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Lithuanian Students at Stefan Batory University: Creating New Lithuanian Elites in Interwar Vilnius

Tomasz Błaszczak^a

^a Vytautas Magnus University

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Tomasz Błaszczak

Lithuanian Students at Stefan Batory University: Creating New Lithuanian Elites in Interwar Vilnius*

Abstract: This paper explores the position of the Lithuanian students at the Polish Stefan Batory University (SBU) during the period of 1919–1939 in Vilnius. The author analyzes the development of the Lithuanian historical narrative on this question and the activity of the Lithuanian Academic Union (LAU). The main goal of this paper is to show the activity of the Lithuanian students, and their place both in the academic community of the university and in the society of the Lithuanian national minority in interwar Poland.

Keywords: Stefan Batory University, Lithuanian minority, academic organizations, interwar

Introduction

The history of interwar Vilnius and the history of SBU cannot be analyzed without the international context and the relations between modern nations that emerged in the region of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania. At least three nations counted the city as theirs—the Poles, Lithuanians and Belarusians—and it was the most important and influential city for the Jewish community in the region. The City of Vilnius was proclaimed as the capital of the newly-born Lithuanian state at the beginning of 1918, but since then it was controlled by the Germans, the Bolsheviks, the Poles, the Bolsheviks again, the Lithuanians and finally from October 1920, it was controlled by the

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Poles again. In 1922, it was annexed by the Polish state and remained within its borders until the outbreak of WWII. A few weeks after the war began, the city and its surroundings were transferred to the Republic of Lithuania.

All the states that claimed rights to the city saw it as an academic center, one that would continue the traditions of the university that had existed there during the period from 1579 till 1832. In December 1918, the Lithuanian authorities had worked out the statute of the Vilnius University, but because of their evacuation to Kaunas, it remained only on paper, although it served as the basis for the Statute of the University of Lithuania in Kaunas, established in 1922.¹ On August 28, 1919, SBU was established in Vilnius by decree of Jozef Pilsudski, and functioned until it was closed by the Lithuanian authorities in December 1939.

The main aim of this paper is to analyze the development of the position of Lithuanian students at SBU in Vilnius, especially through the activity of the LAU.² This question, despite well preserved archival material, so far has not been present in the Lithuanian historiography and played a marginal role in the historical narrative on the Lithuanian minority in interwar Poland. So, one of the aims is to challenge the official Lithuanian narrative over the Vilnius question.

Despite well-preserved sources, and a practically complete archive of the LAU stored in the Manuscript Department of the Wróblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences,³ this organization had not been the object of proper research, although it cannot be said that such attempts were not made because we can find some articles on the topic.

In analyzing the historiography, first we should mention the fundamental work on the Lithuanian minority in interwar Poland, *Lithuanians in Poland 1921-1939* by Bronislaw Makowski (Bronius Makauskas),

- 1 In 1930 during the state campaign, that celebrated the 500th anniversary of death of Lithuanian grand duke Vytautas it was renamed to Vytautas Magnus University.
- 2 Various names the Lithuanian Academic Union are used in official documents and in literature, although the official Polish name used was "Związek Akademików Litwinów"; Lithuanian name of the organization slightly differed from Polish one—"Lietuvių Studentų Sąjunga Vilniuje"—The Union of Lithuanian Students in Vilnius.
- 3 The Wróblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences—Manuscript Department (Lietuvos mokslų akademijos Vrublevskių biblioteka—Rankraščių skyrius, LMAVB RS), Band F174.

part of which is devoted to the topic of the Lithuanian students at SBU.⁴ Being written more than 30 years ago, it remains to now the most important work on this topic. Published in 1986 (the Lithuanian translation appeared in 1991), the study brings loads of valuable factual information and shows the role that academic youth played in the Lithuanian community in the Second Republic. Since then, more archives have been made available to researchers, especially the files of SBU kept at the Lithuanian Central State Archive (fond 175).⁵ In addition, during this time, a number of memoirs, written by former SBU students have appeared in print.⁶

Recently, the topic was taken up by Akvile Gasiutyte.⁷ The author, a student of Vilnius University, introduced some new sources, such as the aforementioned memoirs, but a quick library and archive query indicate even more sources. As well, Romualdas Juzefovicus analyzed the cultural activities of Lithuanian students among the Lithuanian national minority in Poland.⁸

1. Between Historiography and Historical Narrative

The city of Vilnius in the Lithuanian narrative of the interwar period was treated as the official capital of the state, which had been under occupation since 1920. This approach is still maintained today; however, the term “occupation” has been gradually replaced by annexation and Polish rule, and according to the recommendations of the Polish-Lithuanian Textbook Commission, in place since 1992,

4 B. Makowski, *Litwini w Polsce 1921-1939* [Lithuanians in Poland 1921-1939], Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1986, pp. 129-134.

5 Lithuanian Central State Archive (Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas, LCVA), fond 175.

6 V. Maminskaitė-Kulbokienė, *Gyvenimo vingiuos* [In the meanders of Life], Chicago 1992, pp. 14-170; V. Maldžiūnas, *Išaugau Vilnijoje. Atsiminimai* [Grown up in Vilnius region. Memoirs], Kaunas: Spindulys, 1996, pp. 41-55; G. Šlapelytė-Sirutienė, *Vilnijos atgarsai* [Echoes of the Vilnius region], Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijos leidybų institutas, 2004, p. 133; A. Juknevičius, *Atsiminimai* [Memoirs], Vilnius: Lietuvos nacionalinis muziejus, 2016, pp. 169-183.

7 A. Gasiutyte, ‘Lietuvių studentų sąjunga Stepono Batoro universitete’ [Lithuanian Students’ Union at Stefan Batory university], in: *Lietuvių studentų korporacijos tarpukariu* [Lithuanian Student Fraternities in Inter-War Period], Vilnius: Diemedžio leidykla, 2013, pp. 96-114.

8 R. Juzefovičius, ‘Vilniaus lietuvių studentų kultūrinė veikla visuomenėje 1928-1940 m.’ [Cultural activities of Vilnius Lithuanian students in the society 1928-1940], *Lituanistica*, vol. 60, no. 2(96), 2014, pp. 79-90.

both sides should avoid the term “occupation” in history and geography textbooks.⁹

The Polish rule of Vilnius was broadly analyzed during the inter-war period, of course in a very negative way, showing the repression of the Lithuanian community, since the Lithuanian education system under Polish rule experienced a lot of struggle with local authorities, especially at the level of the local public administration.¹⁰ Those facts had determined the view on the Polish university in Vilnius, seen as one of the tools used in the process of Polonization of Lithuanian lands. However, while the university was not fully autonomous, it was not dependent on the local authorities, and even after the reforms of higher education in 1933, the authorities were not able to interfere in the internal relations of the university. The policy towards the Lithuanian minority at the university slightly differed from the one that was conducted by the authorities.

To show the “Polonizational character” of the university, often two statements were cited. The first is a quote from the first SBU rector, Prof. Michał Siedlecki, who stated that the university should be a “fortress of Polish culture”, when in fact he meant that it should be “an outpost of Latin civilization, as it was in the previous ages, and should resist the waves of Eastern culture, which have so easy access to us.”¹¹ The next example is the Memorial of Vilnius voivode Ludwik Bociański, who in 1936 stated that “the access of Lithuanian youth to

- 9 A.P. Kasperavičius, ‘Dvišalės Lietuvos ir Lenkijos istorijos mokymo problemų tyrimo komisijos veikla ir jos prasmė’ [The activity of Bilateral Commission for History Education Problems and its meaning], *Lietuvos istorijos studijos*, vol. 28, 2011, p. 177. The collection of protocols and other working materials are accessible on the webpages of both Polish and Lithuanian Ministry of Education: <https://men.gov.pl/pl/zycie-szkoly/ksztalcenie-ogolne/komisje-podrecznikowe/polsko-litewska-dwustronna-komisja>; <https://www.upc.smm.lt/ekspertavimas/vadoveliai/komisija/> [2017-10-16].
- 10 In 1922 the authorities of Middle Lithuania had expelled to Kaunas from Vilnius 33 Lithuanian and Belarusian intellectuals and activists, this group had formed a core of further “Vilnius liberation movement”. One of them was Mykolas Biržiška, who at the beginning of 1920s was among the candidates to head the Lithuanian Studies Department at the SBU, as well he was an author of the first chronicle, that documented the Lithuanian “works and suffering under Polish occupation”, M. Biržiška, *Vilniaus golgota* [Golgotha of Vilnius], Kaunas: Sąjunga Vilniui vaduoti, 1930.
- 11 Z. Opacki, ‘Reaktywowanie czy powstanie? Dyskusje wokół utworzenia Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego w Wilnie w latach 1918-1919’ [Reactivation or creation? Discussions over the establishment of Stefan Batory University in Vilnius 1918-1919], *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, CV, vol. 3, 1998, p. 61.

SBU should be limited or fully obstructed.”¹² His words were often used as proof of existing quotas, when in fact it was only a proposal, not implemented by the authorities of the university.

Similar to the interwar view was that of Lithuanian historians in exile in 1979. In his text on the 400th anniversary of Vilnius University, Tomas Venclova briefly characterized SBU:

Being a strictly Polish institution, it contributed significantly to Polish cultural life. The university's influence in Poland, and through it in other countries, is felt even today. However, Stefan Batory University had very little contact with local Lithuanian culture. In Vilnius and its environs, a chauvinistic, repressive type of Polonization dominated, which especially gained strength after the death of Pilsudski in 1935. The university did not negate this spirit and sometimes even reinforced it. (...) Of exceptional importance to the development of Polish literature was the group calling itself, with the Lithuanian name, 'Zagary'.¹³

Most of these kinds of texts on SBU were written around 1979 when the university celebrated its 400th anniversary, which prompted former student from all over the world to write their memoirs, with the most important of these by G. Slapelyte-Sirutiene. It portrayed the university from the perspective of a young person forming an intellectual life without political or national prejudice, however, she claimed that some Polish students were involved in anti-Lithuanian incidents during the time of the Polish ultimatum to Lithuanians in March 1938, but which in fact was the only major incident that took place during the whole existence of LAU.

Similar to the exile historiography was the position of Lithuanian Soviet historiography, which didn't pay much attention to either SBU or its students, unless they were communist activists.¹⁴ This topic dom-

12 *Ścisłe tajny memoriał Wojewody Wileńskiego Bociańskiego z dnia 11 lutego 1936 r.* [Top Secret Memorial of Vilnius Voivode Bociański dated 11th of February 1936], Kaunas: V. Vaitkevičius, 1939, p. 37.

13 T. Venclova, 'Four Centuries of Enlightenment: a Historic View of the University of Vilnius 1579-1979', *Lituanus-Lithuanian Quarterly Journal Of Arts And Sciences*, vol. 27, no.1, Summer 1981, http://www.lituanus.org/1981_2/81_2_01.htm [2017-10-16].

14 M. Kurauskaitė, 'Pažangūs lietuviai studentai marksizmo-leninizmo idėjų skleidėjai Vilniaus Stepono Batoro Univeristete 1929-1933' [The progressive lithuanian students—spreaders of marxist-leninist ideas at the SBU 1929-1933], *Lietuvos TSR Aukštųjų mokyklų mokslo darbai, Istorija*, vol. XXI, no. 1, 1981, pp. 54-58.

inated all the historical narratives on the “Polish times” in Vilnius. On the other hand, much material collected or written during the Soviet times was not published, and some printed only in the 1990s in independent Lithuania. Primarily, we should mention Vincas Martinkenas, a former student of SBU who was working at the library of the Lithuanian Academy of Arts, where the LAU archive was and is still stored.

What’s interesting is that both Vilnius and the Kaunas university were regarded as “national” branches, or at least inheritors of old Vilnius University. For example, in the monograph issued on the 400th anniversary, right after the chapter devoted to SBU, one can find the chapter “The University in Kaunas”. However, this book does not give any information on the activity of Lithuanian students at the university, instead it provides a list of SBU alumni working in Soviet Lithuanian science and humanities sectors (without mentioning their nationality).¹⁵ One can find some data regarding Lithuanian students whose access to the university was limited for economic or political reasons.¹⁶ In general, the monograph does not add much knowledge on the subject of the Lithuanian students, even in comparison with other general monographs on Vilnius or Lithuanian history.

After 1990, thanks to well-preserved sources, it is possible to research the topic comprehensively and present the Lithuanian academic community of interwar Vilnius in a new light, going beyond the traditional narrative of Lithuanian historiography, which treats Lithuanian society in Vilnius practically exclusively as hostages in the Polish-Lithuanian conflict. However, this change of perception is very slow, and the new view on the Lithuanian minority in Poland or Lithuania formed in the interwar period still exists. The only solid monograph was the aforementioned work of B. Makauskas, written in Lithuanian in 1991. The book slightly differs from the other publications that occurred in this period, since it was a translation from a Polish text, and slightly differed from texts published in Lithuanian literature. In the first years of Lithuanian independence, the question of Polish-Lithuanian relations during the interwar period and the Vilnius question

15 *Vilniaus universiteto istorija 1803-1940* [The History of Vilnius university 1803-1940], vol. 2, Vilnius: Mokslas, 1977, p. 158.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 165.

became crucial in society. That led to a revival of the interwar narrative on the Vilnius question.

Through the first 25 years of independent Lithuania, we find only the two aforementioned articles dealing with this question, and using the new sources, comparing them to the exile and soviet historiography. As mentioned, through this period lots of new sources were published, especially memoirs of former students. But this situation does not influence the view on SBU; however, the opinion increasingly is that somehow SBU had an influence on Lithuanian culture, since Lithuanian studies on the history, ethnography and linguistics of the region were presented at the university. On the other hand, it was the only way to create a new national intelligentsia in eastern Lithuania, and this project was successful. Alumni of SBU continued this work on Lithuanian culture after finishing university, during both Polish and Lithuanian rule, and during Soviet times or on emigration.

2. The Polish University and the Lithuanian Minority

Counting the Vilnius region as an integral part of the Lithuanian state, the situation of the Lithuanian population in Vilnius was closely observed by the authorities in Kaunas and who contributed financial resources to support the Lithuanian organizations. Support organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania was coordinated by the Vilnius Lithuanian Provisional Committee (VLPC), which due to the lack of official interstate relations played a role of quasi-consulate.¹⁷ In this scheme, the priorities for the Lithuanian community used to be education and schooling, but the fate of the Lithuanian students was not forgotten. They could count on scholarships, e.g., in the academic year 1926-1927, scholarships of USD 10, 15 or 18 were received by nearly half of the Lithuanian students at SBU (13 out of 32).¹⁸ The scholarships offered by the VLPC were very good, but were granted under certain conditions and with certain

17 A. Gaigalaitė, 'Lietuvos valstybės pagalba Vilnijos lietuvių organizacijoms 1922-1928 metais' [Support of the Lithuanian State to the Lithuanian organizations in Vilnius region 1922-1928], *Lietuvos istorijos metraštis*, 1994, pp. 52-72.

18 1928 05 Vilniaus Lietuvių Studentų Sąjungos narių sąrašas [List of members of the Union of Lithuanian Students in Vilnius], LMAVB RS, F174-11/1, l. 43-46.

obligations: a pledge not to leave Vilnius after the period of studying, to work for Lithuanian organizations, and contracting a mixed marriage automatically excluded the award of a scholarship.¹⁹ Scholarships guaranteed a decent life for students and, when working for Lithuanian organizations, were paid also during the holiday season.²⁰ The person receiving the scholarship was obliged to pay part of their future wages to a scholarship fund after starting work.

At the beginning of the 1920s, the access of young Lithuanians to Polish universities was limited because public school status was not granted to Lithuanian secondary schools. That fact forced graduates of Lithuanian high schools in the Vilnius region to study in Kaunas. The situation changed in 1924-1925 when such status was granted to Vytautas Magnus Gymnasium in Vilnius (VMG), opening Polish universities to its graduates. During the period 1919-1938, a private gymnasium run by the Lithuanian Society of Education "Rytas" was operating, but its graduates would take their final state exams at VMG. In this situation, the natural academic center for young Lithuanians from Poland was Vilnius, where about 80 percent of students received their education (apart from SBU, at the School of Political Science, The Music Conservatoire, and Theological Seminary).

Until the academic year of 1926-1927, the Lithuanian student community at SBU was small, numbering only a few students, who according to Rapolas Mackonis (Mackevicius), did not take part in Lithuanian intellectual life.²¹ After that period, we can observe a steady increase in number to about 100 people (about 3 percent of all students) in the 1930s, slightly exceeding the representation of the much larger Belarusian minority.²² It should be noted that an analogous process took place in Kaunas, where since the mid-1920s there had been

19 Laikinojo Vilniaus Lietuvių Komiteto raštas dėl Vilniaus krašto lietuvių studento stipendijos [Vilnius Lithuanian Provisional Committee on the scholarship for Lithuanian Student from Vilnius country], LMAVB RS, F174-9, l. 60.

20 According to the memoirs of V. Maldžiūnas, the scholarship of 15 US dollars (80 Polish zlotys) was enough to live on, and allowed even the rare visits to the café, V. Maldžiūnas, op.cit., pp. 43-44.

21 R. Mackonis, *Amžiaus liudininko užrašai* [Notes of the bystander], Vilnius: Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 2001, p. 112.

22 A. Srebrakowski, 'Litwa i Litwini na Uniwersytecie Stefana Batorego' [Lithuania and Lithuanians on Stefan Batory University], in: J. Marszałek-Kawa, W.K. Roman (eds), *Stosunki polsko-litewskie wczoraj i dziś* [Polish-Lithuanian Relations yesterday and today], Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2009, pp. 121-122.

an increase in the number of Polish students. In the 1920s, Lithuanian students favored the Faculty of the Humanities, with most of the rest (together almost half) split among two other faculties: Law and Social Studies, and Mathematics and Natural Sciences. The least numerous representation was in the Faculty of Fine Arts, which for the whole period graduated only two Lithuanians. By the school year 1938-1939, SBU graduated a total of 68 students.²³ In the Lithuanian popular narrative and sometimes even in professional writings, one can find the thesis that SBU had quotas on students of non-Polish nationality, however this thesis had already been rebutted by B. Makowski, who pointed out that certain limitations were occasionally introduced for political reasons.²⁴ Often, we can find statements that access to the Faculty of Medicine was limited for Lithuanians, but those statements were refuted by R. Mackonis back in 1936, who showed that the problem lay with the students, who were “not able to look at the corpses in the prosectorium and were not answering during the exam,”²⁵ and beyond that fact, not a single female Lithuanian was enrolled to study medicine at SBU.

This small number of Lithuanian students at the university was, however, well organized, favored by the strong ties between the members of the hermetic national environment and the fact that at the time of their studies, most of them had already known each other for at least a few years. The establishment of organizational structures of Lithuanian students is linked to the first group of VMG graduates, who started informal meetings in 1925, and during the following academic year established the Lithuanian Students' Union.

3. The Union as the Only Representation of Lithuanian Students

The founding meeting of the Union was held on November 12, 1926. On March 18, 1927, its statute was approved by the University Senate

23 J. Cicēnas, *Vilnius tarp audrų* [Vilnius between the storms], Chicago: Terra, 1953, p. 341.

24 B. Makowski, *op.cit.*, p. 208.

25 R. Mackevičius, 'Mūsų inteligentai' [Our intelligentsia], *Lietuviškas baras*, 1936, no. 1, p. 4.

and the union registered as the “Lithuanian Academic Union” (LAU).²⁶ According to the statute, it was an “apolitical and non-party” organization, whose main goal was to “unite all Lithuanian academics into a single organization for spiritual and material assistance” and to “promote national awareness among its members by cultural and educational activities.”²⁷ On November 20, 1926, the first board of LAU was formed, composed of: Antanas Juknevičius, chairman, Marija Cernyte, deputy, Rapolas Mackevičius, secretary, Marija Karuzaite, treasurer, and Kajetonas Blazys, librarian.²⁸

The majority of Lithuanian students belonged to the union, with the instances of a refused application for membership of LAU or exclusion from the organization only occasional. In 1933, though, five students, communists, were expelled for activities detrimental to the organization. The first statute of the LAU also provided for honorary membership, though the only such member was Emilija Vileisiene (1861-1935), an outstanding activist of Lithuanian national rebirth and the wife of physician Antanas Vileisys (1856-1919).

Like every student organization, the LAU had an advisor from the academic staff of SBU, and the first was Dr. Juliusz Retinger, head of the Department of Physical Chemistry. After he left the university, this post was taken over by Prof. Juliusz Rudnicki, head of the Department of Mathematics, who in the academic year 1927-1928 was dean of the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences. He held this position until the last days of SBU, and relations between him and the students were very good, and he defended the rights of the students before the authorities. For example, on February 16, 1928, on the 10th anniversary of Lithuanian independence, the Lithuanian flag was hung on Gediminas Hill. SBU Rector Prof. Stanislaw Pigon called for the closure of the LAU and crossed out A. Juknevičius from the list of students. Thanks to the efforts of the advisor and other professors, the rector's acts were withdrawn even before a session of the University Senate

26 Podanie studentów narodowości litewskiej do JM Rektora USB, 12.11.1926 [Application of Lithuanian Students to the Rector of SBU], LCVA, f. 175, ap. 1(IA), b. 574, l. 565.

27 Statut Związku Akademików Litwinów Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego [The Statute of The Lithuanian Academic Union at Stefan Batory University], LCVA, f. 175, ap. 1(IA), b. 574, l. 568.

28 In the following years, the post of LAU chairman were successively: Kajetonas Blažys, Adomas Juškevičius, Vincas Martinkėnas, Motiejus Kraužlys, Juozapas Valiukevičius, Pranas Čenys, Petras Viščinis, Vladas Jurkevičius, Juozapas Specius, Bronius Uziela.

could be held.²⁹ Among the professors who were friendly towards the Lithuanian students, historian Stanislaw Koscialkowski and mathematician Antoni Zygmund are mentioned as well.

The statutes of the LAU initially did not specify its symbols, such as a seal, banner or caps, though official colors were defined: green, purple and black. These records, however, without specific definitions, were included in the next statute of 1933.³⁰ In its first period of operation, LAU had only its seal. According to the Senate guidelines, non-Polish inscriptions were allowed on organizational emblems but headers of official letters or seals had to be in Polish. In 1928, students worked out the design of the caps and sashes. The first project was rejected because, according to the university authorities, they resembled corporate caps too much.³¹ Eventually, the second project was confirmed in 1929. The caps were dark green with ribbon decorated with yellowy-green folk motifs, a golden monogram with the letters V.L.S.S. (abbreviation of the Lithuanian name of the Union—*Vilniaus Lietuvių studentų sąjunga*) and Columns of Gediminas. The hats were sewn in the spring of 1929 only, and from November were compulsory for all members of the union. The banner was sewn only in 1935, on the 10th anniversary of the organization, which took place on November 23, 1935, and was cause for great celebration, broadly discussed in the press on both sides of the border and attended by most Lithuanian organizations and even delegations from Kaunas.³² The culmination of the ceremony was Holy Mass at the Church of St. Nicholas, during which the banner was ordained. On the right side of the banner in green was the Lithuanian name of the organization and its abbreviation “VLSS”, and on the left in purple were the Columns of Gediminas and the inscription “For You, the Homeland, we are sacrificing the strength of our youth.”³³

29 J. Cicėnas, op.cit., pp. 336-337.

30 Statut Związku Akademików Litwinów USB w Wilnie [The Statute of The Lithuanian Academic Union at SBU in Vilnius], LCVA, f. 175, ap. 15, b. 53, l. 94-96.

31 Pismo Zarządu ZAL do Senatu USB, 24.05.1928 [Letter of the Board of LAU the Senate of SBU], LCVA, f. 174, ap. 1(IA), b. 574, l. 556.

32 Pismo JM Rektora USB W. Staniewiczza do Konsula Litewskiego w Dyneburgu, 21.11.1935 [Letter of the SBU Rector to the Lithuanian Consul in Daugavpils], LCVA, f. 175, ap. 1(IA), b. 574, l. 461.

33 Lith. “Tau, tėvyne, aukojame savo jaunas jėgas”, The project of the banner: LCVA, f. 175, ap. 1(IA), b. 574, l. 472.

In the mid-1930s, the academic autonomy was slightly limited, and registration of the banner as an official symbol required not only the approval of university authorities but also that of the local state administration. In LAU's case, the application to the Vilnius voivode was submitted in December 1935. Rumors spread from the City Starosta (pol. Starosta Grodzki) that the approval would be granted only after removing the Columns of Gediminas from the emblems. The refusal was received by LAU more than a year and a half later, in September 1937.³⁴ The students tried all possibilities of appeal, finishing at the level of the Ministry of Interior, but the decision remained in place.³⁵ As a result, the Lithuanian students were not allowed to display the banner or their caps publicly, and the rector was obliged to enforce this ban. Further, LAU was obliged to exclude members who did not follow this decision, and in 1937, a new cap design was created and approved by the Senate in February 1939. Unfortunately, there are no further registers regarding the procedure.

The union's office at the beginning was on the premises of the Lithuanian Club on 12 Dominikanska Street, where it shared space with other Lithuanian organizations, although the student meetings were closed.³⁶ In 1929, two rooms at the Lithuanian Charity Society at 12 Wielka Street were rented for a short period as a student dormitory.³⁷ In 1932, LAU rented from a Franciszek Oskierko a spacious flat consisting of six rooms, a kitchen and toilet, located in the heart of the city at 28/1 Wilenska Street.³⁸ On the one hand, it was a forced step because the Lithuanian Club was closed, but on the other, the necessity of changing premises determined the rapid development of the organization and broadened its activities. The large space (ac-

34 Pismo Wojewody Wileńskiego do Zarządu ZAL USB, 22.07.1937 [The letter of Vilnius voivode to the Board of LAU at SBU], LMAVB RS, F174-3/1, l. 165.

35 Pismo ZAL do Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych w Warszawie, 27.09.1937 [Letter of LAU to the ministry of interior in Warsaw], LMAVB RS, F174-30/2, l. 311.

36 J. Karosas, *Mówią kamienie Wilna* [The stones of Vilnius speak], Warszawa 1968, p. 238; 1930.02.02, Lietuvių studentų sąjungos protokolas [The protocol of LAU], LMAVB RS, F174-11/1.

37 Umowa wynajmu lokalu nr 1 w domu numer 12, przy ulicy Wielkiej, pomiędzy Związkiem Akademików Litwinów USB i Centralnym Komitetem Litewskiego Komitetu Dobroczyńności, 07.09.1929 [The Rental Agreement on the apartment no. 1 at 12 Wielka street, contracted between LAU and Central Committee of Lithuanian Charity Society], LMAVB RS, F174-15, l. 42-43.

38 Umowa wynajmu lokalu przy ul. Wileńskiej 28, 26.07.1932 [The Rental Agreement on the premises at 28 Wileńska Street], LMAVB RS, F174-1, l. 35.

commodating up to 200 people at a time) allowed the organization to have theatre and choir rehearsals, various presentations, evening events and dances. It enabled the group to organize a canteen, which opened in November 1932 and soon was enormously popular with students and non-students, both because of its location and quality of food. From that moment, the income from the canteen became an important part of the LAU budget (for example, in 1935, it amounted to 22 percent of all budget revenues).³⁹ Part of the dinner proceeds (daily, two types of three-course dinners were offered) was spent on loans or aid to the poorest students. In 1934, the LAU became a shareholder in the Lithuanian Dairy Cooperative “Ruta”, which enabled it to purchase dairy products at lower prices.⁴⁰

The office was, compared to other student organizations, well equipped. Thanks to the inheritance of Emilija Vileisiene, LAU received a decent collection of furnishings,⁴¹ though some were later sold to bolster the budget. A very important place in LAU was the Library. At the beginning, its collection was composed of academic textbooks bought at the request of students. Then, some gifts from Vilnius’ Lithuanian intelligentsia completed the collection, as well as copies received from Kaunas. The LAU library, according to B. Makauskas, had the right to collect press from the Republic of Lithuania, but whose distribution was banned in Poland.⁴² Thanks to that, the office of LAU was a popular meeting place not only for students but for the Lithuanian intelligentsia as well.

The most important field of LAU activities concentrated from the very beginning on student aid, and the organization’s first official document contained regulations for it. In 1928, the Lithuanians, together with other minorities at the university, made some efforts to remove the adjective “Polish” from the name of the central student-aid organization “Brotherly Help of Polish Academic Youth,” however this

39 Sprawozdanie budżetowe za rok 1935 ZAL USB w Wilnie [The LAU budget report, year 1935], LCVA, f. 175, ap. 15, b. 53.

40 Pismo Rektora i Senatu USB do Zarządu ZAL, 21.12.1934 [The letter of Rector and Senate of SBU to the Board of LAU], LCVA, f. 175, ap. 1(IA), b. 574, l. 483.

41 Protokół podziału masy spadkowej po śp. Emilii Wilejszysowej [The division of the assets left by late Emilija Vileišienė], LMAVB RS, F174-3/2, l. 97.

42 It was a result of mutual international agreement, analogous rights had Polish students in Kaunas, B. Makowski, op.cit., p. 133.

attempt was far too ambitious. By 1931, all members of LAU had left “Brotherly Help” and received funds allocated for student aid from the rector’s office.

4. Varying the Activities of the Union

● The organization of Lithuanian students initially had uniform structure, its activity was limited to meetings, during which its members read lectures, and public lectures were organized. Highly important too was their activity in Lithuanian villages. According to the first chairman of LAU, A. Juknevičius, one or two students from a village or community guaranteed the preservation of national ideas among the villagers and limited the influence of Polonization by the authorities.⁴³ Students activities in the provinces were usually connected to their activity in other Lithuanian organizations to bypass administrative restrictions limiting the activities of LAU to the city of Vilnius as the seat of the university.

At the beginning of the 1930s, when the number of members of the union considerably increased, internal organizational divisions were established. Usually they appeared as a result of natural social and ideological groupings within the organization, starting from academic year 1929-1930. On the other hand, the organization from the outside usually looked like a monolith, and at decisive moments the students could show their unity.⁴⁴ Eventually, in the early 1930s, four sections emerged: drama, education, women, and sports. The various sections of the union, in line with the aforementioned divisions, cooperated closely with other Lithuanian organizations, primarily “Rytas” and the Society of St. Casimir.

The first, and the most active, was the Drama Section, which in the early 1930s presented more than 100 performances. The beginnings of this section are linked to 1929, when the students prepared a comedy by the Vilkutaitis brothers, “Amerika pirtije” [“America in the Sauna”]. The rector asked for opinions on this play, and one of the biggest experts in Lithuanian studies, then vice-dean of the Faculty of Humani-

43 A. Juknevičius, *Atsiminimai* [Memoirs], Vilnius: Lietuvos nacionalinis muziejus, 2016, p. 183.

44 V. Maldžiūnas, *op.cit.*, p. 45.

ties, Prof. Jan Otrebski, who was very well known by the Lithuanian students, as he was a permanent examiner on final exams at VMG, responded very critically to the rector's action, claiming that "none of the SBU professors could be appointed to censor public theatrical performances."⁴⁵ The students and their theater performances became a permanently part of the cultural calendar of the province, and the local communities looked forward to each one.⁴⁶ Of course, according to the aforementioned limitations on its activities outside the university, the spectacles were officially organized by the Society of St. Casimir or the Lithuanian Society of Literature and Art.⁴⁷ In 1936, from the Drama Section, the Vilnius Lithuanian Amateur Theater, under the Lithuanian Committee, was established. Organizational changes and the "professionalization" of the theater were a necessity enforced by the Polish authorities, who were seeking full control of the initiative.

Almost at the same time the Social-Educational Section, gathering mainly "right-wing" students had emerged. By 1936, they had organized more than 60 meetings with local people promoting new economic initiatives: a cooperative movement and the development of rural reading rooms. The members of the section in 1933-1939 actively worked as editors of the magazine *Lietuviškas baras*, however it wasn't a purely student magazine, rather it pretended to be a cultural magazine addressed to a wider audience. Only in a special issue on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of LAU and the Union of Lithuanian Teachers did it devote more space to student affairs.⁴⁸ As a rule, student affairs very rarely appeared on the pages of the Lithuanian press in Vilnius, however the idea of setting up a student magazine was raised as early as in 1928, and even an editorial board was selected.

Around 1931, a group of students representing "Christian democracy" was formed, sometimes even regarded as a separate section of

45 Pismo prodziekana Wydziału Humanistycznego J. Obrębskiego do JM Rektora USB, 20.12.1930 [The letter of vice-dean of the Faculty of Humanities J. Obrębski to the SBU Rector], LCVA, f. 175, ap. 1(IA), b. 574, l. 511.

46 A. Lapinskiėnė, *Vilniaus Lietuvių literatūra 1920-1940* [The literature of Vilnius Lithuanians 1920-1940], Vilnius: Lietuvos literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2008, p. 86.

47 O. Miciūtė, "Vilniaus Lietuvių teatras" [Lithuanian theatre in Vilnius], in: R. Kazlauskaitė (ed), *Vilniaus skrajojamas teatras „Vaidila“*, Vilnius, 2001, p. 7.

48 Žalvaris, Vilniaus Lietuvių Studentų Sąjungos dešimtmetį minint [Celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Union of Lithuanian students in Vilnius], *Lietuviškas baras*, no. 3, 1935, pp. 3-10.

“Catholic action” or “viltininkai” (from the Lithuanian word *viltis*, or “hope”) and “ateitininkai” (lith. *ateitis*—“future”). There was also a Women’s Section, not very numerous but very active in their activities, especially in the province, in organizing lectures, and in discussion and providing various kinds of help for Lithuanian women. At the same time, they collected ethnographic and folkloric material from the countryside.

In 1932, the Sport Section was founded and significantly contributed to the revival of Lithuanian sport in Vilnius (there was a sports club, “Lituania”, at the beginning of the 1920s). The organization of the section was quite complicated—for example, at the beginning the football team trained on the football pitch of the Jewish club “Makabi”, and from that club also came the first coach.⁴⁹ The Sport Section students then managed to buy a table for tennis and two kayaks. They also played volleyball, but mainly concentrated on seasonal sports: in winter, on skiing and skating, and from spring to autumn, on field athletics, basketball, and football, and in summer, on water sports. Two years after the creation of the Sports Section, it became the basis for the establishment of the Vilnius Lithuanian Sports Club. At the beginning of 1938, like many other Lithuanian organizations, the club was closed by the state authorities. The rebirth of the Sport Section occurred in the spring of 1939, and volleyball, basketball and table tennis teams started to train.⁵⁰

The LAU maintained, as much as possible, contacts with student organizations from Kaunas and from time to time managed to obtain permits to cross the border. In 1931, four representatives of LAU went to the SELL group (Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) student conference.⁵¹ In 1935, a similar conference was held in Kaunas and Klaipeda, but LAU members were unable to get there.

The Lithuanian students at SBU were the only ones of the many national minorities to not establish their own academic corporation. It seems this was primarily because of the reluctance to create new structures, since the union’s activity fully satisfied the organizational

49 ‘Sportas’ [Sport], *Lietuviškas baras*, 1933, no. 1, p. 59.

50 1939.03.14 Sporto sekcijos steigėjų pareiškimas VLSS valdybai [The statement of Sport Section to the LAU board], LMAVB RS, F174-3/1, l. 100.

51 Žalvaris, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

needs of the Lithuanian academic youth and enabled their full integration. The unwillingness towards a corporate movement may also be the result of an incident that took place in 1921, when a Lithuanian school was evicted from its premises at 38 Mickiewicz Street and the Polish corporates actively helped the police.⁵²

Another important element of the LAU's activities were its relations with other student organizations of national minorities, namely Belarusian and Ukrainian. Together with the Belarusian Academic Union (BAU) and the Circle of Ukrainian Students, an annual dance called "The Ball of Three Unions" was organized. The close links with these organizations are visible through the analyzed preserved correspondence, in which they informed each other about the most important events in their organizations, sending occasional good wishes or invitations to mutual social gatherings. The relations with the Belarusians, however, were not entirely cordial. A common historical legacy and the claims of both nations to the city of Vilnius made the relations between the Lithuanians and the Belarusians rather cautious. For example, in 1934, BAU was allowed to organize regular meetings and board meetings in the LAU office, but only when an LAU member was present.⁵³ The same condition did not apply to the Ukrainians, who had been renting for a long time one of the rooms in the office, and they were allowed to organize Ukrainian language lessons, general meetings, and board meetings without any control from LAU members. The Ukrainian representatives were frequent guests at the meetings of the LAU, and sometimes they were also invited to give lectures. The Lithuanian-Ukrainian friendship was firmly rooted, and not only among the students. Criticism of contemporary Poland made both nations closer, but to the Polish authorities, from the Lithuanians inhabiting the territory of Poland at that time, there was no threat of irredentism, unlike the Belarusians or Ukrainians. The authorities' position is confirmed by the statements of V. Maldziunas, who was responsible for contacts between LAU and the Ukrainian organizations. In his view, the Ukrainians tried to persuade the Lithuanians

52 A. Gasiutyte, *op.cit.*, p. 99.

53 1934.01.24 VLSS Valdybos protokolas [The Protocol of LAU Board], LMAVB RS, F174-6.

to start fighting against the Polish state through terror acts, and they were completely rejected by the Lithuanians.⁵⁴

The union did not maintain contacts with Polish organizations, but in LAU's archives we find some traces. In the first period of LAU's existence, it regularly received occasional greetings concerning Lithuanian national holidays from the Circle of Kaunas at SBU. In the late 1930s, there was an attempt by Seweryn Wyslouch and Stanisław Staniewicz to organize a transnational "Circle of local history". Despite being considered a valuable initiative, it was quickly abandoned.⁵⁵ Some of the Lithuanian students maintained friendly relations with the "Academic Club of Wanderers" (*Akademicki Klub Włóczęgów*).

5. Surviving the Repressions

As mentioned earlier, hard times for the union came in the second half of the 1930s, when the voivodeship administration headed by Ludwik Bocianski aggravated its policy towards national minorities. By 1938, the majority of Lithuanian organizations were closed, but the Union itself succeeded, despite pressure from the administrative authorities, as an academic organization to continue its activities. In 1937, Rector W. Staniewicz issued a letter warning the union of non-academic activity and the interference of non-students in the union.⁵⁶ In this case, the role of advisor J. Rudnicki played a major role. But where the administrative authorities could use their influence they did so, usually by refusing to give permission to organize a cultural event, classifying it as a threat to "security and public peace."⁵⁷

The accusations of academic authorities of non-academic activities were not unfounded. As long as the broad spectrum of Lithuanian organizations allowed students to work in other organizations after their closure, the role of the union for the Vilnius Lithuanian community grew considerably. On December 4, 1938, a closed discussion evening

54 V. Maldžiūnas, op.cit., pp. 46-49.

55 R. Mackonis, op.cit., p. 113.

56 Pismo Rektora USB do Zarządu ZAL, 25.03.1937 [Letter of SBU Rector to the LAU Board], LMAVB RS, F.174-1, l. 2.

57 Pismo Starosty Grodzkiego Wieleńskiego do Zarządu ZAL USB, Wilno, 22.01.1938 [The letter of Vilnius Starosta to the LAU Board], LMAVB RS, F.174-3/1, l. 153.

on problems of the Vilnius Lithuanian press took place. After extensive action by the voivodeship authorities against Lithuanian organizations, the LAU prepared a memorandum to the president of the Republic, consisting of 20 points with proposals on how to regulate the issues of the Lithuanian minority in Poland.⁵⁸ This letter, like other protests, was retained by the academic authorities. LAU had some experience in the field of anti-establishment protests. Yet, in December 1929 they protested the contents of the radio program “A Lithuanian moment,” broadcast in Lithuanian by the Vilnius radio. On May 17, 1931, at an LAU meeting, a 20-point resolution protesting the anti-Lithuanian policy of Archbishop Romuald Jalbrzykowski was drafted. The protest document appeared in print separate from the union, but its publication was halted by censors, and the students themselves came under threat of excommunication.⁵⁹

LAU and its office became a very important point on the map of Lithuanian Vilnius after the establishment of diplomatic relations between Poland and Lithuania in March 1938. However, the process of “normalization” was hard, as during the time of the Polish ultimatum to Lithuania, the office was the object of violent protests, with several windows broken. After the “normalization,” trans-border movement enabled regular trips from Lithuania to Vilnius. Thanks to the excellent location of its office and since it was one of the few remaining Lithuanian organizations in Vilnius, the students made a good business of servicing and guiding “tourist” traffic from the Republic of Lithuania.

The work of the LAU lasted until the end of SBU. Unfortunately, from September 1, 1939, there is no evidence of academic activity. The organization itself continued its work but in the new reality, it was viewed suspiciously by the rest of the SBU community, the union did not conduct any activity until the final closure of SBU in Decem-

58 Odpis Memoriału ZAL do Jego Ekscelencji Pana Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej, 15.05.1938 [Copy of the LAU Memorial to his majesty President of the Republic of Poland], LCVA, f. 175, ap. 15, b. 53, l. 36.

59 V. Martinkėnas, “Per lenkystę į dangaus karalystę” (ištraukos iš atsiminimų) [“Through Polishness to the God’s kingdom” (extracts from memoirs)], in: G. Šapoka (ed), *Lenkinimo politika Vilnijoje. Straipsniai ir dokumentai* [Politics of polonization in Vilnius region. Articles and documents], Vilnius: Žaltvykslė, 2009, p. 87; 1921.05.17 (should be 1931) Lietuvių USB studentų balsas dėl Vilniaus Arkivyskupo R. Jalbrzykowski’o politikos, taikomos lietuviams [The voice of Lithuanian students of SBU on the politics of Vilnius Archbishops R. Jalbrzykowski towards Lithuanians], LMAVB RS, F174-15, l. 53.

ber 1939, looking more towards Kaunas. Students actively prepared greetings of Lithuanian troops in Vilnius on October 28, 1939. After the Vilnius region was incorporated into Lithuania, students received various help from organizations collaborating with them during the period of 1938-1939.

Conclusion

In its nearly 15 years of operation, the LAU was extremely important for the Lithuanian community in Vilnius. It was conscious of its mission to create the future Lithuanian intelligentsia of Vilnius city and region, which in the mid-1920s was very small. Thanks to the involvement of the Lithuanian activists and the wide support from Kaunas, the Lithuanian student community at SBU was, by its very nature, one of the strongest and best organized student groups at the university. LAU created a new generation of Lithuanian intelligentsia, ready to work for the good of the Lithuanian nation. Close relations between the students and other organizations allowed rapid integration with the society. On the other hand, the SBU students, thanks to the semi-autonomous status of the university, were able to act on some level independently from the local Polish authorities. Finally, it was the only Lithuanian national organization that survived the wave of repressions by the Polish authorities in the late 1930s and was in far better condition than other Lithuanian organizations in the interwar period.

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