POLES AND JEWS IN THE VILNIUS REGION IN 1939–1941

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SUMMARY. The historical events in the Vilnius region in the years 1939–1941 unfolded a bit differently than in the rest of the North-East Polish Borderlands. Polish population here was much larger, and the Lithuanians’ claims to these lands were merely historical. Soviet troops entered the city on September 19 and remained there until 27 October 1939. Jews constituted about one third of the Vilnius population reaching nearly 200,000, the rest of which consisted of Poles and only a few thousands of Lithuanians. During the occupation of Lithuania, Polish-Jewish relations ran relatively smoothly with the exception of the tragic incidents in Vilnius between 28 and 31 October 1939. Under Lithuanian rule, the position of Poles became even worse than under the Soviets, since the Lithuanians, like their predecessors, favoured the Jewish population.

KEYWORDS: Jews, Poles, Vilnius, Soviets, refugees.

The historical events in the Vilnius region in the years 1939–1941 unfolded a bit differently than in the rest of the North-East Polish Borderlands. Polish population here was much larger, and the Lithuanians’ claims to these lands were merely historical. The pre-war Wilno voivodeship with the area of 29,000 square km in 1931 had 1,276 thousand residents in its ten districts (counties) Brasłaŭ, Dunilowicze, Dzisna, Molodechno, Oszmiana, Švenčionys, Trakai, Wilejka, Postawy and Vilnius. The population of Vilnius city in 1938 was 209,000. The ethnic composition was as follows: Poles – 137,000, Jews – 58,000, Russians – 7,000, other nationalities – 7,000. In the towns and cities of Vilnius region two different ethnic groups – Poles and Jews, each with its own religion – lived side by side for centuries. The first had a well-developed national consciousness, among others only the first of its trailers appeared, whether in the circles of intellectuals associated with the Vilnius YIVO, or among the activists of the local branch of the Bund. Secular intelligentsia was certainly more Polonized than Russified.

After 17 September 1939, Col. Jaroslaw Okulicz-Kozaryn to avoid fights with the new aggressor issued an order stating that Polish troops were not at war with the Russians, and ordered the withdrawal of some troops from the city. Despite
this, there were sporadic clashes in the square Batory, where local supporters of Soviet Russia opened fire on the retreating Polish troops. The city previously had suffered German bombing that took place on 16 September.

Soviet troops entered the city on 19 September and remained there until 27 October. The Temporary Vilnius District Board was constituted and headed by Joachim (Yakov) Żylianin. The day when the Soviets returned Vilnius to Lithuania came (an agreement “on the transmission of Vilnius and Vilnius Region to the Republic of Lithuania and Lithuania-Soviet mutual aid” was signed between the Soviet Union and Lithuania in Moscow on 10 October 1939 by Vyacheslav Molotov, the head of the political department of the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Juozas Urbšys and the Military Commander of Vilnius Team Col. Pranas Kaunas). Lithuania was granted a strip of the territory of the former province of Vilnius (6880 km², stretching over 220 km from Oran in the south to the north Turmont, with a width of up to 80 km). In April 1942, After German authorities increased Vilnius Region by incorporating the old districts Ashmyany, Svir, Ejszyszki, the Vilnius District included the total of 53 rural communities and five municipalities.

Jews constituted about one third of the Vilnius population reaching 200,000, the rest of which consisted of Poles and only a few thousand Lithuanians. According to Marek Wierzbicki, most Jews residing in Vilnius greeted the Soviets with outright euphoria as liberators, mainly for fear of the Germans. According to him, “the entry of the Red Army separated the Vilna Jews from the Poles and built the wall of hostility, resentment, and finally hatred between them.” According to some Polish representatives, for example, Jesuit priest Kazimierz Kucharski, such behavior “aroused among the Poles both disgust and hatred of the local Jews, as well as fear of their rule on the side of the Soviet authorities.” All the more so that, apparently, some of the Jewish militia groups supported Soviets providing them with arms during the occupation of the city from 18 to 19 September, and later disarmed Polish soldiers and Polish civic guard. It was a prelude, writes Wierzbicki, a six-week mass collaboration, the Jews had to report to work in the administration, to organize a number of meetings, including meetings at the university, to control the Guard Workers.

During the first occupation by the Soviets, NKVD arrested many Poles and Jews (560 people). The list of those arrested and detained after 17 September

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1 Approved in this position by the Central Committee of the KP (b) Belarus 2 October 1939.
3 They were deported, among others: one of the leaders of the Bund, Henryk Erlich, and a known philologist named Zalmen Reisen.
1939, prepared by Jerzy Surwiło, contains the names of 340 people, including 250 Poles. In turn, the list of the deported, who arrived in France on 6 December, among these 226 people, there were at least 15 Jews. The preparations for the arrests of Jewish political activists are also mentioned in reports of operational head of the Belarusian NKVD Canawa.

“Jewish Soviet Republic,” as it was then called, lasted until 28 October, and three days later, the Poles in retaliation arranged a pogrom. The Lithuanians did not intervene until the Jewish Religious Community Council announced that it would ask for help to the Soviet authorities. Riots also occurred in Lentvaris and Old Wilejka.

Polish-Jewish relations during the occupation of Lithuania ran relatively smoothly with the exception of the tragic incidents in Vilnius between 28 and 31 October 1939. Anti-Jewish riots broke out for a seemingly trivial reason – after rumours were spread about the increase in bread prices and the closure of Jewish bakery. The underground statement of the Polish government, “Remarks about the situation in Vilnius and Vilnius Region,” dated before 31 October 1940, noted that before one of the bakeries in the Jewish Quarter was closed, someone raised a provocative cry “Long live the Red Army,” and there blows started, and the Lithuanian police was called. Jews were accused of farewell for the Russians leaving the city, some of them left the city, according to the gossip shuttling around the city, about 3,000 young Jews.

Local security forces failed to resolve the conflicts, therefore the Soviet army had to intervene by sending a garrison from New Wilejka. About 40 Jews, mostly young people, were injured, 66 participants of these incidents (including 20 Jews) were arrested. The next two days were also uneasy – Poles manifested in the Rossa cemetery at the mausoleum of Jozef Pilsudski, where his heart was interred, the Soviets arrested 104 people, mostly students.

Under Lithuanian rule the position of Poles became even worse than under the Soviets. Lithuanians, like their predecessors, also favoured the Jewish population. On 27 October, the new government extended the Lithuanian legislation on the territories connected to the Vilnius District. The consequences of such a rapid connection included the exchange of officials (about 20 thousand Lithuanians arrived to the town on June 1940), Lithuanization of education (University of

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4 Apparently stored in the Central Archive in Vilnius.
5 Wroclaw, Library Ossolińskich, 16543 / II.
Stefan Batory was closed on 19 December) and the change of the names of about 490 streets. In November, authorities announced a new Law on citizenship, which was restrictive with respect relation to the population of non-Lithuanians (to obtain a passport, one had to prove that he or she was a “permanent resident” from 6 July 1920 to 27 October 1939), and from 7 December war refugees had to register themselves. The law also limited peoples’ transferability from the provinces to Vilnius (it was necessary to obtain a permission from the police to stay in the capital for more than seven days).

Nevertheless, both sides, Polish and Jewish, became more cautious, and gradually within the elite, who used to gather at the Committee for Refugees, a compromise, or rather a non-aggression pact, was developed. Thanks to the activities of a lawyer and sociologist Felix Gross the League of Intelligentsia was founded, which was acting to reach the rapprochement of Poles and Jews. From September 1939 Vilnius was a refuge for the masses of refugees from the central Poland. Up to 27 October, one could get there without any problems from the areas occupied by the Soviet army. Until the beginning of December over 18,000 people, mostly men of Polish (7,700) and Jewish (6,800) nationality found refuge there. In January 1940, the number of refugees grew to 25,000–27,000. The underground memo for the government in London dated 1940, entitled “How was the Committee for Refugees working” notes that until 10 January 1940 the Committee registered 16,500 people, including 7,000 Jews, and that the Jewish community maintained even 3,000 refugees. The memo also quoted the estimates of “Kurier Wileński”, about 25 thousand refugees; in March the number could be 36,000. (According to JDC statistics, the number of Jewish refugees was about 14,000, while the number officially registered ones in July 1940 was a little over 11,000). Generally, at the time around 80,000 Jews resided in Vilnius (the population of the city was slightly over 210,000), while 108,000 of Jews lived in the district of Vilnius. Before February 1940, about 3,000 refugees received French, English, American, Danish or Palestinian visas (Palestinian Bureau awarded...
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400 certificates), managed to go to Sweden, and until May at least as many Jews left Lithuania.

During the second Soviet occupation (1940–1941) it was difficult to emigrate, even though trips were organised by group of Jews, inter alia, to Japan and China (only Shanghai was reached by over 2,000 people from Lithuania, including about 400 Bund members; a report of Polish ambassador in Tokyo Romer for foreign Minister August Zaleski dated December 1940 mentions 50 people). This was made possible both due to the activity of the Japanese consul in Kaunas Chiune ("Sempo") Sugihara, who until 3 August 1940 issued a number of Japanese transit visas to travel to the Danish colony of Curacao, and the support (paid) provided by Polish conspiracy; the verification cell of ZWZ provided a lot of Polish passports with forged Japanese visas. Between the summer and autumn of 1940 about 1,200 more refugees went to Palestine via Istanbul.

In Vilnius, the cells of most Jewish political parties operated from the autumn of 1938. For some time, general Zionists, namely Moshe Kleinbaum (Sneh), Mizrachi – Zerah Wahrhaftig and Poale Zion – Abraham Bialopolski headed the party cells; the young Zionists from HeHalutz moved their Central Committee from Kovel to Vilnius (their Concentration in the eastern borderlands comprised 2,000 people); members of the Hashomer Hatzair moved their cell from Rivne, and ha-Noar ha-Zion from Pinsk. Generally, 2,000 Chaluc and Betar, and Irgun members were transferred to Vilnius (Betar was led by Menachem Begin until his arrest), as well as a large number of the Bund members and Orthodox rabbis (as well as 2,500 yeshiva students from Mir, Kamieniec, Kleck and 171 rabbis). The Central Committee for Refugees, operating under the Lithuanian Red Cross, headed the assistance to Jewish refugees. It cooperated with the Committee of Jewish Emigration Organizations – the Association of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid and Refuge (HIAS) and the Jewish Colonization Association (HICEM) and Kaunas Palestinian Bureau and the committee of Dr James Robinson, representing the orthodox environment. The shares of the aid were committed to the

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8 Library Ossolińskich, ibid., 16527.
11 They saved the students from Mir, almost everyone got into Kobe in Japan, and then Shanghai, and from there they went to Jerusalem, where about 600 of them continued their education (Littlestone L. The light from Lithuania: the rise and fall of Lithuanian yeshivot. In Hydrazide Nacionaline mokykla Vilniaus. Vilnius, 1991, 96, 103).
Jewish community.\textsuperscript{12} In the YIVO archives\textsuperscript{13} dozens of telegrams sent on behalf of the refugees to the US, South America and Palestine survived. In many cases, Alexander Hafftka (who later was appointed the Polish Consul in Palestine) from Tel Aviv intervened, seeking support from prominent figures, including former members of parliament and activists of Palestinian Agency, like Henry Rozmaryn and Yitzhak Gruenbaum. Vilnius branch of Joint, led by Moses Beckelman, that formally worked until 1 January 1941 (closed at the time when his offices in Kaunas and Vilnius were closed\textsuperscript{14}), before June 1940 to help local Jews, mostly refugees from the depth of Poland, issued 742,000 dollars. Financial help for Jewish refugees reportedly flowed more generously than to the Poles, reaching up to 2 litas a day, while Polish refugees received only slightly more than one litas. Both Joint and Bund occasionally supported the Polish Committees of Assistance; it’s confirmed by the information about the packages of food for Christmas and the coupons given to Polish socialists to the Jewish canteen. In the above quoted conspiratorial study “Remarks about the situation in Vilnius and Vilnius region”\textsuperscript{15}, it’s

\textsuperscript{12} Łossowski P. \textit{Ibid.}, 96, 126. Łossowski extensively quotes the Lithuanian press; We found out, among other facts, that the Lithuanians interfered with the activities of some people from the Committee for Aid to Jews at LCK, who were not Lithuanian citizens (\textit{Vilnius Balas}, No. 133, June 12, 1940). Massociations regulating Jews’ activities under Lithuanian laws, among others banning associations, involved a total of 441 organizations, including 176 Jews.

\textsuperscript{13} YIVO, a collection of documents from the period of Lithuanian and Soviet occupation (had to be developed in 1999). The collection includes: list of municipal fees and orders; lists of housing and application for housing; memo about the development of the history of Lithuanian Jews, signed by James Wygodzki, Lithuanian and Russian, from 22 November 1939; a set of legal regulations relating to Lithuanian citizenship; folder 6 applies to refugees and their attempts to emigrate; requests for material aid from the Polish; letters to Tel Aviv and New York with a request for financial assistance; Alexander Hafftka’s letter from Tel Aviv for talks with Henry Rosemary and Yitzhak Gruenbaum on aid to individual Jews from Vilna; a letter of support to the Committee to Aid Refugees in Vilnius dated January 2, 1940 from Jeleń Raphael from M. Pohulanka, folder (11/20) – he states that he is planning to stay the week in Vilnius, wants to inform his relatives that he left his wife in Lida, who must not be informed (“Although I had money to send a message, but I was stopped in Eiszyszkach and I had to buy”); letter from the Committee for Refugees (in Polish) to the Municipal Governor in Vilnius for permission to organize a night of family entertainment for refugees, the income was planned for the activities of the association, for the cello concert, folk songs and playing the guitar J. Kagan.

\textsuperscript{14} Library Ossolińskich, 16527, 31 – Information from Ambassador T. Romer of 29 October 1940 for talks on the deportees, including G. Bider (in December 1940 he went to the USA), deputy Beckelman, “who was still in Lithuania as a representative organization of American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee”, he predicted that within a few months they would have (along with the committee Hoover and Polish Relief Fund) to stop the activity because of lack of funds, “a Jewish organization obtained the consent of the central and local Soviet authorities to carry out the procedure, providing some of its material resources. The procedure involves collecting fees from wealthy Jews applying for travel abroad in the amount necessary to pay travel costs through Siberia and Japan to Central America, and the delivery of these senior citizens, whose travel tickets and transport has been already paid in New York. It is not excluded that, despite the increasing difficulties away in Lithuania, it could be that with the help of JDC, at the moment a smaller number of Poles will leave, whose saving could depend on the Government of the Republic of Poland in particular.” See: Bauer Y. Rescue operation through Vilna. In \textit{The Nazi Holocaust}. Ed. M. R. Marrus, Vol. 8. London: 1989.

\textsuperscript{15} Library Ossolińskich, 16543 / II Kazimierz Sosnowski papers, national Affairs from 1940 to 1942, t. II, 67–165.
noted that “Jewish refugees through greater support from abroad lived at a much higher level than Polish refugees (this remark is not applicable to Polish writers, journalists and artists, who were maintained by the Jewish Committee for Aid to Refugees). “Environment of refugees established the Committee of History, led by Noah Pryłucki (in 1940–1941 director of YIVO)\textsuperscript{16}, who collected the documentation concerning the persecution of Jews under Nazi occupation. The Committee for Refugees opened the department of the Yiddish language and literature at the university. It also organized cultural events.\textsuperscript{17} For several months cells of Joint worked also in Białystok and Kovel, occupied by the Soviet Union.

On 30 May 1940, Soviet government addressed Lithuania with a sharp note of protest against provocations, which had been reported to have been organized against the crews of Soviet military bases (in Porubank, New Wilejka, Alytus, Prena and Gajžuny), during which one of the soldiers was allegedly killed and three more soldiers were abducted. Since mediation had no effect, on 14 June, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR Vyacheslav Molotov sent his Lithuanian counterpart Juozas Urbšys an ultimatum regarding the changes in the status of the Soviet bases. Without waiting for a reply, the next day the Soviet army entered Lithuania. On 17 June, a pro-Soviet government was established with Justas Paleckis as the Prime Minister, and the power in Vilnius was taken by a representative of the Communist government, Karolis Didžiulis-Grosmanas. On 1 July, the new government outlawed all political parties, except of the Communist, and on 14 July set deadlines for elections to the new parliament of Lithuania. On 21 July, the puppet parliament decided to annex Lithuania into the Soviet Union, and the decision was accepted by the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union at its meeting on 3 August. Four days later, it issued an additional decree to grant Soviet citizenship to the people of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

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Attempts of Polish-Jewish rapprochement collapsed after the annexation of Lithuania by the Soviet Russia. Apparently, the Jews began to once again collaborate, an example of this was the fact that, “after the nationalization of trade, the former shop owners usually became heads of state stores.” Many young Jews went to university, therefore, in the autumn they represented one third of all students,


\textsuperscript{17} YIVO. Representatives of the YIVO submitted a request to the governor of Magistrates in Vilnius for permission to organize a committee in the venue where an evening for families will take place, combined with a guitar concert J. Kagan.
“which meant that the number of Jewish students had doubled since 1938.” This opinion was expressed by the historian Marek Wierzbicki, who did not mention that in the late thirties, Polish universities informally were forced to apply the principle of numerus clausus to control the number of students of certain nationalities at university. Since the method was applied to all institutions, starting with the highest-level authorities, it should not surprise that even in Komsomol organizations young Jews constituted almost half of the members. What was pushing them into the arms of Soviets? Wierzbicki mentions a number of fairly obvious reasons, such as fear of the Germans, fascination with Russian culture and left-wing tendencies. He also shyly admits the following: “Even the local Poles noticed that a compelling reason for the pro-Soviet attitudes towards Jews was the latter’s position before the war, and especially their feeling of discrimination and lack of full equality.”

On 1 July 1940 already Soviets outlawed political parties and the press. On 26 July they nationalized banks and on July 29, their eyes turned to larger industrial and commercial facilities (extended range of nationalization on September). By decrees of 31 October and 26 November residential buildings (a total of nearly 600, which represented 57% of all buildings) were nationalized, as well as larger Jewish establishments and more than 1,200 out of 1593 (83%) smaller establishments, mostly shops and stores, while the land was considered public property, temporarily left in private hands. The nationalization forced small entrepreneurs and artisans to work in production cooperatives (at the end of 1940, 9,000 craftsmen worked in 300 artels) and the nationalized commercial enterprises started paying double salaries, which were low at the time, on the so-called black market. For this reason, many former entrepreneurs had to face a new role acting as the negative heroes and launching a state campaign against speculators and parasites of society. The campaign was launched in November by a showing a trial of a former

19 From the beginning of July to August 20 “Wilner Kurier” was published, edited by Jakub, and then by David Omro; on August 21 it was replaced by “Wilner Emes”, also edited by David Omro (secretary of the editorial was Shlomo Beilis), which was published until March 13, 1941; in Kaunas, the first newspapers were “Di Yiddishe Sziime” and “Heintikhe Neis” – published from August 1, and “Folksblat”, the latter in the late 1940s was renamed “Der Emes”, edited by Szochat Joseph. However, the greatest impact on the entire Lithuanian press was exerted, by the editor of the party newspaper “Tiesa” Gershon Ziman. Reorganization of the Jewish press in Lithuania, including the newspapers published in Vilnius – “Wilner Kurier”, “Wilner Togblat” and “Wilner Emes” – is discussed by Dov Levin (The regimented press in the Baltic Countries, Lithuania. In *Ibid.*, Baltic Jews under the Soviets 1940-1946, Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1994, 7–13). The reporters and editors of these newspapers were mainly from the pre-war left-wing environment of “Jung Wilne”, the most prominent among which include Abraham Sutzkever, Chaim Grade, Lazar Wolf and Szmerke Kaczerbińskie. They mostly cooperated well with the pre-war YIVO (YIVO). The correspondence from Bialystok to “Wilner Emes” was sent by Berl Mark.
textile merchant from Vilnius Joseph Rotbarda (Rotburna), accused of hiding 12 thousand meters of cloth. The campaign against “pests”, especially in Vilnius, reached its apogee in December.

The autumn of 1940 brought the reorganization of education, and religious education, among other things, was abolished; Hebrew schools, libraries and independent educational institutions were closed. The refugees were hit with a new very restrictive resolution of 30 December “About citizenship of USSR granted to refugees of war of the former Poland” (Soviet citizenship was granted to permanent residents of the Baltic Republics by decree of 7 September 1941). It required to sign the declaration: “I renounce forever Polish citizenship, I will never strive for Polish independence and agree to be the right Soviet citizen.” Polish exile government in London protested in this case on 15 February 1941, while the Soviet nationality reportedly refused 50 percent of refugees and 2,250 people were arrested for this reason.

The fate of refugees and the local Jews, whom the new authorities deemed as useless, was sealed with the mass arrests of 14–23 June 1941. Instructions of Lithuanian NKVD defining the categories of people to be arrested, and those who only had to be deported, was delivered on 25 April 1941. Until the beginning of June lists of prospective prisoners were prepared in the districts according to the instruction. About 30,000 people (including about 7,000 Jews) were arrested throughout Lithuania, 7,600 of whom were arrested in the district of Vilnius (on 14–18 of June), and 2,200 in the city. It was mentioned later that about 60,000 Lithuanians and about 40,000 Germans were arrested, some of whom Soviets murdered in June 1941, after sending them to prisons in Berezwecz (1.5 thousand), Wilejka (500) and Prowieniszki.

A large part of the Jewish population, especially youth, reacted to the new regime positively. Leftist sympathies among the Jewish intelligentsia had had a long tradition; before the war, most activists and supporters from this group were recruited by the International Organization for Aid Revolutionists and Kultur-League, while, the Communist Party itself was not numerous. The new government sought

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24 The Self-Help and Education Association was founded in 1921 to promote teaching in Yiddish.
specialists, and those who refused to cooperate were threatened by serious consequences; very many former supporters were pressed into the mechanisms of power. The Central Committee of the Communist Party contained five members of Jewish origin (out of 21), while the government entrusted a number Jews to carry out functions in three ministries – health, trade and industry (the Jews represented, however, up to 51% of officials employed in the ministries) and the food economy, besides a number of persons of Jewish origin held to the highest positions in the Supreme Court and in the prosecutor’s office. In the Lithuanian parliament Jews only had four representatives among the 79 members. The participation of people of Jewish origin was significant in the bodies of the NKVD and the state medical supervision, and their importance significantly increased in the officer corps, where they were entrusted to carry out certain functions, but mostly as alternate commanders for political affairs. Available sources do not indicate the proportions of Lithuanian Jews, and newcomers from the depths of the Soviet Union. The situation in the economic institutions and the clerical bodies was similar, usually Jews served as deputy or junior managers. Especially popular with Jews was the Komsomol, where Jewish youth represented about 50% of the members of the organization, extensively used in all propaganda campaigns. Even one of the bodies of the Komsomol press – “Straln” – came out in Yiddish. In addition, Jewish youth owned a lot of clubs.

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Andrzej Żbikowski
LENKAI IR ŻYDAI VILNIAUS KRAŠTE 1939–1941 METAIS

SANTRAUKA. 1939–1941 m. įvykiai Vilniaus krašte klostėsi šiek tiek kitaip nei šiaurės rytų Lenkijos pasienyje. Čia gyveno daug lenkų. Lietuvių pretenzijos šioms teritorijoms buvo labiau istorinės. Sovietų kariai į Vilnių įžengė 1939 m. rugsėjo 19 d., o paliko spalio 27 d. Žydai sudarė apie vieną trečiąją miesto gyventojų dalį, kuri siekė beveik 200 000 asmenų, kitą dalį sudarė lenkai ir keletas tūkstančių lietuvių. Lietuvių okupacijos metu lenkų ir žydų santykiai klostėsi gana neblogai, išskyrus tragiškus 1939 m. spalio 28–31 d. Įvykius. Pradėjus lietuviams valdyti, lenkų situacija tapo dar prastesnė nei valdant sovietams, nes lietuviai pirmenybę teikė žydų gyventojams.
RAKTAŽODŽIAI: žydaí, lenkai, Vilnius, sovietai, pabėgėliai.