

Khafiz Sarsekeev, the forgotten co-author of the first Kyrgyz printed book *ABC for high-speed learning to read* (1911)

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Abstract

This paper presents newly discovered biographical information about the Kazakh educator Khafiz Sarsekeev (1886-1929), the co-author with Eshenaaly Arabaev (1882-1933) of the Kyrgyz and Kazakh children's abecedary *ABC for high-speed learning to read* [Алип-бээ жаки төтө окуу]. Published in Ufa by Shark Publishing in 1911, the abecedary was the very first book ever printed in Kyrgyz. As the inaugural publication in a native language, it holds undeniable historical significance. Eshenaaly Arabaev, one of the authors of the aforementioned abecedary, as well as a well-known educator and author of textbooks, head of the Kyrgyz Scientific Commission and political figure in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia, is familiar to historians and the general population. However, until recently, practically nothing but his name was known about Khafiz Sarsekeyev (1882/83-1926/27), the co-author of the primer. This paper presents information on his education and teaching activities in Jadid medreses, as well as his social and political activities. This newly discovered information is the result of researching articles written by Sarsekeev and other authors in Kazakh-language newspapers and magazines published between 1913 and 1924. A few previously unpublished documents and photographs from the Sarsekeev family archive supplement the information found in the newspapers. The findings presented in this article provide a portrait of the Jadid educator who became also a public and political figure. We can trace similarities in the fates of the Kyrgyz and Kazakh educators of the early twentieth century.

Keywords: Central Asia, intellectual history, Kazakh press, *medrese*, Jadidism, Alash, Eshenaaly Arabaev

Résumé

Cet article présente des informations biographiques récemment découvertes sur l'éducateur kazakh Khafiz Sarsekeev (1886-1929), coauteur avec Eshenaaly Arabaev (1882-1933) de l'abécédaire pour enfants kyrgyz et kazakhs *ABC pour apprendre à lire rapidement* [Алип-бээ жаки төтө окуу]. Publié à Oufa par Shark Publishing en 1911, cet abécédaire fut le tout premier livre imprimé en kyrgyz. En tant que première publication dans une langue autochtone, il revêt une importance historique indéniable. Eshenaaly Arabaev, l'un des auteurs de l'abécédaire susmentionné, éducateur et auteur de manuels scolaires renommé, président de la Commission scientifique kyrgyz et personnalité politique au Kyrgyzstan et en Asie centrale, est bien connu des historiens et du grand public. Cependant, jusqu'à récemment, on ne savait pratiquement rien d'autre que son nom à propos de Khafiz Sarsekeev (1882/83-1926/27), coauteur du manuel. Cet article présente des informations sur sa formation et ses activités d'enseignement dans les *medreses* djadides, ainsi que sur ses activités sociales et politiques. Ces informations récemment découvertes sont le résultat de recherches menées sur des articles écrits par Sarsekeev et d'autres auteurs dans des journaux et magazines en langue kazakhe publiés entre 1913 et 1924. Quelques documents et photographies inédits provenant des archives de la famille Sarsekeev complètent les informations trouvées dans les journaux. Les conclusions présentées dans cet article dressent le portrait de cet éducateur djadide qui est également devenu une personnalité publique et politique. On peut trouver des similitudes dans le destin des éducateurs kyrgyz et kazakhs du début du XX^e siècle.

Mots-clés : Asie centrale, histoire intellectuelle, presse kazakhe, *medrese*, djadidisme, Alash, Eshenaaly Arabaev

Introduction

This paper presents newly discovered biographical information about Khafiz Sarsekeev, the co-author with Eshenaaly Arabaev (1882-1933) of *ABC for high-speed learning to read* [Алип-бээ жаки төтө окуу – وقوا كتوت مكاي ابغل]. Published in 1911 by the Tatar publisher Orient [Шарк] based in Ufa (Азаматова 2020, 1251-1252), the abecedary intended for Kyrgyz and Kazakh children was the very first book ever printed in Kyrgyz. As the inaugural publication in a native language, it holds undeniable historical significance. Eshenaaly Arabaev, one of the authors, was a well-known educator and author of textbooks and has been appointed head of the Kyrgyz Scientific Commission during the Soviet times. He became a major political figure in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia, to whom many publications have been devoted (Абдрахманов 2013; Карыева 2017). Until recently, practically nothing was known about Khafiz Sarsekeev [Sarseke uly]¹ (1886-1929),² except for his name. This paper aims to provide a more accurate representation of him by addressing this oversight.

Many details of his life have been established through research into the Kazakh press to which he himself contributed. Both Kazakh and Kyrgyz intellectuals of the first quarter of the twentieth century published articles and literary experiments in Kazakh newspapers and magazines which were edited in Arabic script. Over the past five years, these periodicals have been transliterated from Arabic script into the Cyrillic Kazakh alphabet which has made these sources more accessible for researchers.³ These include the newspapers *Kazakh* [Қазақ] (1913-1918) (Субханбердина 1998; Әнес 2023d), *Yellow Ridge* [Сарыарқа] (1917-1919) (Әнес 2023c) and *The Bright Path* [Ақ жол] (1920-1926) (Есенқарақызы 2020), and the magazines *Alas* [Айқап] (1911-1915) (Субханбердина 1995; Әнес 2023a; Әнес 2023b) and the *Morning Star* [Шолпан] (1922-1923) (Жаңысбекова 2010). The first newspaper in the Kyrgyz language, *Free Mountains* [Эркин Тоо], also using Arabic script was launched on 7 November 1924.

Having initial information about his place of residence and activities, we found Sarsekeev's descendants, which allowed us to clarify and supplement the details of his biography with photographs and several previously unpublished documents from the family archive.

The new biographical information on Sarsekeev provides a portrait of the Jadid educator who was also an active public and political figure. We can trace similarities in the fates of the Kyrgyz and Kazakh educators of the early twentieth century, who faced similar challenges and circumstances. Without denying the distinct national character of the Kyrgyz and Kazakh peoples, this biography explores a transnational intellectual history. It began under the auspices of Jadidism during the Tsarist colonial period and continued under Soviet national policy.

¹ Kazakh male surnames are traditionally formed from the father's given name and the word for "son" – uly [in Kyrgyz, uluu], for example, Sarseke uly or Sarseke balasy, meaning "son of Sarseke." The Russified version of these surnames was officially used by the authorities of the Russian Empire by adding the endings -ov, -ev, and -in to the father's given name. Therefore, publications often feature various spellings of this man's surname: Sarseke uly, Sarseke balasy, Sarsekeev, or even simply Sarseke (Khafiz Sarseke).

² Contrary to the dates given previously (1882/83-1926/27), his year of birth and death have been established thanks to family archives. He died in 1929 of illness at the age of 43. The Kazakhs, like the Kyrgyz, did not keep birth records during the Tsarist period. Years of birth can therefore only be established from later documents: Личный архив Шолпан Несибековой (Алматы). Жусипхан Сарсенов. Сведения о Хафизе Сарсееве и семье Биляловых от 10.10.1974. Л. 1-2 [рукопись] [Personal archive of Sholpan Nesibekova (Almaty). Zhusipkhan Sarsenov. Information about Khafiz Sarsekeev and the Bilyalov family dated 10 October 1974, pp. 1-2 (manuscript)].

³ The Arabic script was used in Kazakh and Kyrgyz until 1928, when Latin alphabet replaced it. In 1940, the Soviet Union's leadership decided to replace the Latin alphabet in the Turkic languages of the Soviet republics, including Kyrgyz and Kazakh, with the Cyrillic alphabet, which remains in use today (Hallez 2003). Due to the succession of generations over a century, the texts of periodicals from the first quarter of the twentieth century became inaccessible to the majority of the population.

Education – from classmates to co-authors, 1909-1912

Of the two co-authors, Eshenaaly Arabaev was the elder, a Kyrgyz born in 1882 in the Tokmak *uezd* of the Semirechye oblast (Абдрахманов 2013, 240). According to the Registration card⁴ of the employee of Zaisan district department of public education [Зайсанский уездный отдел народного образования] filled out by himself in 1923, Sarsekeev was born in 1886 in the Petropavlovsk *uezd* of the Akmolinsk oblast. As mentioned in a letter by his descendants which related the familial memory on Sarsekeev, he belonged to the Kerei lineage group of the Kazakh Middle *zhuz*. His grand-daughter, Sholpan Nesibekova, related, that “my grandfather [Sarsekeev]’s parents were wealthy, so they were able to send him to Ufa to study at the Galiya medrese, a renowned educational institution in Russia at the time” (Даниярова 2023b).

He studied from 1909 to 1912 at the “Galiya” *medrese* (Muslim religious and secondary educational institution) in Ufa, where he met with Eshenaaly Arabaev. The “Galiya Dinia” *medrese*, which existed in Ufa from October 1906 to 1919 for Tatars and other Turkic peoples, shared Jadid ideas. The high-quality systematic work of the teachers and the intensive curriculum produced stable results in the form of a high level of knowledge among the *shakirds* (students) (Сукталиев 1996). In this intellectually vibrant atmosphere, students coming from all over the Russian empire exchanged and shared ideas for the future. The two schoolmates, Arabaev and Sarsekeev, were passionate about the project to develop schools and Jadid education among their compatriots. They planned to become teachers.

When the abecedary was published, they were still studying in Ufa. Arabaev and Sarsekeev intended to spread the Jadid method of teaching reading among Kyrgyz and Kazakh children. The new method [Usul Jadid] was designed to simplify the learning to read and make it quicker. Their abecedary, consisting of 53 pages, was to be used as a textbook in schools. The following year, Arabaev issued, on his own, another textbook to teach the writing, *Basics of spelling* [Жазуу өрнөктөрү], which was published in Orenburg by the Vakyt printing house.



Figure 1. Khafiz Sarsekeev (7 July 1910)

Between 1911 and 1914, a total of five books were published in Kyrgyz using Arabic script. Three of them were due to the initiative and efforts of Eshenaaly Arabaev: the two aforementioned publications and a poem by Moldo Kylych Shamyrganov [Shamyrgan uulu] (1866-1917), a renowned Kyrgyz *akyn* [improvisational poet, singer] and thinker. Arabaev wrote the preface to *The Earthquake* [Кысса-и-Зилзала – قىسسى و زىلزىلى], published in Kazan in 1911. Two more books, written by Osmonaaly Sydykov [Sydyk uulu] (1875-1942) considered as the first Kyrgyz historian, present Kyrgyz genealogy, which, in our opinion, successfully complements the set of books needed by the first Kyrgyz readers. Short History of the Kyrgyz [Мухтасар тарых-и Кыргызийа – مصتحر تاريخ كىرگىزىيى] and Kyrgyz History dedicated to Shabdan, [Тарых-и кыргыз Шадманийа – تاريخ كىرگىزى شادمانيىا] were published in Ufa respectively in 1913 and 1914.

All these five books were printed at a private expense in the cities of Ufa, Kazan and Orenburg by Tatar printing houses. Unfortunately, due to major historical upheavals, namely the First World War and the rebellion of 1916 followed by exile of northern Kyrgyz to China, which went down

⁴ Личный архив Шолпан Несибековой (Алматы). «Учётная карточка». Жусипхан Сарсенов. Сведения о Хафизе Сарсееве и семье Биялыовых от 10.10.1974. Л. 1-2 : [рукопись] Private family archive of Sholpan Nesibekova (Almaty). “Registration card.” Zhusipkhan Sarsenov. Biographical data about Khafiz Sarsekeev and the Bilyalov family written on 10.10.1974. L. 1-2 [manuscript].

in history under the name “Urkun,” [Үркүн – panic flight] (Chobokaeva 2019), book printing in Kyrgyz language was cut short. It resumed under the Soviet government ten years later – in 1924.

Life as teachers in Zaisan (East of nowadays Kazakhstan): Teaching and activism

After graduating from the *medrese* in 1912, both Sarsekeev and Arabaev became teachers in Jadid *medreses* – Eshenaaly Arabaev in the Przhevalsk *uezd* (Абдрахманов 2013, 87), and Khafiz Sarsekeev in the Zaisan *uezd* of the Semipalatinsk oblast.⁵ He, apparently, taught in the Jadid “*Medrese Kazakiye*”. The Jadid movement was a Turkic-Islamic modernist political, religious, and cultural movement in the Russian Empire including Turkestan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, aimed at acquiring a new kind of knowledge and implementing modernist cultural reforms along European lines. Wealthy representatives of Kazakh and Kyrgyz families invested in the opening of Jadid educational institutions, earning the respect amongst their own people. The locals called them “*medreses*” (for example, in the Kyrgyz volosts: “*Medrese Shabdaniya*,” “*Medrese Kurmaniya*”); although in fact, they were *mektep*, that is, Muslim elementary schools. Elementary education in the Kazakh volosts was very similar to what we could observe in the Kyrgyz volosts of Semirechye.

Like many teachers working in the *uezds* across the Kazakh steppes, Sarsekeev maintained contact with intellectual circles through his contributions to newspapers and magazines. In 1913, Khafiz Sarsekeev wrote three articles for the newspaper *Kazakh*, which were published in the *Iuki хабарлар* [Local news] section. They were simply titled “Zaisan” and signed as “Khafiz Sarsekeev, a teacher from Zaisan” [Зайсанда мұғалім Хафиз Сәрсекеев].

1913's article in *Kazakh* [Қазақ]

In his first article,⁶ Sarsekeev reported that in the town of Zaisan, there were two schools – “Mektep Kazakhie” and “Mektep Gazatie” which provided Jadid education. According to the author, the popularity of the schools gradually grew.

The second article⁷ relates the unfair and cruel treatment of Kazakhs by *moujik* [Russian peasant] settlers. In particular, the author was an eyewitness of a story that he shares with readers. The administrator of the Kara-Irtysh volost, Akhmedi Sarzhan-uly, and his people were returning from the summer camp and stopped near a Russian settlement. The residents of the settlement groundlessly accused the Kazakhs of stealing eight horses. Then they shot to death one Kazakh named Ishtikbay, who was passing by with his herds at the time. The authorities did not punish the killer in any way for this atrocious crime.

In the same issue of *Kazakh*, an article untitled by Mirzhakyp Dulatov (1885-1935), who signed with the initials M.D. (Әнес 2023d, T. 3 : 358), covers in detail the issue of the unfair seizure of Kazakhs lands by *moujik* settlers. Dulatov, one of the editors of *Kazakh*, was a well-known Kazakh politician and writer. His brochure *Wake up, Kazakh!* [Оян, қазақ!] (1909) was distributed throughout Central Asia and had a significant impact in both Kazakh and Kyrgyz circles. In his long article based on correspondence received by the newspaper (Әнес 2023d, T. 1 : 361-364), he cites Sarsekeev's story with reference to a letter from him. Dulatov describes examples of unfair treatment of the local population, unlawful decisions that disadvantage Kazakhs in contentious matters. The author believes that Kazakhs need to spend money on their children's education, so they can better protect themselves. Both authorities and people have to recognize the problem of growing hostility between neighbors – Kazakh and Russian settlers.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *News. Zaisan* [Хат-хабарлар. Зайсан] (18/02/1913), Әнес 2023d, tome 1: 198-199.

⁷ *Local news* [Ишки кабарлар. Зайсан] (14/09/1913), Әнес 2023d, tome 1: 364.

In the third article from Zaisan, Sarsekeev followed the life of the school and its students of “*Medrese Kazakiye*” (Қазақ 1913, 450). Since the beginning of autumn, 85 students began their studies, and the number of steppe Kazakhs among them increased. The author reported that several wealthy people, including Pidakhmet [Bidakhmet] Bobkin (1863-1937), a famous merchant and philanthropist from Zaisan, provided financial support to school (Балтабаева 2025). Nowadays, Bobkin’s house is a local history museum.

1914’s article in *Kazakh* [Қазақ]

In 1914, Khafiz continued to write about Zaisan in the newspaper *Kazakh*. His three 1914’s articles were dedicated to local *medrese*, “*Medrese Kazakiye*” and “*Medrese Gazatiye*.”

The first article⁸ describes the *medrese* Kazakiye’s exams and reports that 125 people applied to study, 80 of whom successfully passed exam. Sarsekeev noted that the desire to study has increased among children from the steppe region. In 1914, 35 of schoolchildren came from the steppe, compared to 20 the previous year. He regretted the fact that the school could not accept all applicants due to overcrowding.

The second article⁹ shares with the readers the inspection of these educational Muslim institutions by a local government official on behalf of the governor of the Semipalatinsk oblast. The questions asked to the *medrese* Kazakiye’s teachers concerned the curriculum, subjects taught, and books used in the *medrese*.

In May 1914, Khafiz tells the news of the death at the age of 83 of Zhäke ämbi Qoitan balasy [Жәке әмбі Қойтан баласы], a prominent representative of the Kazakh diaspora in China.¹⁰ The deceased, known to many as the “Father of the Poor,” was involved in charity work and bequeathed his property to various institutions, including schools in Zaisan.

Further, we did not come across the name of Khafiz Sarsekeev in the issues of the newspaper *Kazakh* for 1915-1918. It is noteworthy, however, that he continued to write at the time and later in other Kazakh-language periodicals. In the same 1914, he wrote an article on the subject of the courts of the *bii* (judges) in the journal *Alas* (Мажитова 2016, 163).

Sarsekeev’s involvement in the Kazakh national movement after the 1917 Revolution

Scarce information is available on Sarsekeev’s participation in the Kazakh national movement from February 1917. Regional congresses and two All-Kazakh congresses were organised in 1917 to unify Kazakh political forces and draw up common demands. The project was based on the principle of national autonomy for the Kazakhs (Hallez 2014).

In the issue of 19 October 1917 of the newspaper *Yellow Ridge* shortly before the October Revolution, his name appears in a list of persons appointed by the district commissariat on the recommendation of the regional Kazakh committee to the district courts of the Karkaraly and Zaisan districts (Әнес 2023с, 225). Thus, at this time, he continued to live in Zaisan, teaching and working in the district court at the same time. According to information from the record card, as well as notes made by Sarsekeev’s student, teacher and later director of the teacher training college in Zaisan, Zhusipkhan Sarsenev, Khafiz Sarsekeev continued to teach in Zaisan during this period.¹¹

⁸ *Ibid.* (24/05/1914), Әнес 2023d, tome 2 : 132.

⁹ *Ibid.* (02/02/1914), Әнес 2023d, tome 2 : 232.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* (02/1914), Әнес 2023d, tome 2 : 303-304.

¹¹ *Op cit.* Личный архив Шолпан Несибековой (Алматы)...

Three months later, Sarsekeev relates in the newspaper *Yellow Ridge* a meeting that took place at *medrese* Kazakiye, where a representative of the Zaisan district, Mr. Akhmet, made a report on the Kazakh-Kyrgyz congress (Әнес 2023с, 225). He expressed his annoyance and disappointment by this report, that, in his opinion, contained nothing but the name “Saryarka”. Meanwhile, he noted that the government of people’s commissars had declared the right of nations to self-determination, thus enabling the Kazakhs to create autonomy, which gave its title “Caring for the Creation of Autonomy” to the article. Kazakh activists formed a party named Alash, they called for a fundraising in its support, and they opened the doors for new members. For this article, he chose the signature “Khafiz Sarsekey” – without the Russified ending of the surname “-ev.”

As far as we understand, Sarsekeev himself also joined the Alash party. To confirm this fact, we discovered the name of Khafiz Sarsekeev in lists of Alash members from East Kazakhstan, cited in various sources, such as the “Photo Album of Alash Orda,” published in 2012 (Мүрсәлім 2012, 276). The Party membership was informal, especially in the Zaisan *uezd*, where Alash supporters were not so many (Hallez 2015, 719-720). It was more a matter of adherence to the principles of Kazakh national autonomy and intellectual affinity with other Kazakh activists.

The next article in the newspaper *Yellow Ridge* signed by “Khafiz Sarsekey” was published in April 1918 (Әнес 2023с, 539). In this publication, the author reports that, on 22 March in Zaisan, a literature evening in the Kazakh language was successfully held to collect funds for the opening of a library, which will be established on behalf of the organization “Kazakh assistance.” Khafiz Sarsekeev expressed gratitude to the organiser, Mrs. Bibigaysha Bobkina.¹² Sarsekeev took part in all the events in meetings in Zaisan and is also mentioned as a distributor of the newspaper *Yellow Ridge* (Әнес 2023с, 717).



Figure 2. House of Zhunus Tatanov in Zaisan;
Headquarters of the Alash party
Photo from the website Qazaqstan tarihy



Figure 3. Pidakhmet Bobkin's house, currently
the Zaisan Museum of Local History
Photo from the website Qazaqstan tarihy

¹² Bibigaysha Bobkina is the daughter of Pidakhmet Bobkin, famous merchant and philanthropist from Zaisan.

Interesting information that sheds light on Sarsekeev's personality published under No. 180 in a 1922 document from the *Eastern Department of the Alash Orda Government. Collection of documents* [Восточное отделение правительства Алашорды. Сборник документов] published in Semey in 2010. A secret "report of a soldier to the commander of the Kosikovskaya 5th Company Kalmykov lists members of the Alash Orda, who served under Kolchak.¹³" This report, dated 14 June 1922, was clearly not written by a very literate person and was a denunciation of activities allegedly carried out by members of the Alash Orda three years before the report's date: as is known, by the summer of 1922, the Alash party had already been officially dissolved. The soldier reported to his commander:

I report that the killed and deceased comrades who served in 1918 under the Soviet government of Klimontov [...] were arrested by persons currently holding responsible positions, namely [...]

– 7) Khafiz Sarsekov, a teacher in the city of Zaisan [...].

The above-mentioned persons held the following positions under Alash [...].

– 3) The teacher Sarsekeev taught the *Kirgiz* under Alash and in 1919, an orator among the *Kirgiz*.¹⁴

From this secret report, we can suppose that Khafiz Sarsekeev was in contact with Kazakh activists who were broadly tagged as members of Alash movement. He continued to work as a teacher in the city of Zaisan where he was known as an "orator."

Finally, two years after the above report, in the issue 404 of 15 February 1924 of the newspaper *The Bright Path*, one can read: "In issue 383 of *The Bright Path*, those who accepted the invitation of comrade Madiyar found subscribers and sent their money to the board," on this list is Khafiz Sarsekey uly from Semey (Есенқарақызы 2020, Т. 15 : 104). It should be noted that the name "Madiyar" was also one of the pseudonyms of Mirzhakup Dulatov (Есенқарақызы 2020, Т. 3: 380). Apparently, Khafiz Sarsekeev was personally acquainted with Dulatov.

Six months later, in the May 1924 issue of the same newspaper, the name of Khafiz Sarsekeev was mentioned again (Есенқарақызы 2020, Т. 16 : 228). Editors expressed gratitude for his help to the newspaper, and below in the same message it was said that Khafiz Sarsekey uly and Manan Turganbay uly [Turganbaev] (1886-1937) had been financially supporting the newspaper *The Bright Path* for a long time. Born in the Karkaralinsk *uezd* of the Semipalatinsk oblast, Manan Turganbay uly, who studied at the Galiya *medrese* from 1909, was also Sarsekeev's schoolmate. Before 1917, he collaborated with the newspaper *Kazakh* and the magazine *Alas* and published a textbook in 1915 entitled *Prophet's time* [Пайгамбар заманы]. After 1917, he took an active part in the Kazakh national movement, still working as a teacher in Semipalatinsk.

Among his peers in Zaisan, 1920's

In the family archive of Khafiz's descendants, there is a photograph (Figure 4), apparently taken during his time as a teacher in Zaisan. In the photo, he is in a yurt surrounded by his colleagues, two Kazakh teachers, Afzal Zhiengaliyev (1885-1937) and Bilyal Beisenbaev (1882-1937). There is no information on the women except their names. The way three of them are dressed suggested that they were also teachers.

¹³ Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak, an admiral under the Tsar, became one of the leaders of the White movement against the Bolshevik regime after the collapse of the empire.

¹⁴ Центр документации новейшей истории Восточно-Казахстанской области [Center for Documentation of Contemporary History of the East Kazakhstan Region]. Ф. 1П, Оп. 1, Д. 173, Л. 36, 36об. Quoted from *Восточное отделение правительства Алашорды. Сборник документов* [Eastern Branch of the Government of Alashorda. Collection of documents], Семей : 2010, с. 330.



Figure 4. Khafiz Sarsekeev in the yurt with like-minded people

Inscription on the back of the photo: 1. Karakozhina (Aubakirov's wife), 2. Zhiengaliev Abzal [Afzal], 3. Khakimova Mensulu (from Semey), 4. *Sarsekeev Khafiz*, 5. Amirova Batikha, 6. Beisenbaev Bilyal, 7. Beisenbaeva Afruz, Bilyal's wife with her son Zhanat.

Personal archive of Sholpan Nesibekova (Almaty), photo in the yurt

The men captured in the photo in the yurt, besides Khafiz, were also teachers by profession and belonged to the same generation. Unfortunately, both teachers pictured in the photo fell victim to Stalin's terror, a series of repressions that lasted from the late 1920s' until Stalin's death in 1953. A large number of Soviet citizens were groundlessly accused of "counterrevolutionary activity" (Article 58 of the RSFSR¹⁵ Criminal Code) without trial by the so-called "troika," a three-person commission. Those found guilty were sentenced to hard labor in the Gulag camps or to the death penalty execution by firing squad, which reached its peak in 1937-1938. The victims of the repressions were officially rehabilitated between 1956 and 1960 after Stalin's death in 1953. Many were rehabilitated posthumously.

Bilyal Beisenbaev (1882-1937) was a teacher and contemporary of Khafiz Sarsekeev and Eshenaaly Arabaev. Zhusipkhan Sarsenov reports in his certificate that Bilyal Beisenbaev graduated from the Galiya *medrese* together with Khafiz Sarsekeev (and therefore with Eshenaaly Arabaev) in 1912. In 1920-1921, Sarsenov studied at the teacher training courses of Sarsekeev and Beisenbaev. The "Book of Sorrows" listing victims of Stalinist political repressions in the 1930s reports that Bilyal Beisenbaev was a native of the North Kazakhstan region (Akmola), and at the time of his arrest in 1937, he lived in Kazgorodok and worked there as a teacher. He was convicted under Article 58 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR¹⁶ and sentenced to capital punishment in December 1937. Kokchetav Regional Court rehabilitated him posthumously on July 4, 1960 for due to the absence of *corpus delicti*.¹⁷

¹⁵ Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR).

¹⁶ The Criminal Code of the RSFSR (Russian Federation), 1926 edition, was also in effect on the territory of the Kazakh, Kirghiz, and Karelo-Finnish Union Republics, which were previously part of the RSFSR as autonomous republics.

¹⁷ Жертвы политического террора в СССР (База данных) [Victims of political terror in the USSR (Database)]. ДКНБ РК по Акмолинской обл. МВД Республики Казахстан ([online](#), accessed on 26 November 2025).

Afzal (Abzal) Zhiengaliev¹⁸ (1885-1937) worked as a prosecutor in Zaisan in 1927-1928, which was also reported in the above-mentioned certificate by Zhusipkhan Sarsenov. The “Open List” also contains information about him. He worked as a teacher, originally from the East Kazakhstan region. At the time of his arrest, he lived in Alma-Ata and was a teacher at the Higher Communist Agricultural School (VKSHSh). He was convicted under the Article 58 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR and sentenced to capital punishment in December 1937. He was rehabilitated by the Prosecutor’s Office of the Kazakh SSR on 16 January 1989, based on a decision of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR due to the absence of *corpus delicti*.¹⁹

As we can see, inner circle of Khafiz Sarsekeev in Zaisan consisted of teachers, approximately of the same age and some of them even graduated from the same educational institution – the Galiya *medrese*. Their lives were destroyed by the ruthless Stalinist machine, many of them being executed during the 1937-1938 mass repression. Let us recall that the educator Eshenaaly Arabaev was among the very first victims of the Stalin’s repressions. He was arrested in 1933 and died in prison under mysterious circumstances. No profession was spared during this period; teachers were also severely affected by the repression. Khafiz Sarsekeev did not live until the Great Terror, he died of illness in 1929, at the age of 43.²⁰

Conclusion

To sum up, Khafiz Sarsekeev and Eshenaaly Arabaev were representatives of the same generation and studied together at the Galiya *medrese* in Ufa in 1909-1912. It was during their student years that they compiled and published the book *ABC for high-speed learning to read*. Both authors worked as teachers after finishing their studies at the *medrese*. They taught children using a Jadid method. Each of them actively supported the independence and autonomy of their people, making material contributions and writing in newspapers for the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. Khafiz Sarsekeev and Eshenaaly Arabaev were politically engaged teachers and kindred spirits.

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¹⁸ In the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, Kyrgyz and Kazakh names and surnames in Cyrillic were often written down by ear, adapted for the Russian language. This led to a person’s name often being written differently in different documents. In this case, the variants are Afzal and Abzal.

¹⁹ Жертвы политического террора в СССР (База данных) [Victims of political terror in the USSR (Database)]. Сведения ДКНБ РК по г.Алматы МВД Республики Казахстан ([online](#), accessed on 26 November 2025).

²⁰ Private family archive of Sholpan Nesibekova (Almaty). Zhusipkhan Sarsenov. Biographical data about Khafiz Sarsekeev and the Bilyalov family written on 10.10.1974. L. 1-2 [manuscript].

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