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**Islamic Female Religious Leadership in Poland?  
Women Leaders of Local Muslim Tatar Religious Communities  
– Preliminary Data**

**Summary**

The history of Islamic presence in Poland goes back over 300 years. In the past, Muslim Tatar women played an important role in their communities by preserving and passing on the faith. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century their role expanded, with a high number of women now present at the highest levels of Muslim leadership. Polish Tatar women play a very important role in the community life of Tatar Muslims. The text presents case studies of four Polish Tatar women, who as elected presidents headed traditional local Muslim communities, belonging to the oldest religious organisation of Polish Muslims – the Muslim Religious Union. Their authority to assume the role of chief administrator of their communities is based on family traditions of religious leadership, personality, education etc. Based on interviews with these women and also with members of the religious communities run by them, the paper presents preliminary results of a project researching these women's activities and analysing their role in the local communities as leaders.

**Keywords:** female Islamic religious leadership, Tatars, Muslims in Poland, mosques, Islamic religious organisation

Muslims are one of the traditional religious minorities in Poland and they constitute a small but varied group. Some of them are Tatars, the traditional Polish worshippers of Islam, while others are Muslim immigrants who started to come to Poland in the second half of the twentieth century. Muslim Tatars are fully integrated with the rest of the Polish society; they are native speakers of Polish and they function in Poland just like the rest of the citizens, with the exception that Islam is their religion and that they

nurture some distinct cultural traditions. One of the characteristic features of the traditional Polish Tatar Muslim community is the active participation of women in its religious and social life.

Based on the historical sources which have survived until today, it can be concluded that at least in the nineteenth century Tatar women functioned in the society just like their fellow female citizens of other religious denominations.<sup>1</sup> After the Second World War, when there was a shortage of men suitably educated in religion, women performed some rites and prayers and they were involved in organizing new Muslim communities. Nowadays many women participate in public prayers, impart religious instruction and engage in charity and cultural work.<sup>2</sup> Tatar Muslim women constitute an active group in the life of their own Muslim religious communities with the result that since 1970s they are being chosen as presidents of the local Muslim communities. Until 2015, eight<sup>3</sup> times local Muslim religious communities of the Muslim Religious Union (Pol. *Muzułmański Związek Religijny* – MZR), a traditional religious organization of Polish Muslims, were led by women.

This chapter presents preliminary results of a research done on profiles and activities of four women leaders of local Muslim Tatar religious communities, drawing upon interviews conducted 2010–2014 with them. The article also draws upon surveys conducted to understand the attitudes of the Polish Muslims towards female leaders and author's participant observations<sup>4</sup> done during other research projects on Islam in Poland. First, however, the history of Islam in Poland is briefly described, without which it is impossible to understand the specifics of Polish Islam (one of the traditional religions in this country) and its worshippers, including the source and structure of the religious authority in Polish Islam. The article also presents the Muslim Religious Union in the Republic of Poland, an organization which consists of the local Muslim religious communities, some of which are led by women, and the legal regulations for the Union's functioning which are also the basis for the authority of the official leaders of these communities.

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<sup>1</sup> The historical sources on Polish and Lithuanian Tatars include very little information about women because they usually deal with political and military issues. For more details on the historical situation of Tatar women see: Agata S. Nalborczyk, *Muslim Women in Poland and Lithuania. Tatar tradition, religious practice, hijab and marriage*, in: *Gender and Religion in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by E. Adamiak, M. Chrzastowska, Ch. Methuen, S. Sobkowiak, Faculty of Theology Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań 2009, pp. 58–69.

<sup>2</sup> For more details on religious functioning of Muslim women, including Tatar women, see Nalborczyk, *Muslim Women in Poland and Lithuania...*, pp. 59f.

<sup>3</sup> Or nine; in Warsaw by Ewa Górska was a president of the local community for a short time, but it was impossible to contact her; Artur Konopacki and Aleksander Miśkiewicz, *Muslims on Polish soil*, MZR, Białystok 2008, p. 116.

<sup>4</sup> For more details see: Barbara B. Kawulich, *Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method*, Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research 6:2 (2005), Art. 43, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0502430> (17.05.2015).

## Muslims in Poland

The first Muslims in the territory of the present-day Poland were Tatars who were granted land in Podlachia by the King John III Sobieski in the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup> However, Tatars first appeared within the borders of the Polish state, which was at that time in personal union with Lithuania, as early as in the fourteenth century,<sup>6</sup> when the Tatar settlements began in Lithuania. The Tatars came from the Golden Horde,<sup>7</sup> a Muslim state since the thirteenth century.<sup>8</sup> These settlers were mostly refugees and mercenaries hired to fight the enemies of Lithuania.<sup>9</sup> In return for military service Tatars were granted fief,<sup>10</sup> they also enjoyed freedom of religion and they were allowed to erect mosques.<sup>11</sup> Those Tatars who served in the army received privileges similar to those of the Lithuanian and Polish *szlachta* (the nobility). However, not all Tatars served in the army, some were craftsmen, and others were translators of oriental languages or were employed at magnate courts.<sup>12</sup>

After Poland regained its independence in 1918, nineteen Muslim religious communities found themselves within the Polish borders.<sup>13</sup> In 1925 these communities moved to establish the Muslim Religious Union in the Republic of Poland (Pol. *Muzułmański Związek Religijny w Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*; henceforth MZR), a Muslim religious organization.<sup>14</sup> It was officially recognized by the Polish State in 1936 through an official Act<sup>15</sup> and thus Islam became one of the seven officially recognized denominations.<sup>16</sup> After the Second World War Muslim Tatars were dispersed as a result of postwar migrations and the places for prayer and religious teachers were left in poor supply. In 1947 the Muslim

<sup>5</sup> Tatars still live in some villages which were the subject of historical studies, including Krynki and Sokółka; and in two other, Kruszyniany and Bohoniki, there also still exist historical mosques and cemeteries, so-called *mizars*; Ali Miśkiewicz, *Tatarska legenda. Tatarzy polscy 1945–1990*, KAW, Białystok 1993, pp. 25–26.

<sup>6</sup> Jan Tyszkiewicz, *Z historii Tatarów polskich 1794–1944*, WSH, Pułtusk 2002, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Jan Tyszkiewicz, *Tatarzy na Litwie i w Polsce. Studia z dziejów XIII–XVIII w.*, PWN, Warszawa 1989, pp. 59f.

<sup>8</sup> Piotr Borawski, Aleksander Dubiński, *Tatarzy polscy, Dzieje, obrzędy, tradycje*, Iskry, Warszawa 1986, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> For more details on the history on Tatar settlements in Lithuania and Lithuanian-Tatar relations – see Jan Tyszkiewicz, *Z historii Tatarów polskich*, pp. 14f.

<sup>10</sup> Jacek Sobczak, *Położenie prawne ludności tatarskiej w Wielkim Księstwie Litewskim*, PWN, Warszawa–Poznań 1984, pp. 51f.

<sup>11</sup> Before 1795 there were 23 mosques in the territories of the Polish-Lithuanian state; Stanisław Kryczyński, *Tatarzy litewscy. Próba monografii historyczno-etnograficznej*, Związek Tatarów Polskich, Gdańsk 2000, pp. 160–161.

<sup>12</sup> The Tatars who were granted land were treated as *szlachta*, they had their own family coats of arms, but they did not have full political rights of *szlachta*; see Andrzej B. Zakrzewski, *Czy Tatarzy rzeczywiście nie byli szlachtą?*, “Przegląd Historyczny” 1988, 79, 3, pp. 573–580; P. Borawski, A. Dubiński, *Tatarzy polscy...*, pp. 85–87.

<sup>13</sup> S. Kryczyński, *Tatarzy litewscy...*, p. 162. Kryczyński uses the word ‘parishes’ for these communities.

<sup>14</sup> Aleksander Miśkiewicz, *Tatarzy polscy 1918–1939*, PWN, Warszawa 1990, pp. 35f.

<sup>15</sup> Jacek Sobczak, *Położenie prawne polskich wyznawców islamu*, in: *Islam a świat*, ed. by R. Baecker, Sh. Kitab, Mado, Toruń 2004, pp. 173f.

<sup>16</sup> For more details on the legal situation of Islam in Poland – see Jacek Sobczak, *Położenie prawne tatarskich wyznawców islamu w II Rzeczypospolitej*, “Przegląd Historyczny” 1988, 79, 3, pp. 501–520; Agata S. Nalborczyk, Paweł Borecki, *Relations between Islam and the state in Poland: the legal position of Polish Muslims*, “Islam and Christian Muslim Relations” 2011, 22,3, pp. 343–359.

Religious Union was reactivated. In the 1980s students from Muslim countries, mostly Arabs, started to come to Poland, and some of them stayed in Poland permanently. After 1989, that is, after the fall of the communist regime also business people from Muslim countries (e.g. from Turkey), as well as refugees (above all from Chechnya) began to come to Poland. Despite this the total population of Muslims in Poland remains very small: 5,000–6,000 Tatars and 15,000–25,000 immigrant Muslims, i.e. 0.05–0.08% of the total population of Poland respectively.

### **The present-day organization of the Muslim religious life**

Poland is a secular state which does not fund religious organizations. The relationship between the main religious organizations and the state is regulated by acts of parliament. Other religious organizations must be registered in the State Registry of Churches and Religious Associations and enjoy less privileges. While the Muslim Religious Union of the Republic of Poland (MZR) remains the only Muslim organization of Polish Muslims, that operates on the basis of a special Act of Parliament, the Act of 21 April 1936,<sup>17</sup> some immigrant Muslims registered the Muslim League (Pol. *Liga Muzułmańska w Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej*; LM), a new religious organization of Sunni Muslims, in 2004.

The religious life of Polish Muslims is based on national organizations that have their local communities. These communities are similar to Christian parishes: they operate on a certain territory and are responsible (also financially) for the religious activities on this territory, which includes functioning of mosques and prayer halls. There are four purpose-built mosques in Poland (three belong to the MZR and one to LM), but each local community has its own prayer hall (or halls) if there is no purpose-built mosque.

Each local community has an elected president and the board, who in consultation with the community appoint the imams to the community mosque.

### **The Muslim Religious Union and female leaders**

Tatar Muslim women do not lead prayers in the mosques but they are very prominent in leadership positions within the MZR and in imparting education to Muslim children. The MZR is led by the All-Polish Congress of the Muslim Religious Union, summoned every five years, and by the Highest Board, which operates on a daily basis, with the Mufti as its President.<sup>18</sup> Two out of five members of the Highest Board are women:

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<sup>17</sup> For more details on the contemporary functioning of Islam in Poland – see Agata S. Nalborczyk, Stanisław Grodz, *Poland*, in: *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, ed. by J.S. Nielsen, A. Alibašić, S. Akgönül, E. Račius, Brill, Leiden 2014, pp. 472–486.

<sup>18</sup> The position of mufti has been held since 2004 for the first time after the Second World War.

Rozalia Bogdanowicz is secretary and Mierjema Chalecka-Giembicka treasurer.<sup>19</sup> The MZR operates based on seven local Muslim religious communities in Białystok, Bohoniki, Gdańsk, Kruszyniany, Podlódów and two in Warszawa. The leaders of each one of these seven Muslim communities, i.e. the presidents, are elected democratically. Every local religious community is a legal person, therefore responsibilities of the president include representing the community before local authorities and supervising the finances. The president thus becomes more important than the imam who only leads prayers and delivers sermons and is not responsible for functioning of the mosque or the prayer hall. At present there are two women, who are elected presidents of local communities – i.e. Lejla Majewska in Białystok and Elżbieta Tarkowska-Chatila in Podlódów. However, in 2012 for example women were presidents in three out of eight religious communities of the MZR: Halima Szahidewicz in Białystok, Tamara Szabanowicz in Gdańsk, and Mirosława Korycka in Bohoniki. They were not, however, the first women to hold the positions of the presidents of religious communities – the position of the president of the religious community in Gdańsk had been for many years held by Dżemila Smajkiewicz-Murman, in Gorzów Wielkopolski by Rozalia Aleksandrowicz.<sup>20</sup> Their profiles are presented below.

### Dżemila Smajkiewicz-Murman

The first woman to hold the position of a leader of a Muslim religious community in Poland was Dżemila Smajkiewicz-Murman, elected in Gdańsk. The religious community in Gdańsk was established after the Second World War in the territories annexed to Poland after the end of the war – partly in the area of the Free City of Danzig (Pol. *Wolne Miasto Gdańsk*), and partly in the so-called Western Territories, which had been part of the Third Reich before the war and were annexed to Poland in exchange for Polish Eastern territories taken over by the Soviet Union. Tatars who, as it was mentioned above, inhabited Eastern parts of Poland prior the war, were “repatriated” and found themselves in places where there had never been Muslim inhabitants before. In the repatriated groups of people there were imams from prior the war, and Tatars often followed an imam and tried to live near him.<sup>21</sup>

Descending from the family of imams, Dżemila Smajkiewicz-Murman was elected the president of the local religious community in 1979 and she held the function for almost 22 years until 2001. Apart from representing the local religious community before the state authorities, her duties included: organizing the religious life of the community, including public Friday and holiday prayers; helping the poor; attending funerals and delivering speeches during such ceremonies; representing the local religious community

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<sup>19</sup> This is not a new phenomenon, during previous terms of office women were also members of the Highest Board, for instance Halima Szahidewicz, who is one of the women described in this article, as well as Helena Szabanowicz, a sister of another leader of a Muslim religious community described in this article.

<sup>20</sup> Rozalia Aleksandrowicz died in 2008 so that it was impossible to interview her. Also in Warsaw by Ewa Góralska for a short time; A. Konopacki and A. Miśkiewicz. *Muslims on Polish...*, 116.

<sup>21</sup> A. Miśkiewicz, *Tatarska legenda...*, pp. 15–16.

during meetings with political leaders from Muslim countries (e.g. during the visit of the president of Turkey in Poland).<sup>22</sup>

Smajkiewicz-Murman's greatest achievement is, however, the fact that during her tenure the Muslim religious community in Gdańsk erected a mosque. As a new community, Muslims in Gdańsk did not have a place of prayer and met at private homes. When the community started considering the construction of the place of prayer, the first idea was to create it in Dżemila Smajkiewicz-Murman's family house, as her father was an imam. Later a mosque building committee was established by Smajkiewicz-Murman together with other representatives of Tatar intellectuals. The mosque in Gdańsk is an evidence of her contributions to the Muslims in Poland.

### **Tamara Szabanowicz**

Tamara Szabanowicz was the second woman to hold the position of the president of the local religious community in Gdańsk. She replaced Dżemila Smajkiewicz-Murman in 2001. She comes from an eminent family who contributed a lot to the community in Gdańsk: her father, Bekir Szabanowicz, organized the community at the beginning of its functioning, he was also its second leader; while Adam Szabanowicz, Tamara Szabanowicz's grandfather, was one of the imams.<sup>23</sup> Her responsibilities as the president of a local religious community included taking care of the mosque and undertaking fundraising. She tried to help Muslim emigrants and refugees in Gdańsk. She organized religious education in the community and taught Islam to Muslim children. As she stated, this task required constant broadening of her knowledge, but it was also a pleasure for her, because she is proud of the tradition and achievements of the Tatars.

### **Halima (Halina) Szahidewicz<sup>24</sup>**

Halima Szahidewicz is a doyenne and one of the most important people in the largest Polish local Muslim religious community in Białystok.<sup>25</sup> She was elected in 1987 and she is the first woman to hold this position in her community. Unlike the two prior case analyzed, Szahidewicz does not come from a highly influential Muslim family who would have been involved in the life of the community before or after the war.

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<sup>22</sup> In the interviews the women leaders used the term 'parishioners' to described the members of the religious communities, a Christian term used by the majority of the Polish society.

<sup>23</sup> A. Konopacki, A. Miśkiewicz, *Muslims on Polish...*, p. 115.

<sup>24</sup> During the communist regime authorities often did not want to allow naming children with Muslim names, therefore, parents found names which were approved by the authorities and sounded closest to the Muslim names, and these were officially registered. Therefore, for instance, Emir was registered as Emil, Ali as Aleksander and Halima as Halina.

<sup>25</sup> For more details see: Aleksander A. Miśkiewicz, and Janusz Kamocki, *Tatarzy Słowiańszczyzną obłaskawieni*, Universitas, Kraków 2004, p. 138.

Her duties as the president of the local Muslim religious community included organizing the whole religious life of the community.<sup>26</sup> Szahidewicz engaged in organizing everyday public prayers as well as those on Fridays and during holidays, night prayers during Ramadan, and meals at the time of opening the fast, *iftars*. She called the community assemblies during which imams were chosen, she represented the community to the state authorities, as well as to the suitable ministries or ambassadors of Muslim countries. She kept register books of the members of the community and she appointed individuals to take part in the pilgrimage to Mecca. The religious community in Białystok has a prayer house<sup>27</sup> and Halima Szahidewicz's duties as the leader included the administration of the house. She was also responsible for organizing religious instruction in the community. This is considered a very important responsibility, because in 1992 the religious instruction of religious denominations officially recognized by the state was introduced into the public school system<sup>28</sup> and MZR started to teach Islam as inter-school classes in public schools.<sup>29</sup> Szahidewicz supervised the education of public teachers who taught Islamic curriculum in public schools. Szahidewicz supervised also the school registers of the teachers, and prepared job contracts for them, which were issued by the Ministry of National Education. She also replaced absent teachers to ensure smooth functioning of the Islamic education system in the community.

Szahidewicz was and is still involved in organizing meetings and conferences and in publishing books and magazines which serve to maintain religious and cultural tradition of Muslim Tatars, and to spread knowledge on it among Tatar youth and among most of the society. Despite her advanced age, Szahidewicz found both time and strength for other activities as well. She founded and led an artistic group of Tatar youth called 'Buńczuk', whose members present traditional Tatar dances, recite poetry and sing old songs.<sup>30</sup> For years she has also been involved in the interreligious dialogue, she is a co-founder of the Common Council of Catholics and Muslims, and she was a member of the board of the Council for many years. In her religious community she collaborates with local parishes and invites Christians to prayers for the peace.

She is well respected not only among her own religious community,<sup>31</sup> but also in all of the Polish Tatar and Polish Muslim communities. She is well-known in Poland, she often gives media interviews, she is invited to women's meetings with the first ladies of subsequent Polish presidents.

<sup>26</sup> Halima Szahidewicz also used the Christian term 'parish' and 'parishioner' in the interview.

<sup>27</sup> At the same time it is the headquarters of the Highest Board of the Muslim Religious Union.

<sup>28</sup> For more details on this subject see Nalborczyk, Borecki, *Relations between Islam and the state in Poland...*, pp. 351–352.

<sup>29</sup> For more details see: Agata S. Nalborczyk, *Islamic religious education in Poland – curricula and textbooks*, in: *Islamic textbooks and curricula in Europe*, ed. by E. Aslan, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main 2011, p. 185.

<sup>30</sup> For more details see: Miśkiewicz and Kamocki, *Tatarzy Słowiańszczyzn...*, pp. 139–140.

<sup>31</sup> Miśkiewicz and Kamocki, *Tatarzy Słowiańszczyzn...*, p. 138.

### Mirosława Korycka

In Bohoniki, one of the two oldest Muslim religious communities in Poland,<sup>32</sup> Mirosława Korycka had been the president of the local community since 2001 until 2013. She was the first woman to hold this position in her community. She was responsible for all secular duties connected with the functioning of the religious community, that is, the upkeep of the historical mosque in Bohoniki from the second half of the nineteenth century, of the parish house, of two historical cemeteries, so-called *mizars*, of the house of prayer and of the pilgrim house in Suchowola,<sup>33</sup> and organizing religious instruction, also in public schools. As the president of the local religious community, she represented the community before local and state authorities and took part in official events such as the Independence Day on 11<sup>th</sup> November.

Mirosława Korycka admits that she accepted the function of the leader of the religious community because she was worried about the condition of the historical mosque, the parish house and the cemeteries in Bohoniki. She notes, they were in a pitiful condition and required immediate renovation.<sup>34</sup> Korycka, as the new president, managed to collect and properly use the financial resources from the Ministry of Interior and Administration (Department of Denominations and National and Ethnic Minorities), from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, and from local authorities to preserve these buildings. The range of works that have been conducted is extensive: thorough renovation of the mosque, cleaning of the surrounding area of the mosque, fencing of both cemeteries, renovation of historical tombstones, expansion and thorough renovation of the pilgrim house in Bohoniki, acquiring and thorough renovation of the pilgrim house in Suchowola, etc.

As the president of the local religious community, Mirosława Korycka was in charge of organizing various meetings and events such as on the occasion of celebrating 330 years of Tatar settlement in Podlachia, the Tatar Children's Day, as well as culinary events devoted to traditional Tatar dishes. Three other women were chosen to the board of the religious community in Bohoniki during this term of office: Dżenetta Miśkiewicz was treasurer, while Mira Miśkiewicz and Ewa Sułkiewicz were the members of the board; there was only one man in the board.

Mirosława Korycka (nee Miśkiewicz) states that she carried on the family tradition of the need for the active participation in the life of the Muslim community. Two brothers of Mirosława Korycka took active part in the life of the Muslim religious community as well, and one of them, Adam Miśkiewicz, was the president of the local religious community in Białystok.<sup>35</sup> Mirosława Korycka is a retired primary school teacher.

The greatest achievement of Mirosława Korycka was the renovation of the historical mosque, cleaning of the surrounding area of the mosque, renovation of the pilgrim houses.

<sup>32</sup> Tatars were granted the village of Bohoniki by the king of Poland John III Sobieski 1679.

<sup>33</sup> Suchowola is large village in the territory of the Bohoniki religious community.

<sup>34</sup> As she emphasized in the interview, before her the leader of the religious community was a man.

<sup>35</sup> Before Halima Szahidewicz; Konopacki, Miśkiewicz, *Muslims on Polish soil*, p. 115.

## Conclusions

The religious life of Polish Muslims is regulated by acts of parliament and other legal regulations. On the organizational level it is based on national organizations and their local divisions – religious communities, which function in a way similar to Christian parishes. The most important person in each local community within the MZR, the oldest and biggest Muslim religious organization in Poland, is the president of the community, elected democratically by members of the community. The authority of the president of the local community is based on the Act of Parliament dated 21 April 1936 and on the internal Statute of MZR ratified by the state authority.

While the authority of the president of the local community on one hand results from the above mentioned legal regulations, on the other hand, it also stems from the individual characteristics of a particular person such as leadership abilities or devotion to the community and sometimes lineage. The profiles of the former female presidents of the local Muslim religious communities in Poland, show that while family lineage played some role in creating space for them as leaders of Muslim communities, they came to assert their authority due to their active involvement in the religious life of the Muslim communities. Muslim women leaders are respected and obeyed, while properly dressed, none of these women leaders wear any kind of veil on a daily basis, except during the time of prayer.<sup>36</sup>

In a survey conducted within Muslim communities, the most frequent answer to the question why women in Poland are chosen to be the leaders of the religious communities was that in each case, regardless of sex, the character of a particular woman was a decisive factor, and that she was the best candidate to this position. Some stated that women are better suited than men to hold this function thanks to their empathy, the ability to work in a team, the use of diplomacy, because they introduce law and order and promote respect for life, and even because office clerks are more willing to help a woman who is in trouble. All the surveyed people emphasized the equality of women and men in religious matters and in religious rites. Women's leadership of local Muslim religious communities constitutes thus a salient feature of present day Polish Tatar Islam and their personal agency, and not just family lineage, is critical to assertion of their authority.

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<sup>36</sup> For more details on the dress of Polish Muslim women see Nalborczyk, *Muslim Women in Poland and Lithuania...*, pp. 65–66.