

ILLEGAL EDUCATION OF POLISH CHILDREN IN INDEPENDENT LITHUANIA IN THE 1930s: CIRCUMSTANCES AND DEVELOPMENT TRENDS

Saulius Kaubrys

University of Vilnius, E-Mail: saulius.kaubrys@if.vu.lt

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Abstract:

The circular of the Minister of Education Konstantinas Šakenis on the amendment to the 1925 Law on Primary Education, dated August 6th 1927 and the 1936 Law on Primary Education created the precedent demanding that children of mixed families (only one parent of Lithuanian nationality) should be taught at Lithuanian schools. As a result of this demand, the need to evade this provision arose because the contingent of pupils in Polish schools suffered losses due to this restriction. Polish organisations ("Pochodnia") seeking to compensate losses due to restriction of spread of Polish people started organising illegal (secret) Polish schools. To contain their activities, official authorities used the mechanism of punishment, which partly suppressed that process. Polish organisations changed the tactics of their activities in seeking to maintain vitality of secret schools. The analysis of contents of some financial sources shows that almost the same amount of funds was allocated to both legal and illegal schools (the case of 1937). Establishment of diplomatic relations between Lithuania and Poland in 1938 activated secret education of Polish children, developed it even to a greater extent, and enhanced self-confidence of secret teachers in doing their work.

Rezumat:

Circulara Ministrului Educației Konstantinas Šakenis asupra amendamentului la Legea Educației Primare din 6 august 1927 și Legea Educației Primare din 1936

au creat precedentul de a solicita ca elevii din familii mixte (cu un singur părinte de naționalitate lituaniană) să fie educați în școli lituaniene. Ca rezultat al acestei solicitări a apărut și nevoia de a se sustrage acestei prevederi ca urmare a faptului că a fost afectat contingentul elevilor din școlile poloneze. Organizațiile poloneze ("Pochodnia") care căutau să compenseze aceste pierderi datorate restricțiilor impuse au început să organizeze școli poloneze ilegale (secrete). Pentru a le diminua activitatea, autoritățile de stat au făcut uz de pedepse, acestea contribuind la suprimarea acestui proces. Organizațiile poloneze și-au schimbat tacticile căutând să mențină vitalitatea școlilor secrete. Analiza conținutului unor surse financiare arată că fonduri aproape echivalente au fost alocate școlilor legale și ilegale poloneze (datele sunt din 1937). Stabilirea relațiilor diplomatice dintre Lituania și Polonia în 1938 a activat procesul educației ilegale a copiilor polonezi, a dezvoltat-o într-o mai mare măsură și a întărit încrederea profesorilor clandestini în activitatea lor.

Keywords: secret education of Polish children, "Pochodnia", the Law on Primary Education of 1936

1. Background of the precedent for secret education of Polish children in Lithuania: development of preconditions

The development of Lithuanian primary education during the period under discussion was marked by active works in elaboration of legislation regulating the progress of this segment of institutional development (Laws on Private Schools of 1922 and 1936), which did not in detail analyse the condition of schools for ethnic minorities. Nonetheless, the 1925 amendment to the Law of Primary Education recorded an essential and new provision, which programmed a conflicting situation up to the time of losing the Independence. It specified that "only children of that nationally can be admitted in schools of that type (in non-Lithuanian schools – the authors' note) the training language of which is that of those children". Practical implementation of this requirement immediately faced the challenge of declaring the nationality of the pupils (how to admit them in schools – based on ethnicity declared in their parents' applications or according to nationality as recorded in passports). Implementation of the aforesaid paragraph of the circular of the Minister of Education Šakenis K. dated August 6th, 1927 was explained additionally to primary education inspectors: "When sending children to learn in primary schools that were

considered to be schools for ethnic minorities, parents or guardians must submit to the school principal certificates of nationality issued by the councils of small rural districts or towns, which must be consistent with the data in personal documents held by such persons”¹

It is thought that this new procedure for admitting pupils in non-Lithuanian schools could “evoke” intentions of some part of the population “to adjust” their nationality, all the more so that division on separate ethnic groups (including Polish people) was important to maintain a mandatory occupation rate of some schools, and so the issue of the minimum required number of pupils occurred. It seems that previous, more liberal procedure for admitting pupils in schools for ethnic minorities did not give rise to this issue until 1925. Secondly, this campaign of “adjustment” was accompanied by unawareness. For example, in a paradoxical context on November 7th, 1931, the Ministry of Education (4 years after the announcement of the circular) was forced to warn once again the primary education inspectors on the illegal nature of “Pochodnia” Polish educational society’s actions, urging “the nationality to be determined based on parents’ applications”^{2,3} The 1936 Law eliminated this problem having raised the provisions in 1927 circular to the powers of law.

It is obvious that this chain of legal acts spoke in favour of an aggressive “Lithuanisation” of children born in mixed families (only one parent of Lithuanian nationality) without providing an alternative solution. The assembly of above-mentioned acts most likely became one of the preconditions for illegal (unregistered) education in the Polish environment.

Secondly, it is thought that a relatively positive change (see Table 1) incurred in the development of Polish schools in the twenties could become another supporting factor for such illegal education.

¹ A circular of the Minister of Education Šakenis K. (August 6, 1927), Lithuanian central state archive (hereafter LCVA), F. 391, Inv. 3, File 2855, 113.

² In parents’ applications the nationality could be specified voluntarily as differing from nationality recorded in passports

³ A circular of the Ministry of Education to primary education inspectors (November 7, 1931), Švietimo ministerijos žinios, 1931, Number 11, 39.

Table 1
Elementary schools of Lithuania (1918-1939)

Date		Total	
		Lithuanian	Polish
1918/1919	1036	903	33
1920.1.15	1173	1059	21
1921.1.1	1321	1180	22
1922.1.1	1656	1478	27
1923.1.1	1849	1643	30
1924.1.1	2003	1808	26
1925.1.1	2064	1859	26
1926.1.1	2108	1915	24
1927.1.1	2301	1997	91
1928.1.1	2401	2117	47
1929.1.1	2431	2185	30
1930.1.1	2386	2158	25
1931.1.1	2288	2113	15
1932.1.1	2290	2123	15
1933.1.1	2297	2129	15
1934.1.1	2298	2129	15
1935.1.1	2301	2135	15
1936.1.1	2308	2144	15
1937.1.1	2308	2147	11
1938.1.1	2319	2160	10
1939.1.1	2334	2173	10

The breakthrough in Polish primary education that occurred in 1926 was determined in essence by a more open and liberal educational policy after the political regime had changed (representatives of the Peasant Popular Union and Social Democrats, who, together with the representatives of ethnic minorities constituted a fragile majority coalition in the Seimas and formed the Government, won the elections to the third Seimas). It is thought that forces representing the Polish part of society, contrary to other ethnic groups, made the greatest benefit of this situation. Unlike other ethnic groups, the Poles received a counter reaction from the

Lithuanian society too (especially from political opposition). For example, in the interpellation of the Seimas opposition on November 16th, 1926 to the Prime Minister, the purposefulness of a favourable official policy of establishing Polish schools in 1926 was disputed⁴. During the meeting of primary education inspectors held on November 25th 1926, concern was expressed about the actions of the Polish educational and cultural society “Pochodnia” in enticing pupils to their schools. A positive change in the number of pupils of Polish schools was also obvious (see Table 2).

Table 2
The number of pupils in Lithuania’s elementary schools (1922-1939)

Date	In Lithuanian schools	In Polish schools	Total
1922 I.1	101719	3336	120028
1923 I.1	99952	2852	117466
1924 I.1	102198	2728	118596
1925 I.1	107554	2535	123785
1926 I.1	104396	1862	118603
1927 I.1	102884	5276	122196
1928 I.1	108244	1788	134578
1929/1930	159008	1470	177536
1930/1931	184684	649	200960
1931/1932	205774	603	222584
1932/1933	217883	592	235033
1933/1934	223372	551	241410
1934/1935	231862	550	249665
1935/1936	241497	540	258997
1936/1937	252299	329	269950
1937/1938	266116	296	283773
1938/1939	274509	266	292545

It is though that the “1926 experience” encouraged people to undertake secret education of Polish children in the nearest perspective

⁴ Seimo stenogramos. A minute of 43th meeting (November 16, 1926), 15-16.

because it would testify to the presence of certain reserves, i.e., potential candidates for secret Polish schools being established.

Thirdly, it can be supposed that concentration of the Polish community that intensified in the 1920s (an active participation of Poles in the elections of Seimas), spoke in favour of the latter argument and particularly guaranteed support and success for other forms, though illegal, of self-expression = self-defence of the community. It should be noted that strengthening of Polish community will act against the background of the general programme of strengthening the Lithuanian nation in the future. These both campaigns (they were not equal in force and instruments of action), on the principle of the "adjoining vessels", provided each other with evocative and reciprocal impulses.

2. Situation of secret education of Polish children in the 1930s: competition between action and counteraction

It is supposed that the process of illegal (secret) education of Poles most probably gained momentum at the beginning of the nineteen thirties though this supposition cannot exclude the fact that the first roots could have occurred at the end of the 1920's. It is thought that the analysis of the contents of the operational order of State Security Director dated January 5th, 1934 testifies to the following: "Recently it has been established that Poles received increased subsidies to expand the network of illegal Polish schools. It has already been noticed that all over Lithuania, even in Klaipėda region, such illegal schools were being established. Children at those schools are usually taught from the textbooks which are prohibited by censorship to be brought in Lithuania"⁵. That Law specifically states that military commanders, in seeking to contain this process, should be obliged to impose as many fines as possible, but this seemed to fail frightening founders of illegal schools and teachers, as they were paid from a separate fund"⁶. It is supposed that the latter material protectors operated quite reliably. For example, the report of the Alytus District Commandant dated December 31st, 1937 addressed to the Minister of National Defence (more than three years after issuance of said circular) stated that fines did not stop

⁵ A circular of the Director of State security department (January 5, 1934), LCVA, F. 384, Inv. 3, File 247, 7.

⁶ Ibid.

the activities of Petras Gieduša who taught Polish children secretly.⁷ The supposition cannot be rejected that sometimes, in seeking to create the effect of “heroism of the prosecuted” the possibility to choose imprisonment instead of fine was declared.⁸

On the other hand, the very mechanism of punishments (it was improved later too, e.g. secret Order No. 25 of the State Security Department dated October 7th, 1937) obligated schools to adhere more strictly to the 1936 Law on Primary Education. Implementation of this Law on Primary Schools, in essence eliminating the possibilities of out-of-school education⁹, did not avoid contradictions. For example, on February 24th, 1934, the Commandant of Panevėžys district informed the Minister of National Defence that upon declaring the Independence on February 16th, sixteen persons were pardoned from serving the remaining punishment for teaching Polish children.¹⁰ Such “clemencies” did not satisfy a part of the Lithuanian patriotically disposed society (there were complaints about mitigating such punishments). Secondly, it is thought that the procedure for charging fines most probably was not always consistent. E.g., in March 1937, the Commandants of Raseiniai, Ukmergė and Zarasai admitted that there were breaks in imposing fines¹¹, which most likely sent signals to the Polish organisations urging them to employ “more aggressive” tactics. Nonetheless, between August 1st, 1936 and August 15th, 1938 Heads of Districts charged 363 fines, which amounted to 19.715 litas¹².

On the other hand, the supposition concerning “aggressiveness” of such tactics is not completely true because Polish organisations (the above-mentioned “Pochodnia” is regarded to have been the major driving force) were forced to adapt themselves to the present strategy (and later even make use of it, especially during 1938-1939) and analyse the market of their

⁷ The report of Alytus district commandant (December 31, 1937) to the Minister of National defence, LCVA, F. 384, Inv. 3, File 507, 25.

⁸ A survey of situation in Panevėžys district (January, 1934), LCVA, F. 378, Inv. 3, File 3475, 653.

⁹ See more: LCVA, F. 378, Inv. 10, File 23,156.

¹⁰ The report of Panevėžys district commandant (February 24, 1934) to the Minister of National defence, LCVA, Inv. 3, File 247, 125.

¹¹ An abstract of districts commandants reports (March, 1937), LCVA, F. 384, Inv. 3, File 507, 55.

¹² A list of persons teaching Polish language in secret way, LCVA, F. 377, Inv. 10, File 337, 99-111.

possibilities. For example, the attitude of Polish organisations after the same 1936 Law on Primary Education had been adopted speaks in favour of such behaviour. The Secretary General of "Pochodnia" Česlovas Mackevičius had gone to Warsaw to get instructions about the newly issued law and had instructed the teachers of secret Polish schools to temporarily suspend their activities¹³. The bulletin of the State Security Department dated December 2nd, 1936 states the following: "Meantime, the private teachers of Polish schools are instructed to teach children only to read and write in Polish without preventing them from attending Lithuanian state schools at the same time. Last year, as it is known, it was required that as many pupils as possible should be withdrawn from Lithuanian schools. Perhaps this was a result of the relevant regulations of the new law on schools¹⁴. To the best of knowledge of the Ukmerge District Commandant (a secret report dated February 2nd, 1937) teachers secretly teaching the Poles were urged to engage only in children's education and teaching, and not to come out, not to frighten away the pupils' parents and not to draw attention of the police.¹⁵ In January 1937, the Central Board of "Pochodnia" admitted that a secret Polish teacher should not teach more than 30 children (earlier the limit was not specified) and stated unofficially that only children of school age should be taught (earlier children of pre-school age were also taught).¹⁶

Beyond doubt, the main role in the process of secret teaching of children was held by "Pochodnia" (the contraposition of "opposition" and "position" of younger and older generations inside it also determined the tactics of the organizations), which was supported by Poland, e.g., in 1936, to develop its activity, the Central Board received 633,850.56 litas (it was presumed that in 1926-1927 it received one million litas). In 1937, it spent 22,186 litas each month on three gymnasiums, 6574,50 litas on Polish primary

¹³ A bulletin of the Department of State security (September 24, 1936), LCVA, F. 378, Inv. 10, File 88a, 263.

¹⁴ See more: LCVA, F. 378, Inv. 10, File 88a, 471.

¹⁵ The report of Ukmerge district commandant 2 02 1937 to the Minister of National defence, LCVA, F. 384, Inv. 3, File 507, 49.

¹⁶ The survey of State security Department (political parties and organizations, January, 1937), LCVA, F. 378, Inv. 5, File 3335, 4.

*schools, 6500 litas on secret schools*¹⁷, i.e., these three groups of expenditures formed the absolute part of “Pochodnia” expenditures. Attention should be drawn to the fact that *proportions between financing legal and illegal primary education* (the quality of the latter in an educational sense most likely was lower) *are quite similar*.

The year 1938 became an obvious milestone in the process of education of Polish children, when diplomatic relations between Lithuania and Poland were established. The “forced” nature of establishment thereof provided additional incentive to intensify activities of Polish community and incurred changes in the collective (group) self-value. The process of secret teaching of Polish as such was partly freed from its nature – secrecy, but not completely liberated from it. E.g., the summary of reports of Districts Commandants states the following: “The secret Polish schools are beginning to spread bravely and impudently”¹⁸; a similar summary dated May 1938 states the following: “Secret Polish schools are no longer secret”¹⁹. It seems that the role and activity of secret teachers became more public²⁰ and their former activity gave them moral confidence in the society of dividends. Most likely the contents of teaching at those schools acquired other directions of education. For example, according to the Ukmerge district Commandant, “the history of Poland is taught intensively at secret Polish schools”, teachers tell the pupils about “Polish heroes”, “treasures of Poland are compared to those of Lithuania and Lithuania is made to look poor. If Lithuania was united with Poland its inhabitants could make use of Poland’s treasures and this makes Lithuania to pursue unity with Poland”²¹. Also there were considerations about establishing legal Polish schools instead of secret centres of primary education. Nonetheless, in 1939

¹⁷ The survey of State security Department (political parties and organizations, December, 1937), LCVA, F. 378, Inv. 5, File 3335, 51.

¹⁸ An abstract of district commandants reports (April, 1938), LCVA, F. 384, Inv. 3, File 521, 74.

¹⁹ An abstract of district commandants reports (May, 1938), Ibid, 95.

²⁰ The report of Kėdainiai district commandant (May 13, 1938) to the Minister of National defence, Ibid, 25.

²¹ The report of Ukmerge district commandant (December 13, 1938) to the Minister of National defence, Ibid, 239.

"Pochodnia" maintained 51 illegally working teachers who taught 1105 children.²²

Conclusions

It is thought that provisions recorded in legal acts (1925, 1936), which restricted the possibilities for children of mixed families (only one parent of Lithuanian nationality) to attend non-Lithuanian schools stimulated the processes of secret teaching of Poles. The illegal alternative to overcome this prohibition – secret teaching of Polish children in essence gained momentum during the 30s. The mechanism of charging fines, despite all efforts made to improve it, was not always effective. The tactics of operation of these secret schools was based on adaptation. The establishment of diplomatic relations between Lithuania and Poland in 1938 provided new incentives for this activity and possibly determined changes in the contents of subjects taught.

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²² S. Vaitiekus, "Lietuvos Respublikos lenkai 1920-1939 m.", *Atgimimas* (November 2nd, 1992).