

Sabira Stahlberg

Visible and Invisible Tatar Women in Finland



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Introduction

Muslim women appear often nowadays in global news. They are habitually presented in mass media as shrouded figures confined to their homes and restricted in society; anonymous and faceless, without visibility, freedom, rights or education; and at the mercy of brutal and tyrannical men. Fierce debates are raging about Muslim female dress in several countries. Whenever women are mentioned in connection with Islam, the topic awakens strong emotions and reactions.

This media image is a crude generalisation: Muslims live in different social, cultural and political conditions. Although they share the same religion, it is being interpreted in highly diverse ways. A uniform Muslim world, in the sense media, politicians and some scholars try to present it, exists as little as any compact realm of Christians, Buddhists, Hindus or other religious groups. There are societies and cultures which in historical times have been or today are being influenced by Islam, and countries or regions where Islam is the dominant religion. Scholars speak of such societies as *Islamicate*,¹ to differentiate from *Islamic*, a term which refers to the religion

1 The term *Islamicate* was coined by Marshall Hodgson in his highly influential work *Venture of Islam* (1974: 59), as the “social and cultural complex” associated with Islam and Muslims in historical times. Thus, also non-Muslims can be Islamicate.

itself. Islamicate societies, minorities and women are usually studied from the viewpoint of religion, but analyses focusing only on Islamic topics are limited both in the scope and the conceptual framework. They fail to observe a wide range of other aspects present in these societies.

This book discusses the visibility and/or invisibility of a group of women who identify as Muslims and practise their religion in a secularised European country. The Tatar women in Finland are as far from the media stereotype as they can be: they see themselves as equals; they are independent, free, strong, and active in society. These women are visible both within the Tatar community and the society in Finland, as well as internationally in the Tatar and Islamic contexts. Yet, until now their multiple roles and functions, among others as teachers and transmitters of language, culture and traditions, contributors to the Tatar community and Finnish society, and other aspects have been overlooked by academic researchers who focus mostly on their origins, migration history of the Tatars to Finland and religion.

This book does not claim or pretend to cover all possible topics related to the women of the Tatar diaspora in Finland. Instead, it offers background information, views and voices from inside the Tatar community, and tries to answer at least a few questions: how did the Tatar women reach this point of equality? What factors contributed to the development of the position of the women before and after the Tatars migrated to Finland? Where do they stand now?

Tatars in Finland

The first Tatar traders arrived in the Grand Duchy of Finland from Nizhny Novgorod province south of the Volga River in Russia in the 1860s. These migrants were all men and they came mainly from a few villages in the vicinity of Sergach. Their language was Mishär Tatar, a western dialect of Tatar, and if asked, they would tell that they were Muslims of the Sunni Hanafi school. Their goal was economic activity and they did not migrate to another country, because Finland was part of Russia. Many of the men already traded in towns in Russia including the capital Saint Petersburg.²

For some six hundred years, from the twelfth century until 1809, Finland had been the eastern province of Sweden. Yet after the Swedish-Russian war of 1808–1809 it became an autonomous Grand Duchy (the Grand Duke being the Tsar) within the Russian Empire. The Grand Duchy of Finland had several privileges: it could keep the earlier Swedish laws, and its Senate and Supreme Court had far-reaching power over the internal affairs. The Grand Duchy also introduced its own currency in 1860, the Finnish *mark* (*markka*). When state-orchestrated Russification efforts began in 1898, the situation changed, and after a turbulent period of some two decades, Finland declared its independence on 6 December 1917.

2 For an overview of the history of the Tatars in Finland, see Halén & Martikainen 2016; Leitzinger 1996, 1999, 2006 and 2008; Saint Petersburg: Bekkin 2016; Bekkin & Ståhlberg 2016.

In the 1890s, not only the Mishär Tatar men peddled in different regions in Finland, selling small goods, textiles and clothes, but also several families had established themselves in Finland. Still, the majority of the wives took care of house and family in the home village while their husbands were away. By 1917 whole families lived in Finland, although the women and children often went for prolonged periods to the villages. The Tatars started to receive Finnish citizenship in the 1920s.

Tatars all over the world are part of transnational networks in addition to local ones. In Finland, they shared linguistic, cultural and religious spheres with Tatars, Turkic peoples and Muslims in Russia, Ottoman Empire (from 1923 Turkey) and elsewhere. Mishärs and other Tatars continued to cross the border from Russia and the Soviet Union (1922–1991) until it was not only officially but really closed in the 1930s. Then the Tatars in Finland set out on a linguistic, cultural, social, political and economic development of their own, separate from that of the Tatars in the Soviet Union.³

Despite this disruption, Tatars in Finland created and kept up networks and contact with the global Tatar diaspora and Turkic-speakers as well as Muslims. The list of international guests visiting the Tatars in Finland is impressive. Naturally, the political turbulences and limitations between the 1920s and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 caused many shifts

3 See details in Bekkin 2020a. Tatars arrived both legally with passport and illegally into the 1930s, often walking in secret over the border.

and rifts, but the Tatar community kept on connecting: when displaced Tatars from Tatarstan were found in prison camps during World War II, Tatars in Finland applied to the state to employ these prisoners-of-war in their companies and homes. When tourist groups were arranged in the mid-1950s from Finland to the Soviet Union, Tatars went on them, visiting in secret relatives who had remained behind the Iron Curtain.⁴

The Tatars in Finland could be defined as a *middleman* minority. Middleman minorities occupy an intermediate, not low status in society, like some other minorities or immigrant groups. They often focus on commerce and occupations such as agents or contractors, have a strong affection for the home land where their ancestors came from, and they strive to keep their language and culture.⁵

During the past century, the Tatars in Finland have been engaged in trade, remember the home villages and traditions, and educate children in language and religion. They also have resisted assimilation and marrying outside the group until recently. The Tatar community is now reduced in numbers from probably some 3,000 at its peak to less than 1,000, but they maintain an organised community, language, culture, religion and their *Tatarness*, in other words: distinct traits of being Tatar.

4 Safiulla, unpublished manuscript; interviews with Fazile Nasretidin (FN) and Feride Nisametdin.

5 The term *middleman minorities* is often used in Europe for the Jews, but the term was originally created for the Chinese in Southeast Asia. See Bonacich 1973.

The Tatars in Finland and the Finnish general public agree that the Tatars have integrated well into the society. A crucial factor is education: most men were literate already at the end of the nineteenth century. They had learned to read and write in Arabic letters in village schools kept by mullahs. Around 1910, a girls' school was opened in the village of Aktuk or Aktök (Russian Aktukovo); its new part where many of the Tatars who moved to Finland lived was called Yangepar (also spelled Yañapar). Before this time girls could study at home with a private female teacher, so many women could read and write. Further, the Jadidist (reformist) movement among the Tatars in the nineteenth century reached and influenced the attitudes of the Mishär Tatars, too, and brought them closer to the Western European values prevalent in Finland. This also facilitated integration.



Reading skills facilitated integration in Finland. Unidentified woman reading in her home in the 1950s. Kanykoff family album.

Tatar women in Finland

Women figure more rarely than the men in studies about the Tatars in Finland. Often they are mentioned only as teachers, war veterans or wives of male activists. Until the 1930s, the women were mainly invisible workers and supporters behind the scenes in organisations such as *Helsingin musulmaanien hyväntekeväisyysseura r.y.* (1915), ‘Helsinki Muslim Charity Association’, and the Finnish Islamic Congregation founded in 1925 in Helsinki, *Suomen muhamettilainen seurakunta*; its present name is *Finlandiya İslam Cemaati*, Finnish *Suomen Islam-seurakunta*.

Activities were mainly connected with religion until the cultural associations *Finlandiya Türkleri Birliği r.y.*, Finnish *Suomen turkkilaisten seura*, ‘Association of Finnish Turks’, nowadays just FTB; and *Tampere Türkler Birliği (Tampereen Turkkilainen Yhdistys* in Finnish) ‘Tampere Turkish Society’ were founded in 1935, and *Turku Türk Tatar Birliği*, Finnish *Turkkilais-Tataarilainen yhdistys r.y.*, ‘Turku Turkish-Tatar Society, in 1938.

At this point, women became visible in community life. By the time a congregation was founded in Tampere in 1943, *Tampereen Islamilainen Seurakunta*, today *Tampere tatar cämiyäte*, Finnish *Tampereen tataariseurakunta*, ‘Tampere Tatar Congregation’, women were already acting in theatrical plays, singing, writing and editing, organising cultural events

and teaching. Tatar language, culture and traditions have been taught by women since at least the 1930s. Some groups still remain invisible, however: among them are the cooks, always women whose culinary input is indispensable at Tatar events.

Finnish society in general saw less of Tatar women in the first decades of the twentieth century, although the women were not restricted to the home and many contributed to the family budget through work in family shops and businesses. Several kept their own shops or sold clothes and other goods at markets. The first generation born in Finland in the 1920s and 1930s went to Finnish schools, and several of them chose to become traders or entrepreneurs like their parents.



Young unmarried Tatar women would either work in the family enterprise or help out at home. From the left Gölçäçäk (Gölçeçek) Saadetdin, Lamia (Lemiye) Bavautdin and Naciye Bavautdin in Rauma, 1940s. Fazile Nasretdin family album.

World War II changed the perspectives of the community and for the individuals: several Tatar men were conscripted to fight in the war. Women had to take over male jobs. Just like Finnish women, Tatar women expanded their activity fields while the men were away at the front. New job opportunities were available for women also after the war. The Tatars were quick to adapt and many young members of the community acquired higher education, became professionals and entered the Finnish labour market. They also became more visible to the society and media, often representing Tatars or Muslims, and several have been presidents and board members of the cultural organisations. The congregation in Helsinki has a female president since 2018. The Tatar women in Finland see themselves today as “normal”, that is like the Finnish women who hold a strong position in society.

Success story and questions

The “success story” of the Tatars in Finland has been partly documented,⁶ but the women appear only in the margins of that story, which focuses on the more visible male activists. The starting point is important to understand the rest of the story: did the Mishär Tatar women really live an invisible life in the background in the home villages, focusing only on family and home at the time of migration to Finland, or was the situation more complex?

6 See Leitzinger 2006.

The next step should also be analysed: how did the move from the family-centred life to the workplace happen? What did the Tatar women sacrifice (if anything) – or gain – when they picked up models of educated, skilled women as equals in society? Did they follow a majority model in Finland, and if yes, to what degree and how? The fact that family size and structure have been transformed, from several children and multiple generations living under one roof, to core families with an average of two children, does not speak for following a Finnish model only: similar developments are observable in other countries in Europe as well.

Religion has been much canvassed in academic literature about Tatars in Finland, but the role of the women and their attitudes towards religion and religious practices is scarcely documented. How did and does the everyday dialogue with the society in Finland influence the Tatar women, who have not only a role to play in the Christianity-influenced society, but also within the Muslim community? How do the Tatar women perceive the role of religion in their lives? Tatar Islam is generally seen as an introvert, ethnic and tolerant form, but fluent Tatar language skills are needed for participation in the communities, and this excludes other Muslims and non-Tatar spouses. How do Tatar women in mixed marriages cope with the transmission of religion to their children? In recent years, Muslim immigrants have brought new attitudes and changed public opinion about Islam. What are the relations between the “old” Muslims, the Tatars, and “new” Muslims?

As this study is a first on the topic of Tatar women, it is difficult as yet to answer any of these questions fully, but an effort will be made to map out at least part of the road Tatar women have walked for the past century, factors which have influenced, consequences and transformations.

Visibility and invisibility of Tatar women in Finland is the topic of this book. An important issue is visibility for whom, when and where, for Tatars, Muslims, Finnish society? What are the contexts and how do they influence the (in)visibility? This book asks questions about the social status and roles of Tatar women, their own perceptions of their situation and multiple roles, relation to Tatar culture, language, previous generations, the majority and society in Finland, to education and religion, etc. A gender study or solely feminist approach to these women is too narrow and would miss several aspects of this multilingual and multicultural group.

A similar study has not been carried out about women in the Tatar diaspora as yet. Although there are historical and modern studies on Tatar women in Russia, they mostly look at the Jadidist movement and the emancipation of women in a historical perspective. The story is far more complex both in Russia and the diaspora: the dialogue between the Tatars and the Russian state since the eighteenth century, and the internal processes of the Mishär Tatar groups in contrast to Kazan, must be taken into account. After the move, Tatars in Finland created different dialogues from those in the Soviet Union, with the surrounding society, international trends, etc.

Interviews, ethics and memory

The core of this book consists of a series of interviews made over a longer period in 2021 and 2022 with Tatar women and men in Finland, an interview in 2018 and personal memories written in the 1980s. The interviewees were asked not only about themselves and their views, roles in different contexts and attitudes, but also about their family history, the Tatar community and networks in Finland and internationally as well as adaptation strategies. The (in)visibility topic became soon apparent: only a couple of the interviewees are visible and appear with names. Several who consented to talk did so only if they could remain invisible and anonymous.

This issue raises a myriad of ethical questions concerning protection of the respondents in a small community where all know everybody else. A pseudonym or fuzzy personal data would not shield the interviewees, so I have opted for an even more anonymous solution: opinions are presented generally, without indicating the interviewee(s) in any way. Thus, only I and the interviewee know who said what. Further, I have not indicated dates for interviews so that phone calls, meetings or video talks cannot be traced.

In addition to interviews, personal reminiscences, private archives and works published by the Tatars in Finland, I have used research literature, both older and newer works which contribute to the historical background and modern situation.

Source criticism has to be applied, but also what the Swedish historian Janken Myrdal calls *source pluralism*, that is to take into account such sources and even scraps of information which ordinarily might be overlooked.⁷

Memory studies could be a useful scientific approach to view the materials, but a separate book would be required to discuss topics like autobiographical memory, the cultural self with variations, time, social origins and contexts of memory.⁸ For the topic of Tatars, and especially Tatars in the diaspora, much material is available for analyses of how memories are socialised, memory in relation to cultural history, cultural memory, experiences and narration, communicative memory, different generations and memory, and how children encode and remember. Specifically for the topic of women, there are the questions of gender, identity, social memory and politics. Further, essential topics are for example group and collective memory, forgetting, cultural and individual trauma, true and false memories, cross-references, entangled memory, and one of the most important issues for Tatars: multilingual memory.

The question if a multilingual individual and community experience and express a memory in the same way in all their languages has barely been researched. Bilinguals have been found to create double memory sets and live in both worlds, with two sets of codes, components, emotions, words, images

7 See Myrdal 2012.

8 See for instance Erll & Nünning 2008; Erll 2011; Fivush & Haden 2003; Feindt et al. 2014; Rubin 1995.

and information.⁹ The Tatars live in several worlds since birth and in my observation, memories are multiple and connected with cultures and languages. Multimodal narratives are very common. They depend on context and conversation partner: a person with Tatar background is “one of us” and can often extract more information than an outsider, because a Tatar is supposed to know and deal with the data in a respectful way, and to put it into the “right” kind of framework.

The Tatar community offers many interesting possibilities for studies how multicultural and multilingual memories and narratives function on the collective level. How to work with multilingual respondents, collective multilingual memories and people in minority situations and their memories from the linguistic point of view is a question requiring far more research than is available at the moment. Discovering the different meanings and reflections from various languages could offer interesting perspectives for future research.

*How will this birthday celebration be remembered in different languages?
4 January 1962 in Hyvinkää.
Kanykoff family album.*



9 Bilingual memory: Schrauf & Rubin 2003.

About this book

The topic of Tatar women is vast and one book cannot cover more than a small part of the multiple aspects and topics in relation to women. Also, to limit the research only to women or to try to isolate and separate them from the men and all the social connections and networks, which are important to them, would be to distort reality.

My own interest in the positions and situations of Tatar and Muslim women has grown slowly over the years and in dialogue with both women and men. As a child, I was told that my grandmother could read and write, but she had only received a home education, ergo – I should value school and study hard. As a university student, I read texts written by Tatar reformists about the need for female education. During field trips and travels in different countries, I have met many Tatar and Muslim women and talked with them about life, education, family and other topics. More recently, in my capacity of guest editor for special issues on Tatars in the Baltic Sea region (*Studia Orientalia Electronica*, 2020, and *Journal of Endangered Languages*, 2021), I discovered many interesting stories about Tatar women teachers and activists. All these factors, combined with too many occasions when I have been compelled to try to disperse misunderstandings and prejudices about Muslims, and women specifically, have contributed to the creation of this book.

This study is aimed not only at an academic audience, but as it also documents the past and present of the Mishär Tatar communities, it might be of interest for Tatar communities and especially for young Tatars looking for information; they might discover parallels to their own communities. The book is also written for a general, interested international audience and therefore it is not burdened with scientific annotations or theories about gender and other issues, but keeps sources and hypotheses to the minimum so that anyone who wants to read the book without having academic training can do so.

The Tatars who arrived in Finland around 1900 were, in Joseph Henrich's handy definition, not WEIRD. The concept of WEIRD is short for *Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic*.¹⁰ The Tatars came from a world where family and kinship was important, cousin marriages were common and trust in complete strangers was low; they had faith in family, kin and people from the same villages or who were somehow connected. The descendants of the first Tatar generation have lived in a WEIRD society all their lives, but they manage a much more complex world than the Finnish reality. This world contains many non-WEIRD elements and one of them is: what kind of information is relevant and for whom?

To account for the multicultural complexity, and the Tatar ways of communicating and valuing information, I have not kept to strict Western standards of scientific writing, which

10 See Henrich 2020.

are too inflexible and limiting for the materials and for the Tatar experience and understanding of the world. Thus, apparently irrelevant or gossipy details are given in several places, because they carry meaning not only to the Tatar reader but also have an important contextual function when exploring the overall picture. The narrative is circular and not linear, so the same topics return for different time periods.



Tatars in Finland were not WEIRD, or at least not to the same degree as Finns and Swedish-speakers in Finland, when they arrived at the end of the 1800s, but in the dialogue with the surrounding society both dress and attitudes changed. Engagement celebration, Perkjärvi, Finland, 1920s. Fazile Nasretidin family album.

This book was originally planned as two longer scientific articles, but photographs kindly provided by Fazile Nasretidin and descendants of the Kanykoff family changed the plan: a

full-size book is a more suitable format to contain dozens of pictures showing Tatars in Finland during the past century. These unique private pictures are published for the first time and present more concretely the changes which have taken place than any description can do.

The aim of this study is to contribute to, diversify and expand the discussion about Muslim women and especially female Muslim immigrants in Finland and internationally. The Tatars in Finland have developed and implement several remarkable adaptation strategies, multiple identities and ways of dealing with Finnish society during the past century. They are deeply integrated both in society and the labour market, but simultaneously they keep their language, culture, religion and other aspects of Tatariness, as well as their community, social contacts and networks.

Could the Tatar strategies for adaptation to Finnish society serve as an example for other migrants who profess Islam, and the Tatar women's precedent contribute to the integration of Muslim women from other regions and with other views on Islam? Maybe. The Tatars contribute since over a century to the multicultural knowledge, understanding and attitudes among Finnish authorities towards immigrants and Muslims especially. How these knowledge and experience are being utilised, misused or ignored, and if the Tatar example can be transferred to other Muslims with dissimilar backgrounds, remains open. Only the future will show if others will have learned from the Tatar experience.

Notes and thanks

In this book, the name *Mishär* is used for the Mishär Tatars who moved to Finland, especially for the early period, often synonymously with *Tatar*. *Mishär* is also the western Mishär dialect of Tatar language. The Tatar spelling is *Miṣär* and *Mishar* is the English one, but I have opted for *Mishär* which is fully understandable in English, and at the same time it is closer to the pronunciation than *Mishar*.

Mishär Tatar is used for the Tatar words in the book and the corresponding form in Kazan Tatar (called in Finland the “literary language”) is provided, too. The Mishär words are spelled as the Finnish Tatars or sources write them. Journals such as *Shura* (*Şura*) have English spelling, as they already possess some academic history with this format.

*

My heartfelt thanks to Fazile Nasretdin, Gölten Bedretdin and Feride Nisametdin, who consented to be interviewed and appear with their names, and to all interviewees who talked about their experiences and thoughts. I am deeply grateful to Marjut Kayenuk, who in the 1980s typed Hamsä Kayenuk’s memories of his childhood. Kanykoff descendants and Fazile Nasretdin kindly provided photographs from their family albums. Fazile also answered numerous questions throughout the writing process and the manuscript was corrected by the interviewees. Any errors are solely mine.

Starting Point: Village

When my father went to Ainetdin to ask for my mother's hand, my future grandfather said:

"Take two wives. Keep one with you abroad and one at home in the village."

My father was astonished and asked why.

"So that you don't fall into the lap of Russian women while away!" grandfather answered.

— HK, unpublished memoirs, 1980s

Trader, furrier and political activist Hasan Kanykoff (1880–1954) married twice, but he did not follow Ainetdin's (1832–1919) advice: he took a second wife only after his first wife's death in 1917. Hamsä Kayenuk (HK; Hamze, Hamzä, Mishär Kämzä; 1909–1998, until 1966 Kanykoff) told that his father read newspapers and books and had progressive ideas. His mother Haditshä's (1880–1917) father was considered odd in the village, not only because of his peculiar character, but for keeping two wives. In most families there was only one wife.

Their home was in Yangepar, the new part of Aktuk or Aktök (both forms were used) village. Most Tatars moved to Finland from here, but also from nearby villages Uraz aul (Urazovka), Çümbäli (Chembilei), Mädänä (Medyana) and some others. These villages are located south of the town

Sergach in the southeast of Nizhny Novgorod province, some 300 km to the west from Kazan in Tatarstan. To the south from the Mishär Tatars live Finno-Ugric Mordvinians, with whom they sometimes intermarried.¹¹ To the northeast are Turkic Chuvash and Finno-Ugric Mari (earlier Cheremiss).



The Kanykoff family, Tampere 1913. From the left grandmother Bartan, eldest daughter Halisä, elder brother Djäfür (Djagfür), in the back Hasan Kanykoff, then Haditshä with baby Hafisä, and far right Hamsä, aged four. Kanykoff family album.

11 According to HK, intermarriages was the reason for some Mishärs to possess light-coloured eyes, fairer hair and more European features, while other Mishärs (and Mordvinians with Tatar mothers) had dark eyes, black hair and more “Mongol” features. Possibly some Mishärs spoke Mordvinian or other languages in the neighbourhood. Personal communication, 1980s.

The life of the Mishärs was anchored in the home village, but through newspapers, magazines, books, letters, visits and prolonged stays in towns and cities, they connected with the vast Tatar and Turkic-speaking world, including Kazan, West and East Turkestan and the Ottoman Empire, and with other groups in the Russian Empire, especially in the multilingual and multicultural capital Saint Petersburg. Hasan's stepfather, along with many other Tatar men, had served in the Russian army. This stepfather participated on the Caucasus front in the Russian-Ottoman war 1878–1878. During his army years, he learned to write Russian and was therefore tasked with collecting taxes in the village, and his former comrades used to visit him in Aktuk. Besides Mishär Tatar, Hasan Kanykoff read Kazan Tatar publications and knew at least Russian. After going to Finland for peddling, he learned Swedish and Finnish, and possibly he had some knowledge of Arabic from his religious education. Those who devoted themselves to a religious career often studied Persian in addition to Arabic.

Traditional versus modern

Before discussing further women's situation in Aktuk, the background and the period have to be clarified. Most studies about the history of Tatar women assume that there was a "traditional" and "modern" model. The distinction goes back to the conflict between the traditionalists (*Qadimists*) and the reformists (*Jadidists*), whose goal was to "update" Muslims

to the nineteenth century. There is no reason to suppose that the “traditional” model was as static as presented in writings by the Jadidists, or that it existed since the first Muslim was born. The reformists criticised and wanted to do away with a model from around the mid-nineteenth century and prevalent in rural areas, chiefly around Kazan.

In towns and cities, behavioural models of the women and attitudes to females were more relaxed than in the rural areas. In educated and more “progressive” families, women worked alongside men. Among the Mishär traders who went to Saint Petersburg and Finland, women would be involved in their husband’s businesses. In rich families women did not have to work at all and had time for social and educational activities. Poor women and those in villages lived a different life with heavier work and a stronger adherence to traditions, but their situation was changing in the nineteenth century as well.

The situation varied in diverse Tatar-speaking regions as well: in the “west”, the villages were in constant contact with towns and non-Tatar citizens of the Russian Empire, with a substantial part of the men working in cities after the mid-1800s. Among the Qasim (Kasimov) Tatars, Ryazan region, and among Mishärs, women were more independent and had more freedom than those who were less exposed to cities.¹² Those who lived in mixed regions interacted also with other ethnic groups in the village contexts, which influenced their attitudes and views.

12 See Gabdräfikova 2014: 62.

An example of this “western Tatar family model” was the Kanykoffs. Hamsä’s father could leave his wife and children for weeks or even months while he went on business trips. One absence happened around the birth of Hamsä in 1909, but the configuration was the opposite to the usual: his father Hasan was at home in the village trying to recover after an illness affecting his lungs. Haditshä stayed in Tammerfors in Finland (Finnish Tampere; the Swedish name was in use at the time). This was not a problem; there were others from the village and she was in reality never alone. Most of the Tatar women living in the town were present at the delivery of her child, and a letter was dispatched to Hasan, who returned to his family a few weeks later.¹³

A rapprochement of Tatars with the non-Tatar world and towns began far earlier than when the Mishärs migrated to Finland. Before the fall of the Kazan Khanate in 1552, the Qasim Tatars were already in political contact with Muscovy, but to the political history also economy should be added. Trade was an important occupation besides agriculture and animal breeding, and trade occurred not only in the villages, but also in towns, and across language and cultural borders.

Social transformations around 1900 are clearly reflected in the different editions of an ABC book by the scholar, teacher and activist (Ahmed)Hadi Maksudi (1868–1941), brother of the intellectual and politician Sadri Maksudi (1878–1957), who fled to Finland in 1918 after the fall of the Idel-Ural

13 HK, unpublished memoirs, 1980s.

state. The first edition of the book was published in 1892 and the last in 1918. In the early versions, a woman in a village setting shows little of her face, but the urban woman's face is uncovered. In the later versions, a girl wears just a small cap, *kalfak*. In 1914, her clothes are Western European and the head is uncovered; her haircut is fashionably short.¹⁴

Time did not stand still and Tatars in general were not as isolated or backward as the writers liked to present; they just were not as Western European or “modern” as the reformists wished them to be. Similar attitudes and processes from the same period can be observed in other regions trying to define if they belonged to the “unprogressive East” or the “advanced West”, including the Balkans and Finland.¹⁵

Not modern enough?
An unmarried young Tatar woman
in Viborg / Viipuri / Vyborg
in the 1920s.
Fazile Nasretdin family album.



14 Bekkin & Ståhlberg 2016: 83; Galiullina & Salnikova 2012: 64; Galikhuzina 2010: 61.

15 In the Balkans, the process included de-Ottomanisation, the Ottoman Empire being the “East”; see Todorova 1997. The East/West debate was in Finland mixed with racial theories and search for origins, as Finns were seen as odd in Europe because of their language. There was a debate if they were really “Europeans” or actually Mongols; see Kemiläinen et al. 1985.

The inter-ethnic and rural-urban dialogues developed and changed with time, but the fact that the Tatars had lived both in “East” and “West” since more than a century before the reformist movement, gathering elements and experiences and benefiting from both worlds, should not be neglected. In 1773, Empress Catherine II proclaimed religious freedom in the Russian Empire; from 1785 the state actively supported Muslims, among others by establishing the Spiritual Muslim Assembly. Cooperation with Muslim leaders (some of whom received a state salary), establishment of schools and printing of books (many were translations from Russian) were on the state agenda. The aim was to bring the Muslims, Tatars and Bashkirs, closer to the central state power and to stabilise the Central Asian frontier which caused much trouble to Russia. This policy is considered very successful, but later it created problems to the state, when Kazan Tatars decided to push their own agenda not only inside Russia but also in Central Asia.¹⁶

When the reform-minded Jadidists raised the “women’s question” after the mid-1800s, causing strong reactions from the Qadimists, it was a topic the rest of Europe was debating, too. The question was linked to modernisation, economic, political and social changes, and it was one of the dimensions of the Tatar dialogue with the surrounding society. The topic of benighted women reflected the condescending attitude of

16 See Fisher 1968 for a historical overview about this period; Ross 2020 about the role of Tatars in the making of imperial Russia.

the educated elite towards the “illiterate masses”, but as Robert Crews has shown, this image was false: ordinary men and women both challenged the Tatar elite, and the horizon of the “masses” was broader than the elite was prepared to acknowledge. Boys could advance in their studies as far as university, and girls were educated at an elementary level in religion by the wives and daughters of mullahs and imams in homes. Women continued to learn all their lives, however, by attending preaching, informal readings, debates, discussions, storytelling, and *Qur’an*, poetry and literature recitations, and through numerous religious literature and commentaries widely distributed through the Tatar-speaking world. Dozens of women were also considered to belong to the clergy in Kazan, although they had no official status.¹⁷

Tatar men and women sent in petitions and complaints not only locally but also to the capital of the Russian Empire. Both personal issues and complaints against Muslim clerics were the topics. Through mediation efforts and cooperation with the elites, Russian state officials created precedents for alternative interpretations of Muslim law. This in turn led to more rights, opportunities and support for Muslim women, according to Crews. In comparison to Christians, it was easier to divorce, inherit, to claim property and seek safety from abduction, rape or forced marriages.

Traditionalists who wanted to make the women cover their faces were brusquely told to convince the women themselves.

17 Crews 2006: 95, 101–102.

Family laws and documents were regulated by the state, and secular and Islamic law were intertwined already before the Jadidists appeared. Tatar, Bashkir and also Kazak women petitioned the Russian authorities for protection and help among others in cases of domestic abuse and violence. Crews mentions that only Jews divorced more often than Muslims in the Russian Empire.¹⁸

Jadidism, education and literature

The Jadidist movement should be seen as a consequence of this gradual secularisation and reinterpretation of Islam, but also as a cause for modernisation and a driving force for the change in the position of women. The reformists actually quickened a process which had already begun. The origins and history of Jadidism is a much larger discussion and must be dealt with separately, but in the following their views on women will be discussed.

Both Jadidists and Qadimists quoted religious scriptures and looked to the Golden Age of Islam (traditionally eight to fourteenth centuries) to support their arguments for reform (Jadidists) or keeping the *status quo* (Qadimists).¹⁹ Changes had already occurred and the process of modernisation begun, despite the opposition of the traditionalists: Tatar women in towns wore European-style clothes produced in

18 Crews 2006: 147–148, 154, 158–159, 168–173, 317.

19 Brileva 2018: 32.

factories; and they went to the theatre and in the 1900s to the cinema; homes, cultural space, culinary tastes, mobility and horizons expanded with new influences, commercial goods, food ingredients; literature about and for women. Contacts with other groups in society were growing, and in Russian-Tatar schools children learned Russian language, arithmetic, history, geography and natural history, which were taught in Russian. Tatar was used only for religious teaching and for the education of women. The training of females became now important in the budding nation-building process: the women would educate the next generation and reproduce Tatar traditions and culture.²⁰



When Mishär Tatars came to Finland after the 1860s, they already had contact with “modern” and “Western” ideas and lifestyle. They followed the local fashion of dressing up for photographs, creating family albums and exchanging pictures with each other. Unidentified Tatar family in Björneborg / Pori, Finland, around 1900. Fazile Nasretdin family album.

20 Sattarova, Gafarov et al. 2019: 174; see also Guseva 2012.

How far this interest in women was motivated by literature from abroad or fears that Tatar culture could disappear in an increasingly Russian-focused nationalist state remains to be clarified. In any case, reformist ideas, writings and policies had far-reaching consequences on the education of women not only among Tatars and Bashkirs, but also in Turkestan at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Several researchers have pointed out that the Jadidists who advocated female education and women's rights in the press and literature were mainly men. The reformist press, the non-political journal *Shura* 'Council' among the most influential publications, criticised the backwardness of the Muslims and brought forward ideas, ideals and the concept of the "New Muslim" for modern times. Publications with a conservative outlook also discussed women's rights, the economic life of women and the problem of the headscarf. Women discussed women's issues and often sent emotional letters to journals like *Söyembikä* (1913–1918) and *Azat hanım* 'Free Woman' (1917–1918). Other women's journals did not discuss female politics.²¹ Several Tatar-language journals, especially *Shura* (1908–1917) and *Vakit* 'Time' (1906–1918) had very deep influence also among the Mishärs in the villages and in the diaspora.

The "women's question" became a national cause for the Tatar intellectuals: articles, essays, literary works, poetry and drama appeared about topics including equality, education,

21 See Brileva 2019 and 2018: 18, 20–21, 28–31; Khayrutdinov 2011.

women in Islamic law, morality, family relations, cultural and social participation of women, the right to take part in wars, choose a partner, divorce, refuse polygamy, inherit and act as a witness in court.

Active advocates for women's rights were among others the Moscow imam and scholar 'Abdulwadud Fattahetdinov (1882–1954); historian, writer, theologian Rizaeddin bin Fakhreddin (1858–1936) who created the journal *Shura* and wrote several publications on women; Crimean Tatar İsmail Gasprinsky (1851–1914), teacher, publisher and politician whose writings in his journal *Tercümān* 'Interpreter' became highly influential (he also founded a women's journal); Zakir Kadyri (Kadiri, 1878–1954), activist, educator and journalist, who lived in Finland for some time; Ziya Kamali (1873–1942), pedagogue and theologian; Ayaz İshaki (1878–1954), writer, journalist, publisher and politician, who visited the Tatars in Finland in the 1930s; and probably the reformist who most influenced the community in Finland, Musa Bigi (Bigeev, 1873–1943), scholar and theologian. Bigi wrote a book with the pseudonym *Ibn Fatimah* 'Fatima's son' dealing with women issues the *Qur'an*, Bible, European literature, philosophy and poetry; he further discussed headscarf use, Islamic law and other similar topics.²²

22 Zaripov 2014; Zaripov & Iskhakova 2022; Kadymova 2013; Dinikova 2013; Abduramanova 2018; Brileva 2018: 19, 21– 27; Ibn Fatimah/Musa Bigi 1933; compare the discussion about women with the debates in the Mamluk court in the sixteenth century on family and divorce, Mauder 2021.

Also authors like the poet Abdulla Tukay (now considered national poet of the Tatars, 1886–1913) described miserable women's fates in the grips of tradition, and the liberated and educated female of the future. Her happiness was discussed, and new images, sometimes contradictory, were created: she carried culture and family values and was responsible for the education of children. She was to be free from the tradition, but she should save traditions, culture, society and humanity in general.

The insight that good upbringing and education played an important role for a girl's future seeped into the literature, yet a woman was supposed to lead a happy life if she married an educated man. Respect for the family and elders stood at the forefront still; being unfaithful or running away was morally wrong and deserved punishment. Around 1900, the tone in the publications became more radical: the female heroes now began fighting actively and independently as individuals for their rights and happiness, and they were strong, free, equal, progressive and capable of analysing their situation.²³

The male Jadidists have received much attention both by their contemporaries and later scholars, but there were many women educators, writers and activists whose work is only now beginning to be appreciated. They worked in charitable societies and organisations and promoted female education also by founding schools, teaching and writing about women. These women have mostly remained anonymous, but their

23 See Fattakova 2010.

contribution both on the political and the grass-root level was huge and should be researched on a larger scale.



Many women like these remain anonymous in the history of Tatar women, despite the fact that they have been active in the community. Kanykoff family album.

After a first women's society was founded in 1898, dozens of associations followed. They reminded that in the pre-Mongol Volga-Bulgarian state ("Greater Bulgaria", seventh-thirteenth centuries; not to be confused with "Lesser Bulgaria" in the Balkans) women ruled and worked alongside men. The last regent of the Kazan Khanate, Söyembikä (1516–?), whose name was used for a women's journal, became the symbol for the historically strong position of women.

One of the most visible female activists was Mu(k)hlisa Bubi (1869–1937). She called attention to the role of women in preserving and developing the Tatar religious and national

traditions. Bubi wrote, taught and started several schools and seminaries for women, and she became the first female *qadi* ‘judge’ in 1917, but fell victim to the Stalinist repressions in 1937. She was far from alone; for the office competed three female candidates.

Women were also delegates and elected to the board of the All-Russian Muslim Congress in May 1917, where female issues were discussed among many other topics. Meetings and conferences for women were also arranged. After the Soviet Union was established in 1922, women’s organisations were created throughout the country, yet the work with Tatars initiated by the Communist Party was far from successful especially in rural areas, and in Central Asia activists were even killed. During the Soviet era, when religion was banned, women transmitted and taught religion at home.²⁴

Marriage, polygamy and children

The Jadidists pushed for vast reforms and modernisation of the interpretations of Islamic laws and traditions. Although many Tatars agreed, especially those in cities and towns, the changes required time. When Mishär Tatars arrived in the Grand Duchy of Finland, they carried with them attitudes which were a mixture between traditional and modern. Their modern views were not very far from those in circulation in

24 See Gafiyatullina 2021; Sattarova, Gafarov et al. 2019: 173, 175; Gil’mutdinova 2016; Pomelov 2019; Guseva 2012; Muslikhova 2011; congress: Bekkin 2020b: 153.

Finland, Russia or Europe at the time, and their traditional attitudes were very similar to those elsewhere in the Tatar world. This mix had several reasons, among them the Jadidist influences, but even more important is personal experience: many Mishär men spent years in Saint Petersburg and other cities and took their new knowledge back to the villages, while others brought their families to the city after they had made enough money to support wife and children.

These experiences were not always positive from the point of view of the community. The “success story” of the Tatars in Finland contain few difficult or negative issues, but Hamsä Kayenuk went against the flow. He had a long-standing feud with the community in Helsinki about the name of the Tatars – “Tatars”, “Muslims” or “Turks”? He was a Tatar nationalist and refused the general acceptance of “Northern Turks” or other terms containing “Turks”. For many decades he did not participate in community activities. When writing about his life in the 1980s, insults and injustices he had experienced were raked up again. He always felt something of a stranger, but at the same time he could not cut off the bonds. Still, his version is interesting and should be discussed as it provides an alternative view to the “success story”.

Hamsä told that young unmarried men went to work in towns. His father Hasan Kanykoff employed youngsters who bicycled and sold household and textile items in Karelia and Finland at the beginning of the twentieth century. Hamsä remembered that his father had a lot of problems with them,

because life outside the controlled family circle in the village was full of temptations. Many of the young men would take to drinking and dissipate their employer's goods for private enjoyment.²⁵

Living in the city was expensive and difficult, and the men lived often in small premises without much comfort, so they preferred to leave their wives at home where there was more safety, space, and relatives who could keep an eye on them.²⁶ The women who joined their husbands in the towns escaped this family control, but they had to create new networks for support, information, help with childcare, etc. A widespread opinion was that men were the head of the family, but when the men were away, women had to make decisions.

The absence of husbands resulted from time to time in illegitimate children. Their status had to be solved when the men returned. Until then, a woman who bore an illegitimate child was ostracised. Hamsä remembered a case during the famine in Russia, which began already in 1920 in the Mishär villages. His grandmother took silver roubles from the reign of Alexander I (ruled 1801–1825) from her breast jewellery. She sent *Kämzä* to buy food from the Mordvinian villages,

25 HK, personal communication, 1980s. Also Zinnetullah Ahsen Böre wrote that young men often started drinking, gambling and smoking tobacco, and he tried to counteract this by encouraging religious studies; see Bekkin & Ståhlberg 2016: 83. The warning of Ainettin to Hasan Kanykoff about Russian women at the beginning of this chapter also points to the dangers lurking in the city.

26 Compare Bekkin & Ståhlberg 2016: 82–83.

but hunger had struck there as well. Back home, he happened to see a woman carrying her “bastard” child (the male culprit fled to Finland; Hamsä knew who it was but refused to tell). The villagers behind her were shouting, accusing her of sinful behaviour and causing a bad drought. The woman walked through the whole village while the child screamed. After this shameful procession, she could return home. Nobody defended or had any compassion for her, but some wondered what would happen to the child.²⁷



Arranged marriages were going out of fashion at the beginning of the twentieth century, but matchmaking continued in Finland up to at least World War II. Wedding in the 1940s. Fazile Nasretidin family album.

Hasan Kanykoff chose his bride himself, just as many of the men did around 1900. The chosen woman had to consent to the marriage. Arranged marriages and also polygamy were on

²⁷ HK, unpublished memoir, 1980s.

their way out, although matchmaking continued in Finland at least to the 1940s. There were occasions when young women and men and even married couples could meet, flirt and get to know each other better. One such example is the singing of humorous songs with alternating voices. The dialogue songs consist of a few basic melodies and lyrics. The participants add their own lyrics while singing.²⁸ A similar situation could be observed among the Siberian Tatars. Unmarried girls were free to meet boys and both had to be asked before a match was made. A woman had the right to marry according to her own choice, divorce, bring up her children and to own property, and to remarry if she wished.²⁹

Polygamy appears at this time to have become more a relic of the past than practice. Polish-Lithuanian Tatars appear not to have practised polygamy even before the 1900s.³⁰ In the village of Aktuk, there were few men with two wives like Hamsä's maternal grandfather Ainetdin. He had married a small, angry woman called Mädinä from his home village in his youth. As he did not have enough money to build a house, he took his wife to Saint Petersburg, where he first peddled

28 This dialogue singing is called in Mishär *kara-karşı yırlau* ('opposite song', singular form), *kıska yırlar* ('short songs', plural), in Kazan Tatar *kara-karşı cırlau*, *kıska cırlar*; now they are mostly called *uram yırları*, Kazan Tatar *uram cırları*, 'street songs'. Interview with Fazile Nasretdin (FN). This tradition apparently did not follow the Mishärs to Finland or disappeared early. According to interviewees, the Tatars in Finland have become "more reserved, just like Finns".

29 See Bakieva 2009.

30 Nalborczyk 2009: 63–64.

and then bought gold jewellery and watches from pawnshops. Together they cleaned and prepared the jewellery for sale and Ainetdin went out to sell them.

Mädinä was extremely jealous (possibly of the Russian women?) and would pull off his hat and lock him out of the house. He kept an extra hat at a friend's place, but at some point he had enough of these tricks and took her home to the village. There he married a second wife, Märyam. She gave birth to two daughters, Haditshä and Fatima, but died a year after the birth of Fatima. Mädinä brought them up together with her son Dinmuhammad (born in 1882). Despite her bad temper and jealousy, and a folk tradition telling that the head wife and *köndäş* 'additional wives' never get along, Mädinä and Märyam became good friends, and Mädinä considered Märyam's children and grandchildren her own.³¹

Remarriage was common. Hasan Kanykoff's mother had married again after his father died of tuberculosis. This and other illnesses spread easily in the villages, where according to Hamsä the hygiene was poor. There was also a tradition that when someone fell ill, relatives, neighbours and friends should visit and bring food. This supportive custom, and the

31 HK, unpublished memoirs, 1980s. Dinmuhammad later lived in Saint Petersburg / Leningrad and was sent to a concentration camp for ten years in the 1930s for an alleged crime of helping Musa Bigi's sister; see Bekkin 2020a: 64. Fatima lived in Tampere, Finland, to old age. The word *köndäş* is now used chiefly for an opponent in a game, additional wives having become scarce during the twentieth century. *Köneläü* means to be envious or jealous.

fact that they seldom washed the dishes afterwards with soap and hot water but simply reused them, was conducive to the distribution of viruses, bacteria and infections. The lack of hygiene also affected women: how many died in childbirth, from infections or complications after giving birth – doctors and hospitals being far away – is not known.

In Finland, hygiene became somewhat better in the urban context, but Hamsä's mother Haditshä died in February 1917 after giving birth to her sixth child, Ädhäm, who later was a musician and a friend of the famous Finnish composer Jean Sibelius (1865–1957). The reason for her death is unknown, but Hamsä blamed his father for making her pregnant again and again without any consideration for her health. She used to put warm pot lids on her belly to ease the pain, but if she received any medical treatment in Finland is not clear. In any case, Hasan Kanykoff looked for a new wife and married Zeleha (Zöliha) Mangushoff (1896–1974) from Riga, Latvia, in 1920. They had no offspring.³²

Research concerning the pre-industrial period shows that the main values taught to Kazan Tatar children were respect, morality, religiousness, hospitality, generosity and being a hard-working, good person. Swearing for example was out of the question. The values were transmitted through stories and songs, and children mostly learned from their grandparents, elder siblings and friends. Tolerance towards other religions and people were taught early. Mothers were held in high

32 HK, personal communication, 1980s.

regard, and a mother's blessing was required when going on a journey or starting a new project. Creating and keeping close and good relations with family, relatives and neighbours were at the core of the child's upbringing, and family honour must be held up. Children received attention and goodwill from the adults, and if they transgressed, they would be admonished rather than punished.³³

The Mishärs shared these values and educational methods. When a child was born and cried for the first time, a woman present at the birth put "the bridle into the mouth" by giving the baby cream on a silver teaspoon. She was something like a fairy godmother to the child: Tiäsuk, the aunt who gave it to Hamsä at birth, was talkative and had a very sharp tongue. Therefore, according to family lore, he often said things that should not be expressed, and he was criticised for it. There were physical punishments, but he mostly remembered the mullah spanking the boys at school.

Hamsä and his siblings were expected to take part in the work from an early age in the village. In the urban life in Finland there was less work and the children could focus on studies and hobbies. The children learned practical skills and how to deal with different situations and people through play, work, imitation and competition, and they also developed strength and persistence. Sleep was very important for Tatar children in the Kazan area, and probably also among the Mishärs. It could have individual variations: each morning

33 Saifutdinova 2008: 174–176.

before sunrise, Hamsä's paternal aunt Hairibä punched him on the shoulder with her fist. He had to go out and herd the animals, while his elder brother – the favourite of the aunt – could sleep as long as he wanted.³⁴



In Finland, the Tatars kept some animals, too, mostly poultry and geese, but for the women it was lighter work than in the villages. Fazile's grandmother Fatima in Järvenpää in the 1940s. Fazile Nasretidin family album.

34 HK, unpublished memoirs, 1980s; Kazan: Saifutdinova 2008: 174.

Daughter-in-law

Although reforms and reformist ideas had reached Yangepar, and girls could get education already at the end of the 1800s, after they married most were still left at the mercy of their husband's family. The young women had nobody to protect them if their husbands were away, and even if the husbands were present, they often would not or dared not stand up against their mothers or family.

Hamsä Kayenuk always remembered his mother Haditshä as an angelic character who tried to avoid conflicts. After her marriage, she had not only to take care of her growing family, but work “as a slave” in her husband's family, too. This was a “typical fate of a daughter-in-law”. As curious child, he often listened in secret to young women “hanging” their husband's mothers and sisters, or sending them to the lowest level in hell. “They had to get it out of their system. They were very frustrated”, he wrote, adding: “A woman was just a machine to produce more human beings, and she received no respect.” When they grew older, many of the women became like these hated mothers-in-law and exercised petty power over their families. “They had experienced the same when they were young, but forgotten what it was like”, Hamsä wrote.³⁵

In the mornings and evenings, the daughters-in-law took care of animals which were herded by the boys outside the

35 HK, unpublished memoirs, 1980s.

village during the day. If the young wives dared, they tried to snatch some extra sleep after the animals had gone out, but most had to start work under the critical eye of the mother-in-law. If they did their work in the morning well, the chances that they received less reprimands grew. Divorce was rare in the village; many young women simply endured the situation, waiting for a chance to take revenge when older.

Aunt Bänät, a friend of Hamsä's mother's, lived her final years in Finland. The two women often comforted each other after bad treatment and talked of the horrors they had to live with. Aunt Bänät liked to talk about the fate of daughters-in-law in the village: there were dozens of cases where young women were raped, beaten, cursed or simply thrown out into the street. Haditshä's mother-in-law, Bartan, and sisters-in-law Hairibä and Halimä nagged endlessly. Haditshä had to wash the dirty clothes of Halimä's family (four children) in the icy river while pregnant, in addition to her own washing, childcare and a newborn baby, household work, milking and taking care of the cows, washing the floors, cooking, keeping the *montsa* (Kazan Tatar *munça*) 'sauna' clean, cutting wood and carrying it up to the second floor, etc. Despite his young age, Hamsä saw that his mother was extremely tired, but she just told the children to be good, eat and sleep, and not to mind the constant nagging and complaints.

"No one ever said a nice word to her", Hamsä wrote more than seventy years later. Finally, a neighbour woman told his father about this drudgery. Hasan brought his wife to Finland

to get away from his family. This was the reason why Hamsä was born in Tampere and not in Yangepar like his siblings. Because of this, aunt Hairibä gave him the nickname *Balban Oras* (*Uris, Oris*), “Fat Russian”, because he had been born in “Russia” outside the village; only those born in the village really belonged. *Oris* was and is still used as a derogatory word in Mishär. After some time the family returned to the village and the toil began again for Haditshä.

Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are supposed to quarrel, according to tradition, but in Fazile’s family Fatima (left) and her daughter-in-law Safiye (Safijä) got along well. Järvenpää, 1960s. Fazile Nasretdin family album.



In Finland, women from the village kept together, “but men quarrelled”, Hamsä remembered. His mother only had to take care of her children and home and cook meals, and although her husband was away frequently on business trips, she had ample company. The women often had tea from the samovar together with something to eat. All talked and gossiped, there were “many more speakers than listeners”. They were kind, friendly and supportive of each other. Haditshä also had time

to lie on the big double bed with her children and tell them stories which would grow into series of adventures and fun. Hasan brought toys, books, magazines and money from his trips; he was very attentive and always saw to it that she had enough to read.

In the village, in addition to working hard, Haditshä had to keep to restrictive traditions of her husband's family. Despite her education and, according to Hamsä, because of her sweet character and strict upbringing emphasising respect for her elders, she accepted without protest the conservative habits of not eating or sitting down before her father-in-law, not talking loudly and mostly keeping silent before him. She ate behind a curtain by the stove after he had gone to his room.

“She was frustrated, but could do nothing”, Hamsä wrote. A curtain was put up between the patriarch of the family and the daughter-in-law and her children for meal times in several families, or the men ate first and women later. Visits to her father's home felt like freedom for the children, because there they could talk and eat without restraint. In other families there were no such rules. Haditshä's younger sister Fatima for instance married into a less conservative family.

Difficult relations in the family could also spill over into the lack of support during crises. When his younger brother Feyez (Feyezrahman Kanykoff, later Kajenuk, 1914–1939) was born in Yangepar, Hamsä woke up to some noise and ran downstairs at once, “without even washing the face”. The room where his mother had given birth was full of women

and someone was crying, but he was quickly sent out of the room. The birth of the baby changed Hamsä's status in the family: now his younger sister Hafisä (Hafize), born in 1912, was "his", because his mother had little time to care for the other children. Hamsä did not remember Hafisä's birthday, but thought it was in August. The journal *Shura* where his father noted all birth dates of the children burned together with their house and belongings in Järvenpää in the 1930s. Hafisä was nicknamed *Terekömöş*, 'quicksilver', but she was never registered in Finland and her name appears in no official documents. *Kämzä* took her everywhere. Then came disaster: Hafisä fell ill and died during an epidemic which took many children's lives in the village in 1915.

"Mother did not cry", Hamsä wrote, "she was completely paralysed". Her husband's family apparently could or would do nothing, so her stepmother Mädinä arrived to support her and Mädinä also prepared the funeral. Even in this traumatic situation the in-laws could not stop nagging. Two years later, when Haditshä died in Finland, grandmother Bartan travelled the whole way to help out with the children and bring them back to the village. Hamsä felt the change keenly: he had lived a carefree life in Finland, but now he had to deal with family restrictions. There was no mother to protect him, but being of a more rebellious nature than she had been, he often refused to obey his elders.³⁶

36 HK, unpublished memoirs, 1984, 1985 and 1990. 'Quicksilver' in Kazan Tatar is *terekömeş*.

Migration: New Sphere

Three Tatar men reached the gates of Heaven after death. God asked if they had been good Muslims, and all of them said yes, they had prayed, fasted and been pious. Then God asked what kind of wife they had.

“A Christian”, said the first man.

He was immediately sent down to Hell.

The second answered prudently that he had a Muslim Tatar wife. He entered Paradise.

*The third man thought he would be even smarter. He told God that he had **two** Muslim Tatar wives.*

“You belong in Hell”, God said.

“Why?” asked the bewildered man.

God replied: “After living with two Tatar wives, Hell will feel like Paradise to you!”

— Tatar joke

“Tatar women are very strong. The woman is the boss of the family. Fathers tell their children: Listen to your mother! Ask your mother!” Gölden Bedretin is the first female president of the Finnish Islamic Congregation since its establishment in 1925. Tatar women in Finland are equals in her view: “They discuss and decide everything together with the men.”

This contrasts sharply with the reminiscences of Hamsä Kayenuk from one generation earlier: he read in the 1980s in

a Soviet newspaper about a Tatar woman marrying a Russian, and wrote that “at least a Russian does not beat his wife”. This is not true, domestic violence exists everywhere as the global statistics show,³⁷ but the article awoke memories of Mishär men not respecting their wives in the village of his childhood. Hamsä had no memory of his father ever beating his mother, but in Yangepar it was “quite common” that men beat women, and the violence might cause miscarriages: “We heard about it [miscarriages] from time to time in the village. Nowadays few Tatar men are violent, but in Finland drinking breaks up families.”³⁸

If we accept these two views as true, there was a radical change in attitudes and behaviour. When and how did the change occur? Not one interviewee could remember any case of adult violence, only physical punishment of children such as spanking or beating the legs with nettles in the 1950s.

Looking back at history, according to Renat Bekkin,³⁹ the Tatars in Finland, Saint Petersburg and villages near Sergach shared the language, cultural, social, economic, political and geographical space at the beginning of the twentieth century. This common dimension disappeared during the oppression and persecutions in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. The Tatar communities separated by the Finnish-Soviet border developed in different directions. Women’s positions changed

37 Compare OECD statistics: <https://data.oecd.org/inequality/violence-against-women.htm>

38 HK, unpublished memoirs, 1990.

39 Bekkin 2020a: 57–58 and 67–68.

and developed into more equality, but it happened in diverse ways which probably can be identified as the consequences of political, social and economic circumstances and changes of the surrounding societies. Contact with the Finnish society might have some influence, but statistics show that although women have a strong position in society, domestic violence continues to be widespread in Finland.

One factor which might have influenced the attitudes to women was World War I, that is before the separation of the communities. Liliya Gabdrafikova⁴⁰ notes that Tatar women all over Russia had to take over male jobs and tasks when the men were sent to the front. Women continued to work also after the war, because thousands of men had been killed or were crippled. Rich women engaged in the war efforts: they started schools and educating young girls beyond the elementary level. It was difficult to find a spouse who could support them and women had to work in order to survive. Many became independent financially and refused to put up with bad conditions or their husband's abusive family.

Tatar women became nurses in hospitals during the war, too. From Nizhny Novgorod province, some young women even went to the front as nurses, wanting to be close to their relatives and beloved ones. World War I accelerated the process of transforming the women's status and situation and enabled more women to get an education and work outside the home. One of the manifestations of the changes was the

40 Gabdrafikova 2014.

Muslim Women's Congress in April 1917 in Kazan, where more than 300 female delegates, many of them professionals, discussed issues related to women's rights.

How much World War I influenced the Tatar community which had formed in Finland is not clear. Several Tatar men from the villages served in the Russian army, but their story has not yet been told. Conscription was abolished more than a decade earlier in Finland, so only a few thousand volunteers left to fight either for Russia or in the ranks of the German army as Jägers (Swedish *jägare*, Finnish *jääkärit*). Most men remained at home in Finland and there was little need for women to engage on a similar scale as in Russia. Women had received the right to vote in 1906 in the Grand Duchy of Finland, but this did not concern the Tatars, who received Finnish citizenship only from the early 1920s.

Friends and relatives

of Fazile's

grandmother Fatima.

From the left

Bänät Hairulla,

Halisä Nisametdin,

Fatima Nisametdin,

a Finnish friend?,

Bänät Hisametdin,

Mörshidä Nisametdin.

Viborg / Viipuri /

Vyborg, 1930s.



Fazile Nasretdin family album.

A further factor driving change and transforming attitudes to women among the Mishärs in Finland before World War II was the example of highly educated Tatar women and men. During the 1920s, Tatar intellectuals, politicians and activists fled from Russia and the Soviet Union through Finland. Most went on to other countries, but they stayed for some time in Finland and many also visited later as teachers or lecturers. These representatives of the elite not only contributed advice and knowledge on congregations, cultural events, education and all kinds of community activities, but also values. They found mostly a receptive audience for their suggestions.⁴¹

Among the educated and influential women was Amina (Äminä) Syrtlanoff (Syrtlanova; also spelled Emine Sartlan in Finland), born in Ufa in 1884. After her husband died unexpectedly in 1912, Amina dedicated herself to charity, education and Muslim issues in Saint Petersburg (from 1914 Petrograd). She taught French for some time in Helsinki after arriving at the beginning of the 1920s.

Amina contributed to the creation of the statutes for the Finnish Islamic Congregation, played the piano and was active in the Tatar community before leaving for France where she lived the rest of her life. Somewhere along the way she became a theosophist and Freemason – and a vegetarian. Hamsä Kayenuk was present during a visit when the host offered her dishes without meat – shocking and unheard of among the Mishärs.

41 Examples of Musa Bigi's advice, see Zaripov & Belyaev 2020.

According to Hamsä, she was the first Muslim he had met who renounced her Islamic faith: Amina resigned from the Finnish Islamic Congregation in the 1930s. The Tatars in Finland heard that she had little or no contact with Tatars and Muslims in France, and that she mostly cultivated friendships among theosophists before World War II.⁴²



The close-knit Tatar community was connected not only through the common background in the home villages, but also through kinships and friendships. More kinship relations were created in the diaspora in Finland. Weddings were large affairs with many guests. Hasan Kanykoff with his recognisable moustache sits in front, the fifth from the left. Beside him is Zeleha. Fazile Nasretidin family album.

42 HK, letter 17 August 1984. Resignations from the congregation are so rare in Finland that the next one occurred only in the mid-1980s. It triggered this memory about Amina.

Family and community

The Tatars have already from the beginning, since their arrival in Finland, been like a big family. Most people knew each other from childhood. Many were relatives, friends or acquaintances in the villages, or they arrived through the same routes to Finland and became friends in the diaspora.

Although the families gathered for celebrations and kept active contact with each other, in the diaspora situation they felt a need to create also minority-wide social and cultural activities, as well as possibilities for practising their religion.

The next step was to establish organisations and congregations, so that the Tatars could meet each other in the community and speak their language and be together with people like themselves.

— Interview with FN

A new kind of relationships with fellow Tatars was required in Finland. Although they brought with them the village and trade networks, in the diaspora they had to restructure and redefine their connections especially after the border was closed. The Tatars in Finland quickly created a community beyond the lines of family, kinship and friendship. The seeds were there already around 1900: networks among both men and women existed in several towns. When the return to the

home villages became impossible, they turned their attention to the community. Family continued to play an important role and still does, but it was now extended into comprising the community as well. The community was not created without friction and conflicts, heated debates and political overtones (Bolshevik accusations, “Tatar/Turk” debate, etc.), and also status, hierarchies, antagonisms and relations established in the home villages continued to have an impact in Finland, but the Tatar community, or more exactly local communities in different towns, were created and continue to exist.⁴³

Structural changes in the social networks and the family occurred because of the new surroundings. The main change was urbanisation, but as many Mishärs already had lived in an urban environment for some time at least, adaptation went fairly smoothly. Women profited from the change: life was easier, there were less household work, smaller houses or just an apartment to keep clean, and fewer animals, gardens and fields to take care of. The women had more time for family, education, developing entrepreneurship skills, and going to social gatherings and other activities.

There was also less pressure from the older generation. Mothers- and fathers-in-law would go for visits to Finland – train connections existed and travelling was relatively easy if not that comfortable, according to Hamsä – but the older generation often preferred to return home. The all-pervading control and power in-laws had over the younger generation

43 Leitzinger 1996 and 1999 has explored the early decades.

was reduced, which certainly also diminished stress levels in the family. Social control in Finland was weaker than in the village setting, but there were some traditions which limited the space of women, mainly connected with religion; men ruled in the congregations. Superstitions also were carried to Finland, but mostly disappeared in the 1930s and 1940s. In Estonia, for instance, women in fertile age were forbidden to visit a graveyard until the 1930s.⁴⁴

In rich families like the Kanykoffs, who could afford to keep “queen bees” or non-working women, the women would focus on family, social gatherings and personal interests. In other families, women worked with their male and female relatives in family enterprises and shops.



*Hamsä's stepmother
Zeleha Kanykoff (left),
the “fine city lady”
who did not have to work,
and Fazile's grandmother
Fatima Nisametdin,
the successful saleswoman,
during a stroll in Helsinki
in the 1940s.
Fazile Nasretdin family album.*

44 HK, personal communications, 1980s. Estonia: Abiline & Ringvee 2016: 117.

Family size has diminished throughout the past century both among the Tatars, Finns and in Europe. Hamsä was the third of six children, a fairly typical family size during the first half of the twentieth century. Gölten Bedretdin's father's family also had six children; her mother was one of eight. Seven of her mother's siblings married and had on average three children each. In Fazile Nasretdin's family in Järvenpää north of Helsinki in the 1950s there were four children.⁴⁵

In comparison, a family in Tatarstan had on average five members in 1939, but by 1979 it fell to four (two adults and two children).⁴⁶ Today, both in Finland and in Tatarstan two children are a usual number. Also in Estonia, Tatar families tended to be big at the beginning of the twentieth century. The women did not work outside the home at first, but then the same changes occurred like in Finland and elsewhere.⁴⁷ From a big extended family living under the same roof, the Tatar families transformed over just two generations into core families with a few children.

45 Exact population statistics for the Tatars in Finland do not exist, but all interviewees confirmed these decreasing family sizes; interview with FN, GB and anonymous.

46 Murtazina & Saifutdinova 2012.

47 Abiline & Ringvee 2016: 116.

Choosing a spouse

In Finland, marriages were still sometimes arranged up to the 1930s. Fazile Nasretidin's mother Safiye (1919–1998) later remembered with a smile how she had been married off by her father. Bedi Bavautdin (1876–1954) brought her to the train station in Rauma, on the west coast in Finland, from where she travelled to Viborg / Viipuri / Russian Vyborg in the east, in the Karelian Isthmus. She asked her father at the station: “So you bring me this far, and then just leave me?” On his deathbed, her father asked if she still held a grudge that he had married her to a man far away. She was surprised at the question which apparently worried him, and told him that she was completely satisfied with her life.⁴⁸

The changed political situation and closed border reflected on the choice of spouses among the Tatars in the diaspora. Before they moved to Finland, exogamy was not impossible, but mostly Mishärs married Mishärs from their home village or neighbouring settlements. From the 1920s, spouses were looked for within the Tatar community, but with the time this became complicated, because many were cousins, some even double cousins (from both parents) or close relatives.

The first Tatar-Finnish wedding was reportedly celebrated in 1930. Although there are cases of Finnish women “turning Tatar”, adapting to Tatar customs, food culture and learning

48 Nasretidin et al. 2021.

the language, only a few Finnish women in the early years who took Arabic names and became Muslims were accepted. Then followed a long period until the 2000s when non-Tatars and half-Tatar children were not welcome. Tatar women – in 1990 they were estimated at 40% – have remained unmarried because they could not find a spouse within the community and pressure was strong on not to marry outside. Despite the social limitations, both men and women have married non-Tatars, some Turks or other Turkic-speakers, and others Finns or Finland-Swedes. After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, many went to Tatarstan and Russia to look for spouses, and some found spouses in the global Tatar diaspora.⁴⁹

The situation is similar in Estonia: mixed marriages were rare and marrying a Russian was not acceptable in the Tatar community. After 1940, when Estonia was occupied by the Soviet army and transformed into a Soviet republic, travel to the home villages became possible again and several Tatars found spouses from “home”. Divorces were very rare among the Tatars in both Finland and Estonia in the first generations, but increased after World War II.⁵⁰

Among Polish-Lithuanian Tatars, mixed marriages were not accepted and especially women were expected to marry at least Muslims. Tatars often married outside their home towns or villages. Today they also look for partners from other countries, mainly Muslims, as the Tatar ethnicity has

49 Leitzinger 2008: 92–95; Mustanoja 1990: 8.

50 Abiline & Ringvee 2016: 116; Lepa 2020: 76.

become synonymous with religion. Earlier, families helped to find a spouse, and before World War II there were balls and events, but now Internet has taken over as meeting place for young people.⁵¹

*Wedding of Fazile's parents
Nuri Samarhan and
Safiye Bavautdin in Rauma, 1938.
In the early years in Finland, there
were many Tatar-Tatar marriages,
but with time the choice of spouse
became increasingly difficult,
as the community was very small
and exogamy not accepted
in the community.
Fazile Nasretin family album.*



The resistance against exogamy is not a conservative attitude only; it is a consequence of the fears of losing the Tatarness, including language and religion. Intermarriages eventually will reduce the numbers of Tatars in Finland, and it is already happening, although many parents are consciously teaching Tatar to their children, but the demographic curve is dropping also because there are more funerals than births; the large generation born after World War II is ageing and leaving.

51 Nalborczyk 2009: 64.

Several interviewees comment that divorce among Tatar-Tatar couples is less than among mixed couples, but the assertion has been impossible to verify. However, a common language and cultural background especially in the minority situation could facilitate a marriage. Fazile Nasretdin, who grew up in the community, sees a similar background as an asset:

When you marry, you acquire new relatives and your family concept is enlarged. You have to adapt to the new situation and your husband's family is always a challenge. It was easy for me, because we both came from entrepreneur families, and both had paternal grandmothers in the family who were friends, and our relations with others in the minority were similar. I knew my husband's grandmother from childhood, which facilitated my integration into the family.

The cultural basics were there and I had a good example of the mother/daughter-in-law relationship at home. I decided to answer friendly and nicely to my mother-in-law, because she had given birth to the central person in my life, my husband. Still, there were complicated situations, but sometimes I felt even more accepted by her than her own daughter was.

— Interview with FN

Fazile and her husband were students when they married, and they tried to make ends meet. Fazile would have moved to her husband's home but he was against it. Her brother-in-

law married a Finnish woman and in the beginning Fazile felt competition for the favour of their mother-in-law. Then she realised that her husband's family treated the Finnish woman more carefully and allowed for more space, because they felt that the intercultural marriage was more fragile than Fazile's Tatar-Tatar marriage.⁵²

The expectations for a young woman to marry, and to marry early in life, were high until some decades ago. Gölten Bedretdin's sisters were married around the age of 21: "All of them are very smart, but they had other values than I had; I did not see marriage and having children as the main goal in life." The family despaired of her marrying at all, but when she was around thirty, after studying abroad and finding a job, she married and had children.

Men were also supposed to marry early and preferably to a Tatar girl. Hamsä Kayenuk, who was married and divorced twice outside the community, told how other Tatars and even some in his family criticised his decisions. His children grew up outside the community like many other half-Tatars. Today, many children who visit the Tatar kindergarten and school in Helsinki have a non-Tatar parent.⁵³ When researching aspects of Tatar families, a study of multicultural families should be carried out. Today many of the families with a Tatar spouse are multilingual and multicultural.

52 Interview with FN.

53 Interview with GB; HK, personal communication, 1980s; Bedretdin & Stahlberg 2021: 245.

Home and upbringing

In Tatar families in Finland, traditions were held in high esteem. The family reputation was important. The woman, wife and mother was the spirit in the home. In the early years, she would also be involved in matchmaking and arranging marriages.

The woman was and is the equal of the husband and father and highly estimated. She kept and transmitted Tatar culture and traditions, and she could manage big families, close relationships with family, relatives, friends and neighbours.

We who went to school in Finland were educated and increasingly worked outside the home, while at the same time managing husband, children and relatives, and organising or participating in activities in the community. Girls were brought up to do any jobs, even those considered to be male or menial tasks.

— Interview with FN

The move to Finland changed many aspects in the value system and attitudes of the Mishärs. Traditionally, the home was and is important. It is the basic unit, the family, but also the building or apartment. The physical house showed the wealth and well-being of the family to the outside world, and it became also a symbol for the nation in Tatar literature. In the family, Tatar language, culture, traditions and customs were transmitted. In the home, life rituals such as weddings,

childbirth, name-giving to a child and funerals were carried out, and in the home children were brought up to be good and decent people.⁵⁴

It is important to note that Tatars are not unique in holding home, traditions, family and relationships with relatives and neighbours in high regard; most of humanity shares these values. It is a WEIRD illusion that the rest of the world is like north and western Europe or North America, where the pursuit of individual interests are seen as more important than being part of a family and relationships network.⁵⁵

Gölten Bedretin and all interviewees remember that they always shared meals (in contrast to Finnish families who did not necessarily eat together). Often they would cook together. Traditionally, a son was important, but the approaches varied in different families: Hamsä Kayenuk never got over his disappointment of daughters, whom he thought less valuable than sons. Gölten's father from the same generation had a different opinion. He encouraged his daughters to compete and win. He would tell his wife to put on lipstick because she looked pale, fix her hair or buy a new dress. His wife and daughters used makeup and were well dressed because he wanted them to make a good impression. While at dinner, everyone would discuss everything, life, events and people. He was active in the community and chairman of the Tatar

54 Symbolism of home: Yildyrym 2015: 83; family rituals: Urazmanova 2004; how children are socialised: Saifutdinova 2009.

55 See Henrich 2020.

cultural association. His daughters were involved from early childhood, singing, performing and organising. Their mother played the piano. She was a housewife out of necessity and not of choice, because the family constantly had guests who had to be provided for. “Maybe one evening per week it was just us at the table”, Gölten laughs.⁵⁶



Grandparents Nasretdin with their grandchildren at the tea table, Hyvinkää 1950s. Fazile Nasretdin family album.

Fazile Nasretdin’s father was often away on business trips, but the children never felt it because he always made up for his absence when he was at home. He knew Finland well and brought his family on holidays around the country, even as far as Lapland. Cousins and relatives were visited in different

⁵⁶ Interview with GB.

places: Tampere, Turku and Rauma. In the summer, when the family visited the cottage of an aunt from Tampere, there would be more than twenty cousins swimming, going to the sauna and enjoying the food their mothers prepared.⁵⁷

All interviewees noted the fact that the Tatar children and most of all girls experienced more parental control than their Finnish schoolmates. Boys had more freedom, but also they had to respect family rules. “We never had problems about wearing swim suits or anything like that”, one interviewee says, “but we had to be home at a certain hour and behave ourselves. On the other hand, we had a safe, loving and warm atmosphere in the home, in contrast to many of our Finnish friends”.

Tatar girls did not have any problem about wearing bathing suits already in the 1930s, on a beach in Terijoki, Karelia. Fazile Nasretdin family album.



Finnish children and teenagers could sleep over with their friends or visit whenever or wherever they wanted, or at least it seemed so to young Gölten, who sometimes asked herself

57 Nasretdin et al. 2021.

why she was not born a Finn. Having a boyfriend was out of the question, but she could go out to discos and events. This old-fashioned upbringing was far more authoritarian than her approach to her daughters: “I preferred to meet the friends of my children and see what kind of people they associate with. It worked and we still have a very close relationship.” Gölten liked to try out new things and her parents encouraged her to become an independent, free and strong woman who thinks, questions and can deal with all kinds of situations.⁵⁸

Pärämäts culture

Grandmothers are fondly remembered by almost all of the interviewees. In Finland, unlike the villages, there might be considerable geographical distances between a young family and the in-laws. In some families, grandparents or one of the in-laws lived with the family or nearby.

Gölten Bedretdin’s maternal grandmother lived in the vicinity and often came to help with preparations for the Tatar and international guests, cooking, baking and talking with Gölten’s mother in the kitchen. She would also take the children and their cousins to pick berries or to the sauna. “We were always doing a lot of things with grandma”, Gölten remembers.⁵⁹

58 Interviews with GB and anonymous.

59 Interview with GB.

Grandmothers, *äbäy* or *äbäi*,⁶⁰ played an important role in teaching the children different skills and transmitting Tatar language, knowledge, traditions, food and culture. Fazile Nasretidin notes: “In other languages, a child is supposed to have received their culture through the mother’s milk. Tatars get it from the *pärämäts*.”⁶¹

The meat-, potato- or other vegetable-filled, fried or oven-baked pastry is at the core of Tatariness. Preparing minced meat with the onion, salt and pepper; rolling out a smooth dough, folding the discs with the filling into pastries, frying, setting the table and eating the *pärämäts* is connected with positive, happy memories, family reunions, celebrations and togetherness. When Tatars from different countries meet for the first time, they very soon start talking about food. The topic of *pärämäts* creates bonding; all share the warm feeling connected with it, and talking about it, or even better, sharing a meal of *pärämäts*, cements the relationship into something close to kinship.⁶²

60 In Fazile Nasretidin’s childhood the word *äbi* was used in the family, but it has more recently in Finland acquired another meaning. *Äbi* is now applied as a derogatory epithet to Russian or other non-Tatar women, in a similar meaning like Finnish slang use of *akka* or *muija*, originally meaning ‘woman, wife’ or ‘old woman’.

61 Mishär *pärämäts*, among the Finnish Tatars nowadays *pärämäç*. The name is also spelled internationally *peremets*, *peremec*, *peremeç* or *peremech*.

62 These Tatar *pärämäts* encounters is confirmed by all interviewees who comment: “Oh yes, that is *so* typical for Tatars! They always talk about food and *pärämäts*!”



Pärämäts is highly important for Mishär Tatars and often prepared for events and celebrations in large amounts.

Pärämäts preparation in the 1940s (left) and 2000s.

Fazile Nasretdin family album.



The older generation of Tatar women in Finland kept together and met almost daily if they lived in the same area. Many did live nearby, especially in the early generations. They created networks which according to Fazile were far more complex than those of the men, and even now the Tatar women have more intricate networks and connections. Today they call first on the phone or send a message, but earlier no invitation was needed for a visit and tea. The grandchildren listened to their grandmothers' talk and stories with great interest.

The grandmothers adapted “miraculously” well to the new environment and picked up all kinds of good aspects of the Finnish society, according to Fazile. When new ingredients

appeared in shops and markets they were eager to try them out. Feride Nisametdin tells how the grandmothers searched in books and watched TV food shows for recipes for instance for leek, which was previously unknown to them and did not figure in the village cuisine they had learned in Aktuk. Then they experimented by putting the leek into the *shorba* ‘[meat] soup’ and other dishes until the leek became part of their everyday cooking. This approach was common also for other things than food:

“We have often wondered later how [grandmother] Fatima learned to wear silk underpants and waistcoats. She was very progressive, despite the fact that she came from a provincial village setting”, Fazile says: “My mother planned the clothes for the family. Our clothes were tailor-made and mother designed grandma’s clothes so that it was easy for her to do the ritual washing before praying.”

Fazile’s paternal grandmother Fatima (1888–1967) was a part of the family. “During World War II, she must have been a great help and support to my mother, when the children were small and my father was away at the front”, Fazile says. Fatima *äbäy* had a fearless entrepreneur spirit. She quickly picked up new things, and although she barely spoke Finnish, she went to the Riihimäki market north of Järvenpää to sell all kinds of goods and clothes. She also knew and talked a lot about folk traditions, culture and language. Fatima knew by heart a huge amount of songs, rhymes, riddles, stories and *Korän* (‘*Qur’an*’) *surahs*. “One of the most scary stories she

told was *Käzä* [Kazan Tatar *Käcä*] *häm bätäläre* ‘Goat and kids’, but we always interrupted her when the wolf came to devour the baby goats”, Fazile laughs. She adds that she has told many of the stories to her children and grandchildren.

On Thursdays, Fazile and her sister Feride went to the sauna where Fatima *äbäy* told about her home village Aktuk and taught the Islamic washing rituals, explaining the names of different body parts. She told also about the white sauna *ak montsa* and black sauna *kara montsa* (Kazan Tatar *ak / kara munça*) in the village; the black one was probably a smoke sauna. In the sauna, the women of the family talked about women’s affairs and the girls listened and learned.⁶³

*Fazile’s grandparents
Hairetdin and Fatima
Samarhan. He died in
1929, but Fatima äbäy
married again, was
widowed a second time,
and then lived with the
family and took care of her
grandchildren while she
sold clothes at markets to
help family finances.
Fazile Nasretidin
family album.*



63 Interviews with FN and Feride Nisametdin.

Strong female models

An important question in Tatar families is which one is more important – his or her family? It was clearly defined in the village – the husband’s where the bride went to live – but in Finland there was a choice. According to Fazile, it is more a question of personality and what the grandparents can deal with in terms of time, the children’s age, and space. Working grandparents had become common when Fazile had her own children in the 1970s and schedules had to be synchronised. Some of the grandparents managed better with the children when they were small, while the others stepped in when the children reached school age.

Fatima *äbäy* was the strong figure of the family, a great help to Fazile’s mother whose family lived far away, and “an example for all”: “My mother was twenty when her first child was born”, Fazile explains. “She was almost a child herself. Fatima *äbäy* supported her and they respected each other.” Naturally, there were stressful situations. When celebrations were arranged or guests invited, Fatima could invite more people than planned without telling her son or daughter-in-law, and accommodating all became difficult. “Once I saw mother scolding her. My strong and safe Grandma left the kitchen sobbing and went to gather gooseberries. My heart was breaking because I loved her so much. But in general they got on well, and even banded up against father.”

Grandmother was always there for the children, too, after Fazile's mother went to work. Her father bought a shop for his wife in 1954, and her mother, mother's sister and a niece worked there during the day selling textiles. Fazile used to go to the shop after school and listen to the women talking in Tatar and Finnish. But it was Fatima *äbäy* who gave advice and faith in life itself. She taught the children all kinds of skills and gave them valuable knowledge. The children were often comforted by her, and Fatima's wise counsel and advice saved them from many difficult situations and conflicts.

A social, helpful and reliable person, Fatima was friendly with everybody independently of their background, and she taught the children to respect all, help people in need, to be tolerant, and to try to understand and accept life's many ups and downs. If there was a problem among neighbours, Tatars, Finns, Russians, Jews or others, she immediately went over to help, even in a case of a suicide in the neighbourhood.⁶⁴

Fazile had a carefree, happy childhood, playing with her cousins, other Tatar children in Järvenpää, and with Finnish children in the neighbourhood. When she went to school, she lived double lives, however: at home and with Tatar relatives, everybody behaved and lived "like Tatars did". Outside home was school, hobbies and the Finnish way of life. She learned soon to cope with the languages and cultures, but at first

⁶⁴ Interview with FN; Nasretidin et al. 2021. Fatima was born with the family name Dayan, then became in her first marriage Samarhan, and in the second marriage Nisametdin.

some things were painful. When Fazile returned from school one day, telling Fatima *äbäy* that the others said she was a Chinese, Fatima consoled and explained that they were just feeling bad and that it was best to keep out of their game.

Another time in the first grade, Fazile was forced to eat pork meat at school, although the family had told the teachers she must not eat pork for religious reasons. “My tears fell on the plate, I cried, then ate and could hardly swallow. All day I felt very, very bad”, Fazile remembers. Upon her return, Grandmother told her it was not her fault and that no blame was put on her. In both cases, Fazile felt relieved and could go on with life at school.



*Fazile's grandmother Fatima (right) talking
with her friend Fäyruza (Feyruza) in the 1950s.
Fazile Nasretdin family album.*

Fazile's other *äbäy*, Fätehä Hamidulla (Bavautdin, 1885–1950) lived in Rauma, far from her daughter Safiye's family in Järvenpää, but they visited her regularly. At her deathbed, Fätehä *äbäy* told Fazile to obey her father and mother. These were her last words, but before that she had given the little girl other guidelines for life which Fazile still remembers. Her grandmother was tolerant and patient even when she was ill: Fazile was playing with her many scarves on the floor and her mother told her to stop, but Fätehä said in a tired voice that she should let the child play.

“My mother remembered her own mother with warmth, admiration, and with feelings mixed with pity, because her mother had been the manager of a large and poor family. Also Fatima *äbäy* said Fätehä had a wonderful character. She praised her capability of keeping the home very clean and the atmosphere positive, despite poverty and a strict, capricious husband”, Fazile remembers.

*A strong, safe and wise
grandmother who could
give the children useful skills,
knowledge and advice.
Fatima äbäy with
grandchildren in the 1940s.
Fazile Nasretdin family album.*



Work life

My father always told me that I should work and earn my own money. When I applied for my first job after finishing university, I realised that the men got more money than a female economist like me. I became so angry. I did not want to be a mere secretary. Yes, I was maybe a bit lazy and I enjoyed sports more than my studies at first, but then I studied very hard and went abroad to improve my language skills. So why should a man get more salary for the same job?

It had never crossed my mind that I would be less valuable than a man and I told the employer so. They raised the salary. After that I worked in many big corporations and banks. I loved my work. Every day I encountered a lot of people, participated actively in everything and dealt with all kinds of challenges. Later I took over my husband's family company. In the meantime I raised a family and was active in the Tatar community – everything at the same time.

— Interview with GB

Working outside the home was nothing new to many Mishär women. In Yangepar, Hamsä Kayenuk's aunt Hairibä never married (according to him, she was lame which reduced her chances for marriage), but she kept a village shop. She could count in her head and had a sharp intellect but a very wicked tongue. "Nobody could win an argument with her", Hamsä

remembered. He wanted to bring her to Finland in the 1920s but his father and elder brother refused. Hairibä *totay* ‘aunt’ remained in the village and the Kanykoffs never saw her again; her fate is unknown.⁶⁵

The economic humiliation of the financially dependent Tatar women was discussed in the journal *Shura* early in the twentieth century.⁶⁶ In the rural environment, women were part of a family work force consisting of several generations, each with their own tasks. The men brought in the cash from their trade and sales of agricultural produce. Most women, however, except the very rich ones, had to work to get food on the table and help keep the family finances afloat.

World War II changed the situation for Tatar women in a similar way as it changed the majority society in Finland. The men were sent to the front and women had to take over many jobs which had been considered male tasks. Fazile’s mother and grandmother had to learn to cope with everyday life without a man in the house. Her father once brought her mother five red roses, which soon wilted. Her mother sighed and said that they were like her first five years of marriage when her husband was away at the front.

Several Tatar women were nurses or worked for the *Lotta Svärd* (1918–1944) paramilitary organisation during the war. Their task was to assist the army and to work in hospitals. With the Tatar men who fought for Finland these women are

65 HK, unpublished memoirs, 1980s.

66 See Brileva 2021: 18.

considered war veterans. The Tatars in Finland also rescued prisoners-of-war from Tatarstan, who had been displaced to Karelia by the Soviet authorities and brought to Finnish prisoner camps. There were many women and girls among the prisoners who worked in Tatar families and businesses in Järvenpää and Helsinki and became friends with the local Tatars. Most of the prisoners were sent back to the Soviet Union after the end of the war upon Soviet request, but a few married and stayed, and a few disappeared. Some of the previous prisoners keep contact with Tatars in Finland until the present day.⁶⁷

Some women were more enterprising than others, and in some cases, the family situation forced women to get out and work outside the home. One of them was Fazile Nasretdin's Fatima *äbäy*. She arrived in Kuopio in 1924 legally with a passport and her son, Fazile's father Nuri (1918–1991). Two girls had died in the village in an epidemic, and a son born in Finland died within three days. Her husband Hairetdin (born in 1878) died of a heart attack five years after her arrival in 1929. She then married a widower who had two children and they moved to Viipuri / Viborg / Vyborg in Karelia.

Within a year her second husband died, too, and she had three children to bring up. Working with this husband, she had learned to be a trader and she became successful. Fatima

67 Interview with FN. Veterans: Suomen Islam-seurakunta 2006. Prisoners: Safiulla, unpublished manuscript. In Poland, Tatar women participated in military conflicts during the nineteenth century and served in the army during World War II: Nalborczyk 2009: 58.

went to markets and peddled textiles and all kinds of small goods for many years, even in her old age when her son was away at the war front during World War II. Her business flourished and she could raise her children and even buy apartments for them.



Fazile's grandmother Fatima and father Nuri selling at the market. Fazile Nasretin family album.

Fatima *äbäy* did not know more Finnish than was needed for business, but she managed to deal with all kinds of clients and problems. She made flannel underpants, but more than sewing skills she possessed a high degree of communicative competence, using any scraps of Finnish she picked up for her trade activities. Once when a man was swearing at her and telling that the underpants she was selling were too tight, Fatima swore back at him and stretched the pants, explaining in broken Finnish “teketä näin”, ‘to do it like this’.

Another story about Fatima, whose business transactions caused much amusement to her family, tells that during the war she was dressed in a nice new coat. People stopped her wanting to buy it. She sold it for a good price, and when she returned only wearing a thin dress, freezing, people would be staring at her, but she just cried “hui kuuma, hui kuuma”, ‘oh hot’, and continued on her way.⁶⁸

In Finland, the women in the early period often worked in family companies with their male relatives, but after World War II, the women chose all kinds of professions, including doctors, lawyers, teachers, officials, secretaries, economists, etc. Religion or ethnic identity has no connection with the jobs they choose, but there is a social preference: several Tatars work in professions where there is much interaction; learning to communicate and socialise are skills they learn at an early age in the family context.

Decisions about studies and profession are today seen as personal, although parents have some say or might try to influence in one direction or other. For the older generations, family pressure was present: Hamsä Kayenuk felt compelled to leave his university studies to help out in the family firm. Later, safety came first: Hamsä wanted his daughters to get secure professions with a guaranteed salary, preferably in the economic sphere. Under no conditions should they become entrepreneurs like him.⁶⁹

68 Interview with FN.

69 Interviews; HK, 1980s; compare Mustanoja 1990: 7.

Establishment: Adaptation

When I went to university, I still lived at home, but after marrying I moved away and finished my studies somewhat later. I rarely joined in my fellow [Finnish] students' parties or activities. Instead, the Tatar youth gathered in the free time.

The generation born after the war was large and we went together to the theatre, prepared programmes for tea evenings, arranged and enjoyed celebrations and parties, and participated in the events of our sports association.

It was clear to us that we belong to a small minority and this consciousness increased the feeling of belonging together, and certainly also the feeling of safety.

In all these events and celebrations, the women and girls were the main organisers, and the boys and men helped where they could. It was so easy to be with people who shared the same dialect and the same background.

Yet sometimes we felt that this little "duck pond" [Swedish ankdam, Finnish ankkalampi] was far too small and the organisational work became a burden. But not for long.

— Interview with FN

The studies of organisational memory mainly deal with corporate memory, but it could be a useful approach also for social remembering in a minority community like the Tatars in Finland. Organisational memory manifests itself in many ways celebrations, events, publications, exhibitions, gathering of archives and stories about founders and teachers, etc.⁷⁰

The Tatar organisational memory in Finland is connected with multiple factors, including family, relatives and family ties, friends, identity, self-identification as well as joint narratives, including the “success story” which is basically the narrative of their successful integration into the society in Finland. The present changes the story of the past, so historical and social contexts must be taken into account when discussing the development of the Tatar community in Finland, or more correctly, *communities* in plural, because there were different communities in various towns who were similar, connected but not the same.

The Tatar women’s input in community organisation and activities in Finland is enormous. The list of female teachers, transmitters of language, culture and tradition (kindergarten, summer camps for children and youth, courses, school, clubs, groups with formal and informal teaching, etc.); organisers or assistants at events; cooks; cleaners; actresses; performers; musicians and singers is long. The men figure as founders of the congregations in Helsinki (1925) and Tampere (1943), cultural associations (FTB and Tampere 1935, Turku 1938),

70 See for example Rowlinson et al. 2010.

and sports association *Yolduz* ('Star', 1945) in Helsinki, but the women upheld and filled the events with activities like theatre, music, literature, choir singing and performances, and last but not least, food.



*A theatre performance in Tampere, 1950s.
Fazile Nasretidin family album.*

Women have been presidents of the cultural associations and the sports club, but with Gölten Bedretdin, the congregation in Helsinki receive a chairwoman only in 2018. Several of the interviewees point out that both women and men sit on the associations' boards and work together in projects and to arrange events. No gender differences in the organisations are mentioned, most reply negatively or comment with a laugh that only the kitchen is the women's domain. "Women and men work together in the community", Fazile Nasretidin says,

and adds: “Food preparation was and is mainly a female task but the men serve and entertain the guests.

According to Gölten, personality is more important than gender. The organisers must be active, visible, communicate and keep contact with people, and they must have patience and be very flexible. “A vast network and a very cooperative personality is required to ensure that everything functions smoothly”, Gölten explains. Still, some men have received more praise than they deserve, interviewees say, and women have received much less attention and credit than they merit.

The only time when men and women are separated and sit at different tables is during celebrations. “Men accept women among themselves when they talk business”, one interviewee says, “but at celebrations men prefer to talk with men and the women with women”. Traditionally men sit at one long table and women at another in the meeting hall. At weddings and engagement celebrations or when there is a family event with small children, men and women sit in couples or mixed, but for all other celebrations the tables are divided.

The interviewees find this separation of the sexes useful: one says that there is less social pressure when they do not need to communicate as couples with other couples. Another laughs and says jokingly that “oh, we know what our men will say, don’t we listen to them at home every day? It is so much more interesting to talk with other women whom we maybe haven’t seen for a while”. Fazile agrees: “We meet in this way more people outside the usual circle of family and

friends. Women talk about women topics and the men have their own talk. This way it is more equal, too. Not everybody has a partner and nobody needs to feel left out because they come alone.” In other words, the women meet as themselves instead of being forced into a traditional couple model. Some women have a non-Tatar partner, others are divorced, and among the elderly widows are more frequent. Gölten adds: “It is more comfortable for all and we are used to this way. We have so many common things to talk about.” The Tatars in Finland are not alone; among the Polish-Lithuanian Tatars there is a similar tradition.⁷¹



Women sit together during a Korban (sacrifice feast) celebration in Järvenpää, 1960s. Fazile’s grandmother Fatima is the third from the right in the front row. Fazile Nasretdin family album.

71 Interviews with FN, GB and anonymous. Cultural activities: Halén & Martikainen 2016: 101. Polish-Lithuanian Tatars: Nalborczyk 2009: 66.

Separate women's associations, like in Kazan and other cities did not exist in Finland. In the Kazan region, already in the nineteenth century there were dynamic groups of females working with women mostly based on secular principles. Several had pedagogical goals or offered courses, advice on a healthy lifestyle or fashion. Transmitting language, culture, knowledge, traditions and literature were some of their aims. Tatar women were and are still seen as the main transmitters of culture and language to the next generation.⁷²

In Finland women met privately in homes during the early years, and some activities gathered female attendance mostly. Unlike in the Kazan area, where women were active in urban and rural settings, the Tatars in Finland were and are solely urban. Otherwise the secular activities are in focus, teaching and transmission of language and culture play a much larger role than purely religious activities for the women.



The Tatars quickly learned to enjoy the same kinds of holidays and live as “everybody else” in Finland. Going to the beach was considered a healthy and pleasant summer activity.

20 July 1937.

Kanykoff family album.

72 Sattarova, Sabirova et al. 2019; Yemelyanova & Shafigullina 2019.

Engaging in the community

Role models in the family and joining the Tatar community activities from an early age are the most common reasons for young Tatars to engage in the community in Finland. Often this participation also awakens an interest in preserving Tatar language and culture. Parents who have nice memories from their own childhood participation in activities want to give it to their children, too. Several of the interviewees tell that they had so much fun in the Tatar kindergarten, school, summer camps and courses, and that they wanted to give the same opportunity to their children.

For the first movers, generations of parents and children who had lived in the home villages and remembered another life and time, the community was extremely important. It not only provided contact with a world they felt was theirs but also gave a feeling of security. Several learned Finnish and Swedish, but there were also many in the first generation who knew just a few words. In the community, there were people who spoke their own Mishär language, who could help when needed; and all kinds of information was pooled, discussed and could be gathered and learned from together.

This situation changed for the children who were born in the 1940s in Finland, for whom the village was far away in time and space, and mainly a memory or story they inherited from their parents and grandparents. They still lived in the

community and had intense contacts with other Mishärs, but due to school, higher education, work, hobbies, friends and other aspects involving them in Finnish society and bringing them closer to the majority, the Tatar language and culture was increasingly limited to family and community. The Tatar language reflects this: Finnish Tatar is not anymore “pure” Mishär, but should probably be seen as a separate variation. It contains Finnish loanwords and expressions and specifics which do not exist elsewhere in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. The process of reduced opportunities to speak and use Tatar has intensified since the 1990s with the number of Tatars dwindling in Finland; on the other hand, internet has brought new possibilities to connect internationally.

For young Tatars, an awakening to their own language and culture can engage them in the community. The pressure from the surrounding Finnish society is strong and children at school are often made to feel that Tatar does not have the prestige or the status Finnish, Swedish or English have. When they get in contact with other Tatars or something interesting about language or culture, they usually want to know more.

In 1954, during a political thaw after the death of Stalin, it again became possible to travel from Finland to the Soviet Union. The older generation missed their home villages and talked about them very often. Hamsä Kayenuk told colourful stories about Yangepar and planned visits there, but was afraid he would not get a visa or that he might be arrested; according to him, he had been blacklisted after World War II

and had to spend a few years in Sweden to avoid being sent to the Soviet Union because he had served in the headquarters in Finland during the war. The village was alive for him until the end: “I just close my eyes”, he said, “and I am there [in Yangepar] on the steppe. The vast, open sky, the fog of the morning, the dew on the grass, the fields with cranes...”⁷³

Fazile Nasretidin’s grandmother Fatima went with a tourist group in the 1950s and secretly met her siblings, whom she had not seen for over thirty years. She brought back three boxes of Tatar-language discs and Fazile’s father bought her a player. After that, their home echoed with Tatar music. The children understood that there was more to Tatar language and culture than they had known, although they received Tatar-language education. Then came a turning point: Fazile remembers vividly how she recited the poem by the national poet Abdulla Tukay, *Tugan awıl* ‘Home village’ at the final celebration of the Tatar school year. During the recitation, “something happened in me and I realised how beautiful my mother tongue was”. There and then she became interested in working with and to preserve the language, an occupation she has been actively doing ever since. Her elder sister Feride was interested in the language as well, and this was a model for her. As adults the sisters have been working together for many years, preparing among others educational materials for language teaching.⁷⁴

73 HK, personal communications, 1980s.

74 Interview with FN.

Both Fazile Nasretdin and Gölten Bedretdin participate in community activities since childhood. As activists, they have arranged innumerable events and celebrations for children, adults and pensioners. Both have actively invited guest artists and lecturers from Finland and abroad and organised cultural exchanges and visits. Theatre and music groups or artists, often from Tatarstan, have been invited to perform before the Tatar community and to general audiences. Performers from Finland have also been on tours abroad, before 1939 at least in Estonia, and later among others in the USA and Tatarstan.

Fazile, Gölten and many other women have also been and are involved in publishing of educational materials, books, magazines, CDs, and some are engaged in documentary film production. Gölten has been the president of all associations based in Helsinki; fourteen years in the cultural association FTB, ten years in the sports club *Yolduz*, and presently in the congregation. Her parents were active before her in the same organisations, and her father was for almost two decades chairman for FTB and the congregation respectively. “Maybe subconsciously I follow in my father’s footsteps”, Gölten laughs. “But I also like to do a lot of things and to be with people.” She has never received any money for her activities, everything has been voluntary work, but she is satisfied: “I have given a lot and received a lot, and many people have helped throughout the years.”⁷⁵

75 Interview with GB; see also Bedretdin & Ståhlberg 2021.

Fazile agrees that participating in activities from an early age creates a close bond with the community. As a student, she was elected to the board of FTB which mostly arranged tea evenings at the time, and she became an *apa* 'elder sister' or assistant at the Tatar summer camps. The imams of the congregation taught religion, but the women taught Tatar language: Fazile Nasretidin and Hamide Çaydam taught the mother tongue in summer and winter courses for many years; Feride Nisametdin and Fehime Safiulla taught for some thirty years in the kindergarten, and Derya Samaletdin and Adile Samaletdin have been teaching courses in summer camps.

When Fazile became president of the cultural association FTB, she organised among others a language and literature group which offered possibilities to use and learn more about the Tatar language. Most members used the language mainly with their family and other Tatars, but Fazile says that it is important to create spaces where language users can develop their language and cultural skills in a context where they feel that they belong. Clubs, groups, courses and other activities offer this chance and support those for whom transmission of language and culture to the next generation is a challenge.

I learned a lot from my work in the community about people and responsibility, having to deal with and to solve all kinds of situations. My family, friends, and the support I have received from everyone around me has been extremely valuable.

But it was not always easy to arrange life and time – home, family, work, hobby and community activities. Anyway I learned to balance them.

My children have always been present at rehearsals and preparations and celebrations, which certainly has influenced their development and taught them different skills.

We had so much fun and there was so much love and friendship. Everybody felt it.

Once I was looking for a shoe after a rehearsal. The child of our friends had hidden it so that we would not leave for home, but could go on having fun together!

— Interview with FN

Tatar culture days at Kinnari school, Järvenpää, 2 June 1974.

From the left: Feyzi Samarhan, Gölten Asis, Fazile Nasretdin and Samil Nasretdin. Children were present at all rehearsals, preparations, events, festivals and celebrations. Fazile Nasretdin family album.



Religion

“Islam is inside, there’s no need to show it.”

This opinion was expressed by all interviewees for this book. The Tatars in Finland are officially Sunni Muslims, like other Tatars, and of the Hanafi school, but differ widely both in the interpretation of Islam and practice from many other Muslim groups of the same school. Research on the Tatars in Finland has so far focused chiefly on Islam – Tatars are seen first and foremost as Muslims, a consequence of the debate in society about Islam and migrants since the 1990s, which has led to increased funding for research projects about Muslims.

Several articles and chapters have been written about their Islamic practices, but there are many points that should be added: the Tatars are strongly influenced by the reformist Jadidism, education, folk beliefs, traditions, and last but not least, life in Christianity-influenced surroundings, where not only the calendar contains Christian holidays, but language, culture, rituals and many other aspects also carry the imprint of Christianity, although today’s Finland is to a high degree secularised.

According to the interviewees, if the Tatars in Finland had to choose between believing in religion or scientific facts, they would presently put their faith in science. The question of religiousness has not been studied as yet, but the number

of Tatars visiting the mosque in Helsinki on Fridays is very small; most visitors are recent immigrants. The situation is similar in Järvenpää. The mosque in Järvenpää just north of Helsinki was built in 1943. It was the northernmost mosque in the world until the 1980s, the only wooden mosque, and the only mosque which is a separate building in Finland (the mosque in Helsinki, for instance, is situated in an apartment block). Tatars administer the congregations and they are still ethno-confessional, but attendance in mosques among Tatars is very low.

For many of the older generation in Finland, religion was crucial. They had been brought up with religious rituals and celebrations, and a substantial part of their education was about Islam; in Aktuk, the mullah taught the boys' school. Islam defined the basis for the Tatar communities in Helsinki and Tampere and it is still significant, although among the younger generations it has become more of an ethnic marker. Several Tatars from Finland have made the *hajj* 'pilgrimage' to Mecca and some have done it more than once.

Mishär folk beliefs in Finland have not been researched, and even speaking about them with the interviewees is not easy, as superstition and the use of magic are no longer seen as acceptable. Traditional medical practices such as blowing on the pain, *öşkörü*, Kazan Tatar *öşkerü*, have disappeared in the face of modern medicine. One interviewee mentions that elderly women gathered in homes still during the 1970s to do benevolent white magic, among others for love or to make

positive things happen. This was very secret, because they knew that it did not fit into the values and attitudes of the surrounding society. Now these practices have disappeared, but there might be some scraps of information in personal letters or other documents, or in recordings.

In Yangepar, if a child became “crazy” (had mental issues or stress), an old woman was called in and she smoked out the illness and spoke spells to cure the child. Hamsä Kayenuk mentioned at the end of the 1980s also the use of curses and black magic. One part of him believed, and another – the more scientific part – denied that they had any power. Still, he told stories about people falling ill after being cursed or attacked by black magic: jewellery had disappeared from a house and the owner suspected one person. He denied and she resorted to magic: she killed a frog, took out a special bone and made a package with linseed which was buried at a crossroads at midnight. Believe it or not, Hamsä said – the culprit had a stroke! There were several similar cases in the village he had heard about.

Hamsä also mentioned folk beliefs such as a woman who came in through the gate at New Year meant accidents in the family; a pregnant woman entering in the morning through the gate was a sign of trouble. Some were apparently child lore: if someone stepped on your toes, you had to quickly step back on their toes, or your mother would die.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ HK, unpublished memoir, 1985; letter to Harry Halén at Helsinki University, 30 April 1989.

In the home villages, the women were concerned about keeping religious traditions, sometimes apparently far more than men. Hamsä Kayenuk was circumcised at the late age of eleven in Yangepar, when his grandmother Mädinä realised that his parents in Finland had been careless and omitted the important ritual. It was not carelessness, Hamsä wrote later, but his mother kept pushing it off because she was against it, “she wanted to spare me the pain”. His father respected her opinion. Why Haditshä did not want her son to follow this tradition is not clear, as her elder son was circumcised, but it is possible that she in the meantime had read or heard something that influenced her opinion.⁷⁷

Zeleha Kanykoff praying at home.

8 November 1951.

Kanykoff family album.



⁷⁷ HK, unpublished memoirs, 1980s.

Tatar Islam in the diaspora

Fazile Nasretidin's grandmother Fatima prayed regularly. In the summers she would go out in the garden and ignoring the neighbours, she prayed. The small town of Järvenpää in the 1950s was an international community with Tatars, Russians, Finns, Jews, Swedish-speakers and many other groups, and neighbours generally accepted any religious practices without question. Some Finnish children even learned a little Tatar, such as “come”, “eat” and expressions they often heard from Tatar children and their parents.⁷⁸

Nowadays tolerance is much talked about, but attitudes to other religions are harder both among the Finnish majority and recent immigrants. Traditionally, the Tatar interpretation of Islam includes tolerance to other religions: their attitude could be shortened to “live and let live”. This was stressed by the Jadidists in the nineteenth century, too. In the diaspora, and in dialogue with the surrounding society, the process of reinterpreting Islam and modifying religion and practices to suit the new reality has been accelerated: the Swedish form of “updated” Islam has been called “blue-yellow” (*blågul*) after the Swedish flag colours.⁷⁹ The secularisation and changes in attitudes among Tatars has often occurred parallel with the processes of the societies they live in.

78 Interview with FN.

79 Sweden: Ståhlberg & Svanberg 2016; Svanberg & Westerlund 1999.

Among Tatars worldwide, fanaticism has no place in the religious life. Religion is deeply intertwined with tradition. Imams or mullahs who have studied abroad, and inspired by ideas about a “pure Islam” try to prohibit traditional customs such as cooking, bringing food to the mosque, or discourage women to be present, are reported to have been isolated or banished in Russia.⁸⁰ For the Tatars, the mosque is not only a place for prayer but also for socialising, exchanging news and celebrating. In Finland Tatar community life centres around the mosques, and for instance in Helsinki the mosque is only a part of the premises which also include a kitchen, office, rooms for teaching and meetings, etc.

This custom is not new: in 1935, an Estonian journalist visited a Friday noon prayer in Tallinn: women prayed behind a curtain, among a sewing machine, a samovar and other things. A Tatar woman lived in the prayer hall and she took care of it. The hall was used only once a week for prayer, but there were women sitting and talking on the carpets. When the imam appeared, he joined in the discussion.⁸¹

According to Gölten Bedretdin, president of the Finnish Islamic Congregation, all imams in Finland have advocated equality of women in religion and welcomed their presence and activity. There are certain rules related to Islam, such as imams being exclusively males, and men and women pray separately (women often at the back of the mosque behind a

80 Almazova & Akhunov 2020: 53; Khabibullina 2020: 209 and 2013.

81 Estonia: Abiline & Ringvee 2016: 114.

curtain), but women are present during all celebrations and events, and female leadership has never been questioned.⁸²

Similarly, among the Polish-Lithuanian Tatars, women are community leaders and board members in organisations, but they cannot become or imams or muezzins, and earlier they had no right to elect officials. During the twentieth century, however the situation changed and the women's role in the congregations expanded, and women also became presidents of local Muslim communities. Such changes have happened in Russia, too: at the end of the nineteenth century, women were forbidden to enter the mosque or prayer room during prayer in Saint Petersburg, but male outsiders, even Russians, were allowed.⁸³

Despite the restrictions on females becoming imams, Tatar women have taught religion to girls and other women in Tatar communities for centuries. Traditionally they were the wives and daughters of imams and mullahs, *abistay*, a woman who had received training and was knowledgeable about religious matters and traditions. The role of *abistay* was important for the transmission of religious knowledge to women.⁸⁴ Women

82 Interview with GB.

83 Polish-Lithuanian Tatars: Nalborczyk 2016 and 2009: 58, 60–61, 63; Micinski 2012; Saint Petersburg: Bekkin & Ståhlberg 2016. 71–72; Bekkin 2016: 134.

84 The word *abistay* comes from *abzi(y)* 'grandfather, elder brother' and *totay* (Mishär), *tuta(y)* (Kazan Tatar) 'aunt'. Ähmät'yanov 2001: 8–9, 214. Nowadays the word *totay* is hardly used in Finland, but it was common until the 1990s. Now *apa* 'elder sister' has replaced it for women who are older than the speaker.

can also lead prayers when no men are able to fulfil this task: Polish-Tatar women led prayers and among others funerals after World War II where there was no imam. In Leningrad during Soviet times, and in Estonia, women kept on teaching and transmitting Islam at home, although religious practices were forbidden and persecuted. Women might also perform private ceremonies. In Estonia, a Tatar told the researchers that his mother was one of few people who could read the *Qur'an* in Arabic; his father could not. The *Qur'an* occupied the honorary place in the home.⁸⁵

In Finland, women have been actively involved in religious work on all levels except being imams. The *abistay* tradition does not appear to have reached Finland; by the 1900s, the *abistay* were already being replaced by female teachers with a mainly secular agenda. The Tatar women in Finland had different roles: some were “mother figures” like Zeliha Sali (1876–1965) in Tampere, an organiser and supporter of her husband who was the president of the congregation. Others contributed with their skills, like the dentist Mehrusa Wafin (1911–1984), who was born in Kuldja in East Turkestan, went to school in Istanbul, and studied in Berlin. She was an active speaker and organiser, a polyglot who often performed during events in addition to writing about the Tatar events in Tampere. Others were not that visible, like Leyla Baibulat

85 Polish-Lithuanian Tatars: Nalborczyk 2009: 61–62; Leningrad example: Bekkin 2016: 142 and 2020b: 325; Estonia: see Lepa 2020; example in Abiline & Ringvee 2016: 111.

(1925–2001) who hosted guests of the congregations, visiting scholars and theologians. The closest to an *abistay* in Finland was probably Bibi-Rehana Shakir (1918–1974), daughter of a famous imam and wife of an imam. She had learned Arabic already as a child and often explained religious issues to the Tatar women in Tampere.⁸⁶

Tatars in Finland do not perceive any conflict between the surrounding society and Islam: polygamy is not obligatory in Islam and several Muslim customs are similar to Christian traditions and laws. Few if any Tatar prays five times a day, “because everyone is working or busy, and it is not realistic in this environment”, the interviewees say. Many do not fast during the month of Ramadan either, but that is acceptable in Islam, too.

The visible differences distinguishing the Tatar Muslims from the majority society are food restrictions, and many Tatars also do not celebrate the Christian holidays of Easter, Christmas, etc., mostly national holidays in Finland. Instead, they celebrate each Islamic *bäyräm* ‘feast, festival’ with the Tatar community or other Muslims. Rituals such as *bäbäy çäye* ‘baby tea’ (when women come to look at a new baby), name-giving, weddings, funerals and memorial celebrations after death (the first is forty days later) are carried out partly at home and partly in common spaces of the community, including the Tatar Muslim graveyard. In terms of dress for rituals and celebrations, the Tatars mostly do not differ from

86 Baibulat 2004: 38, 41, 44, 52.

the majority in Finland, but unlike the Finns, at funerals they seldom wear black or muted colours. For the weddings the fashion has followed international trends and most Tatar women have been married in a white dress at least since the 1940s, probably even earlier.⁸⁷



When a baby is born, women traditionally visit the mother and child for a “baby tea”, b b y  y e. They congratulate the mother and get to know the baby. In contrast to the name-giving ceremony, which is performed by the imam and all family members are present, the baby tea is an all-female and less formal occasion. Taking a walk with friends and the baby was also a popular pastime for women. Unidentified women and baby. Fazile Nasretdin family album.

Bringing up children as Muslims is a challenge for the Tatar parents, but as Didar Samaletdin, first female president of the Islamic congregation in Sweden has explained, attending the Christianity lessons at school did her no harm. She grew up at a time when there was no alternative to Christian lessons,

87 Interviews with FN and anonymous; compare Mustanoja 1990: 8–9.

but she was able to see the benefit of learning also about the belief system the Swedish majority society adheres to. Her father was the president of the Islamic congregation and she received religious education at home. As a child she wanted a Christmas tree like her Swedish friends. Didar also invented “Ramadan gifts” for her children, and installed prayer rooms in old people’s homes with immigrant elders.⁸⁸

In Finland, similar situations and solutions have also been experienced and developed in the Tatar families. The Finnish system has over the past century taken several steps towards flexibility: at school, the Muslim children receive alternative food to dishes with pork meat or blood (schools in Finland provide lunch).

They are liberated from attending the obligatory Lutheran Christian classes, as they are supposed to receive religious education in the congregation. The imams in Helsinki have taught religion since at least the 1910s and religion is still an important topic in the weekly school; the other main topic is Tatar language. Those who cannot receive Islamic education because of the geographical distance or other reasons attend school classes where world religions, ethics and philosophy are taught.⁸⁹

88 Ståhlberg & Svanberg 2016: 153; Westman 1983; Samaletdin 1983.

89 Bedretdin & Ståhlberg 2021: 247.

Tatars and other Muslims

Until the 1990s, immigrants were few and far between in Finland. The majority of Muslims were Tatars who practised Islam within the ethnic-confessional community, invisible for Finnish society in general. But the attitudes towards Muslims for the past thirty years have become rougher and tougher, and news about attacks carried out by fanatics have further enforced the image of the “Muslim” being synonymous with “terrorist”. Further, after the arrival of migrants from Muslim countries especially in Africa and Asia, the question of who is actually a Muslim has become difficult. To the image of a Muslim also skin colour, race, wearing a full beard and other outward aspects such as specific behaviour have been added.

Gölten Bedretdin, who in her capacity as president often meets and talks with members of the Helsinki congregation, observes that young Tatars think Islam has “gone wrong” and they avoid telling that they are Muslims. Didar Samaletdin, who for many years explained Islam to the general audience and media in Sweden, has said that she no longer calls herself a Muslim, because the word is “connected with so many negative things”.⁹⁰ “In European Islam”, Gölten Bedretdin says, “tolerance comes first. We have learned to respect other religions. There are so many things we have in common in all faiths, such as do not kill or steal, and be a good person.”

90 Samaletdin 2018.

The Tatars did not take to the immigrants despite initial expectations from the newly arrived to be accepted into the Islamic congregations. The immigrants have divided along ethnic lines, too; the fact that all are Muslims does not mean that cultural differences can be overcome. These immigrants have a completely different background and experiences than the Tatars, and another history. Many come from countries where Islam is the dominant religion, unlike the Tatars whose religion was one of several in the Sergach region.

The Tatars see themselves as a minority and also have this status in Finland, but often the recent immigrants have little understanding about the situation they find themselves in. They request rights and a visibility Tatars would never even dream of asking. Many Tatars find this disrespectful, because they perceive that migrants, including the traditional minority of Tatars, are guests. Hospitality rules and respect require a guest to accept the house rules of the host. “Take off your shoes if that is what people do where you are visiting”, one interviewee says, “and shake the hand someone offers you”. Tolerance towards other religions, views and cultures, and the position of women are further topics Tatars and many recent immigrants disagree about.

Female dress is one of the issues often brought up when media or politicians talk about Muslim women. Tatars do not differ from the majority in Finland in skin colour or dress, and Tatar men are usually clean-shaved. Women have never covered their face in Finland or in the home village, as far as

collective memory goes. Gölten Bedretdin remembers her grandmothers wearing a scarf they knotted at the neck like Finnish women did at the beginning of the twentieth century and far into the 1970s in rural areas. Gölten's mother never covered her hair. All the family always wore modern clothes and adapted to the current fashion trends: "The women were curious and they wanted to try out new things all the time."

Fazile Nasretudin points out that the older women wore their headscarves not only for religious reasons. When they went somewhere, for a visit or to the shop, a headscarf was useful; there was no need to fix the hair. During celebrations and religious events, scarves were used and worn in a specific way. In the village, a headscarf was not a necessity, as Fazile remembers from the talk of her elders. The photographs from various periods show clearly that the headscarves went out of fashion among the Tatar women very soon after their arrival in Finland. Women use scarves in the mosque during prayer nowadays, and some also use for funerals, although the latter habit is disappearing.⁹¹



Many Tatar women in Finland never wore a headscarf even in the 1920s, Zeleha Kanykoff who had been born in Riga among them. She preferred fashionable haircuts and hairstyles. 20 July 1926. Kanykoff family album.

91 Interviews with GB and FN.

In Estonia, women covered their hair and palms during public meetings and social events in the early years, but the Tatars did not wear any specific “ethnic costumes”. During celebrations, the women carried headscarves and jewellery. The only things that showed that Tatars were different from Estonians were the carpets on the walls in the homes. Polish Tatar women around 1900 simply tied up their hair, but did not cover their hair or wear modest clothes.⁹²

The *hijab*, which is not a simple headscarf but a specific headdress, has created vigorous debate worldwide in recent years, but it has never been an issue with Tatar women in the countries around the Baltic Sea. Jadidists like Musa Bigi considered the headdress a symbol of chastity and honour of a woman, but a woman had no obligation to wear the *niqab* covering the face.⁹³

With the arrival of Muslims with other concepts about Islam, the Tatars have been forced to redefine themselves as Muslims. Should they show that they are Muslims like the immigrants? Among many of the immigrants, the *hijab*, using a veil or covering up the female body is part of tradition. All interviewees here agree that showing to the world that you are a Muslim is not in conformity with Islam. They say that being a Muslim is a private choice and Islam should be in the *heart*, and not in the *dress*.

92 Estonia: Abiline & Ringvee 2016: 111 and 116; Polish-Lithuanian Tatars: Nalborczyk 2009: 61.

93 Compare Bekkin 2020b: 276–277; Zaripov & Belyaev 2020: 44; Ibn Fatimah 1933.

Finnish women who marry Muslim migrants often believe that they become “true” Muslims when they “look Muslim”, an interviewee says. “Tatars are not fanatical Muslims. Islam is not a restrictive religion”, another explains: “To try to be separate from society through dress is not a positive thing to do. It causes many negative reactions, but for what purpose? Preferably we should look for common things and keep an open dialogue with the society surrounding us. Everyone has the right to dress as they want, yes, but moving to another country means that you have to change and adapt in any case. You can’t live here [in Finland] and pretend that you are still living at home, wherever that place is. The reality is always different abroad.”

When Muslim converts began wearing what they perceive as “traditional Muslim” dress, the *hijab* caused reactions. In Estonia, Tatars had to start answering questions about what form of religiousness is reasonable, although it might not be what others see as “correct”. They agree with the Tatars in Finland that aggressive behaviour and distinguishable dress are unnecessary. One Estonian Tatar even called the converts “clowns”, because they dress up to show and stress that they have become Muslims.

Polish-Lithuanian Tatars also think that a Muslim is a person who knows the religion. Modest dress is enough for a religious person, but it is an individual choice which does not influence the person’s Muslimness.⁹⁴

94 Lepa 2020: 73 and 77; Nalborczyk 2009: 66.

An interviewee summarises: “Your clothes does not make your religion better or worse. Clothes have nothing to do with Islam. *Only Allah knows if you are a real Muslim.*”



The female Muslim dress has been a much debated topic recently, but the Tatar women in Finland are of the opinion that the clothes do not make a Muslim. Many Tatar women follow fashion trends and are very well dressed.

*Aliye Josipoff and Safiye Ahsän (Ahsen)-Böre in Tampere 1921.
Fazile Nasretidin family album.*

When Finns hear that Gölten Bedretdin is president of the Islamic congregation, they are impressed that she as a woman can hold this position:

But they ask: why do the Tatars not help the new Muslim immigrants integrate? Well, the Tatar recipe is: learn languages, get an education and integrate in the labour market. Be humble and grateful that you have the possibility to live here, and adapt.

Acknowledge that this is your new home country, at least for now, even if you might return when the war is over at home. This country gives you so much: food, schooling, security and freedom.

Accept that Finland is a country with Christian traditions and learn to live with these traditions and customs. If you want to live in a Muslim country with Islamic laws, this is not the right place for you.

Similar opinions are voiced also by Tatars in other countries. When asked if they would live in a country with Islamic laws, Polish Tatar women all answered no, in contrast to most immigrant women who said yes.⁹⁵

Tatar female leaders and activists sometimes get shocked or negative reactions from immigrant Muslims, mostly men who find it difficult to accept the strong position and freedom of the Tatar women. Tatar women never ask for permission to go out and they are working outside the home. “Some men are so limited in their culture that they cannot understand our culture”, one of the interviewees says. “Our understanding of Islam is different than theirs, we see that. But we should be respected, too, just the same as we respect them.”

Another interviewee says that racism and xenophobia does not only exist in Finnish society, but many immigrants are racists, xenophobes and sexists, too: “So few immigrant Muslim women are visible... The men all talk about brotherhood and sisterhood [in Islam]. So why don't they respect us, who they say are their sisters in religion?”⁹⁶

95 Interview with GB; Polish Tatars: Nalborczyk 2009: 67.

96 Interviews; the situation is comparable in other Baltic Sea countries, including Poland: Nalborczyk 2009: 62, 65.

Education and teachers

Schools for girls had been established already in the 1870s in the Kazan region. The daughters of the Tatar nobility studied often in Russian schools and some took initiatives for Tatar girls' schools. In the 1890s, modern teaching methods started to spread in the Tatar communities. The role of the *abistay* or *ostazbikä*, wife or daughter of an imam or mullah, changed. They had taught at home the basics of Islam to girls from the parish, but now they were gradually replaced by a new class of teachers, *mugallima*, *mögallimä*, Mishär *möällimä* 'female teacher'. These women taught also reading, writing, foreign languages and secular topics in special rooms, which were set apart for teaching.

Among the first *abistay* turned *mugallima* were Muhlisa Bubi (born 1869); Margui Muzaffariya (born 1873); Lyabiba Husainiya (born 1880) who opened a girls' school in 1904 in Kazan; Fatyiha Aitova whose school was opened in 1909, and several others.⁹⁷ Many of the teachers were also active writers and contributors and sent letters and articles about women's education to journals. Among their students was

⁹⁷ For a history of female teachers, see Gabdrafikova 2019; Minullina 2006; Galikhuzina 2010: 62; Bubi: Rorlich 1986: 100; Soviet times, Rorlich 1986: 233; Brileva 2012 on the image of female teachers in the journal *Shura*; Murtazina 2020 about the journal *Vakit*; and the press in general about female student exams and raising awareness: Murtazina & Zinnatullina 2019.

Re(i)hane or Rayhana Samaletdin (1893–1975). She studied in the Izh-Bubi school and taught in Aktuk at the girl’s school from around 1910. After arriving in Finland, she taught some courses at least in Järvenpää.⁹⁸

A female teacher received a small salary, in contrast to the *abistay*. Her school was supported by wealthy entrepreneurs who were also the trustees. The *möällimä* taught everyone interested in education, not only girls from the parish. Her background, social or economic status was of no importance, but in the beginning, female teachers often received support from their parents because the salary was too low. They soon started requesting higher wages, although it depended on the local community how much they received in the end.

These teachers changed not only attitudes to women, but also the concept of the “modern” woman, her behaviour and her dress. Girls from all social groups, even poor ones whose perspectives had been bleak, started dreaming of becoming teachers. The educators around 1900 used Western European models of teaching, mainly German, and they also received influences from the Ottoman Empire. Corporal punishment or scolding was banished; instead the pupils were set to work or were refused food for some time.

The Russian authorities liked neither the *abistay* nor the *möällimä*, because both taught without official permission. Traditionalists (Qadimists) criticised the secular teachers and

98 Reihane Samaletdin: interview with FN; Baibulat 2004: 69; see also quotation from a letter to Muhliisa Bubi in Kamaly 2019: 141.

the question of marrying versus acquiring an education and becoming a professional strained relations between parents and daughters. Some girls even ran away to get an education.

Around 1900, the female teachers can be considered to have formed a new group of Tatar secular intelligentsia. In reformist journals and literature, the teachers and their need for advanced training, legal regulations, duties, conditions and behaviour were discussed in laudatory terms. The writers and editors praised them for sacrificing comfort, marriage and personal happiness (the two last perceived as synonyms) for the national cause and progress of the Tatar nation.

The official status of these female teachers was legalised only during World War I. By then, the numbers had increased considerably and they finally had to be integrated into the national school system. Before that only those women who had acquired Russian pedagogical education were registered, but in schools often the actual teacher was someone else.

Tatar female teachers had an impact which reached far outside the Tatar language and culture sphere or education: they contributed to the social and cultural life wherever they taught, and in Turkestan also to the development of medical care. Among the Uygurs in East Turkestan, Tatar women are still today seen as teachers.⁹⁹

In Finland, Mishär children went to Tatar-language school already in the 1910s. From the 1920s the children went to Finnish- or Swedish-language schools and learned both Latin

99 Turkestan: Nasretdinova 2020; personal communication from Uygurs.

and Arabic script, and could read and write Finnish and Tatar as well as foreign languages. The Arabic script remained in use far into the 1990s until the last representatives of the early generations passed away. Arabic script was replaced by Latin script in the Tatar school in Finland in the 1960s, but some books were still published with it.

Hamsä Kayenuk, who went to the mullah's boys' school in Aktuk at least from 1917 until his return to Finland in 1921, remembered it as a strict one. He learned to read and write and received a religious education. Hamsä had already started school in Helsinki at age seven in 1916; supposedly his elder siblings also went to the school. A document dated on 1 May 1917 contains grades for his first school year.



School grades for Hamsä Kanykoff, 1 May 1917, signed by Weli-Ahmed Hakim.

Hamsä passed all exams for the first grade and was supposed to continue in the autumn, but after his mother died in February 1917, his father took the decision to send the children to the home village, where Hamsä went to the mullah's school.

Kanykoff family archive.

The document was signed by teacher Weli-Ahmed Hakim (1882–1970; imam in Helsinki 1914–1962), who taught the *Helsingfors (Helsinki) Islamic School*. The form is printed in Kazan and filled in by the teacher after examinations. Hamsä studied reading in “Turkish”, calligraphy, spelling, arithmetic (adding and subtracting) and ethics.¹⁰⁰

In 1948, a Tatar school was established in Helsinki, *Türk Halık Mektebi* ‘Turkish Elementary School’, and in the 1950s it received legal status. The post-war generations were large and there could be up to twenty pupils in one class. After this elementary school the children would continue in Finnish schools.

In 1969 the school was closed because of a lack of pupils, and since then a weekend school operates in Helsinki. Once a week children are taught Tatar language and Islamic religion. The Tatar children go to ordinary school in Finland from age seven and also start the Tatar school. Education has been provided for children and adults in Tampere during the past century, too. Many teachers in these schools and in the yearly summer camps for Tatar children and teenagers were and are women.¹⁰¹

Not all children had the possibility to visit the school in Helsinki and many went to “ordinary” Finnish- or Swedish-language school. Hamsä Kayenuk claimed that he was the

100 HK, unpublished memoirs, 1980s and 1990; Bedretdin & Stahlberg 2021: 261.

101 See Bedretdin & Stahlberg 2021: 246–250.

first Tatar in Finland who finished gymnasium and became a university student. His years at school were difficult, he was bullied by his Finnish schoolmates and had to fight his way through, but he was proud of his education and pushed his daughters to study and get a university education. This was common among Tatar parents in Finland. Gölten Bedretdin remembers: “We were told to get an education and to set goals in life, and to find a job and a husband.”¹⁰²

Upbringing was strict, but children were encouraged to learn, and parents learned from the children. Fazile’s mother, who carried the responsibility for the upbringing especially during World War II, learned many things from her children. “She put strict limits, but was very tolerant and interested in everything we did. She never poked into our things or private matters. We could participate in Finnish activities, clubs and sports, play baseball in the local club and go to their summer camps.” When Fazile went abroad as a young trainee, her mother gave her only some advice about being careful with boys, but “often we children knew without saying what was expected of us”.¹⁰³

Before going to the Finnish school, according to memories of siblings Feride, Feyzi and Fazile, the children were told to behave and remember that they were representatives not only of their family but of the whole Tatar community. Living in

102 HK, unpublished memoirs, 1980s; interview with GB; see Ståhlberg 2006.

103 Interview with FN.

Järvenpää north of Helsinki, they went to the local mosque for Tatar language and religious education on weekends, in addition to going to school during the week. “We felt it was unfair”, they remembered later, “but now we understand how important it was for us to develop self-confidence and our identity as Tatars”.¹⁰⁴

Gölten Bedretdin’s mother was born in Terijoki in Karelia (now Zelenogorsk in Russia) in 1916. At sixteen she went to Tampere for a course in bookkeeping. Her family lived in a multilingual environment and engaged a German teacher, a Russian piano teacher and other teachers for the education of the children; Gölten’s mother who was the oldest of eight had many of teachers, and she knew besides Tatar also Swedish, English, German and Russian. Tatar and Turkish scholars came to Finland to teach language, culture and other topics, and there were regularly foreign guests visiting the family.

Gölten’s maternal grandmother, who had married at an early age in Aktuk, could read and write. She used many Russian words when speaking. Yet the wife of one of her brothers was illiterate. During a visit this came as a shock to the culturally active family in Terijoki.¹⁰⁵

104 Nasretidin et al. 2021; interview with FN; HK, unpublished memoirs, 1980s.

105 Interview with GB.



A mixed class with boys and girls and guest teachers Alimcan Idris (middle with a tie, 1887–1959) and beside him Gibadulla Murtasin (1895–1968). Terijoki, 1929. Fazile Nasretidin family album.

Literacy

Many of the Mishär women who came to Finland could read and write before 1900. Hamsä Kayenuk's mother Haditshä (born in 1880) had received a home education in reading and writing from a private teacher called Märyam who was only five or six years older than her pupil. Hamsä's grandfather Ainetdin was rich and could afford to pay a teacher for his daughters. Hamsä's step-grandmother Mädinä had promised Haditshä's mother that her girls would get an education. Haditshä's maternal grandfather Seyfulla knew Russian, too, and he had paid for his daughter's education in the 1860s, so Haditshä was at least the second generation of women who

could read. The teacher Märyäm came from a rich family and had been educated probably by a mullah's daughter or other *abistay*. Before the girls' school was established in Aktuk around 1910, education for girls was carried out privately in homes and after 1905 also on a larger scale with more pupils. Teacher Märyam lived until old age in Finland.

When little Hafisä died in 1915, Haditshä wrote with the assistance of six-year-old Hamsä an epitaph on the tomb. Hamsä was very proud of his mother and told all his friends that she could read and write. An old man in the village did not believe him and even wanted to beat him up when he persisted in "telling lies". They went to Haditshä who read a text before them, and the man said that he had never heard or seen anything like that – a woman reading!

The women who were illiterate needed the help of their husbands or family members, children or friends to receive information from written sources or write letters. The exact amount of literate Mishär men and women before 1917 is difficult to assess, but Hamsä remembered that many women received postcards and letters from male relatives at the front during World War I. They could read and answer them. The addresses on the envelopes were in Russian, but in Yangepar there were several people who could read and write Russian. In some neighbouring villages they only knew Mishär.

The journal *Niva* '(Grain)field' (1869–1918) and books in Russian were being read in Yangepar; the Kanykoff family subscribed to *Niva*, and Haditshä read *Shura*, *Vakit*, women's

magazine *Söyembikä* and other journals which she circulated among her friends. It is important to note that they were not only literate, that is they could read mechanically, decode and understand a text, but they were avid and active readers of journals and books.¹⁰⁶

Fazile Nasretidin's grandmother Fatima learned to read in Aktuk; she told that the girls were grateful that they had the chance to go to school. The teacher in her childhood was the wife of the mullah; Fatima was already an adult in the 1910s. Lessons were learned by heart and the Arabic letters were taught like songs: the letter 't' and its initial, middle and final forms were chanted as "tään-tiin-töön". "We children found this very funny", Fazile remembers. Fatima *äbäy* read books to her grandchildren and taught *sörä* (Kazan Tatar *sürä*) or *surahs* from the *Qur'an*. She used to read tattered books in Arabic script aloud in a low voice.



Fazile's grandmother Fatima was a fearless woman with many skills, from taking care of poultry to selling goods, and she had much knowledge of Tatar culture and language. She learned to read in the Arabic script but never to write, so her friends and grandchildren wrote letters for her. Fazile Nasretidin family album.

106 HK, unpublished memoirs, 1980s, and personal communications.

Fatima did not learn to write; her parents were afraid that she would be tempted to write letters to boys. Still, she kept up a lively correspondence with the help of her friend. This friend had taught herself to read and write, and she read both newspapers and books. In the 1950s, Fazile saw her read newspapers in Finnish. She followed political events, too, apparently having acquired a large amount of passive Finnish vocabulary. When Fazile and her siblings were old enough to write, Fatima dictated her letters to them “in high speed, and we had the hard task to try to keep up with her”. They wrote in the Arabic script they learned in the Tatar-language school.

Sports

One big difference between the teaching in the village and the education the children received in Finland is the inclusion of sports. Attention was increasingly paid to healthy lifestyles already at the beginning of the twentieth century in Finland, but became more common after World War II. Children were encouraged to do more sports and mothers to prepare healthy food. This influenced also the Tatars: the heavy village fare with fats, sugar, salt and flour, was updated in Finland with vegetables, salads and fruit.

*Tatar girls skiing, 28 February 1948.
Kanykoff family album.*



The sports association *Yolduz* ‘Star’ includes since it was founded in 1945 girls and women. Many have been actively engaged in sports both in Tatar and Finnish for decades.¹⁰⁷

Fazile and her siblings had a lot of space for all kinds of games and sports in Järvenpää. Cousins and neighbours with many children lived nearby, so there was never any lack of participants for games. They played and competed in many sports, baseball, table tennis, hiding games, etc. If there were any quarrels, the children cleared it up between themselves. Fazile’s father Nuri or “Nurkka”, Finnish ‘Corner’, supported all kinds of sports and brought home equipment both for the summer and winter sports.

There were always an audience for sports and the children also went to watch competitions elsewhere. The boys played baseball in the local organisations. During the summer, the children went swimming in the nearby lake or river. No parents were needed; the children took care of themselves, even managing a dangerous railroad crossing. In the winter, they went out skiing in the fields and forest directly from the house. They also skated, the girls training figure skating and the boys playing hockey. On Wednesdays and Saturdays the skate rink resounded with music and couples “danced” on skates to the music.¹⁰⁸

107 Interview with Feride Nisametdin, 2018; Bedretin & Stahlberg 2021: 253.

108 Nasretin et al. 2021.

Literature and music

The image of the Tatar woman in literature changed in the nineteenth century from romantic beauty, fidelity and love, to family, traditions and a character. Questions like happiness, relationships and different social roles of women appeared in the 1900s. Most Tatar literature before the 1920s was written by men and the images of women are also defined by male writers. With modernism entering literature, the hardships of women, working women, rejection of traditions, motherhood, and mistakes became the mainstream and main topics both in the Soviet Union and Turkey.¹⁰⁹

In Finland, the development of Tatar literature went into another direction. The diaspora situation, the disruption of the common dimension, the lost homes, families, friends and trade partners, and the political events which put an end to publications from Kazan and other regions, forced the Tatars to choose a new path, which proved to be highly productive. To map out literary activities of Tatars in the diaspora would require a separate volume, however: Tatars in the Baltic Sea region, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany and Sweden; Turkey, Japan, Manchuria, Turkestan, USA, Australia and many others have abundantly published both books and other materials. This vast literature is still mostly awaiting its researchers.

109 Yildyrym 2015: 78–79.

Publishing in Finland began in the 1920s. Books, booklets and brochures, journals and magazines have appeared. Many of the writers are women, and especially those who produce educational materials are often teachers and educators. The pedagogical materials have mostly been in use in the Tatar weekend school and courses, and never made into “proper” books. They are mostly circulated as brochures during events, summer camps and courses.¹¹⁰

Tatar meetings often have a topic – literature, culture, language or other, and the topic of the day is discussed over tea and something to eat. From the left Naimä Safiulla, Fäyruza Nasretdin, Bänät Hisametdin, Äshaf Alkara in the 1950s. Fazile Nasretdin family album.



Some women assisted their husbands, such as the prolific writer Hasan Hamidulla’s (1900–1988) wife Gülsüm. They published together a first facsimile *Qur’an* edition in Finland in 1943 and again in 1969. Hamidulla wrote several memoirs and memories about Aktuk, including its history, and about

110 For details on Tatar publishing activities in Finland, see Halén 1979 and 1996; Bedretdin 2021a; for recent research, see Bedretdin 2021 for Finland; Atik 2021 for Australia; Iqbal 2021 about Estonian educational materials.

his own life, poetry and prose in several genres, and religious literature. In his writings the exile aspect is clearly visible. Another active writer from the early period was Sadri Hamid (1905–1987), who also focused on history, religion, memory and language.¹¹¹

Women have been active in writing about the past as well: Safiye Ahsen Böre (1899–1973), the wife of the trader and activist Zinnetulla Ahsen Böre (1886–1945), edited and published in 1945 letters and documents relating to the Saint Petersburg imam Lütfi İshaki, who was smuggled over the border to Finland in 1922. She also funded the publication of religious literature and wrote an article about the oppressed Turkic peoples in the Soviet Union in 1941. More recently, Muazzez Baibulat's monumental three-lingual work (Tatar, Finnish, English) describes the Tatar community in Tampere and contains many references to female activists.¹¹²

Kadriye Bedretdin is a scholar who has written, gathered and published writings about Tatars in Finland, among them an anthology about the Tatars, an article about Tatar literary activities, and documentary work about the life and writings of Hasan Hamidulla in Finnish. She has also translated Tatar-language texts for a multicultural and multilingual reader, *Maailma kotona* 'World at home', which contains migrant and minority literature from Finland.¹¹³

111 Bedretdin 2021a and 2021b. A first Finnish translation from English of the *Qur'an* was published by Zinnetullah Ahsen Böre in 1942.

112 Baibulat 2004.

113 Bedretdin 2011, 2021a and 2021b; Domokos et al. 2016.

Poetry is a popular genre among both male and female writers. Among the female poets is Gevher (Gäühär) Tuganay (1911–1998), who wrote about nature but also occasional and festive poetry for gifts or events. Her poems were published in 1970 in a two-part volume, *Şigir mäğmuası* 1–2 ‘Poetry collection’. Saniye Iffet Kadiri (1899–1957), wife of the Jadidist activist and intellectual Zakir Kadyri (Kadiri), wrote poetry and plays for the amateur theatre ensembles, including *Tormoş közgeşe*, ‘Life’s mirror’ in 1937.¹¹⁴

Many women have been actively writing, translating and editing materials about Tatar language, culture and traditions for educational purposes. Fazile Nasretdin, Hamide Çaydam, Feride Nisametdin, Derya Samaletdin, Adile Samaletdin, Saynur İmaditdin, Gölten Bedretdin and several others have created materials since the 1970s, adapted, translated and published Tatar poetry, fairy tales, songs and prose into or from Tatar into Finnish. Since the 2000s also English is often added.

Saniye Iffet Kadiri edited the second edition of the reader *Uqu Kitäbi* (1938). Feride Biçuri (Wahlroos) collected and translated mostly Turkish texts for the reader *Uku kitabı* 1–3 (1969–1970), and also wrote an essay on the Kazan Turks (Tatars) in 1969 for use in the summer camps.¹¹⁵ Derya Samaletdin has collected and published recipes in the Tatar- and Finnish-language culinary works *Milli aşlarımız* (2013),

114 Tuganay 1970; Kadiri 1937.

115 Biçuri 1969.

Perinneruokiamme (2014) ‘Our traditional foods’. Women have been or are editors of the magazine *Mähallä Habärläre* ‘Community news’ and contribute with articles and learning materials.¹¹⁶

Many Tatar women are musical and play musical instruments. Piano players accompany often the singing during celebrations or when teaching Tatar songs. Undated photograph. Kanykoff family album.



Tatar fairy tales and songs have been published as books, drama, CDs and DVDs. The first music disc with folk songs by the singer Hamid Hairedin was published probably in the 1940s (no date), and choir singing in the 1980s. In 1980 and 2000 appeared two large collections with Tatar songs (lyrics and sheet music), *Bızniñ cırlar* ‘Our songs’ I and II, edited by Şuket Bikmohammetov, Ölken Ali, Fehime Safiulla and Hamide Çaydam. The *Başkarma* group with female singers Dina Aziz and Betül Hairetdin introduced Tatar pop and rock in Finland. It produced a first disc in 1991 and in 2002 a double CD including all songs, *Mişär Tatar*. The group has also been on tours abroad.¹¹⁷

116 Samaletdin 2013, 2014; *Mähallä Habärläre*: <http://tatar.fi/en/mh-2/>

117 Bikmohammetov et al. 1980, 2000; *Başkarma* 2002.

Abdulla Tukay's story *Su anası* 'The comb of the water fairy', edited by Fazile Nasretdin and Feride Nisametdin, was published in Tatar and Finnish with a CD in 2009. Fazile and Feride have also edited children's books and published a few issues of a children's magazine in 1981. The Yabalak group, where Raif Hairulla and Fazile Nasretdin are active, issued in 2007 a hugely popular children's CD with songs and lyrics, *Äylän bäylän*. Finnish teachers have told that they sometimes use the CD in kindergartens and all children learn the songs and sing together in Tatar. The Yabalak group also keeps an online dictionary.¹¹⁸

The Tatars in Finland value highly their language and culture, and parents want to transmit their knowledge to the children. The role of the mother is acknowledged as very important in the upbringing. Unidentified ladies with girl. Fazile Nasretdin family album.



Fazile Nasretdin has also taken the initiative for a “baby box” for young parents. It was launched at an event for mixed couples. When a baby is born, the Finnish state donates a box with useful materials, clothes and other things. Tatar parents receive from the Helsinki congregation the *Sabıylar sandığı* containing materials such as music, children's literature, fairy

118 Nasretdin et al. 2009; Yabalak 2007; Yabalak dictionary.

tales, memory games and religious materials which facilitate the transmission of language, culture and religion. The Tatar parents have received this knowledge themselves as children, and with the baby box the early teaching of Tatar language and culture is supported.¹¹⁹

Since 2020, Fazile Nasretidin has translated into Tatar (Latin and Cyrillic script) Easy to Read books, that is books which are in Easy Language, by Sabira Stahlberg. They are the first in the world in Tatar. The goal is to provide children and youth with modern literature which contains references to their context, the Finnish and global environments, and present-day topics they encounter in school or at home, such as computers, bullying or ecology.¹²⁰

Fazile Nasretidin has also written extensively Tatar- and multilingual haiku poetry since 2018. The first haiku book in Tatar globally, *Ninety-nine haiku*, was published in the spring of 2022 with Latin and Cyrillic script in Tatar, and English translations by Fazile Nasretidin and Sabira Stahlberg. In this newest project also the youngest generation of Tatars who is still at school was involved: Derya Nasretidin illustrated the book.¹²¹

Among present-day publishers, mainly the organisations and congregations publish, but there is a multilingual online publisher, *Aybagar*, which since 2022 focuses on materials

119 Interview with FN; see also Bedretdin & Stahlberg 2021: 244

120 Stahlberg 2020–2022.

121 Nasretidin 2022.

and books by and about the Tatar diaspora, in Tatar (Latin and Cyrillic scripts), English and Russian.¹²²

To the Tatar literature in Finland written by women should be added the partly Tatar-language works of Sabira Stahlberg, specifically the novel *Molnvandraren* in Swedish, in Finnish *Pilvivaeltaja* ‘Cloud Wanderer’, which tells a story about the Burtas (alias for Tatars) who move to Finland. Sabira also uses Tatar language in her mixed-language poetry, *Polyglotta Sabirica* (2015) and *Wan Sun* (2021), and she translates together with Fazile Nasretdin haiku poems for the website *Haiku Colorit*.¹²³

Today there are several young Tatars who do not speak the language or do not trust themselves to write in Tatar. The future will show what kind of literature they will create.

*Illustration by Derya Nasretdin
for Fazile Nasretdin’s book
Tugan-tukiz haiku.
Туксан тугыз хайку.
Ninety-nine haiku (2022).*



122 Aybagar: <https://aybagar.eu>

123 Stahlberg 2006, 2015 and 2021; Haiku Colorit:
<https://haiku.coloritrf.eu>

Epilogue: Dialogue

It is normal to live like we do.

Anonymous interviewee

This book about visible and invisible Tatar women in Finland is neither smooth nor systematic, just like the life and road of the women for the past 150 years. From a context where the women were part of an extended family unit, in which the members depended on each other for support and survival, the family in the diaspora situation in Finland transformed into a small core family. The interviewees for this book all see Tatar women as normal, that is like women in Finland in general. But the Tatar women have come a long way, and this book can only scratch on the surface. There are many more stories to tell and details to discover.

In Hamsä Kayenuk's childhood in Yangepar, gender roles were clear but not completely separated: women cooked and took care of home and family, while the men were peddling or working in the fields. A typical man of his generation, he knew four recipes, minced meat-filled pastry *pärämäts*, meat soup *shorba*, cooked whole buckwheat grains or *botka*, and *plau* (*pılau*), rice-carrot-meat pilaf. Hamsä oscillated like many others of the early generations in Finland between the village and the urban setting, as well as between tradition and

modernism, requiring his daughters to get an education (all of them did) but telling them to marry only Tatars or at least Muslims (none of them did). He could analyse and admire the situation and the freedom of women in Finland, marrying two of them, but when it came to his own wife and children, traditions, old family models and emotions often prevailed over rational thinking.

The women also have this double role between “tradition” and “progress”: they transmit traditions, but at the same time they are modern and equal. The Tatars have followed largely changes in Finnish society, but they created their own models and discovered their own solutions through the dialogue with the surrounding society, utilising their background, religious and traditional beliefs, values and attitudes – and naturally through trial and error, and through communication within the communities in Finland.

The gender roles have changed from the village to the city over the generations: in Finland, a couple or a woman alone could own a company in the mid-1900s. Gölten Bedretdin’s father did not cook, but he liked to sit in the kitchen and talk with his wife while she was preparing dinner. Nowadays men also cook and take care of the children and it depends on the work, schedules, available time and personal interests who takes responsibility or carries out specific tasks in the home.

The dynamics between the spouses is also important to take into account: in Gölten’s home her father was the active, outgoing person, but he always asked for her mother’s advice

and opinion. If their opinions differed, her decision was the final one, and although he was a little angry, he followed it.¹²⁴

In Fazile Nasretidin's view, it is difficult to generalise the gender roles among the Tatars in Finland. The role of the women varies in the families, and the dynamics of the family can vary with time. In the first generations, the prevalent model was that women took care of the home. Remnants of this still exist not only among Tatars; Finnish women still work more than men at home. Also in the Tatar community, mostly women take care of children's language and culture education in the kindergarten and school, and the women are cooking for events.

Cooking in the Kanykoff kitchen before the time of electric or gas stoves and ovens. Women often helped each other when there were celebrations or guests coming.



Upper row 4 June 1950, below left 4 April 1944, and right 15 June 1950.



Kanykoff family album.

124 Interview with GB.

“Finland has been a good country to grow in as a girl, wife and grandmother”, Fazile says. Her grandchildren are the fifth generation of Tatars in Finland, and they have even more freedom to choose how they want to live. But they have fewer cousins and the challenge of keeping up the language and culture is becoming increasingly difficult.¹²⁵

The seeds for adaptation and modernisation were sown in fruitful soil long before the reformist movement reached the Mishär villages near Sergach. They affected the position of the women. The Russian state had already created conditions for a reinterpretation of Islam and possibilities for women to stand up for their rights. The Mishärs moved to towns from their villages, but not quite: urbanisation began in Finland in the 1890s at a larger scale, but by then the Mishärs already lived and worked in towns since several decades. The world they came to was not that different from the one they left: the Grand Duchy of Finland was strongly influenced by events, politics and the social and economic situation in Russia. Also, the Mishärs had ample time to adapt and learn between the 1860s and 1920s how Finland functioned.

Further, exposure to new knowledge and habits was there: the Mishärs and the inhabitants in Finland were both familiar not only with modern attitudes to education but also shared the idea that girls should be educated. Literacy and the active reading habits were an important factor contributing to a fast and fairly smooth cultural and social adaptation.

125 Interview with FN.

An additional aspect is that the Mishärs went from one minority situation to another, and never had any pretences or ambition that they would ever be anything else; this reduced pressure and expectations on performance and status in the society in Finland.

In discussions about Tatar adaptation to Finland, not only Jadidism but the deeper historical roots of Tatar culture and education, and the Mishärs' dialogue with the multicultural society in the Russian Empire, encountered during business trips and work stays in cities and towns, and the multicultural area their home villages were located in, should be taken into account. They carried all this background to Finland, where the society before independence was multicultural, too. Yet from the 1930s, nationalist campaigns were implemented and the Tatars almost completely disappeared from view, with a long period of less visibility than in the 1920s or after the 1990s.

The Tatars did not stop the development, however, and they never closed any doors against the society; instead, they developed strategies to cope with influences and pressures coming from the majority. The women participated actively in changes and transformations. It was a patriarchal society that the Mishärs carried with them to Finland, but the power structures were already around 1900 mixed, as the women had to cope without the men in the villages. From powerful mothers and older women, one of the main changes is that now all women feel powerful and equal.

There are regional differences between the communities in Finland which must be considered: Helsinki, Järvenpää and Tampere were the most compact settlements, but there were also groups in Turku / Åbo, Rauma / Raumo, and Viborg / Viipuri / Vyborg, and other places in Karelia like Terijoki, lost to the Soviet Union after World War II. Further, the Tatar diaspora in Finland should be studied in comparison with other Tatars in the Baltic Sea region, including Russia and the Soviet Union, and in the larger context of the global Tatar diaspora and Tatarstan, and even further, the vast Turkic world, including the Ottoman Empire and Turkey.

Besides the Turkic world also neighbours are important for the understanding of the Mishär community in Finland: the Finno-Ugric Mordvinians and Mari, connections with the Turkic-speaking Chuvash, Russian society and the impact of the state, and the Finnish society and state. The contexts can contribute much to the understanding of the visibility and the invisibility of Tatar women, their roles and input, much more than to focus only on classification and definitions, or trying to fit the Tatars into specific, often too limited scientific Western categories. The general policies of the states where Tatars live should also be taken into account; only looking for the minority rights is a too narrow view.¹²⁶

126 Limitation of minority policies, İsmail 2013: 7.

Crossing the borders

There are still lots of open questions about Tatar women – both in Finland and elsewhere. An important issue is how much Western influences, partly coming directly and partly filtered through Russian channels, changed the Tatar sphere before 1917, and if the Tatars could be called the “Protestants of the East” because of the reformist movement, and how this affected the position of the women. One thing is certain: after the border was closed and there was no return, the Mishärs’ social, political and economic parameters began to move in a new direction. How influenced by Finnish society they have become can be seen in their value systems, attitudes, views and understanding about themselves and the world, and it becomes especially visible in their attitudes to new Muslim immigrants.

Further, some immediately discernible indicators such as the quick integration already in the first decades after 1917, acquisition and interest in formal education, strategies for transmission of and collecting knowledge both within and outside the Tatar sphere, the huge literary and publication activities in comparison to the small size of the minority, and the creation of a long-term collective memory point to the fact that within one or two generations, all were literate. This high literacy rate not only facilitated their adaptation to the Finnish society and its labour market, but still helps to keep

up the Tatar language, culture and other aspects of Tatariness more than a century later. Education is not only a way to integrate, find a job and survive as a minority, but a value in itself and a regular element in life for the Tatars, and it can be sought elsewhere if the education in Finland is felt to be insufficient.¹²⁷

Education and literacy have significantly contributed to a preservation of the Tatar language and culture, not only in Finland, but also elsewhere in the Tatar diaspora. Literacy and education levels are high among Tatars.¹²⁸ “Where there are Tatars, there are schools teaching language and culture, all in a similar way, and there are many female teachers”, one interviewee for this book says: “Most Tatars are proud of their heritage, literature, culture and other achievements.”

Fazile Nasretidin agrees: her paternal grandmother Fatima was “never ashamed to speak her own language – she was in fact very proud of it”. Interviewees mention that they wonder why immigrant mothers speak in public in broken Finnish, instead of talking in their “own wonderful mother tongue” to their children.¹²⁹

Not giving the family language to the children affects their language development and they are limited by the lack of an emotional language. This creates a distance between parents

127 Interviews; compare Wafin 2008 and Bedretdin 2011: 259–261 about Tatar identity; Laitinen 1992 about Aynur Nisametdin, who went to Kazan to study Tatar language and culture in the 1990s.

128 Compare special issue of *Journal of Endangered Languages* 2021.

129 Interview with FN and anonymous.

and children, and later the children who have been denied their parents' language often feel they are not complete; something is missing. Even if they look for their roots and later learn the language, it is not the same. They often remain outside the community as well.

To avoid speaking in a “foreign” language is common in Finland in public places, a consequence of the harsh social climate. Negative attitudes against other languages spoken in public (except English), even the second official language of Swedish, is still strong, although the numbers of immigrants has grown in recent years. This does however not deter Tatars from talking in their own language and cross the social and cultural borders in public spaces, although there are cases of Tatars being attacked for speaking Tatar, even as close to the present day as the 1980s.



Tatar women crossed borders among others by talking Tatar publicly, travelling – since the 1950s, they journeyed both east and west, to both sides of the Iron Curtain, and some crossed the social borders and married outside the Tatar community. Äminä (Emine) Soukkan and Halidä Luhtinen (born Nisametdin) in Stockholm in the 1950s. Fazile Nasretdin family album.

How did the high literacy rate affect the Mishär migrants? Had they not by the end of the nineteenth century already turned WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) to at least some degree? When the Tatars came to Finland, many letters were not there yet: they were not Western (but they were more “western” than Tatars living in rural areas with less contact to cities); they were literate, but few had more education than elementary school; they were not industrialised, as most worked as traders or farmers; many were rich in comparison with others from the villages, but society as a whole in their villages was not rich; and the question of democracy must be defined: the state they lived in, Russia, was not what could be called democratic, neither was the decision-making in the family or the villages. Male authority was common and the opinions of elders respected.

Literacy rates grew steadily in Europe and North America since the reformation movements began in the sixteenth century. They influenced not just the brains of the people, but also the development of the societies. Experience collected in Western Europe over the centuries reached the Tatars on a larger scale in the nineteenth century through the press and literature, mostly produced by men, but the female teachers contributed significantly. The methods and contents of the education were modernised; not only religious beliefs and practices, but social norms, culture, thinking and decision-making were transformed through their activities. According to Joseph Henrich, culture and literacy trigger changes in the

psychology of humans. Literacy in the West has induced a more analytical thinking, which in turn has had far-reaching consequences for the creation of longer memory, formal education, publishing and distribution of knowledge. This, he argues, has made the Westerners “psychologically unusual” or WEIRD.¹³⁰

In most research, the WEIRD world is the measurement against which all are compared, but that is to distort facts and the picture: Tatar women were not all as miserable as the Jadidist writers (and several after them) would make out; the reality was far more complex. In some aspects, Tatar Muslim women actually had more rights than many Christian women in Europe in the nineteenth century.

A comparison between how the Tatar men and women adapted to Finland would be interesting, as there are some differences. The men were much more outside the home in the first generation, but already in the second generation girls went out alongside the boys, for education, with Tatar and non-Tatar friends, and for all kinds of events and activities both within and outside the Tatar community. Family has played and play an important role, and marriage, choosing a spouse and the children are significant for both women and men, but future research should also try to map out more about the professional life, networks, personal choices and other aspects of Tatar women’s lives.

130 See Henrich 2020: 15–27.



Girls' party in the 1940s, all dressed up in nylon stockings and official clothes. The Tatar strategies in Finland consisted among others of adapting to the surrounding society on many levels, including dress, but to keep the essential language, culture and religion. For the Tatars in Finland, there is no conflict between these two directions.

Fazile Nasretidin family album.

On the language level, it would be interesting to explore the gender terminology, symbolism and characteristics of women and men on the lexical, semantic and semiotic levels. A study based on dictionaries shows that a woman's character, aspect, appearance, moral behaviour, role in society and attitude to work are the topics Tatar-speakers traditionally look for in a woman. Among her advantages are youth, colour, slimness, thin waist, beauty, attractiveness, skin and eye colours – and kindness.

Shortcomings are old age, untidy hair, unattractiveness, masculinity, and in her character insensitivity, cruelty, using her beauty (vamp), loose morals, inexperience, extravagance, stupidity and lack of skills. Professional women are highly appreciated, but a woman's worth is still defined in relation to her husband: women who care too little or too much about their men are criticised. For men, the image of a brave and proud warrior-protector is prevalent. Such studies could be carried further and include more levels of language.¹³¹

Studying the Tatars only as Muslims might receive more research funding, but it is to look at one side only. Today the Tatars are according to the interviewees' subjective estimates as (little) religious as the Finns. For many younger Tatars the religious celebrations are chiefly traditions. This opens up questions about memory – whom do the memories of the past serve now?

The roles of women and men, as they are remembered and documented in different periods, should be mapped out in greater detail than is possible here, through more materials such as interviews, diaries, letters, recordings etc. More materials from different parts of Finland could also clarify the social processes, factors which influence the Tatar communities and their attitude changes. Studying the Tatars can contribute much to both memory and gender studies, and also to many other scientific fields.

131 Makhmudova 2008: 208–211; see also Soltanakhmatovna 2012.

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Interviews

Interviews were carried out over an extended period of time during 2021 and 2022. They included personal talks, e-mails and text messages as well as written reminiscences.

FN Fazile Nasretidin

GB Gölten Bedretidin

Anonymous interviewees

Feride Nisametdin, 2018

HK Hamsä Kayenuk, personal communications,
unpublished memoirs and letters, 1980s–1990

Photographs and archives

The identified persons in the photographs are either deceased or have permitted publication. Efforts have been made to identify all, but in some cases it has been impossible.

Fazile Nasretidin family album

Kanykoff family album

Kanykoff family archive

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Mishär Tatar traders migrated to Finland over 150 years ago. Soon they brought also their families from the home villages. Traditionally, women took care of family and home, but many were educated and some created companies of their own. Several women became prominent and visible members of the Tatar community. Other women remained in the background, but without their input neither businesses nor the community would have flourished.

This book documents for the first time the role and position of Tatar women in Finland.



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