CHAPTER 7

Between Poland and Lithuania: Repatriation of Poles from Lithuania, 1944–1947

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Introduction

“Nostalgia is an illness that is common to everyone who came from Vilnius. ... Only we can understand this longing for ‘Lithuania’ our fatherland.” This is how an author described his emotions in a letter to a friend sent from Poland to Lithuania in the late 1950s.1 This chapter tries to explain who those people who longed for Vilnius were, and how and why they ended up in Poland. It deals with the massive displacement of about 160,000 Poles from Soviet Lithuania to Poland between 1944 and 1947.

The migration of Poles from Soviet Lithuania to the new “Peoples Republic of Poland,” shifted several hundred kilometres to the West and firmly under the control of the USSR, had been initiated by Joseph Stalin before the end of the war. It was a highly dynamic process that involved many people. Yet it must also be seen in the broader context of other processes that took place in Lithuania at the same time: brutal Sovietisation, massive repressions, radical economic and social changes, etc. This kind of comprehensive approach is necessary to reconstruct a more objective picture of the course and consequences of the Stalin-led population transfer of Poles from re-occupied Lithuania to Poland.

The epicentre of this transfer was Vilnius and that part of Vilnius region that was incorporated into the Republic of Lithuania in 1939. More specifically, it was the city of Vilnius and the adjacent districts of Švenčionys, Vilnius and Trakai. Similar population transfers took place in other countries of Central and East Europe, as well as in West Belarus and West Ukraine as they were incorporated into the Soviet empire. Historians agree on the coercive nature of this wave of post-war population transfers, insofar as the decision to move people was taken by the common agreement of the USSR, USA and Great Britain against the will of populations, but it is equally true that each case was specific and needs to be studied on its own terms.

1 Letter to Vytautas Sirijos Gira, 17 February 1959, Lietuvos Mokslų akademijos biblioteka (MAB), f. 349–539, l. 4.
In Lithuania, the transfer was perhaps more soft-handed than in other countries, where the local populations were exposed to direct violence. In Lithuania, people had at least a limited choice whether to stay or to leave. Some Poles experienced psychological pressure that forced them to choose a life in Poland. Meanwhile, the authorities occasionally tried to accommodate others by creating favourable conditions for them to remain in Lithuania.

To describe the population transfer from Lithuania to Poland, I will use the term “repatriation,” understood as the organized return of the civilian population from one state to another based on international agreements. While there is some controversy over the use of this term, it could be argued to reflect not only the objective, legal dimension of the displacement, but also the subjective dimension, insofar as many (perhaps the majority) of the displaced Poles did not recognize the territorial changes which made the Vilnius region part of Lithuania; they did not relate themselves to Lithuania as a “fatherland,” but to Poland.

**Population Profile of the Vilnius Region**

Historically, the population of Vilnius city and the surrounding region was multi-ethnic. More than ten ethnic groups resided in the area. Having recaptured Lithuania in 1944, the Soviet authorities tried to form a demographic picture of the country, since the pre-war and war population data was substantially changed and did not reflect the post-war reality. Therefore, the Council of Peoples’ Commissars of the USSR took the logical decision to conduct a census of all the districts of newly re-occupied Lithuania. Their list also included the city of Vilnius and the districts of Vilnius, Trakai and Švenčionys. The census produced the following picture of the ethnic composition of local population (see Table 7.1).

The data shows that Vilnius and its adjacent districts had a population of about 430,000 – 440,000 the majority of whom were Poles. They were concentrated in the Vilnius region (90 per cent) and Vilnius (80 per cent of the whole population). The Trakai and Švenčionys districts ethnically were more mixed; the Poles formed compact communities only in some parishes (for example, in the Švenčionys district: Pabradė, Švenčionys; in the Trakai district: Rūdiškės

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3. Resolution Nr. 75 of Peoples’ Commissar Council of the USSR, 12 August 1944, Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas (LCVA), f. R-754, ap. 1, b. 15, l. 98.