

Tehlikedeki Diller Dergisi Journal of Endangered Languages

e-ISSN 2148-130X

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This article appears in: *Journal of Endangered Languages*, Volume 11, Issue 19, Summer 2021
Tatar Language Preservation Strategies and Innovative Practices. Guest Editor: Sabira Stahlberg

Cite this article:

Atik, Kubilay (2021). The Tatar community and Tatar language education in Australia. Sabira Stahlberg (ed.), *Journal of Endangered Languages* 19, Vol. 11: Tatar language preservation strategies and innovative practices. Ankara: 309–319.

Link to this article: <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/tdd>

This electronic version was first published in July 2021.



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The Tatar community and Tatar language education in Australia

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ACTIVITIES

Abstract: *The Tatar community in Australia is probably one of the newest among the Tatar diaspora groups in the world. The number of its members is estimated to be around 700, yet the community is very active and vigorous. The Tatars live mainly in Adelaide followed by Sydney. This article gives a general overview of the history, migration issues and current situation of the Tatar community in Australia. It also discusses the literary and educational activities related to the Tatar language and culture organised both by younger and older members of the community. The article is based chiefly on resources provided by the Tatar community in Australia, personal communications and the very few scholarly works available on the topic. As research on this community is scarce, this article hopes to inspire more interest in the interesting diaspora group and its activities.*

Keywords: *Tatars, Australia, Tatar diaspora, education, migration, Tatar literature*

Avustralya'da Tatar toplumu ve Tatarca eğitimi

Özet: *Bu makalede Avustralya Tatar diasporasının tarihçesi, eğitim ve kültür faaliyetleri ile dil ve kültürlerini koruma yönünde yaptıkları yayınlar ve diğer faaliyetler genel olarak aktarılmıştır. Avustralya Tatar toplumu dünya üzerinde yayılmış Tatar toplumlarından belki de en genç ve sayı olarak en küçüklerinden birisidir. Bununla birlikte gerek tarihleri gerekse günümüzdeki faaliyetleri ile son derece ilgi çekici olan bu topluluk ne yazık ki bugüne kadar çok fazla akademik çalışmaya konu olmamıştır. İleride yapılacak çalışmalara da yardımcı olabilmek amacıyla bu makale içerisinde konu ile ilgili yapılan tüm çalışmalara atıf yapılmakla kalınmayıp Avustralya Tatar toplumunun üyelerinin*

yazdıkları ve çeşitli dillerde basılan ya da tercüme edilen eserlere de yer verilmiştir. Görece küçük bir topluluk olan Avustralya Tatar toplumu yaklaşık yedi yüz kişi olan sayısına oranla bir okul, çok sayıda kitap, üç yazar ve bir caminin yanı sıra diğer kültürel aktiviteler ile de son derece canlı bir topluluktur.

Avustralya'ya yerleşen tatar toplumunun üyeleri ilk olarak İkinci Dünya savaşını takiben Çin'de çıkan iç savaş sonucu yerlerinden olan Doğu Türkistan ve Mançurya'daki Tatar topluluklarının üyeleridir. İkinci bir dalga ise neredeyse tüm diğer Tatar diasporalarında olduğu gibi Sovyetler birliğinin dağılmasından sonra meydana gelmiş ve eski Sovyet devletlerinden bir göç dalgası yaşanmıştır. Aslında ilk göç dalgasında gelen pek çok Tatar da Avustralya hükümetinin "Beyaz Avustralya" politikası kapsamında o dönem Rus vatandaşı sayılan Tatarların beyaz ırk sayılması ile gerçekleşmiştir. Bu politikaya göre yalnızca Avrupa kökenlilerin Avustralya'ya göç etmesine izin verilmekteydi. Buna gerekçe olarak ise Çin ve diğer Asya ve Afrika ülkelerinden gelenlerin Avustralya'da düşük ücretlerle çalışarak haksız rekabete neden olacakları gösterilmiştir. Ancak kağıt üzerinde Avrupalı görünen Rus vatandaşlarından da Kalmık, Buryat, Ermeni gibi Avrupaî görünüme sahip olmayanların konsolosluklarda yapılan mülakatlarda elendiği, bu aşamada "pub test" adı verilen bir standart kullanıldığı görülmüştür. Buna göre Sydney'de bir bara girip yürüdüğünde içeridekilerin dikkatini çekecek kadar egzotik görünümü olmayanlar Avrupalı sayılmış ve Ermeniler, Kalmıklar ve hatta İspanyol ve İtalyanlardan bazıları dahi Avrupalı sayılmamış, ancak Tatarlar görünüşe göre çok büyük bir sorunla karşılaşmadan göç etmişlerdir.

Ancak bunula birlikte Tatarca Avustralya'da Topluluk Dili (Community language) statüsünde değildir ve bu nedenle devlet desteği görmemektedir. Buna rağmen Tatar toplumu önce bireysel çabalarla bir evde, daha sonra ise bir azınlık okulu olarak daha kurumsal bir şekilde Tatarca, İslam dini ve Tatar kültürü, tarihi ve diğer konularda çocuklara eğitim verilen ve başka etkinlikler yapılan bir okul açılmıştır. Avustralya'daki Tatar toplumunun üyeleri arasında Ziya Maski, Ayşe Maski, Sofya Çanişef gibi yazarlar çıkmış ve bu yazarlar toplamda dörtten fazla ülkede 8'den fazla kitap basmıştır ki 700 kişi civarı olan bir topluluk için bu sayı oldukça etkilidir. Bu kitapların bazıları şiir, bazıları ise Avustralya'daki Tatar toplumunun Avustralya'ya gelmeden önceki ve geldikten sonraki hikayelerini aktarması açısından hem Tatar dili ve edebiyatının önemli eserleridir hem de bu konuda çalışmak isteyen tarihçi, sosyolog ve diğer disiplinlerdeki akademisyenler için değerli kaynaklardır. Bu kitaplardan "Gözyaşları ile Islanan Topraklar" gibi bazıları Türkiye'de çeviri olarak ve orijinal dillerinde de basılmışsa da baskılarına ulaşmak güçtür.

Öte yandan Avustralya'da eğitim faaliyetleri yukarıda belirtilen nedenlerle yaşanan güçlüklerle rağmen topluluk üyelerinin gönüllü iştirakleriyle önce evde hafta sonu okulu olarak daha sonra ise kiralanmış bir okul binasında hafta sonları Tatar Başkurt Etnik Okulu adıyla devam ettirilmiştir.

Edebiyat ve eğitim alanlarındaki bu faaliyetler dışında Avustralya Tatar toplumu Tatarların geleneksel olarak kutladıkları Sabantuy kutlamalarını Adelaide’de sürdürmektedir. Bu festivalde yapılan kültürel etkinlikler, oyunlar ve ziyafetler sayesinde genç nesillere Tatar kültür ve kimliğinin aktarılmasının yanı sıra Avustralya’da Tatar kültürünün de tanıtılması ve bu kimliğin tanınmasına katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Tatarlar, Avustralya, Tatar diasporası, dil eğitimi, göç, Tatar edebiyatı

Introduction

The Tatar community in Australia is probably one of the newest among the multitude of Tatar groups in the global diaspora. This community has at present around 700 members who are mainly based in Adelaide, South Australia, followed by Sydney in New South Wales. Its history, activities, educational work, language, culture and literature have received almost no attention from scholars so far. Despite their small numbers, the Tatars in Australia form a vibrant and active social network which not only maintains the Tatar identity, culture, traditions and language, but also promotes and transmits them to the younger generations. All activities are conducted chiefly by the community, sometimes with assistance from other Tatar diaspora communities worldwide.

The Tatars in Australia possess a unique background and history, even if both are brief compared with several other diaspora communities in Australia. Their ancestors came from different locations in a huge geographic area ranging from Japan to the Volga region in Russia. The first larger groups arrived from East Turkestan and Manchuria, but the vast Tatar trade networks and the diaspora communities spanning from Sweden and Finland in the west to Japan in the east, and as far south as Afghanistan and Pakistan in Central and South Asia, also contributed some Tatar migrants to Australia.

Australia demonstrated some unique features in its immigration policies at the time of the arrival of the first Tatars: until 1973 it pursued the so-called “White Australia Policy” which focused on origins. Together with other policies establishing migration rules and laws, as well as the national approach to language education, this policy affected the Tatar community, too, similarly to other much larger immigrant communities.

This article provides a general overview of the Tatar language-related activities in Australia and the literary, educational and cultural work which has continued for several decades. It also discusses in short the migration policies which enabled the immigration of Tatars from different parts of Eurasia. The article is based on the resources and information provided by the Tatar community in Australia, personal communications with its members and the few academic works available about the topic. As academic studies on the community is almost non-existent, this article hopes to inspire more interest and research on the Australian Tatar diaspora group and its manifold activities.

Historical background

The first bigger groups of Tatars arrived in Australia after World War II, mainly from Manchuria and East Turkestan. After 1949 the Chinese Communist government permitted Soviet citizens (broadly described as “Russians”) in these areas to stay and retain the citizenship, while others holding British or other citizenship were forced to either give it up or leave (Ding 2015: 250). Many Soviet citizens chose to leave, too.

In Australia the White Australia Policy initially made it difficult for Tatars belonging to the Volga and Crimean groups to be accepted as “white”, although most of them held Russian or Soviet passports. At least on paper, all Russian and Soviet citizens could apply for residence. The Tatars were eventually recognised as “Europeans” along with Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians etc. Several Soviet citizens, especially Central Asians, Buryats and Kalmyks, were considered Asians and rejected. Armenians were also not considered Europeans, but individuals could be accepted for immigration in case “they had the desired skills”. Cossacks were subjugated to visual inspection and many with Buryat or Kalmyk origins were turned away.

This White Australia Policy was originally aimed at putting a stop to the immigration flow of Asian and Pacific islanders who were being hired as a cheap work force in Australian farming and other labour-intensive industries. These poorly paid but numerous workers were supposed to cause job losses or a decrease of salaries for Australians. The policy was under debate already during the late nineteenth century, but with the support of the Labour Party and pressure from labour unions it became a bill to the first federal Australian government. The British government pressured the Australians from the start against such a policy, but it was enforced as the Immigration Restriction Act in 1901. Unlike in the United States, those of other origins than European already residing in Australia had the same rights as the “white” inhabitants. The policy later turned into a racial preference.

The guidelines for officials who made decisions about residence permits were vague, and confusing rules for immigration made the issue very complicated for the Australian authorities. The policy itself had many exceptions: the Maori, who did not count as “white”, were accepted after some pressure from New Zealand. Some Crimean Tatars were permitted to stay “out of kindness” in 1947 (Fitzpatrick 2021: 67–69). The policy had become more relaxed by then and most Tatars were finally accepted as “white non-Europeans”. One individual, Abidan, whose family had left East Turkestan, officially had a Russian identity, although her father was a Tatar and her mother Uyghur (Ding 2015: 261). A similar process seems to have taken place for Tatar migrants from Manchuria, Japan and the Soviet Union (Fitzpatrick 2021: 187).

Community activities and education

In 1990 the Tatar and Bashkir (Bashkort) communities in Australia established a joint organisation, the *Tatar-Bashkort Association in Australia*. This association was preceded by a multitude of community and educational activities, often together with other Turkic groups. The history of the Australian Tatar community has not yet been researched so we need much more documentation, detailed interviews, archive work and collection of materials before it can be presented. In other diaspora situations the Tatars usually first established mosques and organised the community around religious activities. In Australia the first Tatar mosque was founded only in 2013 in Adelaide.¹

The Tatar-Bashkort Association organises events, among them festivals and celebrations; singing and literary activities; concerts and lectures. The annual *Sabantuy* celebration in the summer is one of the most important events. The Sabantuy festival not only serves as an occasion when Tatars of all ages gather, enjoy and entertain with music, poetry, singing and other performances and share traditional Tatar food. Sabantuy is the meeting point for the members who live in different areas, a place for talks and exchange of news and a time to have fun together. The children and youth can meet in an informal setting, get to know each other and connect more closely with other Tatar speakers of the same age. They receive a unique possibility develop their identity, different skills and Tatar language knowledge.

These photos from Sabantuy celebrations in Adelaide, South Australia, are published with permission from the Tatar-Bashkort Association in Australia and the authors Aysha and Ziya Maski (see Maski & Maski 2012).²

1 <https://tatar-congress.org/en/news/the-first-tatar-mosque-to-open-in-australia/>

2 All photos in this article: © Aysha Maski 2012.



Australian Tatar youth competing in an egg-spoon race (2009)



Australian Tatar children competing in an egg-spoon race (2011)



Students from the Tatar-Bashkort Ethnic School competing in a sack race (1997)



Tatar youths Ilgizer Gabitov and Edel Sadri competing in a pillow fight (2009)



Tatar children participating in a tug-of-war (2011)

Tatar language does not have the status of a Community Language in Australia³, which means that it is not included in the ordinary school curriculum. Still, the Tatar community is actively transmitting the language to the next generation and also produces printed materials for language education.

On Sundays the Tatar children visit the *Tatar-Bashkurt Ethnic School* in Adelaide, where they learn the language and take part in cultural activities. This school was initiated in 1981 as a home school in the house of the Chanisheff family for Tatar, Uyghur and Uzbek children, but a year later, when the family moved to another town, the school location was transferred to Trinity Gardens Primary School.

Tatar language education began only in 1986; until then the children attended religious and cultural classes. In 1991 a second school was opened under the name *Northfield Tatar Ethnic School*. The distance to the first school had become too great for some of the children. In 1992 the Uzbek and Uyghur community grew because of increased immigration from East Turkestan and they established a separate school.

The name of the Tatar school was changed in 1997 to the *Tatar-Bashkurt Ethnic School* to conform with the name of the cultural association. The curriculum contains subjects such as language, religion, culture, history, literature, songs and folk dance.⁴

In 1979 the Ethnic Schools Association of South Australia was founded and in 1989 the Ethnic Schools Board came into being. An ethnic school has as its task to maintain and develop the language and culture of the community. The Tatar-Bashkurt school is one of almost a hundred ethnic schools in the area. The school is today visited by the children of Tatars who have attended this school themselves. The children from the school perform regularly at festivals and celebrations and participate in the community activities. Many are from the third generation born and raised in Australia.

The school is maintained with the support from the community members and voluntary work of its teachers and administrators. For a community of about three hundred members in Adelaide these efforts are remarkable. The Tatars keep their heritage alive, while at the same time they are fully integrated, study and have successful careers within the Australian society.

3 <https://www.communitylanguagesaustralia.org.au/about-languages/>

4 <http://www.australianatatars.com/tatar-bashkurt-ethnic-school/>

Tatar literature in Australia

The Tatar literary tradition belongs to the richest and most developed in the Turkic world along with Ottoman/Turkish and Uyghur. A majority of the Tatars who emigrated from East Turkestan, Manchuria and the Soviet Union were merchants and artisans. Still, they were literate and carried their literary tradition also to Australia and the local Tatar community is prolific in terms of intellectual production and publishing.⁵

Among the published works is for instance Aysha and Ziya Maski's book *Journey To Freedom* (Maski & Maski 2012). It was first published in Tatar with Arabic script and then translated into English (2013). This book is perhaps the most comprehensive account of the background and history of the Tatar community in Australia. It depicts the migration stories of 22 Tatar families, including Aysha Maski's own story, beginning with her childhood in East Turkestan. Photographs reflect the lives and culture of the Tatar community in Australia. This book is maybe the last book published in Tatar with Arabic script instead of Cyrillic or the varied Latin scripts, which are used by different Tatar diaspora groups.

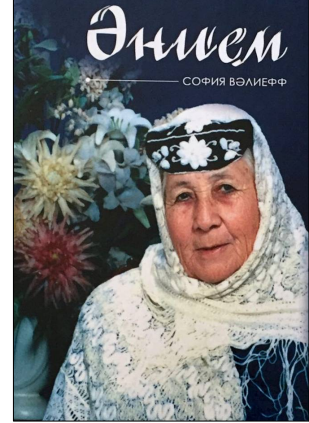
In addition to this valuable source which offers a personal approach and much more than archival or official documents, Suyungul Chanisheff has penned a book which was initially written and published in Uyghur under the title *Manas Boyenda Tutken* 'Procrastination at Manas'. The book was translated into Turkish and published in Turkey under the title *Gözyaşları İle Islanan Topraklar* 'Soils Soaked With Tears' (Chanisheff 2008). Chanisheff narrates the stories of the Tatar community members in Ürümqi and Chohek and the contributions of the Tatar diaspora to the cultural life in East Turkestan. This book was also published in Kazakhstan. In 2012 she wrote another book titled *Sökmeyen Şafak* 'Dawn without break', published in Turkey four years later (Chanisheff 2016). This second book told the story of her grandmother.

These authors tell the background stories of Australian Tatar families and contribute thus not only to the Tatar community worldwide, but offer also much material to historians interested in minorities and modern history and to scholars who study migration. There are books published in Turkey and Japan by Ali Merthan Dünder on the Tatar community of Japan – another destination for Tatars who migrated from East Turkestan and Manchuria (Dünder 2006 and 2008), yet the lives of the Tatars who went to Australia has rarely been narrated in such detail as in these books. They might therefore contribute to advance both Tatar, minority and migration research.

5 <http://www.australiantatars.com/books-published-by-australian-tatars/>

The Australian Tatar community also has a poet in Adelaide: Sofiya Valiyff has published a number of poetry collections (see for instance 2015 and 2018), some of which have been transformed into songs and presented at Sabantuy celebrations. Several of her books have been published also in Kazan. The famous composer Ilgiz Zakirov from Tatarstan and the singer and composer Fanir Galimov among others have added music to her poems.

Cover of Sofiya Valiyff's book Äniem (Mama, 2015).



Conclusion

The memories of the homes left behind in the 1940s are still much alive among the Tatar community members in Australia. In contrast to Tatar diaspora communities whose connections were cut already in the 1920s, for example Finland, there are some elderly Australian Tatars who experienced the emigration personally. Further, unlike some other Tatar diaspora communities, such as Turkey and the USA, the community in Australia received relatively few newcomers following the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent migration waves from the post-Soviet republics in the 1990s.

The small Tatar community in Australia maintains and continues to transmit its cultural, religious and linguistic heritage today. Education in the Tatar language and Tatar culture is the focus of its activities besides organising events and publishing learning materials and books. At the same time, the Tatars have adapted to the surrounding society: they employ the available structure of ethnic schools and cooperate in the Tatar-Bashkurt association. A website in English and Tatar written in Latin script informs about the activities and background of the Tatar community.

Although it is not possible to determine the exact numbers of Tatar speakers in terms of fluency due to the lack of research, the lively activities of the Australian community and the events organised by the association suggest that the younger generations also can speak Tatar and have an understanding of the cultural heritage and identity. Activists, writers and community volunteers such as Roostem Sadi and the families Chanisheff, Maski and Valiyff maintain not only community activities within the framework of the Tatar-Bashkurt association, but participate in the activities of the World Congress of Tatars and maintain relations with other Tatar diaspora groups and Tatarstan, too.⁶

⁶ See for instance <https://prav.tatarstan.ru/eng/index.htm/news/104619.htm>

Thanks

I would like to express my gratitude to the members of the Tatar-Bashkurt Association in Australia, especially to Dilyara Valieva who kindly answered my questions and Ziya Maski for providing photos.

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Halık köye yırakka iştelər.
A folk song is heard far away.
Tatar mäkale / proverb