

Urszula Wróblewska

- University of Białystok
- email: u.wroblewska@uwb.edu.pl
- ORCID: 0000-0003-3585-3903

Rita Tamašunienė

- Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania
- e-mail: ritatamasuniene@gmail.com
- ORCID: 0009-0005-4046-8614

THE BEGINNINGS OF MACIERZ SZKOLNA – THE ASSOCIATION OF POLISH SCHOOL TEACHERS IN LITHUANIA: AN OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUE

| Abstract

- *Goal* – The aim of this article is to present the beginnings of Macierz Szkolna and to discuss its main areas of activity in the interwar period (1918-1939) in the Vilnius Region.
- *Research methodology* – An archival and library search was conducted, and a review of the literature was performed. The article is based mainly on the preserved archival sources deposited in the archives of the Lithuanian Central State Archives.
- *Score/results* – The research findings reveal the essence of the Educational Society in the eastern territories and the role the organisation played in the Vilnius region. To operate effectively, the Educational Society carried out tasks such as educating children, establishing schools, conducting training courses, and assisting in the dissemination of education.
- *Originality/value* – Issues related to the activities of the Macierz Szkolna (School Society) in Poland are of interest to researchers, but not in the Vilnius region during the interwar period. This article is an attempt to take a closer look at the activities of the Macierz Szkolna – an organisation that contributed to reducing illiteracy levels in the Vilnius region.

| **Keywords:** Macierz Szkolna Society, interwar Vilnius region, social organisations, interwar education, interwar period

1. Introduction

One of the key educational organisations operating in the Polish community in Lithuania is Macierz Szkolna – *the Association of Polish School Teachers in Lithuania*. With over 130 years of history, this organisation has been continuously working to develop and protect Polish education in this country. Macierz Szkolna plays an important role in promoting national culture and building the identity of the Polish community, while also serving as a bridge between Poles in Lithuania and the Republic of Poland. The contemporary forms and directions of Macierz Szkolna's activities are the result of the constant activity and commitment of many people, continuous response to the needs of Poles, and a long-standing tradition.

The aim of this article is to present the beginnings of Macierz Szkolna and discuss its main areas of activity in the interwar period. The analysis covers the historical context of the Association's establishment and operation – from its founding in the Vilnius Region, through its activities until 1939, to the outbreak of the Second World War. Particular attention was paid to the role of Macierz Szkolna in the reconstruction of the Polish state and in eliminating high levels of illiteracy in the eastern lands.

Much research attention has been devoted Polska Macierz Szkolna [in English: The Polish Educational Society] in various aspects of its activity and in specific periods. Research in this area has been conducted by, among others, Hanna Markiewiczowa, Józef Stemler, Józef Kwiatkowski, Mieczysław Jackiewicz, Jarosław Góralski, Marta Meducka, and Elwira J. Kryńska. This study is based on historical sources deposited in the archives of Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas [in English: The Lithuanian Central State Archives], where the files of Starostwo Grodzkie Miasta Wilna Rzeczpospolita Polska [in English: The Municipal Office of the City of Vilnius of the Republic of Poland] contain statutory documents and annual reports on the organisation's activities. The reports on the activities of Macierz Szkolna, compiled by its founder and long-time director Józef Stemler [Stemler, 1926], were invaluable. They contain important information about the origins of the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands, its basic cultural and educational goals, the political conditions in which they had to be implemented, and the organisational and financial work of the Polish Educational Society. Another valuable source is "Gwiazdka – tygodnik dla dzieci i młodzieży" [in English: A Little Star – a weekly for Children and Youth] published by the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands. The analysis was supplemented

by publications contained in the pre-war magazine “Szkoła Powszechna. Kwartalnik poświęcony sprawom szkolnictwa polskiego” [in English: Primary School. A Quarterly Devoted to the Polish Education]. This paper also includes valuable excerpts from an interview with Józef Kwiatkowski, long-standing president of the Association, who contributed significantly to the development of the organisation and the continuity of the Polish education in Lithuania. The following article is of a contributory nature and provides only an outline of the issue, which is the subject of broader research interest by Rita Tamašunienė, MA.

2. Social initiatives in Vilnius at the beginning of the 20th century

In 1905, in response to the increasing Russification and the restriction of Poles' rights in the Russian partition, the Polish Educational Society was established in Warsaw on the initiative of Józef Świątkowski, engineer. The first president was Henryk Sienkiewicz, a winner of the Nobel Prize for writers, and the president of the Main Board was Antoni Osuchowski, a lawyer and a journalist. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Polish Educational Society played a key role in organising independent education in the Polish lands, which were under three partitions. Owing to social activism, the local circles of the Polish Educational Society were established, as well as folk schools, orphanages combining the functions of an orphanage and kindergarten, libraries, reading rooms, community centres, courses for illiterate people, home schooling groups, and various lectures and discussions were organised. By the end of 1907, over 900 educational institutions were operating, and their number and reach were steadily growing. In 1917, the Polish Educational Society ran, among others, 419 primary schools, 23 secondary schools, 7 teacher training colleges, 187 supplementary courses and 206 libraries. It also ran a publishing house and supported individual teaching. The development of the Polish Educational Society's activities was possible primarily in places where favourable conditions existed – communities supportive of national education and people willing to undertake social work.

Social, charitable and educational activities were particularly important in the Eastern Borderlands, where needs were enormous and the community often undertook work on its own, without central support.

The first official reports indicate that in 1870, there were two secret schools operating in Vilnius, one in Zawalna Street in Franciszek Chądzyński's flat, and the other in Honorata Puciato's house in Kazimierski Alley. Within this period,

secret youth circles were formed, which established bookshops and reading rooms. Underground education for adults also developed, led by Eliza Orzeszkowa, who established a bookshop and reading room called “E. Orzeszkowa i S-ka” in 1879, which was closed down two years later by the tsarist authorities, who considered it illegal and a source of Polish agitation [Zięba, 2015: 192–194].

Furthermore, in 1882, the brothers, Bronisław Piłsudski and Józef Piłsudski, founded “Spójnia” [in English: Coherence], one of the first secret self-education circles after the January Uprising in Vilnius, which brought together a dozen or so colleagues from the Vilnius government gymnasium, including: Alfons Machwica, Augustyn Wróblewski, Bronisław Przybylski and Kazimierz Chodźko. The pupils formed a library and met to read and discuss together [Kuczyński, 2015: 12–13].

In 1890, Witold Węśławski, a doctor, and Emma Dmochowska, née Jeleńska, a writer, founded *Towarzystwo Oświaty Narodowej* [in English: The National Education Society] in Vilnius. The Society’s activities brought together the most active educated Poles. During the period of intense Russification, the Society’s activities were focused on promoting Polish education in the Vilnius Region.

The Society organised secret schools, courses and educational activities aimed at young people and adults *Państwowa Szkoła Przemysłowo-Handlowa Żeńska im. E. Dmochowskiej w Wilnie* [in English: The E. Dmochowska State Industrial and Commercial School for Girls in Vilnius], Warsaw 1929: 3–4).

The situation of social organisations improved somewhat when, in the wake of liberal activities, as a result of the 1905 revolution, growing social discontent and the lost war with Japan, the tsarist authorities issued the so-called ‘tolerance decree’ [Łupiński, 2001], which allowed teaching in Lithuanian and Polish in two-class elementary schools and municipal secondary schools, as well as the organisation of meetings and the use of Polish in public spaces. Taking advantage of favourable legislation, the Polish community began to organise and establish legal societies. On 10 September 1906, an organisational meeting of *Towarzystwo “Oświata”* [in English: The Education Society] was held, with Eliza Orzeszkowa as its honorary member. The aim of the Society was to raise the level of education and learning in society. The Society implemented its ideas of grassroots and organic work by establishing orphanages, bookshops and libraries, reading rooms, organising assistance for youth in education and courses for illiterate adults. The Society covered the communities of Eyshishok, Kernave, Olkeniki, Koshedary, Hlybokaye, Zhaludok and Smarhon (currently in Belarus) [Kwiatkowski, 2015: 8–9]. However, the liberal attitude of the tsarist authorities towards the Polish community in the Vilnius Region lasted only two years, because on 15 February

1908, the Education Society was closed down for conducting secret teaching in Polish, establishing orphanages and documenting its activities in Polish.

As declarations of freedom and respect for the rights of the Polish community were not observed, and the tsarist authorities once again prohibited the establishment of private Polish schools and the use of the Polish language at political meetings and in religious education classes, educational activities once again began to take on a conspiratorial character. Despite the closure of the Education Society, other organisations continued to operate in parallel, such as Towarzystwo Opieki nad Uczącą się Młodzieżą [in English: The Society for the Care of Learning Youth] (founded by Józef Montwiłł), Wileńskie Towarzystwo Opieki nad Dziećmi [in English: The Vilnius Society for the Care of Children], Towarzystwo św. Zyty [in English: The Society of St. Zita] and Towarzystwo Filaretów [in English: The Filaret Association], which brought together secondary school youth from Vilnius, Kaunas, Daugavpils and Minsk [Kwiatkowski, 2015: 8–9]. All the initiators had one goal in mind: to make Polish schools accessible, to impart the Polish language and culture, and to make education the foundation of the Polish identity.

Over time, they began to consolidate their activities, and organisations pooled their resources in order to operate more effectively. One example is Komitet Edukacyjny [in English: The Educational Committee], established in 1915, which united many educational organisations and associations in Vilnius and the Eastern Borderlands, with Witold Węsławski, PhD., as its president. The Education Society and Towarzystwo Katolickie Polskiej Szkoły Ludowej [in English: The Catholic Society of the Polish Folk School] in Vilnius merged to form Polska Macierz Szkolna [Towarzystwo Katolickie Szkoły Polskiej w Wilnie, 1916]. That same year, the following schools were established: 4 secondary schools (2 for boys – 425 pupils, 2 for girls – 390 pupils), 8 municipal schools (4 for boys – 580 pupils, 4 for girls – 480 pupils), 30 elementary schools, attended by approximately 4 500 pupils. In total, approximately 6 375 pupils were educated in Vilnius. There were 120 primary schools and three co-educational junior high schools in the province of Oszmiana, Świeciany and Vileyka. The Education Committee also ran a wide range of courses and training programmes, including university-level academic courses, agricultural courses (in cooperation with Towarzystwo Rolnicze [in English: The Agricultural Society]), economics and trade courses, general education courses in Antokol, two Sunday courses and six courses for illiterate adults, teacher training colleges (short-term and two-year), four-year evening commercial schools, four vocational schools, general education courses for workers, Uniwersytet Ludowy

im. Adama Mickiewicza (in English, the Adam Mickiewicz Folk University), and established publishing companies specialising in the publication of textbooks [Kwiatkowski, 2015: 10].

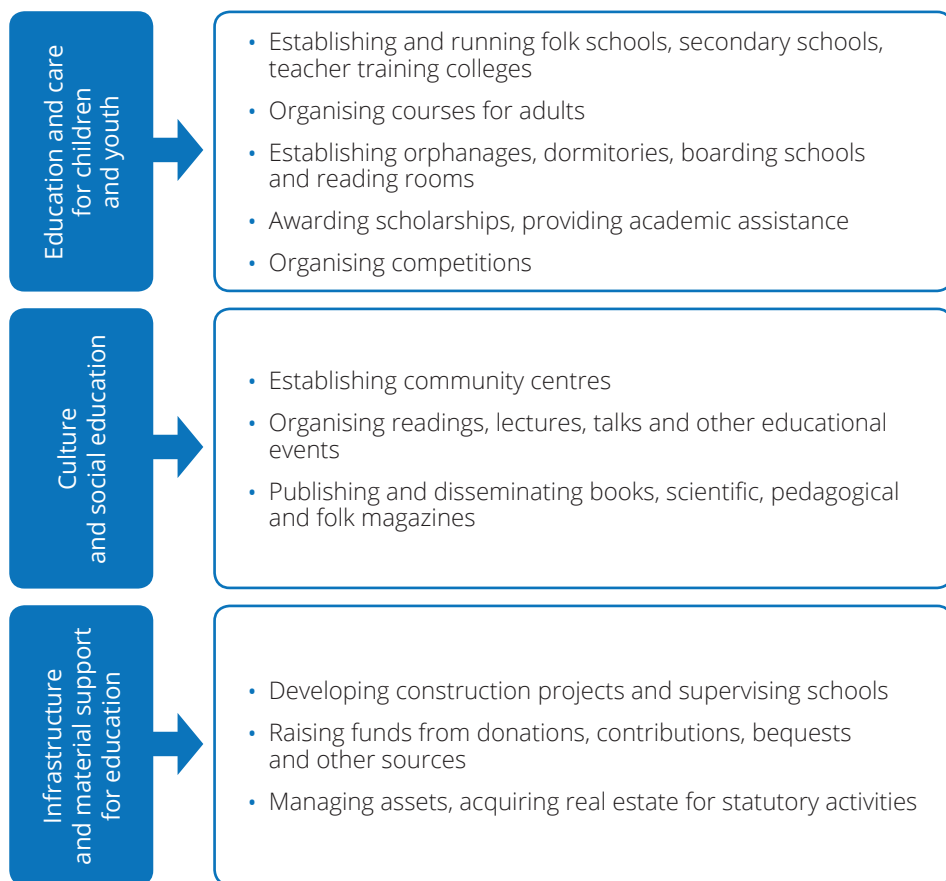
At the beginning of the 20th century, associations in the Vilnius Region became a national symbol of resistance to assimilation, of the national struggle and of the need for social action. The educational activities undertaken by the Polish patriots to preserve the Polish identity were fundamental, and their intense activity, despite unfavourable circumstances, was a response to the social needs of the time and also set the direction for further action. Therefore, social initiatives in Vilnius were the seed of the Polish Educational Society's activities, giving rise to organised efforts to promote national education.

3. The activities of the Polish Educational Society in the Vilnius region (1918 to 1939)

After Poland regained independence in 1918, there was an ongoing armed conflict with the Soviet authorities and a dispute over Vilnius, which delayed the process of organising, developing and shaping Polish education compared to other areas of the Republic of Poland. A distinctive feature of the Polish education in the Vilnius Region was the presence of numerous national and ethnic minorities and religious groups, which obliged the Polish government to take into account the social needs and the ethnic structure of the Second Polish Republic. Furthermore, the census conducted in 1921 showed that 33.1% of the population over 10 years old could not read or write, and in the Vilnius district alone, the illiteracy rate was 66% [*Rocznik Statystyczny Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, Warsaw 1927: 29; *Mały Rocznik Statystyczny*, Warsaw 1937: 29]. An additional difficulty was posed by the government attempts to consolidate and unify various education systems and to implement compulsory schooling [Gąsiorowski, 66]. It is true that *Dekret z 7 lutego 1919 roku o obowiązku szkolnym* [in English: Decree of 7 February 1919 on Compulsory Schooling] introduced compulsory attendance at school for children of 7 to 14 years old and laid down rules for the training of teachers in five-year colleges. However, in practice, the implementation of this proposal was difficult due to the limited availability of schools. The development of education and public schooling in the Vilnius Region was also influenced by “reforma Jędrzejewiczowska” [in English, the Jędrzejewiczowska reform] and adopted *Ustawa o ustroju szkolnictwa* [in English: The Act on the Education System]. The

structures of all school levels were completely reorganised, and the principle of “patency” between stages of education was introduced. Education at the primary level, i.e. *seven years of primary school*, was a statutory obligation. Furthermore, in the 1930s, the situation regarding school accessibility and equal educational opportunities in areas with poorly developed infrastructure in the Vilnius School District was improved by the implementation of the “Plan budowy 100 szkół” [in English: The Plan to Build 100 Primary Schools] (and ultimately 120) named after Marshal Piłsudski. In 1936, the number of primary schools increased by 15 in the Braslav District, by 13 in the Disensky District, by 9 in Ashmyany District, by 11 in Postavy District, by 14 in Svetsiansy District, by 11 in the Vileyka District, by 8 in the Maladzyechna District, and by 19 in the Vilnius-Trakai District [Srebrakowski, 2019: 151–152]. Owing to the more even distribution of schools across the region, there was a marked increase in public education [Surwiło, 1992: 18]. Despite legislative support from the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Education, the process of spreading education in the Vilnius Region was a long and arduous task. Social and educational organisations undertook many activities to overcome the deficiencies and differences resulting from the partitions, reduce illiteracy and promote education. The integration and aforementioned merger of the social and educational organisations of the National Education Society in Vilnius with Towarzystwo Oświaty Narodowej [in English: The Catholic Society of Polish Public Education] was important for the development of education in the Vilnius Region [Kwiatkowski, 2015: 10]. As a result of joint arrangements, on 21 August 1919, an independent Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands (hereinafter – PESEL) was established, covering Vilnius Region, Nowogródek and Białystok Voivodships. It had its own organisational structure and programme [Statut Polskiej Macierzy Szkolnej Z.W., 1927: 1]. Witold Węsławski, PhD., the former head of the Education Committee, was reappointed as president of the newly established organisation. The seat of the PESEL was located at 2/3 Benedyktyńska Street in Vilnius [2005: 10]. The aim of the cultural and educational work of the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands was ‘to promote and support education in the Christian and national spirit and to provide moral and material care for children and youth in education’ [Statut Polskiej Macierzy Szkolnej Z.W., 1927: 1]. In order to achieve the above aims and take into account the social and educational situation in the eastern lands, the Polish Educational Society, in accordance with its statutes, organised its work in three areas: education and care for children and youth, culture and social education, and infrastructure development.

Figure 1. Areas and Forms of the Activity of the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands



Source: the authors' own work based on *Statut Polskiej Macierzy...*, 1927: 1.

The work and activities of the Polish Educational Society in the Vilnius Region were intense. In 1919, during the first months of the PESEL's operation, there were: 9 schools in Vilnius, 85 schools in the provinces, including 70 schools under the care of local circles of the PESEL, 2 teacher training colleges (for women and men), junior high schools and primary schools in Święciany, Ashmyany and Vileyka. Two Polish language courses for adults were organised, and a Vocational School Association was established. In 1920, there were 331 Polish schools operating throughout the Vilnius Voivodeship, employing 583 teachers. This was the first period of organising Polish education in the region, which had only just

come under the Polish administration. Between 1920 and 1922, the number of Polish schools in the Vilnius Voivodeship almost doubled (from 331 to 617), and the number of teachers increased significantly (from 583 to 1 170). These data testify to the intensive efforts of the Polish state to develop education in the eastern lands, where it was important to strengthen national and cultural identity [Wareński, 1929:12].

Table 1. Education in the Vilnius Region in 1923 to 1925

Type of school	Number of state schools	Number of private schools	Number of pupils/listeners
Secondary schools	11	28	6107
State schools	52	27	14535
Vocational schools	2	12	No data available
Teacher training colleges	3	5	771

Source: Wareński, 1929.

The expansion of the school network was also linked to the need to employ the qualified teaching staff who had been trained at teacher training colleges. Teachers made use of the resources of teacher training libraries and drew knowledge and inspiration from the pedagogical press. The Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands had Centralna Wypożyczalnia Książek [in English: The Central Book Lending Library], which served approximately 1 200 readers [Kwiatkowski, 2005: 10]. From 1924 to 1928, the number of books increased from 12 791 to 19 000 [*Rocznik Statystyczny...*, 1930: 250]. However, as early as 1920, the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Education in Warsaw published “Szkola Powszechna” [in English: Primary School], a quarterly for teachers. This magazine was an important source of information and methodological support for teachers in the Polish primary schools in the eastern lands of the Republic of Poland. The magazine published articles on pedagogy and psychology, as well as on teaching methodology, teacher training, teacher documentation, and pedagogical movements in Poland and abroad [Michalska, 2019: 35]. The Polish Educational Society also enriched its school and library collections with pedagogical publications, i.e. “Oświata Polska” [in English: The Polish Education], “Nasza Praca” [in English: Our Work], “Oświata i Wychowanie” [in English: The Education and Upbringing],

“Nasz Program” [in English: Our Programme], “Oświata Pozaszkolna” [in English: The Extracurricular Education], “Przegląd Oświatowy” [in English: The Educational Review], “Przewodnik Oświatowy” [in English: The Educational Guide], “Polacy za Granicą” [in English: Poles Abroad], “Biuletyn Oświatowy” [in English: Educational Bulletin], “Siew Młodej Wsi” [in English: Sowing of the Young Village], “Plon” [in English: The Harvest], “Przewodnik Wiejski” [in English: The Rural Guide]). However, as early as 1925, on the initiative of the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands, “Gwiazdka – tygodnik dla dzieci i młodzieży” [in English: A Little Star – a weekly for Children and Youth] was published in Vilnius. Its first volume comprised 40 issues published from the beginning to the end of the year. It was an illustrated weekly for children and youth, containing educational, literary and popular science content, illustrated and adapted for young readers: educational stories and fairy tales, historical and patriotic articles, poetry for children and drawings. The Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands was developing rapidly. By 1925, it had 244 local organisational units, known as Circles of the PESEL, with a total of 18 274 members. In addition, 539 libraries and 510 adult education courses were organised [Kwiatkowski, 2005: 10]. In the 1930s, the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands intensified the activities of its local Circles, which entered into formal employment contracts with teachers. In addition to the basic teaching duties, these contracts also included a provision on the necessity to conduct courses for illiterate persons and actively to participate in organising the cultural life of the local community. Teachers employed by the circle of the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands often served simultaneously as librarians, school principals and organisers of various educational and cultural events [Markiewicz, 1994: 222].

In order to raise the level of elementary education and promote preschool education, between 1929 and 1930, the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands established nine preschools, including four in Vilnius, providing care for a total of 140 children. The activities of the existing Women’s College in Vilnius were also expanded to include an additional course, and the T. Zan Men’s College was established. The Society also involved in the development of vocational education, establishing three vocational schools, including the Women’s Vocational School of Tailoring in Nova Vileyka [Kryńska, 2000: 92–93].

The problem most often faced by the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands was undoubtedly the lack of funds, but also public awareness. Faced with difficult living conditions, the priority for many families was to secure the basic means of subsistence, often at the expense of their children’s

education. Daily economic needs often took precedence over education, which meant that many parents decided not to send their children to school so that they could help them with paid work or on the farm. One of the reports on the activities of the PESEL for 1929 provides that: “Economic issues are absorbing the attention of society, pushing cultural matters into the background – to the detriment of both issues, as they are closely related” [Polska Macierz Szkolna..., 1930; Kwiatkowski, 2014: 12]. In addition, a significant number of children did not attend school due to population dispersion, lack of educational infrastructure and difficult social conditions (the lack of clothing, footwear, long distances to schools). The Main Board of the Polish Educational Society emphasised the importance of nationwide involvement in education in the Eastern Borderlands. The Polish Educational Society appealed to the entire society for financial assistance, organising, among other things, fundraisings and collections [O Ziemię wschodnie..., 1936: 7, 8, 11]. Despite the difficulties described above, in 1936, the Polish Educational Society took care of a total of 8 068 children, including 2 139 in the Vilnius Region [O Ziemię wschodnie..., 1936]. According to the data of 1936, there were 30 circles of the Polish Educational Society, 48 primary schools educating 2 132 children, 6 dormitories and orphanages, and 147 libraries in the Vilnius Region, which was one of the highest rates among the eastern regions.

4. Summary

The Eastern Lands were both unique and problematic, and the educational situation in the region was complicated. The economic crisis of the 1930s, inadequate school facilities, overcrowded classrooms, lessons held in rural huts, a lack of qualified teaching staff, difficulties in transitioning between stages and continuing education at higher levels, and poor attendance meant that many pupils ended their education after completing the fourth grade of primary school [Markiewicz, 222; Kryńska, 92, Gąsiorowski, 73]. Despite these difficulties, the Vilnius Region was one of the most active areas of operation for the Polish Educational Society in the eastern lands of the Republic of Poland. The involvement of the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands contributed to an increase in compulsory school attendance to 85% at the end of the inter-war period. This was a fairly good result, considering the initial illiteracy rate in the eastern lands. It is worth noting that in 1939, only the City of Warsaw

and the Voivodeships of Silesia, Poznań, Pomerania and Kraków were close to achieving 100% compulsory school attendance [*Mały Rocznik Statystyczny*, 1939, Mauersberg, 1998].

Unfortunately, the further development of the Polish education in the Vilnius Region was interrupted on 17 September 1939, when the Red Army troops entered the eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic. The outbreak of World War II halted the development of the Polish Educational Society [Gąsiorowski, 2014: 86]. During World War II, the occupying authorities in the Vilnius Region changed five times. The following authorities ruled there in succession: the Russians (from 19 September to 28 October 1939), the Lithuanians (from 28 October 1939 to 15 June 1940), the Russians again (from 15 June 1940 to 24 June 1941), the Germans (from 24 June 1941 to 13 July 1944), and the Russians again (from 13 July 1944). An analysis of the rule of successive occupiers clearly shows that their policy was aimed primarily at, if not the complete extermination, then at least the infliction of significant losses on individual ethnic groups in the area [Szczurowski 2012: 174]. As a result of military operations and occupation policies, some Polish schools were closed down or Lithuanianised. Teaching in Polish was restricted, though not completely banned [Gąsiorowski, 2014: 87]. However, as a result of the closing of Polish schools in the Vilnius Region between 1939 and 1945, a phenomenon of secret teaching developed, continuing the pre-war traditions of the Polish Educational Society. During those dramatic years, Polish teachers, intellectuals and clergy were the guardians of Polish culture and the native language. Owing to these measures, educational continuity was maintained and staff was prepared for post-war social and cultural life [Kamilewicz-Rucińska, 2017: 121–139]. It was only the political changes of the 1980s in Lithuania that created the conditions for the revival of Polish national life. As early as 1988, Stowarzyszenie Społeczno-Kulturalne Polaków na Litwie [in English: The Social and Cultural Association of Poles in Lithuania] was established, which gave rise to Związek Polaków na Litwie [in English: The Union of Poles in Lithuania], an organisation that made education one of its pillars. In this context, there was a need to reactivate the Polish Educational Society as an institution supporting the development of the Polish education. The reactivation of the Polish Educational Society and the aforementioned activities were crucial for the survival and development of Polish education in the new political reality of independent Lithuania. All the more so because the Polish Educational Society is much more than an educational organisation – it is a community of people united around the idea of education, upbringing and protection of national identity. Its activities

in the Vilnius Region – both in the interwar period and in the post-war and contemporary times – prove that it is an association of a unique nature: responsive to the needs of the times, active regardless of political and social realities, always ready to take on new challenges.

From the beginning of the 20th century to the present day, the Polish Educational Society has been one of the most important pillars of social life for Poles in Lithuania – it is an institution that permanently combines the cultivation of tradition with care for future generations. The activities of Polish Educational Society are an example of a social effort by an organisation that requires constant commitment, competence and determination. The long-term, multi-generational dimension of the activities of the Polish Educational Society in the Vilnius Region is a topic that will continue to be developed by the authors in order to highlight the nature and specific forms of activity, as well as to commemorate those who were involved in the development of this educational institution.

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