

Muz., 2017(58): 193-205
Rocznik, eISSN 2391-4815

received – 05.2017
reviewed – 05.2017
accepted – 06.2017
DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0010.2238

STRUGGLE FOR THE SO-- CALLED RECLAMATION OF CULTURAL GOODS FROM VILNIUS AFTER WORLD WAR II*

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The Józef Piłsudski Museum in Sulejówiek

During the inter-war period Wilno (today: Vilnius) was a dynamic centre of Polish culture.¹ Pride of place went to the **Stefan Batory University** (USB), heir to the magnificent tradition of the Wilno Academy and, at the same time, a modern scientific centre revived thanks to a decree issued by Marshal Józef Piłsudski on 28 August 1919. Particular importance was attached to the University's Faculty of Fine Arts.² established by the eminent artist Ferdynand Ruszczyk, with the following professors as lecturers: Jerzy Hoppen, Ludomir Słędziński, Benedykt Kubicki, Tymon Niesiołowski, Bronisław Jamontt, Stanisław Horno-Popławski *et al.* The University Library was composed predominantly of *Leleweliana* – the Joachim Lelewel collection totalling (in 1939) 377 000 volumes and 12 000 manuscripts.³ presented by the Polish State to the Library collections in 1926.⁴

One of the most significant from the viewpoint of the collections was the **Eustachy and Emilia Wróblewski State Library** (BPW)⁵ with an extensive collection created by Eustachy Wróblewski, containing mainly publications on medicine and entomology, supplemented by his wife, Emilia and son, Tadeusz, who added works on pedagogics,⁶ and by books purchased by, i.a. Henryk Plater (ca. 6000 volumes from the sixteenth-eighteenth century), Józef Ciechanowiecki (2749 volumes from the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century), Józef Bieliński, and a complete set of

publications issued by the Polish Academy of Learning (PAU). The book collection was dominated by works dealing with law, politics, medicine, and biology, all in various languages, *Vilniana* and *Lithuanica*. In 1922, ten years after its establishment in 1912, the Eustachy and Emilia Wróblewski Library Society received a new statute and name: the E. and I. Wróblewski Society of Scientific Assistance. According to §1 of the Society's statute it was created for the purpose of *arranging and maintaining in the town of Wilno a collection of books, maps, drawings and other printed works as well as manuscripts, old acts, paintings, seals and similar collections for the sake of general, scientific, and educational benefit, and in particular to render scientific assistance to teachers and students of all scientific departments regardless of different nationalities and religions*, while § 2 stressed: *The seat of the Society is the town of Wilno and the Society collections cannot be transported from Wilno.*⁷ A year later the library was nationalised and became known as the Eustachy and Emilia Wróblewski State Library, while collections of the Wróblewski Society of Scientific Assistance were deposited to the Polish state. In §12 of the Agreement between the Society of Scientific Assistance and the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Education emphasis was placed on the fact that the Agreement had been signed only in relation to the Polish State.⁸ In 1931 BPW had a total of 20 400

* The term: so-called reclamation campaign is inadequate in relation to the entire gamut of activity undertaken in 1945 by the Polish government. In the described case it does not entail a return of objects to the former place of their storage but a transference of Polish property to Poland within the latter's new borders. More extensively in: L. M. Karecka, Akcja rewindykacyjna w latach 1945-1950. Spór o terminologię czy o istotę rzeczy, in: "Ochrona Zabytków" 2002, no. 3-4, pp. 404-409; there: literature on the subject.

books, ca. 1400 titles of periodicals in 8400 volumes, 260 different publications in 4000 volumes, and 5800 works in the *Vilniana-Lithuanica* section. The Rare Prints department included *Polonica* – 150 works from the fifteenth-sixteenth century, 730 from the seventeenth century, and 2240 from the eighteenth century as well as foreign monuments from the fifteenth-sixteenth century – 210 works, and from the seventeenth century – 1210 items. The BPW indices contained also 1450 atlases and maps, 285 albums, 2700 manuscripts, 7400 autographs, 50 paintings and drawings, 2400 photographs, and 2500 museum pieces.⁹ The most valuable exhibits included, i.a. Masonic monuments from the collections of Jan Wolfgang, Waclaw Fedorowicz, and Henryk Tatur,¹⁰ royal privileges, and material for the history of the universities of Warsaw and Wilno.

The Society of Friends of Science in Wilno (TPN), with a seat in 8 Lelewela Street, was another institution with significant cultural accomplishments. According to § 2 of the 1907 Act on establishing TPN its purpose was to *cultivate Polish language sciences, skills and literature, and in particular to study the country from the viewpoint of natural sciences, ethnography, history, economy, and statistics*.¹¹ The Society was the owner of a number of collections: library, numismatics (originating from, i.a. the Prince Michał Ogiński collection), natural history, ethnography, and art from, i.a. the Tyszkiewicz family, Ludwik Abramowicz, and Michał Brensztejn collections, on view at the TPN Museum.¹²

Pre-war Wilno was also the site of other museums, such as the Tatar Science Museum in 5 Św. Michalski Lane, the Byelorussian Museum, and the Municipal Museum, opened on the eve of the war. Mention must be made of the fact that apart from the earlier listed libraries and museums Wilno had copious collections belonging to churches and many other institutions,¹³ including the State Archive and the Municipal Archive. During World War II all those institutions were closed and their collections – scattered. Movable historical monuments comprising the property of Polish institutions and private owners were seized by the Lithuanian authorities and from 1940 kept at the Municipal Museum, later changed into the Lithuanian State Art Museum (PMS), which in 1941 received the most valuable paintings from the TPN collections. In 1943, at the time of the German occupation, part of the TPN library (4000 volumes) was moved to the Wróblewski Library. Precious incunabula were placed in the seat of the Calvinist commune board in Zawalna Street, and manuscripts were transferred to the State Archive in the former Benedictine monastery next to the church of St. Catherine. Part of the Museum collections, especially Lithuanian costumes from the M. Brensztejn collection, was transferred to the Lithuanian Society of Friends of Science on Antokol. Ultimately, the remaining TPN museum exhibits were included into PMS, and the TPN building became the seat of the Historical Institute of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences.¹⁴ In this way, the Polish museum – featuring the most extensive collections in Wilno – ceased to exist.

After the expulsion of the Germans from Wilno, collections amassed in the building of the Municipal Museum were examined and put in order (from July 1944 to March 1945). They were then divided into sections: I General Art Department under Prof. Jerzy Hoppen; II Lithuanian Folk Art Department, and III Historical Department – both under

Lithuanian supervision; IV Old Wilno Department – *Vilniana*, and V Library, amounting to ca. 6000 volumes. Out of a total of 1073 paintings, 641 originated from TPN and the rest from the Municipal Museum or were the private deposits of Helena Dowgiałłowa, the Romer family, and others. Particularly noteworthy were works by Bartholomew Spranger, Frans Francken, and Jacob Steveyck, and among canvases by Polish artists those by Franciszek Smuglewicz, Ferdynand Ruszczyk, Aleksander Szturman, Bronisław Jamontt, Tymon Niesiołowski, and Michał Rouba.¹⁵ In November 1939 the Wróblewski Library became the Institute of Lithuanian Philology. The Lithuanian Academy of Sciences was established in the second half of 1940 and included confiscated Polish private collections and the earlier mentioned TPN library.¹⁶ It later became obvious that it was impossible to convey to Poland other collections of pre-war Polish institutions, with the exception of the mementos of Eliza Orzeszkowa, secured during the war,¹⁷ and part of the TPN collections.

In 1939–1944 Wilno and the entire Wilno region changed hands six times, which affected the collections of local institutions.¹⁸ Ultimately, territorial changes were confirmed by the Potsdam Conference, which left Wilno outside Poland. An *Agreement between the Polish Committee for National Liberation and the Government of the Lithuanian Socialist Soviet Republic on the evacuation of Polish citizens from the territory of the Lithuanian SRR and the Lithuanian population from the territory of Poland*¹⁹ (further as: Agreement) was signed in Lublin on 22 September 1944. The evacuation of the Polish population was to be supervised by the Office of the Chief Plenipotentiary of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Poland for Evacuation from the Lithuanian Socialist Soviet Republic (LSRR).²⁰ Somewhat later, the efforts of the Poles resulted in the establishment of a **Department of Culture** (further as: Department) within the structure of the Office; the Department was to collect material for the future reclamation of Polish cultural goods to Poland. Originally, such a Department was not foreseen in the plan of the Office of the Chief Plenipotentiary,²¹ and was created only after Dr Maria Rzeuska,²² subsequently head of the Department, talked to Władysław Wolski, a Minister of the Polish Committee for National Liberation (PKWN).²³ The Department of Culture, known also as the Culture Office or the Culture and Press Office, commenced its activity, as did the whole Office, on 1 December 1944. Its prime task was the protection of private Polish cultural goods, which, due to the evacuation of the Polish population from Lithuania, could be damaged, as well as the preparation of documentation for the future Reclamation Commission. R. Rzeuska wrote: *The organisation principles and the system of work were determined not by official means, i.e. instructions, but by the experience of current necessities and needs. (...) The Department was compelled to rely on its own forces and ingenuity*.²⁴ Officially, the Department's tasks were described in the "Provisional" instruction issued by the Office of the Chief Plenipotentiary on 31 December 1945 and signed by Ludwik Abramowicz, i.e. a year after the establishment of the Department of Culture and the Office as a whole.²⁵ Presumably, these principles were devised by the employees of the Department of Culture.²⁶ In § 23 of the instruction we read: *Competences of the Department of Culture include:*



1. View of Vilnius, 1943



2. View of Vilnius, 1943

a) repatriation from the territory of the LSRR of Polish cultural goods (books, etc.) originating from donations or purchased from private persons,

b) receiving financial donations directly from the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Moscow for the purpose of the repatriation of cultural goods from the LSSR, the expenditure of those donations according to possessed instructions, and keeping suitable accounts,

b) assisting in the transportation of cultural goods to Poland by Polish repatriated persons,

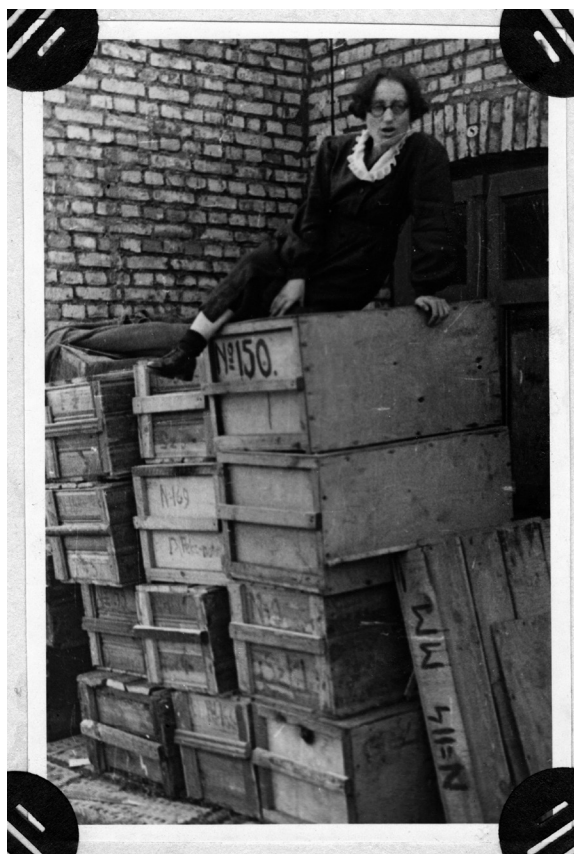
c) storing cultural goods intended for repatriation from the LSRR to the moment of their transport to Poland,

d) supervision over Polish culture workers in the LSSR,

e) running an administrative office and own archive.²⁷

In different periods the Department of Culture employed from two to ten persons: Maria Rzeuska (head), deputy heads, and heads of suitable sections: the *Vilniana* library, book-keeping, a storehouse, transport, and a typist. Permanent employees included an expert on art and museums, whose task was to assess the artistic value, and partly the material value, of the incoming objects – a function of particular importance while making purchases. The Department began working with a two-person staff: M. Rzeuska and Halina Zalewska, later accompanied by Doc. Dr Bronisław Halicki. Throughout its entire existence the Department employed altogether 25 persons.²⁸ In numerous instances the co-workers of the Department were freelancers working free of charge. Apart from functioning at the central Office, i.e. the seat of the Office of the Chief Plenipotentiary in Wilno, the Department of Culture was active also in the region of Wilno and pre-war Lithuania: Kiejdany, Kowno, Poniewież, and Wilkomierz. Evacuation outposts of the Offices of Regional Plenipotentiaries engaged special representatives, who upon the basis of received instructions and in close contact with the Department of Culture in Wilno gathered material needed by the Department and concerning the history of libraries, archives, museums and other cultural goods of Wilno and its region.²⁹

According to plans of the Chief Plenipotentiary Office the reclamation of cultural property from Wilno was to be entrusted to a special **Reclamation Commission**, for which the collected material were *indispensable and collecting them, once the suitable moment [reclamation] comes, could be hampered or outright impossible*.³⁰ Work was carried out to the beginning of September 1945. Attempts were made to obtain as much information as possible about each institution, *especially those whose Polishness is unquestionable*.³¹ Literature and interviews were prepared and completed using questionnaires conceived by M. Rzeuska³² and filled by persons connected with the given institution both prior to and during the war. Collecting information was the task of Dr Helena Hleb-Koszańska from the USB Library, Janina Kapuścińska from BPW, Aleksander Korbut and Józef Kojdecki – members of the museum staff, Helena Drege, associated with BPW and TPN, and Władysław Zimnicki. The systematically collected data, especially wartime, were to become an important reclamation argument in relations with the Soviet Union and the authorities of the Lithuanian SSR.³³ At the beginning of 1945 work began on accumulating a library (periodicals, Masonic material, albums, photographs, handwritten archival material, and historical documents) pertaining



3. Maria Rzeuska on chests packed with books by employees of the Cultural Department

to Wilno and its region as well as Polish-Lithuanian relations, which was to become a useful collection of necessary information for the Reclamation Commission. The question of reclamations from the Eastern territories was broached by Witold Suchodolski in a memorial: *Rewindykacja polskiego mienia kulturalnego z obszaru byłych województw wschodnich*, in which he stressed: *If the entire Polish population from former Eastern voivodeships wins the opportunity and right to join its nation by resettling to Central Poland or regained ancient Polish lands – so should everything that documents its centuries-long spiritual contact with the rest of the nation and represents accomplishments shared with the nation, i.e. Polish cultural goods, return to their common homeland*.³⁴ *Projekt umowy polsko-litewskiej w sprawie repatriacji zbiorów polskich z LSSR* prepared by Ministry of Culture and Art (MKiS) foresaw a reclamation of cultural goods from Wilno. The goods in question included predominantly:

a) works of Polish artists and scholars,

b) mementos of Polish monarchs, leaders, statesmen, state dignitaries, and Polish social, scientific, and art activists,

c) Polish collections as a whole, regardless of the already conducted nationalisation since they constitute unquestionably Polish cultural accomplishments,

d) statues of Poles located in the discussed terrains since they are of no interest to the Lithuanian nation,



4. Employees of the Cultural Department

e) *Polish national foundations intended by their private Polish donors for the cultivation of Polish culture,*

f) *Polish libraries created in the years 1991–1939,*

g) *libraries of assorted Polish societies and libraries established by the Poles as distinct institutions regardless of the time of their origin,*

h) *archives concerning regions belonging to the present-day Polish State.*³⁵

Such an agreement was never signed despite the efforts of Vice-Minister of Art and Culture Leon Kruczkowski, who carried on a copious correspondence with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Moscow.³⁶

The Department of Culture initiated activities intent on protecting Polish cultural goods by accepting objects as deposits, thus establishing contact with Polish society and winning its trust. This was an extremely important step because during the war private persons stored objects of Polish culture, the public property of assorted Polish institutions or persons, who, as a consequence of the war, found themselves either outside Wilno or were no longer alive. The deposits were accepted upon the basis of a special act, which foresaw also donations as compensation for their transport to Poland. However, M. Rzeuska recalled: *This was applied only in the case of those persons who, possessing more valuable and larger collections, could make such a donation.*³⁷ As a sign of their gratitude for transporting cultural goods across the border Janina Błażewiczowa, Helena Dowgiałłowa, Helena Montowtowa, Zofia Romer, and Jadwiga Łukowska

offered individual objects to the collections of the National Museum in Warsaw (MNW). Some of the deposits were made by third parties who, during the absence of the owners, in this fashion salvaged historical monuments. Zygmunt Wrześniowski, an employee of the Department, transferred a collection of photographic plates of landscape photographs of Wilno, Brześć, Krzemieniec, the Wilno voivodeship, and Warsaw – a total of 281 glass plates and 99 photographic films belonging to Wojciech Buyko, member of the Wilno Photo-club.³⁸ In another case a seventeenth-century canvas: *The Holy Family*, the property of Count Ludwik Choiseul of Kowno, was deposited by Michał Ukiński,³⁹ while Professor Jerzy Hoppen deposited *a golden ring, a gift from the town of Poznań to the actor Szczurkiewicz from 1926*, the property of the Society of Friends of Science,⁴⁰ and the Committee of custody over the artworks of Leonia Szczepanowiczowa, established in Wilno, protected the artist's legacy by presenting it to the Department. The efforts of the Department staff also made it possible to bring over to Poland, i.a. collections belonging to the Convent of the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration: 20 paintings and six chests containing archival material, old prints and books⁴¹ as well as 18 paintings and ten chests of archival material, the property of the Congregation of the Mission.⁴²

The Department of Culture also accepted donations made by persons aware of the enormity of the wartime losses suffered by Polish cultural goods, often looted by the Germans. The most valuable donations were made by Jadwiga Brensztejnowa, widow of Michał Brensztejn. Apart

Blażewiczowa 3

Oświadczenie.

Tekst obowiązujący w stosunku do Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie.

Niniejszym stwierdzam, że na ręce p. Pełnomocnika Głównego do Spraw Ewakuacji w Wilnie - przekazałam następujący - wymieniony również w osobnym oświadczeniu - komplet mebli czechockich w charakterze depozytu tymczasowego do Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie:

- 1/kantorek,
- 2/szafka oszklona.- ornamenty czarne,
- 3/stół owalny z deseniem pośrodku,
- 4/kanapa - twarde oparcie, siedzenie na sprężynach wkładane,
- 5/4 krzesła - siedzenia na sprężynach wkładane,
- 6/4 krzesła połamane.
- 7/postument z ozdobą w kolorze czarnym.

Odbiorcą mebli mogą być: Janina Błażewiczowa, Janina i Ewa Ruszczyćówny oraz p. Maria Weyse. Jako kompensatę za przewiezienie i przechowanie wyżej wymienionych mebli - ofiarowuję w formie daru następujące przedmioty:

- 1/szkic olejny "Chata" - Ruszczyca,
- 2/obraz olejny "Kwiaty" - T. Niesiołowskiego,
- 3/litografię - hr. Włodzimierz Potocki - pułkownik W.P.
- 4/kieszonkowy zegar słoneczny/zabytkowy/.

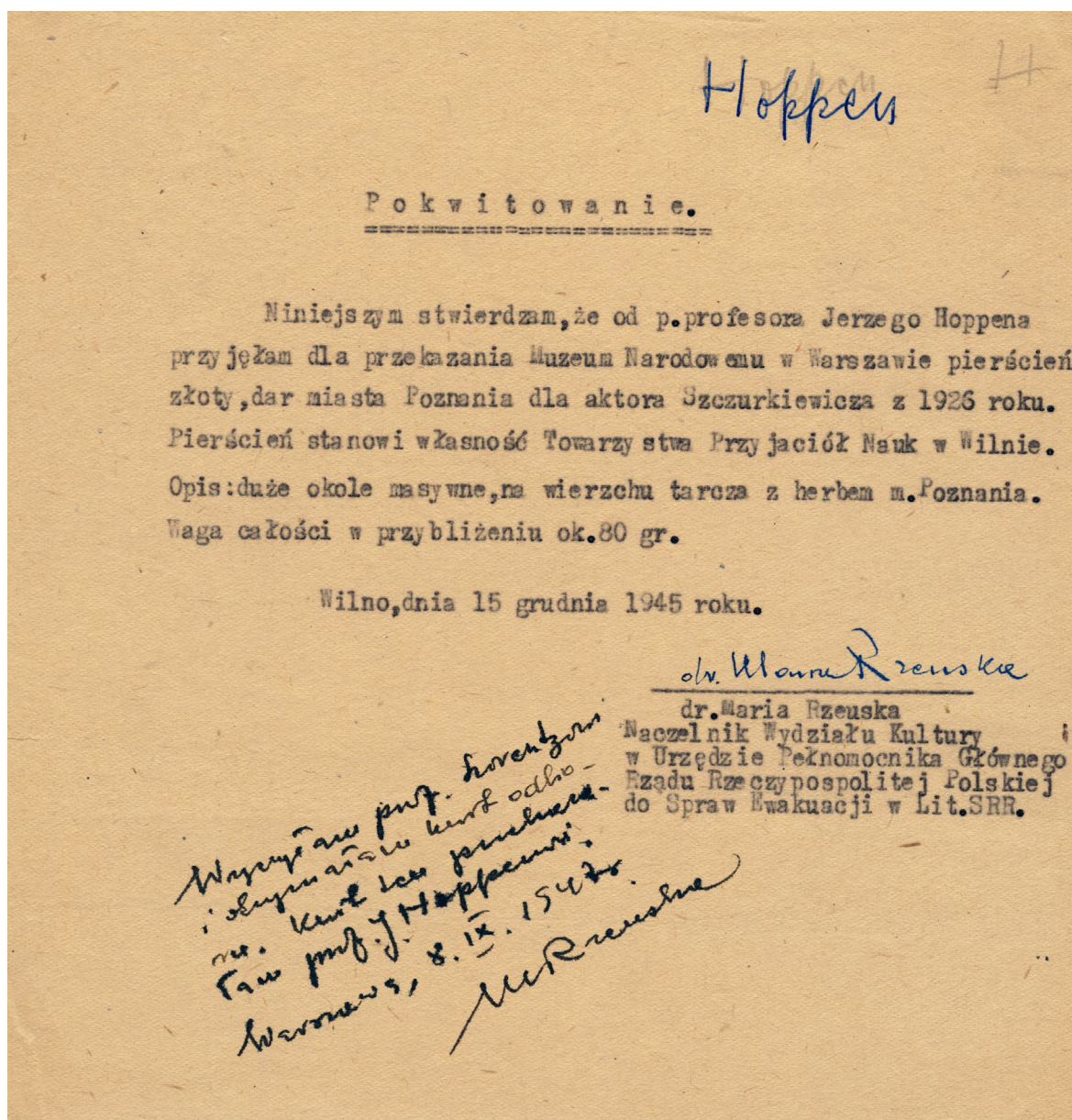
Wilno, dnia 20 sierpnia 1945 roku.

Janina Błażewiczowa
Janina Błażewiczowa

from a vast collection of *Vilniana* and numerous objects she entrusted 21 royal documents, including parchment ones from the sixteenth-eighteenth century. Janina Reniger offered paintings and collections of family documents,⁴³ while the Górski family, living in former Lithuania, conferred paintings and several hundred examples of archival material,⁴⁴

Another way of protecting cultural goods from Wilno, applied by the Department of Culture, involved purchases, although the Department started functioning without suitable financial means since the budget of the Office of the Chief Plenipotentiary did not foresee *any sums, even for packing, costs of labour, and transport of works of art and libraries.*⁴⁵ For all practical purposes, the Department

of Culture did not receive any financial assistance from the Polish government. At the time it obtained 100 000 roubles, although Rzeuska maintained that the needs were at least ten times as large. In view of the above, on 25 August 1945 the Office of the Chief Plenipotentiary turned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with a request for a successive donation for the Department of Culture for, i.a. the purchase of Polish cultural goods.⁴⁶ Correspondence between MKiS and the Ministry of State Treasury concerning a donation of 800 000 zlotys, of which 500 000 zlotys were to be offered by MKiS and 300 000 zlotys were to be provided by the Ministry of Education, lasted for more than half a year.⁴⁷ The funds in question were to be presented to the Chief Plenipotentiary



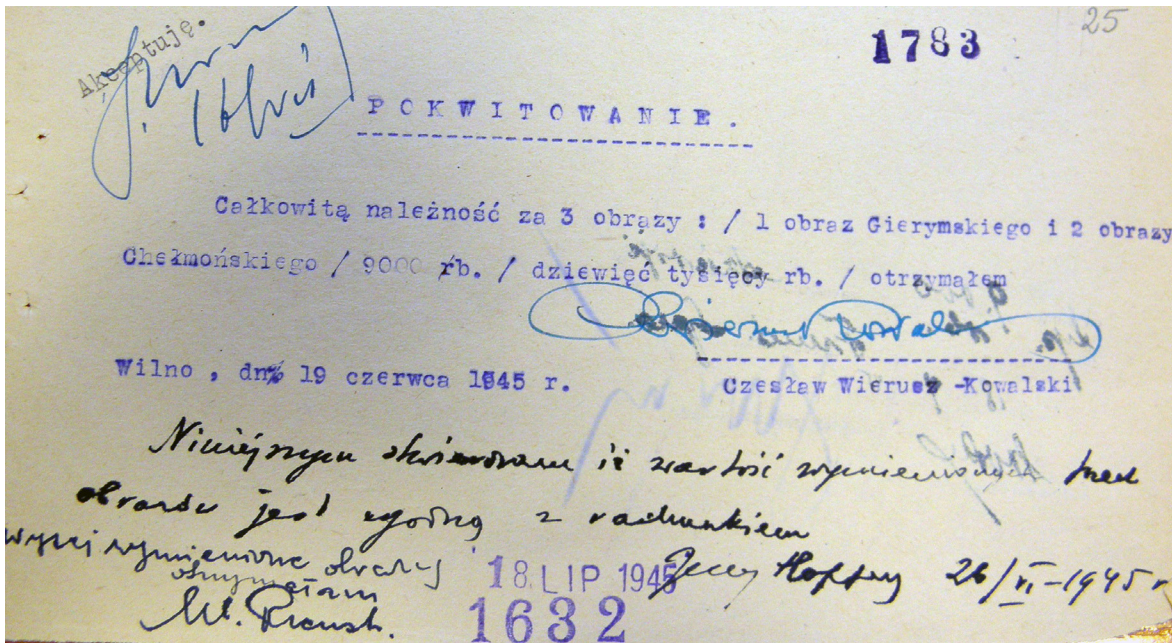
6. Receipt from 15 December 1945 concerning the ring given by J. Hoppen

in Wilno through the intermediary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MSZ). In view of the fact that this promise was not kept, the Chief Plenipotentiary enclosed in a letter of 14 December 1945, directly addressed the Ministry of State Treasury, the earlier cited *Sprawozdanie z rocznej pracy...*⁴⁸ and a memorial by M. Rzeuska: *Sytuacja dóbr kulturalnych polskich w Wilnie, na Wileńszczyźnie i na terenie b. Litwy, stanowiących własność prywatną*,⁴⁹ in which she warned: *I regard the fact that Lithuanians and Lithuanian institutions are buying up Polish cultural goods to be one of the greatest failures. Among all the social strata the gravest material situation in Wilno is that of the Polish cultural elite and the former so-called landowning aristocracy for whom almost the only way to survive the war was to sell the most valuable objects of art, science, and culture, thus diminishing and destroying whole collections, sometimes completed for centuries. (...) Forced by sheer necessity, the Poles, without any other sources of obtaining cash, sell invaluable treasures of Polish culture for all practical purposes in return for nothing, and in this way Polish society, so greatly impoverished in this domain by wartime damages, loses them for always, because a sold object sold will never be regained, in even the most favourable conditions of eventual reclamation.*⁵⁰ Despite the absence of donations the Department attempted to make "on account" purchases either by resorting to loans from the Department's budget or paying the sellers due sums at a later date. The purchases made at this time included, i.a.: *Portrait of Bishop Albertrandi* by Bacciarelli, *Self-portrait* by Albertrandi, *St. Helen* by an anonymous painter, and *Portrait of the Artist's Wife* by Rustem as well as canvases by Horowitz, Gierymski, and Chełmoński, a silk shawl, porcelain, etc. Nevertheless, Rzeuska recalled: *As a result of numerous efforts and requests as well as the actually favourable attitude of the already mentioned Ambassador Modzelewski, and later Ambassador to Moscow and Rector of UMCS [University of Maria Curie-Skłodowska] Henryk Raabe, as well as Director of the Department of Schools of Higher Learning Professor Stanisław Arnold of the University of Warsaw, and director of the chancellery of the Minister of Education Józefowicz, a several times more effective assistance was received via the Embassy. Extremely notable help from the MKiS was also obtained for the purchase of works of art and museum exhibits. The sum of 500 000 zlotys, intended as a special donation from MKiS for the Department expenses is owed in the first place to the efforts and exceptionally considerate attitude of Kurowski, Vice-Minister of the Treasury and a native of Wilno. The Department received further considerable sums to be spent by means of money orders made in Warsaw also from MKiS and owes them to the kindness and appreciation of the situation on the part of Professor Dr Władysław Tomkiewicz, director of the Department of Repatriation and Compensation in the Department of Culture at the Ministry. All those persons and others who indirectly contributed to supplying the Department with financial means deserve deepest gratitude. The majority included those who protected valuable Polish cultural goods condemned to destruction and improved the Polish state of possession as regards culture, already greatly impoverished by the war.*⁵¹

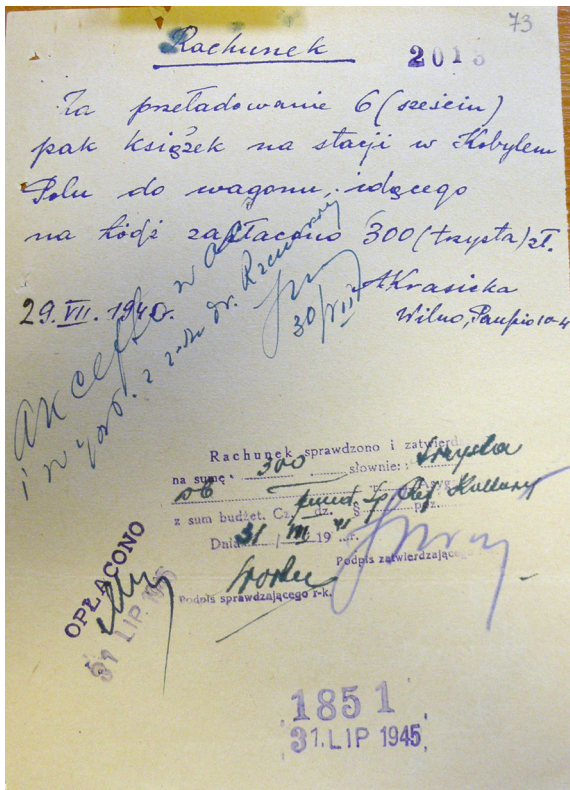
Objects marked as intended for transport were delivered personally by their owners, and sometimes were

reported by them or else the employees of the Department of Culture contacted the owners. After a year of working for the Department its staff members were informed about resources of cultural goods not only in Wilno but also in the environs. *This Intelligence work called for constant excursions by foot to the town, on the average once or twice a day, as well as frequent trips with vehicular transport, which was very difficult to arrange. Car transport was one of the many daily problems of working in the Department since being granted an official car was often simply impossible.*⁵² Another problem, which the Department of Culture was compelled to tackle, was the absence of storage space. To the end of June 1945 books and historical monuments were kept in a Department room and then in corridors in 16 Kościuszko Street. Moving to a new Department seat in 48 Wileńska Street did not help much but at least there the Department obtained a separate interior for a storeroom. The greatest problem – despite the efforts made by the Department personnel – was winning the right to arrange transport. Regarding private property the above mentioned Agreement of 22 September 1944 permitted the evacuees to convey up two tons of belongings for a single family.⁵³ It did not, however, consent to carrying *works of art and antiquities if one or the other comprised a collection or as individual examples unless they are the property of the evacuee's family, arms (with the exception of hunting rifles) and armour, photographs (apart from personal ones), plans, maps, and furniture, transported by railway or automobiles owing to difficulties caused by wartime conditions.*⁵⁴ Since books were not mentioned on the list of items whose transport was allowed or forbidden, eventual consent depended on the good will of the Lithuanians. Works of art could be theoretically transported as long as they were family property. *In practice the citizen encounters unsurpassable difficulties. Taking larger paintings, especially those not rolled up, into a railway carriage encountered difficulties created by the Lithuanian side and often the understandable protest of the passengers.*⁵⁵ Andrzej Miłosz recalled: *If objects of value for culture were transported our representative argued about them with the NKVD. Interventions also helped if they were supported by a bottle of moonshine. We had a special fund just in case to calm things down. Nevertheless, the outcomes of our efforts were rather meagre. After all, we know how many valuable Polish cultural goods were left behind.*⁵⁶

Manual work connected with packing and sending off the transports was performed by Department employees, and chests were built by a carpenter specially hired by the Department while the embarkation of the chests from the Office to the train carriage and handling at the frontier were carried out by specially hired manual workers. All told, the Department of Culture dispatched 17 transports from Wilno, starting with the first transport, which left the town on 9 March 1945 and contained documentation intended for the Directorate of Museums and the Preservation of Cultural Monuments (NDMiOZ), and ending with the ninth transport, sent off on 8 May 1946 for the Ministry of Education; all were received by the National Museum – at the time the largest museum repository.⁵⁷ The incoming chests were stored in the underground interiors of MNW and upon numerous occasions opened either to assemble the objects or hand them over to private persons who thanks to the



7. Receipt – a bill



8. Receipt for work for the Cultural Department

kindness of the Department of Culture could in this way bring their property over to Poland. Consequently, not all objects were listed. This held true in particular for books and archival material contained in the mentioned 17 transports and immediately presented to the National Library and the Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw. The documents of MNW described the Wilno reclamation as: *Transports of the Department of Culture at the Office of the Chief Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Republic of Poland for Evacuation in the Lithuanian SSR and presented to the National Museum in the name of the Directorate of Museums and the Preservation of Cultural Monuments in the 1945–1947 period*.⁵⁸ All told, the lists contained 1518 items,⁵⁹ subsequently included into the Museum collections. These were objects purchased in Wilno by the Department of Culture and entrusted by the Polish population to the Department employees. A further 470 listed deposits were in subsequent years returned to their owners and sometimes purchased by the Museum, while another part still remains at MNW as deposits.

Apart from the mentioned 17 transports the Department also sent books to Warsaw: directly to the National Library – five transports with 18 000 volumes, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – a single transport with 1526 volumes. Moreover, a transport containing 300 volumes was delivered to meet the needs of the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Moscow. Museum pieces were transported exclusively to Warsaw but book collections arrived also in other locations, by way of example, Łódź, where the emergent university received eight transports with 15 650 books, the School District Board – 3000 volumes, the Municipal Library and the School District Board in Białystok – 1800 volumes. The University of Toruń obtained three transports, and the University Poznań – a single transport with 1800 books.



9. Car belonging to the Cultural Department

(Photo: 1, 2 – J. Bulhak, from the collection of the Józef Piłsudski Family Foundation, scan by K. Rogalska; 3-6, 9 – from the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw, scan by Olkowski; 7 – from the collection of AAN, photo R. Olkowski, 8 – from the collection AAN, scan by R. Olkowski)

A total of 2750 volumes were dispatched to the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin and the Catholic University of Lublin. The needs of the Municipal Library in Olsztyn were met by a transport of 3000 volumes. The Academy of Learning in Cracow was presented with 2500 volumes. Altogether, in the course of two years 69 805 volumes were sent to Poland and subsequently all became the property of the institutions, for which they were intended.

This article is a study on a successive link in the so-called cultural property reclamation campaign conducted after

the Second World War by the Polish administration. Apart from presenting facts it proposes to bring the reader closer to the person and outstanding work of Maria Rzeuska and her collaborators. Despite various obstacles, these persons attempted in assorted ways to obtain cultural goods from Wilno for Poland. The article also depicts the sluggishness, indecisiveness, and absence of support on the part of the Polish authorities as well as the activity of the Lithuanian authorities objecting to handing over a centuries-old Polish cultural legacy to Poland.

Abstract: The article describes the so-called requisition campaign carried out in Vilnius city and region and Kaunas, Lithuania, the aim of which was to recover the cultural heritage which was supposed to stay abroad as a result of the change of borders after World War II for the Polish State and its citizens.

People connected with the Cultural Department established by the Polish Committee of National Liberation in 1944 at the Office of the Chief Plenipotentiary for Evacuation in the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. The Cultural Department carried out this activity under the Agreement between the Polish Committee of National Liberation and

the Government of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic regarding the evacuation of Polish citizens from Soviet Lithuania and Lithuanian citizens from Poland concerning the mutual repatriation of peoples.

The article aims to recall the private collections and most important cultural institutions in Vilnius from the period before 1939 which failed to be transported from Vilnius to Poland, despite the great efforts of many people. However, regardless of the result, the actions described and those who conducted them deserve to be recalled and mentioned in the subject-matter literature.

Keywords: Vilnius, reclamation, National Museum in Warsaw, Maria Rzeuska, museum exhibits, Vilnius collections.

Endnotes

- ¹ E. Chwalewik, *Zbiory polskie. Archiwa, biblioteki, gabinety, galerie, muzea i inne zbiory pamiątek przeszłości w ojczyźnie i na obczyźnie w porządku alfabetycznym według miejscowości ułożone*, vol. II, Warszawa 1927; M. Ambros, *Biblioteki wileńskie*, in: "Ateneum Wileńskie" 1932, year VIII; E. Baranowicz, *Muzea i zbiory o charakterze muzealnym w Polsce*, in: "Nauka Polska" 1927, vol. VII; works by M. Brensztejn: *Biblioteka Uniwersytecka w Wilnie od r. 1832*, Wilno 1925, *idem*, *Informator o towarzystwach naukowych na Litwie i Rusi Białej*, Wilno 1914, *idem*, *Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk*, Wilno 1936; J. Remer, *Cuda Polski – Wilno*, Poznań 1934; S. Rygiel, H. Drege, *Biblioteka im. Wróblewskich w Wilnie 1912–1931*, Wilno 1934. More recent works include predominantly: H. Ilgiewicz, *Societates Academicae Vilnenses: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk w Wilnie (1907–1939) i jego poprzednicy*, Warszawa 2005, *eadem*, *Biblioteka Państwowa im. Eustachego i Emilii Wróblewskich w Wilnie (1912–1939) oraz towarzystwa ją popierające*, Toruń 2015.
- ² More on this subject in: I. Kołoszyńska, *Wydział Sztuk Pięknych Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego w Wilnie*, in: *Ferdynand Ruszczyk 1870–1936. Pamiętnik wystawy*, Warszawa 1966, pp. 104–118 and F. Ruszczyk, *Wydział Sztuk Pięknych Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego w latach 1919–1929*, Wilno 1929.
- ³ M. Danilewiczowa, *Straty wojenne bibliotek polskich*, in: "Teki Historyczne" 1948, no. 1, p. 18.
- ⁴ It must be added that the USB structures included three museums – Pre-historical Archaeology and Ethnography in 11 Zamkowa Street, and Natural Sciences in 3 Zakrętowa Street: K. Lewkowicz, *Krótki przewodnik Wilno i bliższe okolice z dodaniem planów orientacyjnych oraz licznych fotografii zabytków m. Wilna*, Wilno [1938], p. 87.
- ⁵ S. Rygiel, H. Drege, *Biblioteka im. Wróblewskich...* describes the history of BPW to 1934.
- ⁶ More in: H. Drege, *Śp. Tadeusz Wróblewski jako założyciel Biblioteki im. E. i E. Wróblewskich*, Wilno 1926.
- ⁷ Archive of the Polish Academy of Sciences (further as: APAN), Helena Drege Collection, call no. 68/10, p. 1.
- ⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 4
- ⁹ BPW resources were described by: S. Rygiel, H. Drege, *Biblioteka im. Wróblewskich...*, p. 16. To 1939 BPW collections were certainly considerably enlarged.
- ¹⁰ S. Rygiel, H. Drege, *Biblioteka im. Wróblewskich...*, p. 7. *Masonica* were presented at the Wilno Iconographic Museum conducted by BPW, *ibidem*, p. 18.
- ¹¹ Act on the Society of Friends of Science in Wilno, Wilno 1907, p. 1.
- ¹² The Central Archives of Modern Records, Ministry of Culture and Art (further as: AAN, MKiS), call no. 387/191 – Catalogue of pre-historical collections, inventory of manuscripts from the TPN Library in Wilno, and a book of donations for the Society Museum.
- ¹³ The M. Karłowicz Conservatory, the Archive of the Roman-Catholic Consistory, the Archive of the Roman-Catholic Seminary, the Archive of the Roman-Catholic Chapter, the Archive of the Evangelical-Augsburg Commune, the Archive of the Wilno School District, the Archive of the Zawadzki Book Store, the Radziwiłł Archive from Nieśwież, the Tomasz Zan Library, the Medical Society Library, the Library of the Evangelical-Augsburg Synod, the III Gymnasium Library, the Central Pedagogical Library and other cultural-educational institutions.
- ¹⁴ AAN, MKiS, call no. 387/106 – Paper: *Materiały informacyjne dotyczące zbiorów Woj. Wileńskiego*, written by Józef Kojdecki.
- ¹⁵ AAN, MKiS, call no. 387/117. Paper: *Stan dzieł sztuki w Wilnie*, written by Irena Kołoszyńska.
- ¹⁶ AAN, MKiS, call no. 387/109. Material for the Wilno file (questionnaire) – explanations by Jadwiga Kapuścińska.
- ¹⁷ Today in the MNW collections.

- ¹⁸ My article does not discuss wartime losses and plunder committed by Soviet and German occupants during the Second World War.
- ¹⁹ Quoted after: *Przesiedlenie ludności polskiej z Kresów Wschodnich do Polski 1944-1947* (documents selected, prep. and ed. by S. Ciesielski), Warszawa 1999, pp. 55-62.
- ²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 58. Article 7 of the Treaty. More on repatriation in, e.g. A. Paczoska, *Dzieci Jałty. Exodus ludności polskiej z Wileńszczyzny w latach 1944–1947*, Toruń 2003.
- ²¹ AAN, MKiS 387 /16 - *Sprawozdanie z rocznej pracy Wydziału oraz przedstawienie jego potrzeb finansowych z dnia 10.12.1945 r.*, prep. by M. Rzeuska, pp. 176-181 (further as: AAN, MKiS, *Sprawozdanie 1944-1945*).
- ²² Maria Aleksandra Rzeuska (1908–1982), Ph.D. in Polish philology, historian of literature, student of Prof. Manfred Kridl. At the time of the Second World War lived in Wilno. During the Soviet occupation worked as a proofreader in “Gazeta Ludowa” (later known as “Prawda Wileńska”). During the German occupation involved in clandestine teaching; in September 1941 arrested by the Gestapo for helping Jews and prisoners. Upon her return to Warsaw worked in the Directorate of Museums and the Preservation of Cultural Monuments at the MKiS, where she ran the Eastern Reclamations Office, and then at Warsaw University, the Institute of Literary Research at the Polish Academy of Sciences, and the Archive of the Polish Academy of Sciences; after: M. Głowiński, in: *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. XXXIV/1, Wrocław etc. 1992, pp. 87-89; M. Rzeuska was recalled also by S. Lorentz, *Album Wileńskie*, Warszawa 1986, p. 2. In certain publications her name is mistakenly spelled Rzewuska.
- ²³ National Museum in Warsaw, Inventory Department, Reclamation Material, Wilno (further as: MNW Wilno). Department of Culture [...] *Sprawozdanie z pracy za okres od dnia 1 XII 1944 r. do dnia 11.1947 r.* (further as: MNW, Wilno, Report 1944–1947) prepared by M. Rzeuska.
- ²⁴ *Ibidem*.
- ²⁵ AAN, *Office of the Chief Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Republic of Poland for Evacuation in the Lithuanian SSR* (further as: AAN, GPR), call no. 523/175, p. 24.
- ²⁶ Cf. L. M. Pamińska, *Powojenne składnice przemieszczanych dóbr kultury w Polsce. Przyczynek do szerszego opracowania*, in: “Muzealnictwo” 2016, no. 57, pp. 76-77.
- ²⁷ AAN, GPR, call no. 523/175, pp. 31-32.
- ²⁸ Owing to insufficient space it is impossible for this article to present in detail all the persons working in the Department of Culture; thus I shall only mention that apart from M. Rzeuska, H. Zalewska and B. Halicki they included: Zygmunt Wrzeźniowski, Stefan Rosiak, Wacława Prządowa, Irena Syrewiczowa, Wanda Popielowa, Euzebiusz Łopaciński, Walenty Paszkowski, Dorota Duszyńska-Meyer, Olgierd Bielski, Franciszek Palewicz, Ada Święcicka, Marta Burba, Marian Niemczynowicz, Kazimierz Kadenacy, Wilhelm Kuklis, Edward Kłysewicz, Janusz Paradistał, Jan Tracewski, Prof. Jerzy Hoppen, Weronika Romanowska-Tarasewicz, Filomena Bortkiewiczowa, and Karol Lipiński. The above listed persons worked full-time in the Department of Culture. The rotation of posts in the Department was caused primarily by repatriation to Poland.
- ²⁹ AAN, MKiS, Report 1944–1945, p. 176.
- ³⁰ MNW, Wilno, Report 1944–1947.
- ³¹ *Ibidem*.
- ³² MNW, Wilno. Three questionnaires were prepared for libraries, archives, and museums. Apart from basic information pertaining to institutions essential questions concerned damage incurred by the German and Soviet occupants and the eventual scattering and state of the collections.
- ³³ *Ibidem*.
- ³⁴ AAN, MKiS, call no. 387/16, pp. 143-145.
- ³⁵ AAN, MKiS, call no. 387/16, p. 169.
- ³⁶ See: file-AAN, MKiS, call no. 387/16.
- ³⁷ MNW, Wilno, Report 1944-1947.
- ³⁸ MNW, Wilno, receipt from 1 October 1946; W. Buyko was related to Z. Wrzeźniowski.
- ³⁹ MNW, Wilno, Receipt from 13 September 1946.
- ⁴⁰ MNW, Wilno, Receipt from 15 December 1945.
- ⁴¹ MNW, Wilno, Receipt from 23 May 1946.
- ⁴² MNW, Wilno, Receipt from 22 May 1946.
- ⁴³ According to an appendix to a Statement of 9 August 1945 the donations were to be handed over to MNW and the University of Toruń with the reservation that if Wilno were to stay within the post-war borders of Poland then the paintings would be restored to Wilno and become the property of the Society of Friends of Science.
- ⁴⁴ MNW, Wilno.
- ⁴⁵ MNW, Wilno, Report 1944-1947.
- ⁴⁶ MN, MKiS, call no. 387/16, p. 133.
- ⁴⁷ MN, MKiS, call no. 387/16, p. 118,130-135.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 175.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 182-187.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 185.
- ⁵¹ MNW, Wilno, Report 1944-1947.
- ⁵² *Ibidem*.
- ⁵³ Art. 3, par. 2 of the Treaty, quoted after: *Przesiedlenie ludności polskiej z Kresów Wschodnich do Polski 1944-1947*, S. Ciesielski (selection, prep. and ed. of documents), Warszawa 1999, p. 56.
- ⁵⁴ Art. 3, par. 3 of the Treaty, *ibidem*, pp. 56-57.
- ⁵⁵ MN, MKiS, call no. 387/16, p. 184.
- ⁵⁶ A. Miłosz, “Lietuvis” w dowodzie, in: “Karta” 1992, no. 7, p. 41.

⁵⁷ More extensively in: L. M. Kamińska, *Wawelska i Warszawska – największe powojenne składnice przemieszczanych dóbr kultury w Polsce*, published in this issue of "Muzealnictwo". At the MNW the collections in question were studied by Irena Kołoszyńska, born in Wilno.

⁵⁸ Complete documentation is available in the Inventory Department at the MNW, and copies – in AAN.

⁵⁹ The actual number of objects is larger because they, e.g. graphic folios, were treated collectively.

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Word count: 4 858; **Tables:** –; **Figures:** 9; **References:** 59

Received: 05.2017; **Reviewed:** 05.2017; **Accepted:** 06.2017; **Published:** 07.2017

DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0010.2238

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Competing interests: Authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Cite this article as: Olkowski R.; STRUGGLE FOR THE SO-CALLED RECLAMATION OF CULTURAL GOODS IN VILNIUS AFTER WORLD WAR II. *Muz.*, 2017(58): 193-205

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