Jewish Women Activity in the Lithuanian Women's Movement in the First Half of the 20th Century

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Jewish women activity in the Lithuanian women's movement has never been investigated. This article provides a brief overview of the most important aspects of their activities in restoring the State of Lithuania and actively joining its activities in the inter-war period. In the end of 1919, the Women's Circle to Aid the Soldiers was established, and Jewish women were active in its activities. The participants of the women's circles were awarded the medals of the 10th anniversary of the Lithuanian Independence for their activities. The women established and actively worked in the *Lithuanian Women Committee to Protect the Homeland* as a response to the call-back of the *Chief Defence Committee*. After the Independence fights, during the period of the democratic Lithuanian state (1920-1926), the Jewish women actively took part in the self-governing institutions. Especially active were the Jewish socialist labourists and Jewish labourists' groups. This activity diminished during the period of the authoritarian regime (1926-1940).

Keywords: Jewish women, activities, inter-war period, society, require

Introduction

The 19th century in Lithuania is a century of national oppression and two revolts (1831, 1863), century of heroism and romantic rebirth of the Lithuanian nation. In the second half of the 19th century a national movement, and as part of it a women's movement arose in Lithuania which after the revolt in 1863-1864 was directed against the denationalization politics pursued by tsarist Russia. The result was that the Tsarist government banned the Latin script in the country, constricted the activity of the Catholic Church, and started to actively colonize the country. By such actions, Tsarist Russia tried to turn Lithuania Russian. The Lithuanian national movement was targeted against Tsarist politics. Secret schools were opened in which pupils were taught in the national, i.e. the Lithuanian language. Women worked side by side with men. In peasant families mothers taught the children to read from prayer-books. These schools, which were active in the period from the second half of the 19th until the beginning of the 20th centuries, were called "mother's" or secret schools. They helped not only to preserve the Lithuanian language but also to develop and strengthen national awareness and opposition to Russification. Beside "mother's schools", the distribution of forbidden books became widespread. All the books and newspapers distributed in Lithuania were printed in the towns of East Prussia and then carried across the border to Lithuania¹. It was hard, dangerous, and altruistic work, which included all

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¹ E.g., in 1866-1904 women book-spreaders (book-hawkers), who were arrested in Marijampole, Panevezys, Siauliai, Ukmerge reached 26%; in Kalvarija, Kaunas and Zarasai districts—5.5%. Though there were less women book-spreaders than men, but it was their active public work for the Lithuanian nation and society. An oldest one was Karolina Laurinavičiūtė (born in 1840). She learned to read by herself and later spread forbidden Lithuanian press in Siauliai and Panevezys. In 1870, she was arrested, and in 1872, was exiled to Karelia (district in Siberia) for unrestricted time.

Lithuanian territory. There was organised secret system for spreading, secret groups of book-spreaders and special secret store-rooms. These brave women and men used various ways for carrying: secret ways, special guides and even bribes for Tsarist gendarmes. There are facts that in this way in the end of 19th century, secret association of book-spreaders in Zemaitija (Lowland, Samogitia) carried forbidden books using strings of more than 40 carriages (!) And, e.g., one of the most active women in Tilze region, Morta Zauniute, supported Lithuanian students in abroad also.

A lot of book-spreaders became peculiar national heroes. E.g., one of the famous was landowner Jurgis Bielinis, pseudonym Baltasis Erelis (White Eagle). The legends spread about his cunning, courage and capabilities to escape from Tsarist gendarmes. As G. Landsbergis-Žemkalnis wrote: once gendarmes caught Jurgis Bielinis with carriage full of hay and Lithuanian books hidden under the hay and took him to the commander. J. Bielinis began to ask set him free, but commander did not want even to listen. The landowner began to offer to him as the present various pictures of catholic saints begging to let him go. Commander was Russian orthodox believer, so he soon got into a rage! Then J. Bielinis began to offer not only pictures of catholic saints, but the pornographic pictures also begging further... Then gendarmes commander's patience was exhausted. He became really furious, jumped to his feet scolding J. Bielinis, seized for collar and threw him out. J. Bielinis as soon as he could jumped into his carriage and made off with all secret books.

It is phenomenal, that in spite of danger, on this movement joined so many women and men in Lithuania, even catholic priests and bishops (e.g. Motiejus Valancius), nuns and even old women beggar. Despite all threats women helped men to distribute the forbidden literature, hid it from the Russian gendarmes, and, what is more, taught their children from it. In this way, women engaged in the national movement and started their activity. In 1904, the Tsarist government abolished the ban for the press. The aim of the paper is to analyse Jewish women activity in the first half of the 20th century.

Methodology

The descriptive, analytical and comparative research methods revealed how Jewish women entered the Lithuanian women's movement. The sources analyzed are: historical including state documents, archival material, monographs, biographical studies, memoirs, private letters, the press, etc.

Women's Activities in the Beginning of the 20th Century

The catholic charitable society *Motinėlė* (Good Mother), established in 1907, set the same goals as *Žiburėlis* (Little Light)—to educate and endow gifted children.

At the beginning of the 20th century, in addition to the aforementioned organisations, there were 11 more women's associations in Vilnius and Kaunas provinces (two more associations defined themselves as "women's" even though they were mixed in terms of gender). Women from Vilnius were especially active, founding even six associations: *Vilniaus mokytojų ir auklėtojų tarpusavio pagalbos draugija* (Vilnius Mutual Aid Association of Teachers and Schoolmasters) involved in mutual endowment, Polish association *Dievo Motinos globos namai* (Foster Home of Our Lady) taking care of women who found themselves in prostitution, *Šv. Juozapo ligonių globos draugija* (St. Joseph's Society for the Wardship of Patients) fostering patients, *Šv. Antano namai Vilniuje* (House of St. Anthony in Vilnius) which was in charge of poor and particularly orphaned girls, also Polish society *Šv. Jadvygos namai* (House of St. Jadwyga) taking care of serving and working girls, *Rusių moterų ratelis* (Circle of Russian Women) giving charity to Russians, primarily to children.

Two women associations operated in Kaunas province: Jewish women's charitable society in Panevėžys, and, most probably, charitable circle in Panevėžys, which mostly consisted of Russian women, taking care of the maintenance of cheap canteen. There was also a charitable society of Jewish women in Kaunas (Griškaitė & Medišauskienė, 2005). All of these charitable societies, established by women, patronised the poor and abandoned by the fate. In addition to these goals, those associations encouraged women's public activism as well as developed their organisational skills. Without doubt, women worked in many other mixed-gender societies.

The summer of 1905 was a turning point in the Lithuanian women's movement. *Tarptautinis moterų susirinkimas* (International Women's Meeting) in Vilnius (it was named this way as it involved a majority of representatives of various Vilnius nationalities) revealed different goals of the Lithuanian and the Polish women's movements. There were two reasons for this meeting: to frame a general bill on the State Duma elections and to figure out the position of women belonging to various Vilnius nationalities towards the question of the restoration of Lithuania's statehood.

The meeting intended to prepare the bill on the State Duma (Russia Parliament) elections, i.e. to make a protest against the electoral law published by the Tsar. Representatives of each nationality had to prepare individual projects. The project by Lithuanian women indicated that they could not agree with the Duma electoral law, and that "our nation will be satisfied if it has autonomy within the ethnographic boundaries of Lithuania together with Seimas (Parliament) located in Vilnius, elected by universal, secret, equal and immediate vote" (Bortkevičienė, 1905). Such content of Lithuanian women's project showed that they were not only active observers of the ongoing political process, but also its participants. It should be noted that in their project they also included the third article of the requirements proposed in the meeting of Lithuanian democratic intelligentsia held on 25 March-7 April 1905 in Vilnius. The article referred to an autonomous Lithuania that has equal rights with all contemporary nations and countries of the Russian state (Miknys, 1995). However, the women's project was more democratic, because it raised the question of equal general electoral rights. Lithuanian women were the first to demand equal elections for both sexes. Polish women, as well as Jewish, did not present any project and, responding to the statements of Lithuanian women, said that they will never agree with the autonomy of Lithuania within the ethnographic boundaries, because it contradicts the cultural interests of Poland and pointed out that only the autonomy of Lithuania and Belarus is possible (Bortkevičienė, 1905). These way Polish women demonstrated their dependence on the Polish Socialist Party (Myśliński, 2000). A dispute erupted between Lithuanian and Polish women during the meeting. Lithuanian women did not agree to waive the requirement of autonomy, and, at the instance of Polish women, left the meeting, although Jewish women invited them to stay. The position of Jewish women did not show up in the meeting, but they could agree with Polish women, as part of Jews were the members of the Polish Communist Party or the Polish Socialist Party, which posed the question of equality for minorities (Bortkevičienė, 1905). In addition, Jewish women did not support the Lithuanians because they realised the restored state only in historic GDL lands. In the absence of general decision, women of each nation prepared protests, under which they collected signatures in the country. Only Lithuanian women gathered more than 230 signatures and sent them to Moscow for *Rusijos moterų lygiateisiškumo sąjungai* (Russian League of Women's Equality) (Ambraziejūtė-Steponaitienė, n.d.). Bortkevičienė noted that they did not arrive at general decision because Lithuanian women wanted to create ethnographic Lithuania, and White Russians, Poles, Jews demanded the

historical one (Bortkevičienė, December 5, 1925, p. 3). Historical Lithuania meant the state which existed till 1772, i.e. till the first partition of Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth.

It can be stated that women belonging to ethnic minorities were active in public activities and influenced the changing societal attitudes to women's social roles in society. Under Jewish educational and cultural associations, charities and social welfare institutions and their departments there were so called madam or lady's committees that regularly organised charity concerts, costume and other balls, lotteries, sales of various memorable signs, collections in streets and steamboat trips along the banks of the Nemunas River. One of the most famous public figures was a doctor Altė Sudarskienė (Atamukas, 2007).

Women's Activities During the Period of Fights for Independence (1918-1920)

Women did not remain on the sidelines even during the most challenging stages of the state formation. In 1918-1920 battles for independence took place in Lithuania and women were also engaged in the struggle for the survival of Lithuania.

In the end of 1919, *Moterų komitetas* (Women's Committee) was set up in Kaunas, conducted by a German, Lutheran pastor's wife Eichelbergerienė. K. Žukas pointed out that the idea to establish a committee of Kaunas women was suggested by S. Nagevičius. The committee collected many items needed for the army within a short period of time (Žukas, 1995). On general's S. Nagevičius initiative and with the help of the city commandant colonel Šarauskas *90 Moterų ratelis kariams šelpti* (Circle of 90 Women for the Support of Soldiers) was organised in Kėdainiai. It was divided into sections. The economy section, located in Kėdainiai train station, set up the nutrition supply point for the passing troops. 2-3 members were constantly on round-the-clock watch at the station. In total those women managed to feed about 14,000 soldiers (Women's aid for freedom in 1919, 1939). Other members of *Moterų ratelis kariams šelpti* (Circle of Women for the Support of Soldiers) were collecting donations, knitting socks, sewing warm clothes for the soldiers and sending them to the front. Jewish women also actively integrated in those activities. L. Gurvičienė was elected the vice-president of *Moterų ratelis kariams šelpti*, H. Kaganienė-Rabinavičiūtė became a member of the board, B. Mecaitė was appointed the treasurer, Ch. Liansbergaitė was the audit commission secretary and F. Birgerienė-Kaplanaitė, together with Ch. Finkelšteiniene-Rabinavičiūtė, G. Fridlanderienė-Melcaitė, O. Gafanavičienė-Rogovinaitė, R. Mozgolinienė-Zifaitė, P. Landsbergienė-Gadytė, B. Milerytė, L. Šrinienė-Landsbergaitė became its members (Jakštas, 1934). Such women's point was also established in Kaišiadorys (Women's aid for freedom in 1919, 1939). Jewish women B. Bregauskienė, L. Dembo, A. Fleišerienė, C. Kaganienė, O. Merienė, M. Reznikovienė, D. Subockienė and R. Šliachterienė worked in a similar circle in Panevėžys. The members of Kaišiadorys and Panevėžys women circles were awarded Lithuanian Independence Medal on the occasion of its 10th Anniversary (Jakštas, 1934).

In 26 September 1920, the government decided to establish *Vyriausiosis gynimo komitetas* (Chief Defence Committee) which addressed the public, asking for donations of gold, silver and other treasures. Women also involved in collecting donations and endowing. *Vyriausiosis gynimo komitetas* reported that in October 1920 it received 610,898 and 600 Russian gold roubles, of which 100,000 gold roubles were given to the government for purchasing weapons². The Committee addressed women with a special proclamation urging them to organise donations and asking to collect "garments and other accessories for the defence of their sons and

² *Chief Lithuanian Defence Committee 1921* (Vyriausias Lietuvos gynimo komitetas) Lithuanian State Central Archive (Lietuvos valstybės centrinis archyvas), f. 1437, ap. 1, b. 50, l. 9.

brothers. Make gloves, socks, weave linen that our Motherland defenders would not get cold”³. The Lithuanian Catholic women's movement brought the idea to hold a women's meeting and invite all women to help the military. On 3 October 1920, the women's meeting took place in Kaunas with the slogan *Lietuvos moterys! Tėvynei pavojuje!* (Lithuanian women! Motherland is in danger!). O. Stulginskienė was its chairperson and B. Novickienė its secretary. The participants of the meeting decided to establish *Lietuvos moterų komitetas Tėvynei ginti* (Lithuanian Women's Committee for the Defence of the Motherland) and elected its board: the chairperson O. Stulginskienė, its members—B. Novickienė, D. Sleževičienė, A. Janulaitienė, S. Paliulytė-Ladygienė, A. Vailokaitienė. For the first time the Lithuanian women's movement mobilised all streams of the movement and representatives of other nationalities for a common activity. The representatives of ethnic minorities were also elected to the board: German V. Ešmanaitė and Jewish Rabinavičienė (Mašiotienė, 1938). The Board established four sections: financial, propaganda, front; and support for warriors and wounded. All sections had to take care of soldiers' moral support, warm clothing and food, nurse the wounded, spread propaganda about the army and their battles in the country, collect and distribute donations, organise concerts. The Committee held six tailor's shops (Ladygienė, 1938), which produced clothes to soldiers.

Lietuvos moterų komitetas Tėvynei ginti sat in Vailokaitienė's apartment located in *Laisvės alėja* (Freedom Avenue). During the meetings, O. Stulginskienė was informing what was already done and planning future works (Ladygienė, 1938). The American Red Cross and Lithuanian province women helped the Committee with donations. *Lietuvos moterų komitetas Tėvynei ginti* set up departments all over the country. Although the board included representatives of the Catholic stream, O. Stulginskienė and S. Paliulytė-Ladygienė, who was also the chair of the committee since 1921, the Central Council of Lithuanian Catholic Women's Organisation (LKMD) during the meeting held on 28 September 1920 decided to join the appeal to women of *Vyriausiasis gynimo komitetas* (Chief Defence Committee) as an independent organisation.

On July 9, 1921, *Lietuvos moterų komitetas Tėvynei ginti* called a women's meeting in Kaunas, which condemned P. Hymans' project and accepted a statement of protest. The meeting was attended by representatives of all streams of Lithuanian women's movement, female members of the Jews Society and individual women (Mašiotienė, 1938). The protest meeting was chaired by Paliulytė-Ladygienė, the secretary was B. Grigaitė, who made a presentation on the international and domestic political situation, Brussels and Geneva conferences. She set out the reasons which prevented the government from accepting Hymans' project (Protests of Lithuanian women against Hymans' Offers, 1921). After the “spirited speeches”, women adopted the resolution: “Lithuanian women protesting against P. Hymans' project ... against the division of Lithuania into two cantons ... protesting against all tight relations with the Poles They require that the League of Nations would force the Poles to fulfil the Suwalki agreement, and that Zeligowski would immediately withdraw the troops outside the line of demarcation, determined in the Suwalki agreement (Our ways, 1952). Women declared their civil and political protest much earlier than all other political and social forces, because only on 20 October 1921, a large meeting of Kaunas society took place in Kaunas Folk House aiming to discuss Hymans' project and almost all representatives of all political parties opposed it. In 1921 *Vyriausiasis Lietuvos gynimo komitetas* (Lithuanian Chief Defence Committee) and *LMKTG* (Lithuanian Women's Committee for the Defence of the Motherland) suspended its activities.

³ *Eltos archive. Echoes (Eltos archyvas. Atsišaukimai)*, Division of Manuscripts, Lithuanian Academy of Sciences (Lietuvos mokslų akademijos Rankraščių skyrius), f. 222-1573, l. 3.

Participation in Local Municipality Activities

Women were elected to the self-governments and city councils in 1918 November-December according to the provisional rules of cities and self-governments. The number of elected women was rather small. The biggest circular note *Delei Savivaldybiu* gave women partial political rights allowing them to use the passive and the active rights of elections to the self-governments in 1918, December. The general principal of elections was legitimated in the *Decree of Self-governments* in 1919. The number of women in the self-governments was still rather small in the 3rd decade. Women were most active in the city of Panevezys, the district of Panevezys and Zemaitija (the district of Telsiai). Women organizations did not value working in the self-governments as much as they should have.

On 6 June 1920, Kaunas City Council made an announcement, stating that new elections to the city municipality will be held on 21-22 July, according to the municipal law adopted in 1919⁴. In 1920 the municipality elections in Kaunas received 16 lists, only four of which nominated women. Those were the Lithuanian Popular Socialist Democratic Party, the Lithuanian Unity Company, the Jewish Socialist Workers and Jewish Workers Companies. The number of women constituted 3.1% of all candidates. Lithuanian Christian Democratic Party (LKDP) did not participate in the elections and Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (LSDP) did not nominate any candidate. No woman was elected. The archival data of elections for Kėdainiai district municipality show that during the election campaign women used both the passive and the active suffrage⁵.

In 1929 nationalists decided to restructure municipal elections, so that more of their union members would get into municipality. This law limited the electoral rights. The law provided the right to elect the parish council and to participate in the meetings of elders only for Lithuanian citizens, not less than 24 years of age, living in the district for at least one year, owning a property in the neighbourhood, having commercial, industrial or craft businesses and paying municipal taxes; as well as for those who were full-time public or municipal civil servants and for persons with higher or specialized agricultural education (Law of local self-government, 1929, August 7, p. 2). These constraints were moved into the law of municipal election in May 1931 (Law of local self-government, 1931, May 2, p. 4). In the absence of a new Civil Code of the Republic of Lithuania and as the Civil Code of Tsarist Russia (amended in 1922 by Lithuanian Constitutive Parliament) was still in operation, according to which women could not have the disposition of property and were dependent on men, only few of them paid taxes to the state and therefore could not vote. That way the size of electorate was reduced and women's rights to elect representatives to municipality and to participate in municipal self-government were constricted. Women who had the right to elect municipal councils constituted only 1/3 of all voters, though, same as in 1923, women accounted for 53 percent of the total population. The number of women voters in various cities and counties differed. It depended not only on the size of women's assets, but also on the position of their husbands, giving them political rights. Traditionally, a man owned the property, notwithstanding all the amendments made by the Civil Code, but he could also entitle a woman to the part of his assets. For example, men in the Jewish community of Alytus, in order to have as many representatives in the City Council as possible, entitled women to some of their assets before elections⁶.

⁴ *Announcement (Skelbimas)*. Kaunas District Archive (Kauno apskrities archyvas), f. 219, ap. 1, b. 78, l. 36.

⁵ Election to Municipalities in 1920. Kėdainiai District Protocols (Rinkimai į savivaldybes 1920 m. Kėdainių apskrities protokolai), Lithuanian State Central Archive (Lietuvos valstybės archyvas), f. 379, ap. 1, b. 5, l. 22-29.

⁶ Report of the Director of Criminal Police of the Ministry of the Interior to the Director of the Department of Municipalities (VRM kriminalinės policijos direktoriaus pranešimas Savivaldybių Departamento Direktoriui). Lithuanian State Central Archive (Lietuvos valstybės centrinis archyvas), f. 379, ap. 1, b. 119, l. 1.

In October 1929, the indirect elections for rural district councils differed from the previous democratic period elections. There was no electoral competition, there were no party campaigns and voters were not active. Similar situation was noticed in 1931 municipal elections (Sireika, 1998). The turnout was 70%. The turnout of women, who had much more inferior rights to participate in elections, did not exceed the turnout of men (Citizen participation in City Election of the Great Lithuania in 15-16 June 1931).

Conclusions

In the end of 19th Century, several women from other social classes joined the national movement as well. Although there were much fewer women than men who spread the press, this activity was the public and active input of women for the society and the nation. New fields of women activities that complemented the so-called Mother Schools were the secret schools of the so-called Daraktors who belonged to every social group.

In 1905 the early stage of Lithuanian women movement was over. Its main features: women participation in the national movement; the first ones who joined the national movement were the noblewomen; later women from other social groups as well.

In 1918- 1920 during the wars for independence women took an active part in the fight for Lithuania. They worked by themselves and joined various organizations as well. Jewish women also actively integrated in activities.

Women were elected to the self-governments and city councils according to the provisional rules of cities and self-governments. The number of elected women was rather small. Women were most active in the city of Panevezys, the district of Panevezys and Zemaitija (the district of Telsiai). Women organizations did not value working in the self-governments as much as they should have. The self-government decrees issued by the President in 1929 and 1931 limited women participation in the self-government because the property qualification was introduced. Traditionally women were not owners of any property. Only several women were elected to the institutions of self-government in the 4th decade.

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