

The Cultural History of Poles in Vilnius in 1991-2001

The objective of the dissertation is to familiarize the reader with the activity of Polish cultural organizations in Vilnius, and above all, with Polish dance and song groups as well as amateur theatre groups. The aim is to show the way in which each institution and organization cares for Polish culture and tradition, protecting thus Polish people, living in Vilnius, from being denationalized. The author felt obliged to raise the topic due to the careful conservation of Polish culture and traditions by Polish minority groups in Lithuania, and this, many a time saved them from denationalization and helped them survive tough times as well as made it possible to settle down in new, independent reality. Vilnius has been chosen for the analysis as it is considered to be the main centre for Polish culture in The Republic of Lithuania. Lithuania houses the biggest population of Polish origin, who being conscious of their background, overtly strive for maintenance of their traditions.

In the course of writing, Polish press issued in Lithuania at the time was given a detailed examination by the author. The interviews conducted by the author in Lithuania in 2012 and 2014 completed the above in a substantial way. Among the interlocutors there were the managers of Polish dance and song groups, amateur theatre groups as well as school drama groups leaders and representatives of other branches of culture. The collections, stored in The Archives of Polish Republic Senate (ASRP), constituted an invaluable source of information about the origins of Polish Culture House in Vilnius.

The thesis consists of 4 main chapters, the introduction, the conclusion, the bibliography, the index of photographs, the index of names, the index of institutions, organizations, groups and names of theatres as well as the annex.

In the first chapter the author dealt with the issues related to regaining of the independence by Lithuania in 1991 as well as all socio-political changes. That has been a period of crucial importance for the rebirthing of Polish minority groups in Lithuania. That was at that time that Polish people living in the area began to fight for their rights. The third chapter is dedicated to Polish Society in Lithuania, while the last subchapter contains information on the origin and activity of Polish Culture House in Vilnius. The institution soon became the centre for Polish culture in Vilnius, which involved the promotion of Polish literature, art, local traditions and folk culture.

In the second chapter the origins and activity of Polish dance and song groups have been described. The only Polish dance and song group, active in Vilnius in 1991-2004, was Polish Dance and Song Art Group 'Wilia'. However, the author decided to present herein

“Wileńszczyzna”, Polish Representative Dance and Song Group as well as Folk Dance Group “Zgoda”. Almost half of the group consisted of people living in Vilnius and so the rehearsals took place there. Four child groups have been presented herein as well: Polish Dance and Song Folk Group “Wilenka”, Polish Dance and Song Folk Group ”Świtezianka”, Polish Dance and Song Folk Child Group “Pierwiosnki”, Youth Dance Group “Sto uśmiechów”. It is worth noting that although interests and preferences of young people kept changing, still a remarkable number of them was active in folk groups, deriving pleasure and also developing the sense of its national identity.

The following, third chapter presents the origins and activity of two amateur theatres : Polish Theatre Studio in Vilnius and Polish Theatre in Vilnius. The theatres were founded in 1960-ies and functioned vigorously throughout the Soviet rule in Lithuania. Still, the author focused on their functioning after 1991. Theatre activity met with great interest on the part of Poles living in Lithuania, who craved Polish language, especially in the times of limited contacts with Poland. Folk groups were not the only ones to have their young counterparts, also theatres had their own. In the 1990s school theatre groups arose in almost each Polish school in Vilnius province.

The fourth chapter was dedicated to the remaining forms of cultural activity of Polish people in Vilnius, including: St. Moniuszko Centre for Polish Culture in Vilnius, Polish writers, poets and visual artists as well as the activities of Polish mass media. The first subchapter in this part demonstrates the activity of St. Moniuszko Centre for Polish Culture in Vilnius, which was set up on Apolonia Skakowska initiative. The Centre was the organizer of a number of cultural events. Thanks to its activity the centre started cooperation with numerous Polish cities as well as many Polish-origin groups scattered all over the world. The second subchapter depicts the transformations, thanks to which Polish people in Lithuania gained access to mass media. Nevertheless, in spite of lifting of censorship and the change of governance, the access was considerably limited due to the disfavour of the authorities.

The 1990s brought about transformations in culture and art, which is the subject matter of the last two subchapters. The revival of poet groups, which undertook a number of initiatives, organized author meetings with readers as well as strengthened cooperation with Polish schools, and likewise, with painters’ groups, associated within the Society of Polish Visual Artists “Elipsa”. Both the visual artists and the poets presented their creative work in Lithuania and in many European countries. All of this facilitated the exchange of experience and generated possibility for general survey of their work.

In the conclusion the author recapitulated her research, whereas the annex includes the agenda of the most important events which took place in Polish Culture House in Vilnius in 2001-2004.