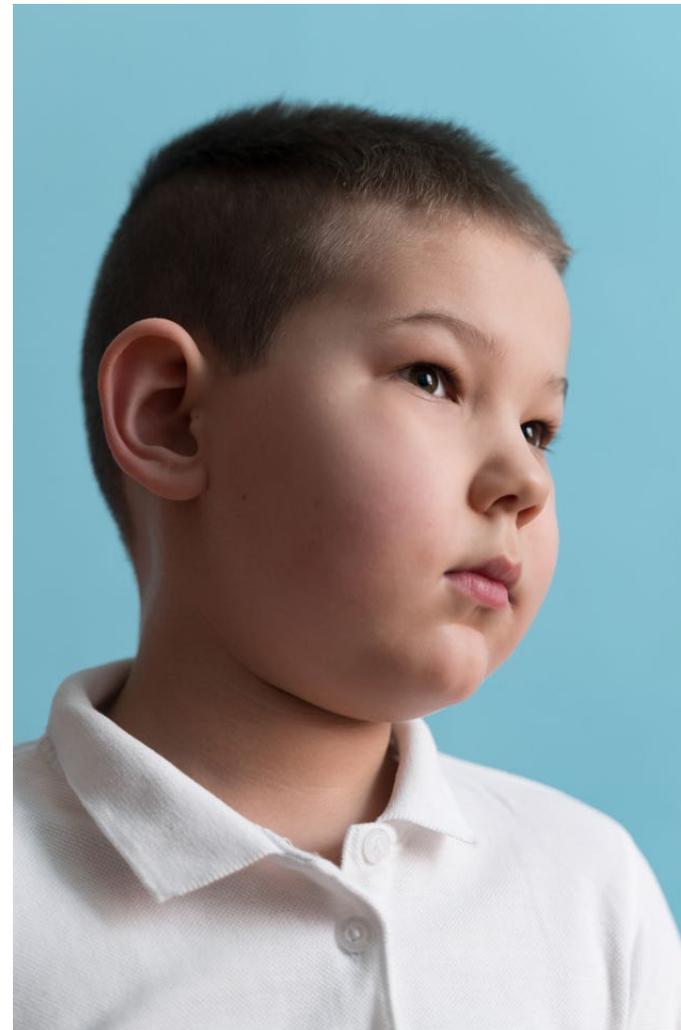


POLAND

The Lipka Tatars: Polish Muslims

by Stefano Marzoli





Kruszyniany. The landscape near the border with Belarus. The Kruszyniany village has a population of 160. In the past, it was primarily a Lipka Tatar settlement. Today the Tatars still make up the only minority in the village.



A BORDER REGION HOME TO A MINORITY WITH ANCIENT TRADITIONS

- A Muslim minority of Lipka Tatars live in the region of Podlasie, near the border with Belarus.
 - The first Tatars, brave horsemen, settled in the area in the 1300s after the fall of the Mongol Empire.
 - This area that is a cultural crossroads was recently the epicentre of the migrant crisis on the border between Poland and Belarus.
 - The villages that are home to the Tatar minority witnessed the humanitarian tragedy and helped the few migrants that managed to cross the border, burying those that died trying.
 - In spite of a cohabitation that has lasted centuries, in ultra-catholic Poland there has been no shortage of episodes of intolerance.
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A tiny antique Koran in the hand of Bronisław Talkowski, the head of the Muslim Cultural Centre in Kruszyniany. The item is from the village's historical collection.





Most of the Tatar minority live in the Podlasie region in Białowieża National Park, Poland's oldest national park. The park's characteristic feature is its world-renowned biodiversity: it has been a biosphere reserve since 1976 and was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1992.



Białystok. Dagmara Sulkiewicz is a graduate of the Faculty of Management at the Białystok University of Technology and the College of Foreign Languages. Since 2004 she has taught the Muslim religion at the Muslim Religious Community of the MZR (Muslim Religious Union) in Białystok, and in 2016 she became the coordinator of the religious department at the Highest Muslim College of the MZR in the Republic of Poland. Co-author of the book *Introduction to Daily Prayer* (2011) and the brochure *Discover Islam* (2008, 2016), she conducts workshops in the field of intercultural education for children.



Kruszyniany. A vintage photo from the collection at the village's Muslim Cultural Centre. The first Tatars, known as Lipka Tatars, settled in the then Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which later became part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 14th century. A contingent of Tatars fought on the Polish side in the great Battle of Grunwald in 1410. Tatars settled in the areas of what is now Belarus and Lithuania. Many of the families, already distinguished or even carrying the Mirza surname, were ennobled by the Polish kings for their military prowess and achievements.



In traditionally ultra-Catholic Poland, currently in the grip of populist nationalists, a very small community of Muslims has survived since the 14th century – the Lipka Tatars, or Lithuanian Tatars (Lipka means Lithuania in Tatar).

These Horsemen who joined the Polish Lithuanian commonwealth as refugees after the fall of the Mongolian Empire were famed as skilled warriors and went on to receive land and noble status. Tatar cavalry divisions, with the crescent moon sewn onto their uniforms, fought for Poland in numerous wars, first against the Ottoman empire, in contrast to its stereotyped classification as a “religious war”, and then, more recently, in the First and Second World Wars.

Today most of them have moved to the cities but in their original villages in eastern Podlasie, an ancient crossroads of cultures and religions, there are still Tatar families living in wooden homes located near the mosque.

Recently this area became the epicentre of the migration crisis on the border between Poland and Belarus, where thousands of migrants massed along the frontiers in a desperate attempt to enter Europe. Just a few kilometres from the barbed wire that marks the eastern edge of the European Union, inhabitants of Kruszyniany and Bohoniki, two villages that epitomize the Tatar minority, showed their humanity in the face of this tragedy. Today the ancient wooden mosque takes in the few cold and hungry migrants that do manage to cross the border, while in its cemetery are buried those refugees that died of thirst and hunger in the forest, their tombs pointing towards Mecca.

Białystok. The unfinished shell of the Islamic Cultural Centre. Construction began in the early 1990s but was mothballed when the Polish economy began to tank. Some years ago Saudi Arabia announced it would fund the building of a new Islamic cultural centre in the village.





Bohoniki. Maciej Szczęsnowicz, is the chairman of the local Muslim community. Maciej was moved to tears when he first saw migrants at the border, hungry and exhausted from the ordeal of being stuck while trying to enter from Belarus. He saw people so tired they could no longer stand, so hungry that they picked mushrooms from the ground to eat and when given an apple, they also ate the seeds.



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Kruszyniany. A visit from Prince Charles in 2010 provided the impetus for regional authorities to fund the construction of the cultural centre in order to prevent the British royal from having to wade through the mud between the mosque and Tatarska Jurta. Now there is a space where the community can practice *azan* and celebrate weddings and funerals.



Białystok. The Bunchuk Dance Group was established in 1999. It brings together children, teenagers and adults of Tatar descent as well as those from the mixed families domiciled in the region. The group strives to maintain the tradition of dances, music and songs inherited from the Tatar ancestors who had once settled in the Podlasie region. The group also promotes Tatar culture, both in Poland and internationally, showcasing Podlasie as a colourful multicultural region.



Bohoniki. The Muslim cemetery (*Mizar*) in Bohoniki was probably founded in the 18th century and enlarged to its current size in the 19th century. A relatively small number of historic gravestones have survived. The oldest of them dates back to 1796 and most of their inscriptions are no longer legible. These are usually granite stones with a smooth face and rounded at the top. Stelae and obelisks can also be found. The post-war gravestones resemble those found in the Christian cemeteries. Most of them have a form of stele and are made of terrazzo, a few are made of granite or marble. The inscriptions, usually in Polish (though a few Russian inscriptions have survived), are accompanied by verses from the Quran and a symbolic representation of a crescent with a star.



Kruszyniany. Dżenneta Bogdanowicz on the construction site at Tatarska Jurta. Dżenneta founded Tatarska Jurta, a homestay, restaurant and Tatar cultural centre in the village but, unfortunately, in 2018 it burned down. Rebuilding work has now started thanks to help from people all over the world. To promote the Tatar traditions, a festival called Sabantuy is celebrated here at the beginning of August. A Tatar holiday imported recently from Tatarstan, it is an occasion to integrate the community and a great way to showcase the Tatars' uniqueness to guests and tourists.



Bohoniki mosque was built at the end of the nineteenth century, most likely in 1873. It was constructed after a fire burnt down a previous Tatar mosque on the same site. During World War II, the building was badly damaged by the Wehrmacht and transformed into a field hospital. After 1945, the mosque had undergone numerous small renovations; there were plans to expand it but these were prevented from coming to fruition.



Kruszyniany mosque. The wooden building is the oldest Lipka Tatar mosque in Poland. The interior is decorated with rugs, and the walls with calligraphic quotes from the Koran. In 2014, during a surge of Islamophobic attacks in Poland, the wall of the mosque was defaced with a drawing of a pig and the adjacent cemetery was vandalized with abusive graffiti.



Kruszyniany. A vintage photo from a collection at the village's Muslim Cultural Centre. In 1683, during King Jan III Sobieski's Vienna Campaign, a Tatar light cavalry company took part in breaking the siege of Vienna. A few weeks after the victory, the king almost lost his life during the disastrous Battle of Parkany but survived thanks to the Tatar Colonel Samuel Mirza Krzczowski. As a reward, the Tatars were given land in the villages of Kruszyniany, Nietupa, Łużany and elsewhere. Since then, Tatars have participated in all the wars the Polish state has been involved in, fighting for their homeland.



Białystok. An after-school class of Arabic language and Muslim religion. The teacher is Dagmara Sulkiwicz, a graduate of the Faculty of Management at the Białystok University of Technology and the Teachers' College of Foreign Languages.



Białowieża. Most of the Tatar minority live in the Podlasie region in the Białowieża National Park. The Natural History Museum of Białowieża Park is an immense building featuring a tower that offers panoramic views of the woods. The museum houses stuffed animals and various films enabling visitors to see hunting as it was once practiced and to appreciate the work of protecting nature. In addition to the bison, other 51 species of mammals can be found in the park, such as the red deer, the roe deer, the wild boar, moose, brown bears, the wolves, European lynx, the red fox, the otter and various species of shrew, rodents and bats.



Bohoniki. Eugenia Radkiewicz, the custodian of the Bohoniki mosque, wears a sequined Islamic cap. "History has it that the Mongolian warriors who came here and remained to fight for the Polish Grand Duchy married Polish women. The men took Polish surnames while the women embraced their husbands' Muslim religion."



Kruszyniany. Fundraising for the rebuilding of the Tatarska Jurta, a homestay, restaurant and Tatar cultural centre in the village that, unfortunately, burned down in 2018. Rebuilding work has now started thanks to help from people all over the world.



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Kruszyniany. Selim Gembicki with his father Dżemil at their family home. Since Dżemil is Tatar and his wife Katarzyna is Roman Catholic, they decided to raise their son as a Tatar Muslim and their daughter Lila as a Roman Catholic. Katarzyna is the mayor of the village, Dżemil is the caretaker of Kruszyniany Mosque.



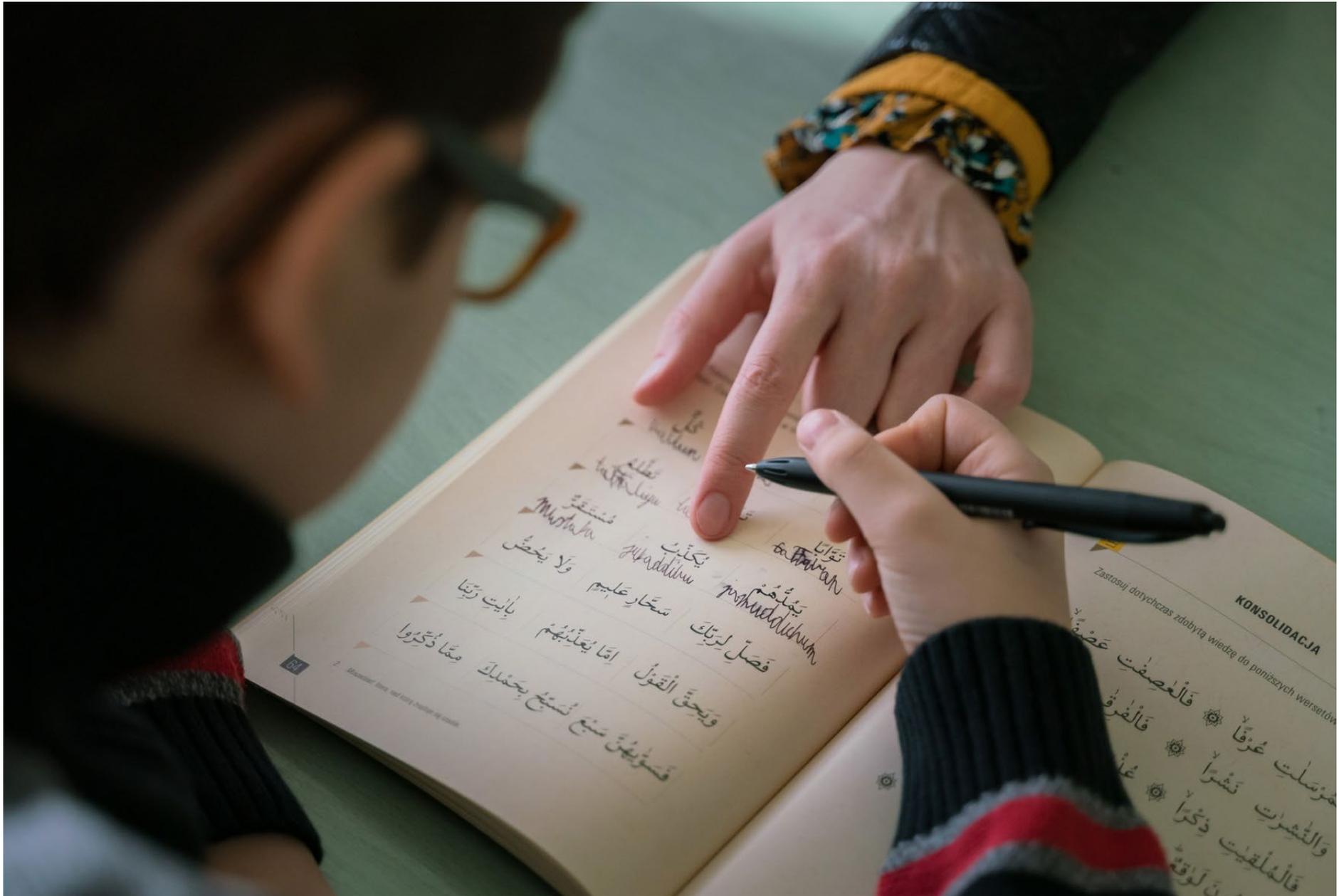
Kruszyniany. Tatars had their own cavalry unit in the interwar period, with all the Polish insignia on their uniforms, but also the crescent moon and star of Islam.



Kruszyniany. Bronisław Talkowski, the head of the village's Muslim Cultural Centre, and his wife.



Białystok. The unfinished shell of Islamic Cultural Center. Construction began in the early 1990s but stalled when the Polish economy began to tank. Years ago Saudi Arabia announced it would fund the building of a new Islamic cultural center in Białystok.



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Kruszyniany. Dżemil Gembicki, the caretaker of Kruszyniany Mosque. The wooden building is the oldest Lipka Tatar mosque in Poland. The interior is decorated with rugs, and the walls with calligraphic quotes from the Koran. In 2014, during a surge of Islamophobic attacks in Poland, the wall of the mosque was defaced with a drawing of a pig and the adjacent cemetery was vandalized with abusive graffiti.



Kruszyniany. A Polish Tatar.



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