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Tatar literary activities in Finland

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Tatar literary activities in Finland

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ACTIVITIES

Abstract: *Tatar literature in Finland is little known outside the community, although Tatars have published magazines and books here for over a hundred years. In fact they are one of the most active minorities producing literary works in the country. This diaspora literature is also rarely mentioned in the context of global Tatar literature.*

Prerequisites for the manifold literary activities among the Tatars in Finland are the high educational and organisational levels of the community members and their interest in preserving the language and culture in the diaspora situation. These factors are also conducive to change and modernisation: an important transformation in the past century is the replacement of the Arabic script by Latin letters for the Tatar language in Finland. A present-day challenge is publishing electronically on the internet. Further, the publications by the Finnish Tatars have never been limited solely to the Tatar language; they have also published books in Finnish, Swedish and other languages, and multilingual and even mixed language works.

This article presents a general overview of the major trends and publications written by Tatars in Finland, including magazines, prose, historical works and poetry, as well as the most important authors, among them Hasan Hamidulla (1900–1988) and Sadri Hamid (1905–1987). These two prominent figures became writers in order to maintain and preserve the Tatar identity, language and culture in the diaspora. Hamidulla and Hamid also played an important role as historians of the Finnish Tatar community and they were active as poets, magazine editors and educators. These authors are together responsible for more than half of all Tatar literature published in Finland.

Keywords: *Tatar literature, Tatar diaspora, literary activities, publishing, multilingual literature, Finland*

Finlandiya'da Tatarca edebiyat faaliyetleri

Özet: Tatarların Finlandiya'da yüz yıldan fazla bir süredir dergi ve kitap yayınlamış olmasına rağmen Finlandiya'daki Tatar edebiyatı kendi toplulukları dışında az bilinmektedir. Aslında Tatarlar Finlandiya'da edebî eser üreten en etkin azınlıklardan biridir. Bu diaspora literatüründen küresel Tatar edebiyatı bağlamında da pek bahsedilmemektedir.

Çeşitli edebî etkinliklerin ön koşulu, topluluk üyelerinin yüksek eğitim ve organizasyon düzeyleri ile diaspora durumundaki Tatar dilini ve kültürünü korumaya olan ilgileridir. Bu faktörler aynı zamanda değişime ve modernleşmeye de yardımcı olmaktadır: Geçen yüzyıldaki önemli bir dönüşüm, Tatarca için Arap alfabesinden Latin alfabesine geçiştir. Yeni bir zorluk da internette yayın yapmaktır. Tatarların ürettiği yayınlar hiçbir zaman sadece Tatar dili ile sınırlı kalmamış, Fince, İsveççe ve diğer dillerde ve hatta karışık dillerde de eserler yayınlamışlardır.

Bu makale, dergiler, nesir, tarihî eserler ve şiirler dahil olmak üzere ve ayrıca alanda bulunan en önemli iki yazar Hasan Hamidulla (1900–1988) ve Sadri Hamid'i (1905-1987) ele alarak Finlandiya'daki Tatarlar tarafından yazılan başlıca eğilimler ve yayınlara genel bir bakış sunmaktadır. Bu iki önde gelen isim, Finlandiya'da Tatar kimliğini, dilini ve kültürünü yaşatmak ve korumak için yazar olmuştur. Hamidulla ve Hamid, Fin Tatar topluluğunun tarihçileri olarak da önemli bir role sahiptir ve şair, dergi editörü ve topluluğun eğitimcileri olarak aktif rol almışlardır. Finlandiya'da yayınlanan tüm Tatar edebiyatının yarısından fazlası bu iki yazara aittir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Tatar edebiyatı, diaspora, edebi faaliyetler, yayıncılık, çok dilli edebiyat, Finlandiya



Introduction

For more than a century the Tatar community in Finland has been active in writing and publishing all kinds of materials, brochures, magazines, journals and books. Since the beginning of their literary activities in Finland, the Tatars have written and published not only in the Tatar language but also in other languages, mainly Finnish and Swedish, multilingually with parallel translations and even in mixed language. Business successes among the first generation of Tatar merchants in Finland at the beginning of the twentieth century created a strong material base, which supported not only the creation of religious and cultural organisations, but also a flourishing Tatar language literature.

Most Tatars, both men and women, were literate at the beginning of the twentieth century and many members of the Finnish Tatar community were active readers of books and journals. An important factor for encouraging education and the continuous use of the Tatar language in the diaspora was the long-term support from reformist Islamic (Jadidist) teachers such as Musa Bigeev (Bigi). The Jadidists valued learning, knowledge and reading and writing skills highly. Bigeev encouraged the community to keep the traditions from their home villages and to speak and teach the Tatar language, but also to learn the languages and receive the education of the country they lived in (Zaripov & Belyaev 2020). The first generation of Tatars in Finland quickly learned Swedish and Finnish to be able to work and live in the new surroundings, and the following generations have been educated parallel in Tatar and Finnish or Swedish. Today the Tatars are multilingual and multicultural and many in the fifth and sixth generations continue to speak and use the language.

This small Tatar community has maintained its unique characteristics while simultaneously changing and adapting not only to the Finnish but also global conditions. The cornerstone of Tatar ethnicity and identity in Finland has always been and is still the Tatar language, which also functions as one of the most important elements for keeping the community together. The language created the foundation for a common space in the diaspora situation, especially after the borders between Finland and the Soviet Union were closed in the 1930s and the cross-border contacts broken. The previous cultural and linguistic sphere disappeared and the Tatars in Finland began creating their own cultural and linguistic models (Bekkin 2020). The Tatar community became a space where individual and collective identities, memories, history, traditions and customs could be expressed, enjoyed and transmitted to the next generations.

The language motivates the Finnish Tatars to identify themselves as Tatars, but a recent and growing group are individuals without or only with basic language skills, who identify as Tatars because of

their heritage. Today the Finnish Tatar community connects less than a thousand individuals and an increasing number of young members marry outside the group. Despite the ongoing acculturation process and the opening up in recent years of Tatar mosques to other Muslims, the language-based identity is still strongly nurtured by the community. The Tatar identity is further strengthened by exchange with Tatarstan and Tatars from other parts of the world. Since the 1960s these exchanges have involved performances by choirs, folk dance, musical and theatrical ensembles, and after the 1990s also reciprocal visits of ordinary members.

An important question which requires further research is what the Tatars in Finland see as “their” literature. Does Tatar literature mean only *Tatar language* literature or also literature written by Tatars in other languages or multilingually? Should Tatar literature only deal with “Tatar” topics? Who is a Tatar writer – a person who writes in Tatar or also those who have a Tatar heritage, but do not use the language in speech or writing? Research on Tatar literary activities in Finland and the significance of this minority literature is scarce, but studies on the definitions and perceptions of the community could offer both Tatar and literary scholars much interesting data.

This article does not pretend to cover all parts and aspects of the literary activities among the Tatars in Finland; instead it offers an overview and presents the main trends, authors and publications. Many have unfortunately been left out due to considerations of space. The article is a contribution to the scientific and global discourse on minority and diaspora literatures.

Tatar literature in Finland

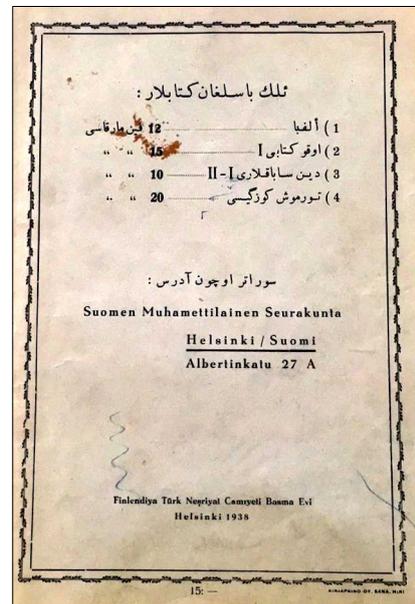
Tatar language publications written and published in Finland number today more than two hundred. They represent many different genres, from religious and historical works to memoirs, biographies, stories, poems, plays, proverb collections and songs (for details see Halén 1980 and 1996; Bedretdin 2011). A large quantity of schoolbooks, textbooks and children’s books have also been published. A special literature society is not present, although the literary production is very rich in comparison to the small size of the group. The religious and cultural organisations, the Finnish Islamic Congregation based in Helsinki, Tampere Islamic Congregation (now Tampere Tatar Congregation) and cultural association FTB have produced a wide range of publications, literary activities and events during the past century. They continue to invite the community members to enjoy Tatar literature in different forms, from new printed books to online literary discussion groups and public readings (see article by G. Bedretdin & Stahlberg, in this issue; Baibulat 2004).

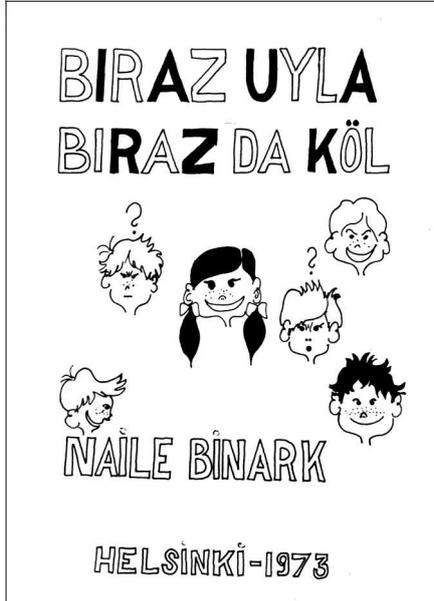
Some features are characteristic for the Tatar literary activities in Finland: firstly, the early publications were printed in the Arabic script. They often had Latin script titles on the front or back cover and sometimes they appeared also with a Finnish translation. In the wake of the Turkish language reform in the 1930s and the orientation towards Turkey within the Finnish Tatar community, the members were encouraged to use the Latin alphabet. Arabic script was still taught in the 1960s together with the Latin script in the Tatar school in Helsinki. Elderly Tatars, especially those from the first and second generations, continued to use Arabic script throughout their lives, some until the beginning of the 2000s.

Another important aspect is that most Tatar writers were or are members of the Tatar community, yet for the past century their literary activities were mostly created on the authors' own initiative, individually and independently of the community. The most prolific amateur author among the Finnish Tatars is Hasan Hamidulla (1900–1988), a merchant who turned writer in the diaspora and began publishing his own texts as books and brochures in 1925. All literary genres are present in Hamidulla's works. Another similarly productive author, Sadri Hamid (1905–1987), is seen as the second most significant writer of the community. They will be discussed in more detail below.

A third principal feature is that since the formation of the Tatar minority in Finland, women play an active part in the creation and development of Tatar literature in Finland and also in the publishing activities and distribution. A prominent example of female writers is Gevher (Gäühär) Tuganay (1911–1998) who wrote mainly poetry. Many of her poems are about nature. The poems are published in two collections: *Šigir mäğmuası 1–2* 'Poetry collection' (1970). Poems are a significant part of a gift during traditional Tatar celebrations and Gevher Tuganay was especially fond of writing occasional verse dedicated to and about cultural events. At present several women are active writers, translators and publishers of both Tatar and multilingual literature. Their current activities are discussed below in the chapter *Recent literary activities*.

The literature published in Finland contains not only fiction and facts but also drama, proverbs and songs. The Tatars are fond of and often perform plays during their soirées and cultural events. Many theatrical plays are comedies. Among others the poet Saniye Iffet Kadiri (1899–1957) wrote several plays for amateur ensembles. Korean-born teacher Naile Binark (1940–) has published a collection of



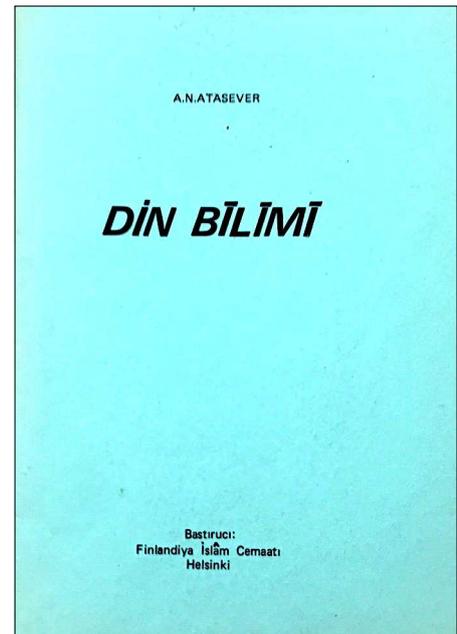


1,500 proverbs gathered from Kazan Tatar sources, *Atalarsüzi* 'Proverbs' (1976) and ethnological materials in the booklet *Biraz uyla, biraz da kö!* 'Think a little and laugh some, too!' (1973). This booklet contains riddles, stories and jokes. Binark also wrote about Tatar topics for the journal *Kazan*, published in Istanbul.

To the many Tatar songbooks published in Finland was added the large song collection *Bızniñ cırlar I-II* 'Our songs' in 1980 and 2000. They are annotated by Şeüket Bikmohammedov, a choirmaster from Ufa in Bashkortostan.

Religious literature is held in high regard by the Tatars in Finland. It includes doctrinal and devotional books and also several booklets in Tatar language. They deal with religious issues, among others Islamic history, prayers and Friday sermons. The first translation of the *Qur'an* into Finnish appeared in Tampere in 1942 with a print run of 5,000 copies. It was funded by Zinnetullah Ahsen Böre (1886–1945) and translated by Georg Pimenoff from an English version. Hasan Hamidulla together with his wife Gülsüm published a first facsimile edition of the *Qur'an* in Arabic, *Qur'an-i kârim* (1943 and 1969) a year later with a print run of 20,000 copies. He distributed also commentaries to it.

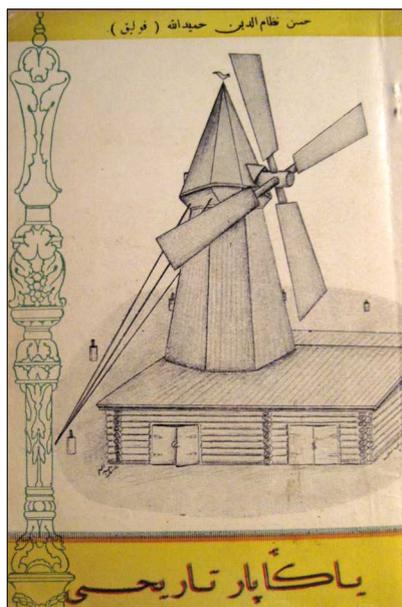
Religious textbooks and booklets have been published also by the erudite imam of the Finnish Islamic Congregation, Weli-Ahmed Hakim (1882–1970, active as imam in Helsinki 1914–1962); the imam of the Tampere Islamic Congregation, Habibur-Rahman Schakir (1903–1975), as well as several later imams of the congregation in Helsinki, Ahmed Naim Atasever, Abdurrahman Kaya, the assistant imam Enver Yıldırım and Ramil Belyaev.



Hasan Hamidulla and Sadri Hamid

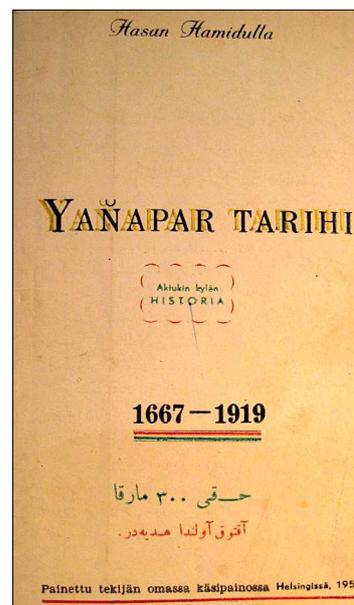
Hasan Hamidulla's extensive literary production includes historical works and memoirs, fiction and religious literature (for a biography see K. Bedretdin 2021). His works are written in the Mishar Tatar dialect of the Sergach region, Nizhny Novgorod province, but they are also peppered with modern Turkish (he lived for a period in Turkey) and Arabic doctrinal vocabulary. The publications gradually changed during Hamidulla's long lifetime in Finland: he began printing in the Arabic script but then adopted the Latin script and published often parallel texts with both scripts, so that the older and also the younger generations could read his works. The poems in *Ilham yimisleri* (Hamidulla 1945) 'The fruits of a gift', for instance, appeared in both Arabic and Latin scripts.

In the cellar of his radio store in Kemi in northern Finland, Hasan Hamidulla produced a large number of self-published books and booklets, and some collected works in many volumes (see Halén 1980 and 1996; K. Bedretdin 2021). He printed all his works on a hand-operated press. In *Yañapar tarihi* 'History of Yañapar' (1954), a small book which presents the history of his and many other Finnish Tatars' home village Yañapar (Aktuk) between 1667 and 1919, he included writings and drawings. The book was based on extensive research, the oral history from the village and memories provided by elderly members of the Tatar community in Finland.



This history of the village of Yañapar, published with Arabic script, is still significant to all Tatars in Finland, as it explains their own history and the past of the community. The book was translated by Fazile Nasretidin into Finnish and she also added comments to the history (see Leitzinger 1996 and 2006).

In his illustrated series of memoirs, *Nik alay?* 'Why so?' (1964–1977) and several other publications, Hamidulla focused on his own life, writing about it in poetry and prose. They include also descriptions of his pilgrimages to Mecca and religious poems. Hasan Hamidulla collected Tatar proverbs and folk songs and he



wrote and published theatrical plays, thrillers and historical novels, mostly dealing with World War I. He tried to follow in Jules Verne's footsteps with his "factual" story of the wonders of space, *Yulduzlarga seyehat* (1950) 'A trip to the stars', a book aimed at teenagers. This work was meant to be the first in a series of science fiction stories but none followed.

Adapting to the Finnish tradition of celebrating name days, Hasan Hamidulla drew up a Tatar name day calendar with also a Finnish text. In addition he published Tatar language wall calendars in Kemi during 1938–1948. His telephone directory of Finnish Muslims appeared in several editions for many decades; it facilitated the contacts within the community.

Sadri Hamid's first publication was a series of poetry booklets with the title *Defter* 'Notebook' (1945–1946). He announced his love for his mother tongue in the poem *Tatar tele* 'Tatar language' (1947). Hamid was against the change to Latin letters, arguing that it would immediately mark the end of both the Tatar language and the Islamic religion. The proponents of the Latin alphabet motivated the shift with the argument that they wanted to facilitate the learning for children growing up in Finland surrounded by the Latin script. They also wanted to produce modern books.

Sadri Hamid's speciality was humorous, rhymed chronicles. He also collected proverbs and sayings in Tatar (for an example see below). Hamid published two compilations of Tatar words and phrases as photocopied booklets: *Quşimli süzlär* 'Compound words' (1968) and *Tugan ildäge süzler* 'Words of the home region' (1973) which contain about 1,700 vernacular Mishar Tatar phrases. During 1972–1975 Hamid published photocopies presenting the rich world of the Arabic alphabet. The names of the booklets illustrate their creative contents: *Ğäühär häreflär* 'Bejewelled letters', *İzge häreflär* 'Holy letters', *Altın häreflär* 'Golden letters', *Aräp härefläre* 'Arabic letters', *Brilyant häreflär* 'Diamond letters', *Enge häreflär* 'Pearly letters', *Nurlı häreflär* 'Shining letters' and *Qur'an härefläre* 'Qur'anic letters'. Surprisingly, Finland seldom appears in Hamid's works. He did however urge the Tatars to follow the example of the "industrious and honest" Finns and to read and "conquer ignorance".

**Äytem – süzneñ bizäge,
mäkal – süzneñ ciläge.
Saying – word ornament,
proverb – word berry.
Tatar mäkale / proverb**

Tatar periodicals

The Tatars in Finland have for the past century mainly used their magazines for communication on matters related to their community and congregations. The periodicals also present different other topics which are of interest for the community and news related to Tatars worldwide. Education, language support and creating awareness about Tatar history, religion, language and cultural heritage are some of the goals of the periodicals. Several magazines were short-lived while others appeared for several years, although somewhat irregularly. They were printed or copied in small numbers and distributed mostly to members of the community.



According to the bibliographic survey by Harry Halén (1980), Finnish Tatars published before 1980 at least twelve magazines in Tatar and two magazines in Turkish and Finnish. Most of the Tatar language magazines were published by private individuals and have now ceased to appear. However *Mähällä Habärläre* (MH)

‘Community News’, founded in 1949 and published by the congregation in Helsinki, appears again regularly since 2012.¹ The Tatar congregations in Helsinki and Tampere have also published several bulletins, but the most important and influential periodical is and remains MH.

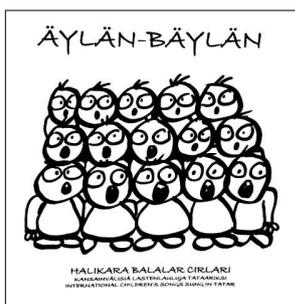
The first Tatar language magazine in Finland was probably *Mägrifät* ‘Knowledge’ or ‘Enlightenment’, edited and published by Hasan Hamidulla. It was published in three issues in Kemi in 1925. *Mägrifät* was a political, educational and pro-Tatar magazine with news, stories and poems. It had an initial print run of 1,000 copies, but this weekly publication had time to acquire only a few subscribers. The magazine was quickly closed down by the Finnish authorities, who were unable to censor a Tatar language publication.

Sadri Hamid published two magazines in quarto format from 1967. The first of these magazines (both looked alike and had similar contents), was *Taviš* ‘Voice’. It ended already in its first year after six 3–4-page issues. *Ak yul* ‘White road’ carried on until 1977 with at least 63 issues, printed in Oulu and Helsinki. The phrase *ak yul* can also be understood as a wish: “may your journey be a trouble-free (white) road!” Both magazines featured stories illustrated with drawings, dealing with the history and ethnology of the Turkic peoples, rhymed chronicles, puns, etc.

1 MH issues from 2012 to 2016 can be read online on the website of the Finnish Islamic Congregation: <http://tatar.fi/en/mh-2/>

Recent literary activities

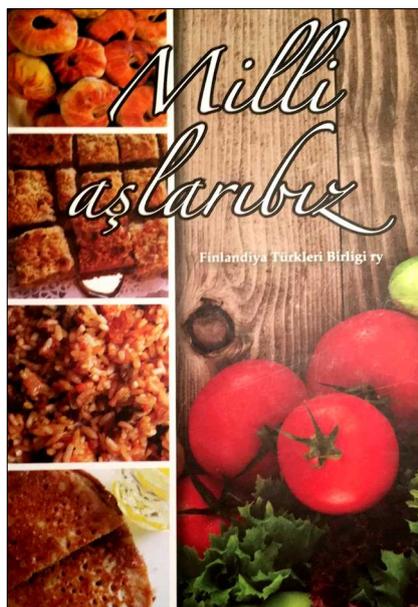
Since the days of Hasan Hamidulla and Sadri Hamid, fewer books have been written and published by the Tatar community in Finland, but the range of genres, topics and languages has become broader and there are new formats such as e-books, DVDs and CDs. In recent years with the popularisation of mobile phones and introduction of digital devices also in Finnish schools, reading habits especially among the youth have changed radically in Finland (PISA 2018). The decreasing interest in reading poses a new challenge to everybody who works with literature, book producers such as writers and publishers, and distributors such as book dealers, bookshops and librarians. It is a matter of concern also to users: parents, teachers and others who try to encourage children and youth to read. Active reading enhances language skills, expression and vocabulary, and regular reading habits should be established already in childhood (Stahlberg 2020: 51).



The Finnish Islamic Congregation in Helsinki has recently published several new school books and children's books (see article by G. Bedretdin & Stahlberg, in this issue) which support the learning of vocabulary and expressions in Tatar. They are mainly translations and adaptations from Kazan Tatar books and most are multilingual. Other examples are the children's book of fairy tales and CD from Abdulla Tukay's story *Su anası* 'The comb of the water fairy', edited by Fazile Nasretidin and Feride Nisametdin and published in Tatar and Finnish (Tukay 2009), and the children's CD with text, *Äylän bäylän* (Yabalak 2007). Fazile Nasretidin has also translated and edited several fairy tales and songs for children. A new project is the translation of Easy to Read books which appear as e-books and paper books. The Easy to Read project (see article by Stahlberg & Nasretidin, in this issue) has within a year produced six new books in Tatar Easy Language, the first of their kind globally.

Among other recent publications during the 2000s is the handsome historical work in three languages (Finnish, Tatar, English) by Muazzez Baibulat, *Tampereen Islamilainen Seurakunta: juuret ja historia. Tampere İslam Mahallesi: nigızı ve tarihi. The Tampere Islamic Congregation: the roots and history* (Baibulat 2004). A historical work is also the Finnish-language book on World War II veterans of the

Finnish Islamic Congregation in Helsinki, *Suomen Islam-seurakunnan veteraaniteos* (Suomen Islam-seurakunta 2006). To commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Tampere congregation, Muazzez Baibulat edited and published in 2010 *Tampere habärläre* 'Tampere news' (Baibulat 2010). An active writer and editor is also Derya Samaletdin, who has published among others a food book on Tatar cuisine in Tatar and Finnish, *Milli aşlarımız* 'Our foods' (2013) and *Perinneruokiamme* (2014).



The internet offers many new possibilities for publication and recently innovative Tatar projects have appeared online in Finland. In addition to translating Easy to Read books, Fazile Nasretdin writes since 2019 haiku poems in Tatar and other languages. They are discussed at meetings called Haikuriltai and published online on the multilingual Haiku Colorit website (see article by Stahlberg & Nasretdin & Kiss, in this issue).² Multilingual writing workshops at Luckan (Swedish-language cultural centre in Helsinki), tutored by Sabira Stahlberg, include also Tatar language creative writing. New Tatar texts were presented and a panel discussion about the Tatar minority in Finland was arranged by the publisher Bokpil³ at the Helsinki Book Fair in 2019. Sabira Stahlberg, Fazile Nasretdin, Ainur Elmgren and Yasmin Samaletdin talked in the panel about the present situation of the Tatars and their visibility in Finnish society.

The multilingual policy established by the Tatars in Finland more than a century ago is reflected also in the literature of the 2000s. In 2006, Sabira Stahlberg, a writer, editor and publisher, wrote a novel about several Tatar generations in Finland and a visit to the ancestral village. The book was written parallel in Finnish (*Pilvivaeltaja*) and Swedish (*Molnvandraren*). It has been translated into German (*Wolkenwanderer* 2014), Bulgarian (*Странстваща с облаците* 2015) and English (*Cloud Wanderer* 2021, forthcoming). The Swedish and Finnish books were published by Basam Books, a publishing company owned by a Tatar, and the translations and e-books by Lecti Book Studio (now defunct) and Bokpil.

Sabira Stahlberg's multilingual poetry books *Polyglotta Sabirica* (2015) and *Wan Sun* (2021) both contain Tatar language, and her cook and travel memory book together with Stina Katchadourian,

2 Haiku Colorit: <https://haiku.coloritrf.eu/tt/>

3 Bokpil is a non-profit publisher for Easy to Read and multilingual literature: <https://villa.bokpil.eu/en/>

Sultanens auberginer ‘The eggplants of the Sultan’ (2003, Finnish translation *Sulttaanin salaatti* ‘The salad of the Sultan’) include Tatar recipes and folk stories. All these books have been presented at several Helsinki Book Fairs, and some of the books also at the book fairs in Gothenburg, Sweden, and Frankfurt and Leipzig, Germany.

The Finnish Islamic Congregation, the Tampere Tatar Congregation and the cultural association FTB continue to publish Tatar and multilingual books in Finland, and the multilingual publisher Bokpil also has several Tatar-related projects on the agenda. All new projects contribute to the modernisation and digitalisation of Tatar literature in Finland and globally. There is however a much bigger need especially for Tatar language literature on a broader range of topics than is currently available and also more writers should be encouraged to publish in Tatar. The Tatars in Finland could also export their literature abroad to a higher degree and reach new readers. With the existing knowledge and experience about writing, publishing and distributing books, the Tatars in Finland could reach readers also outside the community. Further, electronic publishing enables connecting more closely with other Tatars globally. To support Tatar literature all possibilities, skills, knowledge and resources available should be utilised.

Thanks

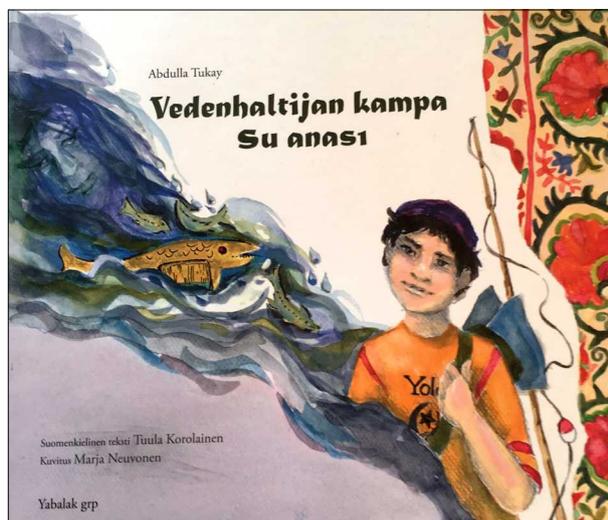
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Kitapsız öy – täräzäsez bülmä.

A home without a book is a room without a window.

Tatar mäkale / proverb