Yiçhak ben Mordehay Firuz		According to a note of J. Sulimowicz, the manuscript was acquired from a person called Kalmuk from Theodosia in 1964.
JSul.I.33a	Bakhchisaray	1903	Raḥel bat Yosef Qılcı	59	The scribe was most probably a sister of Eliyahu Qılcı, who copied the <i>mejuma</i> edited by Aqtay.
JSul.I.48.6	unidentified	1874?	Samoil Moyseyeviç Cumuq	40	The vertical type of binding is untypical for a <i>mejuma</i> , but the content – a tale – suggests that the manuscript should be allocated to this group.
JSul.I.49.4	unidentified	1883	Babay Cumuq	41	Fragment of a <i>mejuma</i>
JSul.I.49.5	unidentified	21 st March 1885	unidentified	21	Fragment of a <i>mejuma</i>
JSul.I.49.7	unidentified	20 th cent.	unidentified	2	Fragment of a rough draft (?) of a <i>mejuma</i>
JSul.I.54.26	unidentified	Second half of the 19 th cent.	unidentified	6	Fragment of a <i>mejuma</i>

It is interesting to note that two manuscripts, namely JSul.I.27 and JSul.I.33a, were written by women: Sultan Pirik and Raḥel Qılcı.

The miscellanea copybooks of Yosif Kefeli from Simferopol (JSul.I.55.1, JSul.I.55.2, JSul.I.55.9, JSul.I.55.10) should likewise be included in this group. Written in the 1960s and probably for the most part consisting of material copied from older manuscripts, they additionally contain original products of Crimean popular literature from the Soviet era (such as, for instance, *Varşava yırı* – a soldier’s song of 1920 or a collection of couplets *Sıçan* sung, in Karaim and in Russian, at a party on 4th November 1965). Hence, they may be regarded as one of the last surviving records of living Karaim folklore.

I have a little space in this short paper to present in detail the contents of the *mejumas*, which is very rich. Similarly to the manuscripts edited by Aqtaı and Çulha they comprise elements originating from Turkish literature as well as products of local – Tatar, Karaim or Krymchak – literature. The latter include numerous *türkü* songs dedicated to certain Karaims mentioned by name, *çıñ* songs, or pieces like, for instance, *Tragediya be-ir Odessa – Simħa İsakoviç len Beraka Aqa Mangubiniñ kızına çıñan türkü. Tragediya misalında* (“A tragedy in the City of Odessa – a *türkü* song dedicated to Simħa İsakoviç and the daughter of Beraha Aqa Mangubi. A kind of a tragedy”, manuscript No. JSul.I.28). Interestingly, its title is partially in Hebrew which is rather seldom used in *mejumas*.

Although it is often impossible to make a clear distinction between the texts composed by Karaims and Crimean Tatars (Kokenaj 1933: 16, Jankowski 2004: 104), in some cases the provenance of the content is clearly determined. For instance, Babay Çoruf, the scribe of manuscript No. JSul.I.24, states in a note dated 7th February 1883: “Tatar kitablarından oquyup yazdım” (‘I read it in Tatar books and wrote it down’). The manuscript in question includes, among other things, folk stories known widely from Anatolia,⁶ such as *Aşık Kerem*, *Arzu ilen Kamber*, *Şah İsmail ve Gülizar Hanım*, *Melik Şah ve Güllü Han* and others. A similar note is also to be found in JSul.I.49.4.

The most interesting item from among the manuscripts with a religious content is the aforementioned translation of some of the Books of the Bible, namely the Books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel I and II, Kings I and II, Ruth, Esther, and a part of the Book of Proverbs. The manuscript, assigned catalogue number JSul.III.02, comprises 244 folios. It can be dated to before 1693, since on folio 68 recto we find a note that the book was written by *ribbi* Abraham the scholar, the son of Shemuel the elder, and after the scrivener’s death his heirs sold it in the year 5453 to *ribbi* Shelomo from Shuyun (Kokenay identifies it as a village in the vicinity of Bakhchisaray) for one thousand pieces of silver. The sized sheets it is written on are white and smooth, and differ from the paper of the other Crimean Karaim manuscripts in the collection. It resembles rather the paper on which Turkish and Persian manuscripts were written. As was mentioned above, further study is needed to analyse and evaluate this text.

Apart from this Bible translation the collection includes other items with a religious content. Among the most interesting of these are twelve *derasha* sermons (No. JSul.VI.26.A-J), a book containing prayers recited when entering Jerusalem and prayers recited at the Western Wall (*Kotel Ma’aravi*), a kind of a diary of a journey to the Holy Land

⁶ See: Boratav (1988), Elçin (1986).

undertaken around 1820 (No. JSul.I.48.10), a copybook with songs for Purim *akhavat* (No. JSul.I.09). Additionally, copies of *Seder halakot šeḥiṭah*, a treatise dealing with the ritual slaughtering of animals, are quite numerous – there are seven examples of them, written in Hebrew and in Karaim.

As far as access to the manuscripts is concerned, it is worth mentioning that another undertaking was embarked upon in tandem with the catalogue project. In 2012 the Association of Polish Karaims obtained a grant from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage enabling it to carry out conservation work on some of the most valuable manuscripts. The project, entitled “Urgent Conservation and Restoration Work on Selected Karaite Manuscripts and Old Prints”,⁷ continued into 2013 and 2014. One of the items already included in the project was the above-mentioned 17th century translation of the Bible. The conservation work on it was completed successfully in 2012 and since all the restored manuscripts have been subsequently digitalized, this item has already been made accessible for further research.

At present conservation of the *mejumas* is the most pressing task. The 19th century manuscripts, although at most only about 150 years old and thus relatively new, are often in much poorer condition than the items dating from the 18th or 17th centuries. This is due, firstly, to the paper they were written on: modern machine produced paper with a high level of acidity which affects its longevity and makes it prone to deterioration. It should also be borne in mind that the *mejumas* were once used intensively, as a consequence of which numerous cases of mechanical damage can be observed. In 2014 the Association of Polish Karaims applied for funds to restore the *mejumas*. In the case of severely damaged manuscripts the conservation process has been extremely time-consuming and expensive. Therefore, in 2015 just one item, namely manuscript No. JSul.I.06, was handed over to specialists from the Department of Paper and Leather Conservation of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń for the purposes of its full restoration and conservation. In 2016 two other *mejumas* (JSul.I.25 and JSul.I.23) are due to undergo the same process. The Association of Polish Karaims hopes to include further manuscripts from Crimea in this project over the next few years, which in the future would ensure their restoration and digitalization, thereby making them accessible to researchers.

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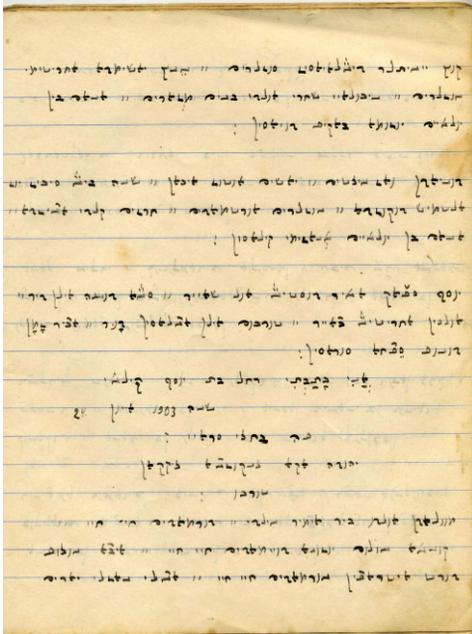
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⁷ Grants No. 00497/12/FPK/NIMOZ and 02261/13/FPK/NIMOZ financed by The National Institute for Museums and Public Collections (Narodowy Instytut Muzealnictwa i Ochrony Zbiorów).

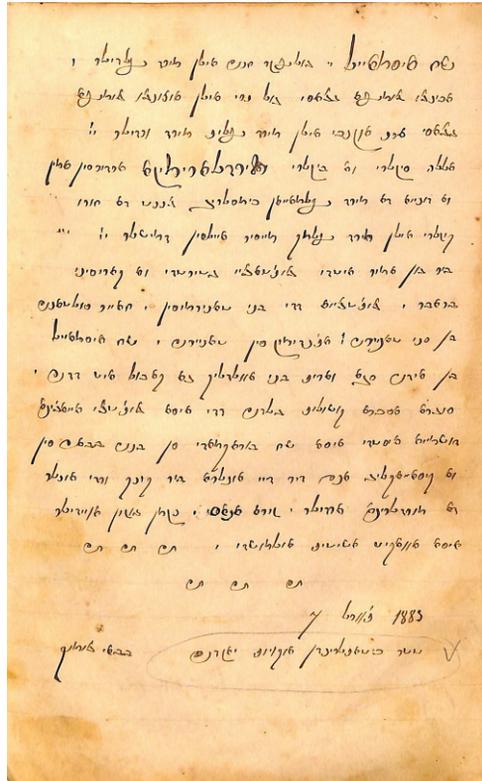
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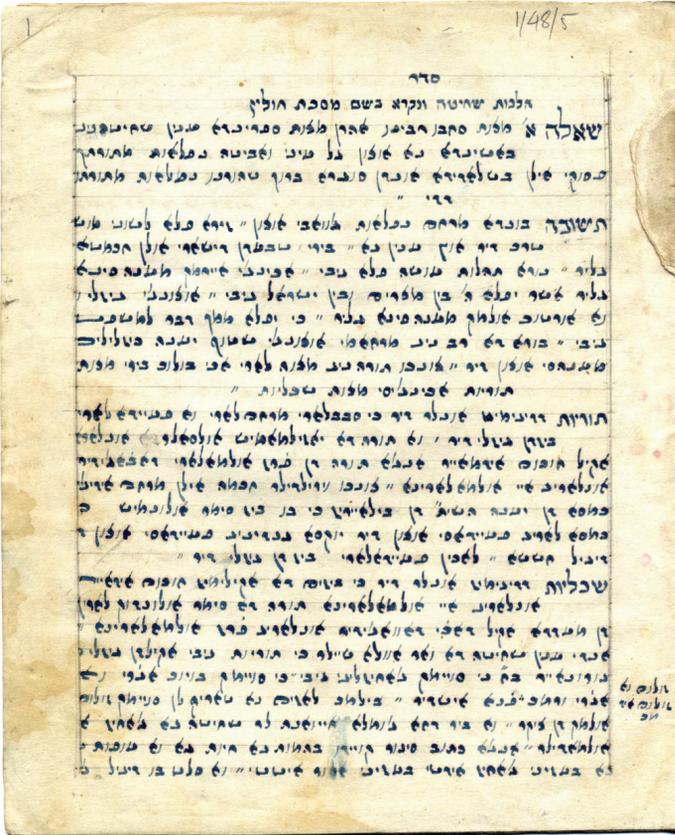
1. Manuscript No. JSul.III.02. A translation of the Book of Kings



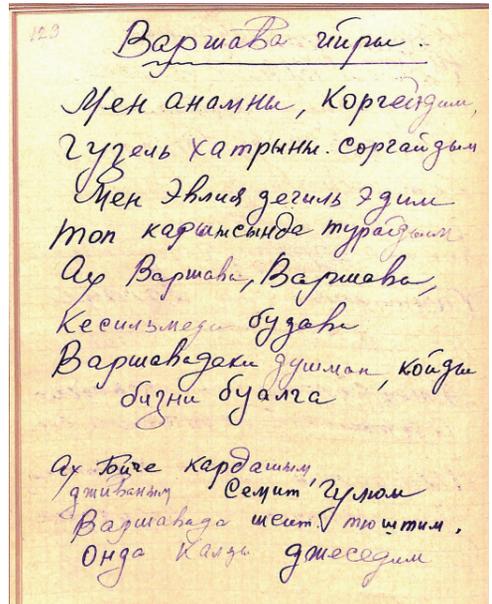
2. Manuscript No. JSul.I.33a. Rahel Qilci's mejuma



3. Manuscript No. JSul.I.24. Babay Çoruf's mejuma



4. Manuscript No. JSul.I.48.5. Seder halachot shechitah



5. Manuscript No. JSul.I.55.1. A copybook of Yosif Kefeli