



# Election to Boards of Jewish Houses of Prayer and Synagogues in Lithuania in 1927–1940

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*Abstract.* Instructions for Election to Boards of Jewish Synagogues and Houses of Prayer (further referred to as the Instructions) were made public in 1927 and underpinned five consequent elections (of 1927, 1930, 1933, 1936, and 1940). The analysis of the core of the elections presumes orderly and consistent behaviour during the elections. On the other hand, a negative trend can be traced, too, as in several cases election results were challenged, and in some cases elections even failed. Election drawbacks resulted from disregard, incorrect application and/or interpretation of various provisions of the Instructions. In some cases “negative” results of elections to boards of Jewish houses of prayer and synagogues were preconditioned by divisions within Jewish communities, by the presence of diverging interest groups, and disagreement between formal and informal leaders of Jewish communities. It is a paradox, but there were cases where the election procedure set forth in the Instructions served as an impulse to reappearance of internal tensions and frictions in Jewish communities. The analysis of several outcomes of board elections shows that there were permanent sources of conflict in some local Jewish communities. There were members of boards of synagogues and Jewish houses of prayer, who having been elected, were not able to earn the trust of their communities or betrayed their trust; there were some who resigned from their duties due to objective and subjective reasons. All weaknesses of the elections hit Jewish communities because of misinterpretation of the Instructions, internal divisions and arguments, and resignation of board members, thus can be interpreted as cases of collective behaviour.

**Keywords:** *the 1927 instructions for Election to Boards of Jewish Houses of Prayer and Synagogues, elder, educated man/teacher, treasurer, Elections to Boards.*

*Anotacija.* Žydų sinagogų ir maldos namų valdybų rinkimų Instrukcija (toliau vadinama Instrukcija) buvo paskelbta 1927 m. Remiantis ja vyko penkeri rinkimai (1927, 1930, 1933, 1936 ir 1940 m.). Rinkimų dokumentikos analizė paliudijo rinkimų skirtynes ir panašumus. Galima atsekti pavienes neigiamas tendencijas, nes keliais atvejais rinkimų rezultatai buvo užginčyti, o kai kuriais atvejais rinkimai buvo net nesėkmingi. Rinkimų trūkumų atsirado dėl įvairių Instrukcijos nuostatų nepaisymo, neteisingo taikymo ir (arba) išaiškinimo. Kai kuriais atvejais žydų maldos namų ir sinagogų valdybų rinkimų „neigiamus“ rezultatus lėmė žydų bendruomenių susiskaldymas, skirtingų interesų grupių buvimas ir oficialių ir neformalių žydų bendruomenių lyderių nesutarimai. Tai yra paradoksas, tačiau buvo atvejų, kai Instrukcijoje nustatyta rinkimų procedūra buvo impulsas žydų bendruomenėse vėl atsirasti vidinei įtampai ir trinčiai. Pavienių rinkimų rezultatų analizė rodo, kad kai kuriose vietinėse žydų bendruomenėse būta nuolatinių konfliktų šaltinių. Dalis išrinktų sinagogų ir žydų maldos namų valdybų narių nesugebėjo pelnyti savo bendruomenių pasitikėjimo. Būta tokių, kurie atsisakė savo pareigų dėl objektyvių ir subjektyvių priežasčių.

**Esminiai žodžiai:** 1927 m. žydų maldos namų ir sinagogų valdybų rinkimo Instrukcija, vyresnysis, mokytas, išdininkas, rinkimai į valdybas.

## Introductory remarks on a late start of elections to boards of Jewish houses of prayer and synagogues

It is common knowledge that, “The First World War was a double-edged sword that devastated traditional shtetl life and culture in Eastern Europe while simultaneously cutting away age-old obstacles that had hampered Jewish cultural and political self-expression.”<sup>1</sup> Having been born and become independent from the Russian Empire in 1918, the State of Lithuania faced a huge dual challenge of establishing and defending a new state. Shaping the legal foundations of the state was part and parcel of the effort to strengthen the vision of the state. It seems as though understanding that an attempt “<...> to create totally new law would practically mean an unsolvable task” came early, therefore “<...> use was made of all that was found appropriate in the law in force on the Lithuanian soil on the eve of restoration of independence.”<sup>2</sup> Continuity and succession

<sup>1</sup> ROSHWALD, Aviel. *Jewish cultural identity in Eastern and Central Europe during the Great War in European culture in the Great War. The Arts, Entertainment, and Propaganda, 1914–1918*. Edited by Aviel Roshwald and Richard Stites. Cambridge, 1999, p. 124.

<sup>2</sup> MAKSIMAITIS, Mindaugas. *Lietuvos teisės šaltiniai 1918–1940 metais [Sources of Lithuanian law in 1918–1940]*, Vilnius, 2001, p. 46.

of the enforced law at the time was approved by the State Council<sup>3</sup> of Lithuania in Article 24 of the Fundamental Principles of the Temporary Constitution on 2 November 1918 which stipulates: “The laws that were in force before the war shall be temporarily valid in the areas which are not regulated by the new laws passed by the State of Lithuania.” The text refers to the laws that were enacted in Lithuania before the First World War.<sup>4</sup> It is noteworthy that even though the pre-war laws continued to be in force, the situation was different in different parts of Lithuania, since Lithuania itself had not been an integral territorial entity before the First World War.<sup>5</sup> The Klaipėda (Königsberg) region was a German territory while the whole ethnographic area of Lithuania belonged to the Russian Empire; it was divided into three unequal parts, connected to the Russian Empire in different ways and at different times. In the wake of the First World War, the law of the Russian Empire was observed in by far the largest part, i.e. in Vilnius, Kaunas and Gardinas (currently Grodno, Belarus) Governorates; the part of Lithuania to the south of the Nemunas River, Suvalkai Governorate (currently Suwałki Region, Poland) that had belonged to the Kingdom of Poland, a small area of Kuršas (Courland) Governorate, i.e. Palanga Municipality, and a part of Zarasai County enacted their own local laws each.<sup>6</sup> The Compilation of Laws of the Russian Empire that had been in place before the First World War was mainly accepted as a source of interwar Lithuanian legislation. Part 1 of Volume 10 of the Compilation of Laws of the Russian Empire was the basis of the civil law observed in Lithuania in the interwar period.<sup>7</sup>

Society was relatively homogeneous (the absolute majority of the population – 83–84 per cent – were Lithuanians) in the emerging Lithuanian state. With the appearance of new circumstances, minorities (ethnic, ethnic-religious) fostered their own versions of economic, social, cultural and spiritual identities. The first permanent Constitution of Lithuania adopted on 1 August 1922<sup>8</sup> granted security to various minorities and guaranteed their rights. Moreover, Lithuania joined the international community in granting and ensuring the rights and needs of national minorities by signing the Declaration

<sup>3</sup> The State Council (from 11 July 1918 – the State Council of Lithuania) was elected at the Conference of Lithuanians held in Vilnius on 18–22 September 1917. It was the first representative body of the country which launched the process of restoration of the State of Lithuania. Lithuanian territory was managed by German occupational administration structures in 1915–1918. For more see *Lietuvos Valstybės Tarybos protokolai 1917–1918*. Sudarė A. Eidintas, R. Lopata. Vilnius, 1991, p. 3–30.

<sup>4</sup> MAKSIMAITIS, Mindaugas. *Lietuvos teisės šaltiniai 1918–1940 metais* [Sources of Lithuanian Law in 1918–1940], Vilnius, 2001, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> On a similar collision of legal systems in Poland please see TOMASZEWSKI, Jerzy. *The civil rights of Jews in Poland 1918-1939*, in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry, Volume 8: Jews in Independent Poland, 1918-1939*. Edited by A. Polonsky, E. Mendelsohn, J. Tomaszewski. Liverpool, 2004, p. 115. BRZESINSKI, Mark. *The Struggle for Constitutionalism in Poland*. Oxford, 2000, p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> Maksimaitis M. *Lietuvos teisės šaltiniai 1918–1940 metais* [Sources of Lithuanian law in 1918–1940], Vilnius, 2001, p. 48–49.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> For more see *Vyriausybės žinios*, 6 of August 1922.

concerning the Protection of Minorities in Lithuania at the League of Nations in Geneva on 12 May 1922.<sup>9</sup>

The Jews were a predominant national minority constituting 7.56 per cent of the total population in Lithuania (most probably there was no other country in Central and Eastern Europe where the Jewish population outnumbered all other ethnic minorities residing on the territory of the country). In the 20s (1920–1925) they enjoyed what may be called a golden age (which is disputed in the current Lithuanian historiography);<sup>10</sup> they were keen on bringing their project of Jewish national autonomy to life. It seems, however, that the existing legal provisions on religious life of Jewish communities were insufficient.<sup>11</sup> The section On Jewish Religious Beliefs in the 1927 Report on the Status of Churches in Lithuania<sup>12</sup> runs as follows: “A board should be set up in each synagogue. Up till now, boards of synagogues have been elected in a private manner. While the laws provide that they should be approved by the Governor, and in case of his absence, they should be approved by the Ministry of Internal Affairs.”<sup>13</sup> This means to say that, without naming the reasons, the informed person, who drew up the document, the Desk Officer for Religious Beliefs, came to a conclusion that elections to boards of synagogues might be held in a wrong way (“in a private manner”), i.e. election practices were disorderly, self-regulated and thus not underpinned by appropriate legal provisions. It must have been for this reason that, against the backdrop of a successfully developing dialogue between the Government of Lithuania and other churches, the situation with elections to boards of Jewish houses of prayer and synagogues called for closing the loophole and ensuring clarity in the procedure. An assumption can be made that it was the Ministry of Internal Affairs that initiated the Instructions for Election to Boards of Jewish Houses of Prayer and Synagogues and even though they were released late, almost a decade after the restoration of the State, it turned out to be a very handy legal instrument.<sup>14</sup> It was signed by Minister of Internal Affairs of the time Ignas Musteikis, while the Ministry was responsible for religious communities (some time later oversight over religious affairs

<sup>9</sup> For more see the daily *Lietuva*, 24 June 1922.

<sup>10</sup> For more see LIEKIS, Šarūnas. *A State within a State? Jewish Autonomy in Lithuania 1918–1925*, Vilnius, 2003, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> At the same time there were legal provisions enacted in Lithuania on the relationship between the Lithuanian State and the Eastern Orthodox Christian and Old Believers communities. For more see: Provisional Rules for Setting Relations between the Lithuanian Orthodox Christian Church and the Government of Lithuania. *Vyriausybės žinios*, 29 May 1923; Provisional Rules for Setting Relations between the Lithuanian Old Believers Organisation and the Government of Lithuania. *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> For more see *Report by Desk-Officer for Religious Beliefs K. Vaitiekaitis (1927) ‘Status of Churches in Lithuania’ to the Minister of Internal Affairs*. Lithuanian Central State Archive (further referred to as LCVA (Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas)], F. 391, Inv. 4, File 68, p. 28. (Authorship of the document is ambiguous, the date is not precise. The signatures and notes on the document suggest that it might have been drafted in the first half of 1927).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> See *Vyriausybės žinios*, 2 June 1927.

was transferred to the Ministry of Education). The documents available in relation to the drafting of the Instructions point to no other initiator but the Ministry. The Instructions consisted of 21 paragraphs and, first and foremost, defined a community of a synagogue or a house of prayer. “All Jews who assemble in a synagogue or a house of prayer for the purpose of worship or prayer, and who have an apartment, office or another job in the area covered by the synagogue” are members of such a community.

The Instructions provided that each synagogue and house of prayer elected, for a three-year period, a board of three members and three candidates – a) Educated Man/Teacher, who dispelled doubts concerning prayers and rituals of worship, b) Elder of the synagogue or the house of prayer (*geba*), and c) Treasurer (*neumon*). A local Rabbi was an *ex officio* member of the board and might act as Educated Man/Teacher. The Instructions stipulated that only persons who had reached 25 years of age could participate in the elections; that persons, who 1) had not paid a community fee for the previous year, 2) had been disciplined by the church, 3) were not believers and did not exercise religious duties, or 4) whose rights had been suspended and limited by a court judgement, could not vote and/or be elected. Persons had to meet certain additional criteria to be elected to the boards, that is, they had to be Lithuanian citizens, to be able to speak Lithuanian, and to have lived in their communities for a period longer than one year. Lithuanian citizenship and knowledge of the Lithuanian language, the latter being a national and state language of Lithuania, drew a dividing line between those who had the right to elect and those who could be elected.

The Instructions set forth the procedure of election to the boards in a precise and meticulous manner by instructing how lists of candidates should be compiled, how electoral commissions should function, and how elections should be run.

A deeper study of the text of the Instructions leads to an assumption that the Instructions expressed the will of the legislator only in respect to board formation, with Paragraph 20 of the Instructions noting that the rights and responsibilities of the boards were spelled out in Articles 1299–1322 of Part 1 of Volume 11 of the Compilation of Laws of the Russian Empire. The Instructions also indicated that the procedure of founding new synagogues and houses of prayer were laid down in Article 1302 of Part 1 of Volume 11 of the Compilation, which is an obvious proof that the legislator of Lithuanian national law gave preference to long-standing provisions of the Compilation of Laws of the Russian Empire in important matters such as functioning of Jewish houses of prayer and synagogues.

Another possible assumption is that the Instructions were a new challenge to the Jewish communities as the Russian procedures were replaced with the requirements set by the young national State of Lithuania. The strategy of survival of the Jewish communities made them comply with the new requirements under the new conditions, and for the most part they managed to do so successfully. In general, the role played by an election institute in the countries of inter-war Eastern Europe was particularly evident in Lithuania where

national minorities engaged in shaping parliaments and local self-government bodies (Jews were engaged in shaping the bodies which represented Jewish communities).<sup>15</sup>

This article pursues an aim to highlight negative sides of elections to boards of Jewish houses of prayer and synagogues held in 1927–1940 in the context of the new Lithuanian legislative process. The article considers the weaknesses as a deviation from standard and usual election practices and seeks to reveal the factors that preconditioned them. The studies of the Lithuanian historiography analysing the development of Jewish communities in Lithuania in terms of both their context and problems usually attempt to present the specificity of the Jewish community,<sup>16</sup> to analyse possible preconditions to the Holocaust,<sup>17</sup> and to describe benevolent relations between Lithuanians and Jews in their everyday lives,<sup>18</sup> etc.

Lack of interest may be one reason for very few studies of practices of election to Jewish houses of prayer and synagogues; the other is the “silence” of secondary sources, e.g. the periodical press of 1927–1940 is devoid of discussion about elections to boards of Jewish houses of prayer and synagogues. The “silence” most probably was due to the fact that Lithuanian Jewish society lived a religious life secluded from the outside world. One gets an impression that the prevailing Catholic population could hardly know about the life of Jewish houses of prayer and synagogues; it was closed to them. Therefore it is no wonder that the Lithuanian press did not know or was not interested in finding out the outcomes of the elections. They did not seem important enough for the Lithuanian public, therefore the Lithuanian press did not even try to look for information about them.

This article is mainly based on unpublished documents available in the Lithuanian Central State Archive such as correspondence among responsible county governors, heads of police stations, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Education, applications of individuals and groups of people, etc.

<sup>15</sup> For more on involvement of Jewish communities in election practices and their outcomes in Poland please see SHAPIRO, Robert Moses. *The Polish Kehillah Elections of 1936: A Revolution Re-examined in Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry, Volume 8: Jews in Independent Poland, 1918–1939*. Edited by A. Polonsky, E. Mendelsohn, J. Tomaszewski. Liverpool, 2004, p. 206–226; JEĐRUCH, Jacek. *Constitutions, elections and legislatures of Poland, 1493–1977. A Guide to Their History*. Washington, 1982, p. 367.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. ATAMUKAS, Saliamonas. *Lietuvos žydų kelias. Nuo XIV amžiaus iki XX a. pabaigos*, Vilnius, 1988; *Žydai Lietuvoje*. Istorija, kultūra, paveldas. Sudarytojai L. Lempertienė, J. Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė. Vilnius, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> E.g. EIDINTAS, Alfonsas. *Žydai, lietuviai ir Holokaustas*. Vilnius, 2002; TRUSKA, L. *Lietuviai ir žydai nuo XIX a. pabaigos iki 1941 m. birželio. Antisemitizmo Lietuvoje raida*. Vilnius, 2005; DIECKMANN, Christopher, SUŽIEDĖLIS, Saulius. *Lietuvos žydų persekiojimas ir masinės žudynės 1941 m. vasarą ir rudenį*. Vilnius, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. ŽENTELIS, Jonas. *Žydai Veprių valsčiuje. Vepriai*. Vilnius, 2010, p. 235–236; GUSTAITIS, Rolandas. *Kaišiadorių regiono žydai*. Kaišiadorys, 2006; MUTURAS, Algimantas. *Žydų likimo vingiais*. Papilė. Vilnius, 2004, p. 337–345; BIELIAUSKIENĖ, Roza. *Apie Raguvos žydus. Raguva*. Vilnius, 2001, p. 280–283.



## Possible reasons of difficulties arising at elections under consideration: from refusal to elect the boards to violation of provisions of the Instructions

The publication released to mark the 10th anniversary of the existence of the State of Lithuania (1928) states that there were “300 synagogues or houses of prayer” at the time.<sup>19</sup> Data from the late '30s mention 360 synagogues and houses of prayer.<sup>20</sup> For comparison, there were 400 synagogues and houses of prayer in Warsaw alone in 1926.<sup>21</sup> Fragmented as it is, the documentary material demonstrates relatively consistent procedures that were followed in electing the boards in the majority of cases. For instance, in Vilkaviškis County, no complaints were filed in relation to 13 elections to boards of synagogues and houses of prayer in 1930 and 12 elections in 1933, which shows that the elections were smooth and flawless. The same was true for Seinai County (Lithuania was divided into 20 counties at the time) where five elections to the boards were held in 1930 and 1933, for Zarasai County in 1930 (11 synagogues and houses of prayer) and in 1933 (10 synagogues and houses of prayer), and for Telšiai County in 1930. It is hard to know how many truly “positive” results there were because of the fragmentation of the available documentary material, however there is clear proof that “positive” cases prevailed over “negative” ones.

The “negative” results could be due to a number of factors. First, the Instructions found some Jewish communities unprepared and unable to follow the new legal act and its provisions on election procedures. Defiance of the new procedure by several Jewish communities was justified by a small circle of those eligible to vote. For example, the local Jews refused to elect members of the board in Šaukotai town in Kėdainiai County, claiming that there were only six families there; they were too few to elect the board.<sup>22</sup> Identical justification was given by Jewish communities in Miroslavas (Alytus County),<sup>23</sup> Boguslaviškis (Ukmergė County),<sup>24</sup> and Barstyčiai (Mažeikiai County).<sup>25</sup> This study suggests a paradox in Taujėnai Jewish House of Prayer that functioned without a board. In response to an urge of the Ukmergė Town and County Governor to elect a board, on

<sup>19</sup> MIRONAS, Vladas. *Tikybos Nepriklausomoje Lietuvoje. Pirmasis Nepriklausomos Lietuvos*. Kaunas, 1990, p. 388.

<sup>20</sup> *1939 04 03 Report of the Chairman of the Executive Committee of Rabbis to the Director of the Cultural Affairs Department*. LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 609, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> BERGMAN, Eleonora. *Synagogues – houses of prayer*. Interactive: <https://sztetl.org.pl/en/towns/w/18-warsaw/104-cultural-texts/138831-bergman-eleonora-synagogues-houses-prayer>.

<sup>22</sup> *Report of 23 July 1927 of the Governor of Kėdainiai County to the Desk-Officer for Religious Beliefs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs*. LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 539, p. 71.

<sup>23</sup> *Report of 22 October 1927 of the Governor of Alytus County to the Desk-Officer for Religious Beliefs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs*. LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 528, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> *Report of 15 November 1927 of the Governor of Ukmergė County to the Desk-Officer for Religious Beliefs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs*. LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 586, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Report on the Investigation Conducted on 19 July 1927 by Petras Damulis, Policeman of the 3rd Police Station*. LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 548, p. 290–290 verso.

24 May 1940 members of the Jewish community said that there were too few families, no rabbi, and they had not had any elections since the First World War, and had never been encouraged to do so, therefore they asked to be exempted from the procedure.<sup>26</sup> In all those cases Jewish houses of prayer and synagogues did not enjoy the rights of a legal person. Based on the examples given above, an assumption can be made that some small communities had no need to form an independent organisational entity.

Second, an assumption can be made that some “negative” respects of the board election process were predetermined by the will of the communities. For instance, the election to the Board of the Synagogue in Eržvilkas (Tauragė County) was considered invalid because of low turnout as only one third of eligible voters cast their ballots on 27 May 1930.<sup>27</sup> The 1930 election to the board of the Jewish House of Prayer *Chai-Odom* in Ukmergė failed because “<...> those who regularly go to the House of Prayer did not agree to elect a new Board claiming that incumbent members of the Board should continue their service.”<sup>28</sup> The branch of the religious society of Jewish youth *Tiferet-Bachurim* in Kėdainiai “<...> making use of the election <...> founded a synagogue and called it *Anšei-Chacova* without an appropriate permission from the administration <...> and held an election.”<sup>29</sup> The Ministry of Education acknowledged that “<...> this synagogue may not have its own approved board as it was founded without an appropriate permission.”<sup>30</sup>

Third, there is plentiful proof of another cause of election weaknesses, i.e. obvious violations of the Instructions. This was ground enough to annul several election outcomes and rerun the elections. The violations varied from single to multiple instances, there were cases of violations of one and of many provisions, or their fraudulent application or interpretation. For instance, the Ministry of Internal Affairs annulled the outcome of the 27 June 1927 election to the Board of the Synagogue in Rumšiškės (Kaunas County) as people who were eligible to vote had not lived in the town for a set period, the electoral commission removed from the voter list poor voters who had not paid their community fee (even though they had been exempt from it before), several members of the electoral commission did not observe the procedure, the ballot box did not meet the requirements.<sup>31</sup> The outcome of the election to the Board in Raguva (Panevėžys County) on 29 May 1933

<sup>26</sup> *Request of 24 May 1940 by members of the Jewish house of prayer in Taujėnai to the Governor of Ukmergė Town and County.* LCVA. Fund 410, Inv. 3, File 189, p. 297.

<sup>27</sup> *Report of 13 June 1930 of the Governor of Tauragė County to the 3rd Department of the Ministry of Education.* LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 577, p. 45.

<sup>28</sup> *Report of 11 July 1930 of the Governor of Ukmergė County to the 3rd Department of the Ministry of Education.* LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 587, p. 177.

<sup>29</sup> *Report of 19 June 1933 of the Governor of Kėdainiai County to the Desk-Officer for Religious Beliefs of the Ministry of Education.* LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 541, p. 153.

<sup>30</sup> *Report of 11 July 1933 of the Secretary General of the Ministry of Education to the Governor of Kėdainiai County.* Ibid., p. 150 verso.

<sup>31</sup> *Report of 29 July 1927 of the Desk Officer for Religious Beliefs to the Governor of Kaunas Town and County.* LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 534, p. 120–120 verso; GUSTAITIS, Rolandas. *Kaišiadorių regiono žydai*, Kaišiadorys, 2006, p. 93.



was cancelled after it had been found that the electoral commission had worked for a couple of hours only instead of having worked from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.<sup>32</sup> Another case of an annulled election outcome was in Molėtai (Utena County) where election to the Board of the 2nd Jewish House of Prayer was held on 29 May 1933. The following reasons were mentioned: commission members' negligence and unacceptable principles used in selecting members of the commission.<sup>33</sup>

With all this explained, it must be stated that the whole system was favourable to the functioning of the boards irrespective of several separate election drawbacks. For example, the outcome of the election to the Board of the New Synagogue in Seirijai (Alytus County) was approved, and Joselis Osockis, elected to the post of Educated Man/Teacher was recognised unfit to perform his duties because he was a foreigner.<sup>34</sup> The same applied to the 29 May 1933 election in Pagirys (Ukmergė County) where Vulfas Gurmanas was elected candidate to Educated Man/Teacher, the Ministry of Education approved the Board membership with the exception of Vulfas Gurmanas, claiming he was a foreigner.<sup>35</sup> A meaningful instance was the outcome of the election to the Board of the 3rd Synagogue in Širvintai (Ukmergė County) on 3 August 1933. The Board was approved and Šmuilas Cheifecas was prevented from becoming a Board member because he could not speak Lithuanian.<sup>36</sup>

## **To be or not to be a member of the board of a religious community? Variations of reluctance and claims of inadequacy**

Boards of Jewish houses of prayer or synagogues, as mentioned above, were not always complete. Newly elected for a three-year period, they were representative bodies of Jewish communities in charge of ensuring compliance with religious obligations. Membership of the boards was not stable. Prospects of change could be sensed as early as at an initial stage. For instance, the election to the Board of the Synagogue in Kamajai (Rokiškis

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<sup>32</sup> *Report of 27 June 1933 of the Governor of Panevėžys Town and County to the 3rd Department of the Ministry of Education.* LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 556, p. 36; *Report of 12 July 1933 of the Secretary General of the Ministry of Education to the Governor of Panevėžys Town and County.* Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>33</sup> *Report of 28 June 1933 of the Governor of the Utena County to the Desk Officer for Religious Beliefs of the Ministry of Education.* LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 591, p. 30; *Report of 8 July 1933 of the Secretary General of the Ministry of Education to the Governor of Utena County.* Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>34</sup> *Report of 12 July 1930 of the Ministry of Education to the Governor of Alytus County.* LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 529, p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> *Report of 19 July 1933 of the Secretary General of the Ministry of Education to the Governor of Ukmergė Town and County.* LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 588, p. 178.

<sup>36</sup> *Report of 3 August 1933 of the Secretary General of the Ministry of Education to the Governor of Ukmergė Town and County.* Ibid., p. 146.

County) failed in 1930 when the nominees refused to stand for election.<sup>37</sup> The Ministry of Education approved the Board of the House of Prayer in Raguva (Panevėžys County) although two members were missing, that of a candidate for elder and a candidate for treasurer. Even though Orčikas Beras and Traitelis Vulfavičius were elected members of the Board, they had not given their consent to be included in the list of candidates, which implies that the will of candidates was sometimes neglected.

The information found in numerous unpublished documents leads to a conclusion that there were cases of voluntary resignation from membership duties (e.g. due to illness, old age and other reasons). For instance, B. Gurvičas was elected Treasurer of the Board of the Synagogue in Linkuva (Šiauliai County) in 1927. Immediately after he had been elected, he resigned, arguing that he had an ailing wife and he had to take care of her; he was an owner of a small, unprofitable shop; he spent his days there; in general, he did not want to have any communal duties.<sup>38</sup> His request was met. The Ministry of Education responded positively to the 6 October 1934 request from Chaimas Rozinas, Elder of Veliuona (Kaunas County) Synagogue (the Valley Synagogue), who asked for his dismissal on the grounds of old age and frequent recurring illness.<sup>39</sup> Erachmielis Kaganas was elected Elder of the Board of the Large Synagogue in Šeduva (Panevėžys County) in 1936. The next year, in 1937, he asked to be dismissed due to poor health and his request was met.<sup>40</sup>

The analysis of the documents of the 1940 elections to boards of Jewish houses of prayer and synagogues points to several individual cases of reluctance to sit on the boards. The elections were held on 3 June 1940 and the Soviet occupation followed a fortnight later, on 15 June 1940. With a political context having changed, some individual members of the boards revised their situation and decided to resign. For instance, Nochumas Sacharas, Elder of the Board of Synagogue *Choma* in Vilkija (Kaunas County), submitted an application on 21 October 1940 (four and a half months after the election) where he wrote that he had not wanted to be elected in the first place and time had come when he was certain he definitely did not want to fulfil his duties as Elder since the post was contrary to his beliefs, claiming to be a non-believer.<sup>41</sup> On 30 August 1940 Chaimas Kremeris said that he could not exercise his duties as Elder of the Board of the Synagogue in Žaliakalnis (district of Kaunas) because he was busy “as a worker”.<sup>42</sup> The fact that his occupational

<sup>37</sup> *Report of 17 June 1933 of the Governor of Rokiškis County to the 3rd Department of the Ministry of Education.* LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 562, p. 284.

<sup>38</sup> *Statement of 28 June 1927 of Gurvičas B. to the Governor of Šiauliai County.* LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 572, p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> *Report of 6 October 1934 of the Ministry of Education to the Governor of Kaunas Town and County.* LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 516, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> *Statement of 13 November 1937 of Erachmielis Kaganas to the Ministry of Internal Affairs.* LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 605, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> *Application of 21 October 1940 of Nochumas Sacharas to the Governor of Kaunas County.* LCVA. Fund 402, Inv. 10, File 84, p. 84.

<sup>42</sup> *Statement of 30 August 1940 of Chaimas Kremeris to the Governor of Kaunas County.* LCVA. Fund 402, Inv. 10, File 88, p. 7.

activities did not prevent him from performing his duties as Elder suggests that it was because of a new regime and new circumstances that he “could not combine” his job and activities for the benefit of his religious community.

On 26 October 1940, the Elder of the Board of the 2nd Synagogue in Žasliai, S. Monusevičius, asked to be dismissed from the post claiming that he was not religious, did not go to pray to the synagogue, and his election was against his conscience and beliefs.<sup>43</sup> The resignations of the time by pointing to the reasons such as “a non-believer” and “not religious” most probably testify to the change of values of individuals in the face of the possible approach of the soviet regime because there were no such cases in earlier elections (before 1940).

It is also true that the change of the composition was sometimes caused by a “hidden” factor; the people elected were not capable of assuming and fulfilling their duties. In some cases they were selected by groups, they sided with, in order to represent their interests. For instance, the Ministry of Education dismissed Maušas Taušeris from the post of Elder of the Board of the Synagogue in Zapyškis (Kaunas County) on 26 September 1930. He was nominated Elder as a compromise between two competing groups representing diverging opinions. The Ministry investigated the case and found out that the person concerned was “an honest man of integrity” but illiterate, and thus not capable of performing the duties of Elder.<sup>44</sup> The election to the Board of the Synagogue in Rietavas (Telšiai County) witnessed an extraordinary situation in 1933. Maušas Varkelis was removed from the list of candidates on the eve of the election when a complaint was filed saying that Varkelis had been paralysed for six years, had not prayed “independently” in the Synagogue for four years, had not been capable of “speaking clearly” for two years; he could not write; thus he could not be elected Elder.<sup>45</sup>

The unpublished documents contain information about the cases where people elected to the boards did not meet their communities’ expectations, that is, some people lost the trust of the community they represented. For instance, while investigating the activities of Ruvinas Fainmanas, Elder of the Board of the New Synagogue in Pandėlys (Rokiškis County), the Head of the 2nd Police Station of Rokiškis County in 1932 found that the Elder “<...> does not care for the maintenance of the prayer house and the cemetery, interferes with the activities of the funeral team *Chevro Kadiš*, does not get along with other members of the Board of the Jewish House of Prayer, is driven by greed for money, and lost the trust of the Jewish community, besides, he is a schemer.”<sup>46</sup> The community was unhappy. When he was asked to resign, he delayed his resignation until the Ministry of

<sup>43</sup> GUSTAITIS, Rolandas. *Kaišiadorių regiono žydai*. Kaišiadorys, 2006, p. 216.

<sup>44</sup> *Report of 31 October 1930 of the Head of the 4th Police Station of Kaunas County to the Head of Police of Kaunas County*. LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 536, p. 107–107 verso.

<sup>45</sup> *Complaint of 14 May 1933 of Izraelis-Jankelis Jankelevičius to Rietavas Electoral Commission*. LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 581, p. 77; *Minutes of the meeting of Electoral Commission of Rietavas Synagogue*. Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>46</sup> *Report of 25 April 1932 of the Head of the 2nd Police Station of Rokiškis County to the Governor of Rokiškis County*. LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 512, p. 59.

Education finally dismissed him in 1932. On 16–17 August 1934 a member of the Board of the House of Prayer *Chasidim* in Kaunas, Educated Man/Teacher Šliomas-Chaimas Namiotas was dismissed from his duties. His post was taken by Candidate Mincas Pinchusas who was approved. According to the Head of the 2nd Police Station in Kaunas, who investigated the case, the Educated Man/Teacher did not conduct the service in a proper way, did not implement decisions taken by the Synagogue and that was why “Jews <...> hate their Educated Man/Teacher Namiotas and wish to replace him.”<sup>47</sup> There were frictions among members of the Synagogue in Subačius Station in the early '30s because of the activities of Elder Atlasas. The Ministry of Education rejected complains concerning the Elder and he retained his post in 1932. In 1934, however, he was dismissed by the Ministry of Education after the latter had received information from the Executive Committee of Lithuanian Rabbis about his inadequacy and a complaint from the local rabbi and the local community about the 1933 election, calling it illegal.<sup>48</sup> The Ministry of Education discharged Educated Man Elijas Zaksas, Elder Mickelis Nejermanas and Treasurer Leizeris Raickinas who were members of the Board of the brick Synagogue in Varniai (Telšiai County) from their posts “<...> because they did not get along with the local Rabbi” and replaced them with respective candidates.<sup>49</sup>

### **“Internal wars” in Jewish communities during and after elections: battles without winners or without losers?**

The elections acted as a catalyst of moods in Jewish communities and highlighted the trends of group divisions and internal tensions in several collective bodies, which had an impact on election outcomes. My analysis of individuals' or groups' complaints and letters exchanged between Jewish communities and monitoring institutions give an idea of an election often as a continuation of internal discord. For instance, in Dusetos (Ežerėnai County) divisions in the Jewish community had deep roots dating back to the time before the First World War. The arguing parties did not get closer after the War, which is evidenced by fist fights so violent that the police had to intervene. A group of Jews, separated from the community, set up their own house of prayer and invited a rabbi. However, another problem arose, that of maintaining the functioning synagogue which was meant to accommodate all the Jews in Dusetos as “the proletariat” alone

<sup>47</sup> *Report of 21 July 1934 of the Head of the 2nd Police Station of Kaunas Town to the Governor of Kaunas Town and County*. LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 516, p. 23.

<sup>48</sup> *Report of 6 February 1934 of the Secretary General of the Ministry of Education to the Governor of Panevėžys Town and County*. LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 516, p. 39.

<sup>49</sup> *Report of 11 November 1938 of V. Soblys, Director of the Culture Department of the Ministry of Education to the Governor of Telšiai County*. LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 602, p. 161.

could not afford it.<sup>50</sup> When the first election was approaching in 1927, having considered the enmity among members of the community and believing that reconciliation of “the proletariat” and “the intelligentsia” was impossible, the Governor of Ežerėnai County asked the Ministry of Internal Affairs for permission to hold two separate elections noting that “<...> otherwise there may be a huge unrest, which sometimes arises here now.”<sup>51</sup> Scarce fragments of documents show that there might have been two separate houses of assembly for Jews in Dusetos in the '30s; there was a synagogue and a house of prayer, therefore two separate elections were held. The neighbouring Rokiškis County experienced a similar situation. The County Governor described the election to the Board of the Jewish House of Prayer *Chasidim* in Obeliai in 1927 as a battleground of two groups. Whichever group won the election, the other would contest the outcome.<sup>52</sup> The Governor of Alytus County noted that the outcome of the 1930 election to the Board of the 2nd Synagogue was contested only due to the fact that “<...> Leiba Sereiskis, Ševakas Kacas, Leizeris Raidbordas filed a complaint concerning the election outcome because of envy and because Leiba Sereiskis has not been elected to the Board.”<sup>53</sup>

An extraordinary and hostile situation was characteristic of the Jewish community in Šakiai at the beginning of the '30s. The community used to assemble in a synagogue and a house of prayer. Rabbi Anachovičius conducted services in the synagogue and Rabbi Fridmanas served in the house of prayer. The Governor of Šakiai County wrote that during the First World War “<...> Anachovičius called himself a rabbi and having no right but having quite a few local relatives and leftist supporters, neglecting the decision of the Rabbis' Union, performs his duties resorting even to violence and does not recognise the right of the invited Rabbi Fridmanas.”<sup>54</sup> In his opinion, “The Jewish community in Šakiai is divided into two groups: a more moderate part is led by Rabbi Fridmanas and a leftist part is led by Anachovičius. There are very many persons in Anachovičius' group who are used to settling accounts in a violent manner.”<sup>55</sup> The outcome of the 1930 election in Šakiai was annulled and the joint election in Šakiai did not solve the problem. Anachovičius' supporters wanted to supervise the activities in “both houses”. The 1933 election campaign was not an easy endeavour. In its attempt to eliminate a brewing conflict, on 4 October 1933 the Ministry of Education authorised the County Governor to “<...> make sure that local inhabitants decide which of the two communities they

<sup>50</sup> For more see *Report of [11] June 1927 of the Head of 2nd Police Station of Ežerėnai County to the Governor of Ežerėnai County*. LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 504, p. 28–29.

<sup>51</sup> *Report of 14 June 1927 of the Governor of Ežerėnai County to the Desk Officer for Religious Beliefs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs*. Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>52</sup> *Report of [7] July 1927 of the Governor of Rokiškis County to the Desk Officer for Religious Beliefs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs*. LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 560, p. 321.

<sup>53</sup> *Report of 21 June 1930 of the Governor of Alytus County to the Desk Officer for Religious Beliefs of the Ministry of Education*. LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 529, p. 169.

<sup>54</sup> *Report of 21 April 1931 of the Governor of Šakiai County to the Director of the 3rd Department of the Ministry of Education*. LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 569, p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

want to be members of and register their choice until 15 October; and separate boards of those communities are elected until 22 November.”<sup>56</sup> The external organisational efforts described above seem to have been fruitful and on 21–22 December 1933 two separate newly elected boards were approved.

Conflicts were typical of a number of Jewish communities. But the situation in Kėdainiai was exceptionally hostile. The Jewish life had deep-rooted traditions and, unfortunately, was marked by an intense internal discord that surfaced in the mid '20s. The proof of lengthy animosity can be found in the 1936 report of the Governor of Kėdainiai County. Considering the prospects of the forthcoming election, he expressed doubts about its feasibility as it might lead to high tension in the community. He put it as follows, “When the election was announced, the battles from before between the Jewish societies *Ezro* and *Kneset Israel* became more severe; agitation among the Jews is of particular intensity <...> the enemies of the incumbent Board, that is, *Ezro*, have more supporters among poorer and more unfortunate Jews.”<sup>57</sup> It is important to note that there was one joint board in Kėdainiai in line with Paragraph 19 of the Instructions that provided for a committee to be set up in case of several synagogues and houses of prayer. The Governor believed, “1) the propaganda of society *Ezro* is much more active and harsher than that of society *Kneset Israel* and 2) the supporters of society *Ezro* are members of the executive body of the Jewish People’s Bank and exercise financial pressure during their pre-election campaign, e.g. apply stricter lending requirements, refuse to extend the maturity of loans, etc.”<sup>58</sup> The County Governor was of an opinion that delayed election would not solve the problem; the friction between the societies and the community might be less fierce but would continue anyway. The joint Board cherished hope that, after the Law on Societies was adopted in 1936, *Ezro* would not meet the requirements and would not be registered, hence would die out. The County Governor wrote, “<...> many Jews err in performing their rituals and have been entered into a list of people who should be disciplined.” In his opinion, this could be another source of discord in organising future elections. He emphasised, “The incumbent Board of the Synagogue and House of Prayer and society *Kneset Israel* are represented by a wealthier, more serious, more public-minded part of the Jewish community; while *Ezro* represents a few who live without fear of rituals as well as other religious requirements.”<sup>59</sup> Having assessed the situation on the basis of the Governor’s report, the Ministry of Education postponed the elections for one year. Under the circumstances, elections to the boards of six synagogues and houses of prayer were held in Kėdainiai neither that year, nor in 1937 or 1938. The elections were postponed

<sup>56</sup> Report of 4 October 1933 of the Secretary General of the Ministry of Education to the Governor of Šakiai County. LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 570, p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> Report of 24 April 1936 of the Governor of Kėdainiai County to the Director of Culture Department of the Ministry of Education. LCVA. Fund 391, Inv. 4, File 608, p. 171.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 171 verso.



until 1939 because a three-year term of all boards of synagogues and Jewish houses of prayer in Lithuania expired and new elections had to be held throughout the country in 1939. In 1939 the Ministry of Education extended the term of all functioning boards for a one-year period and postponed the elections till 1940. This applied of course to the Board in Kėdainiai, too. Therefore the factors inciting discord in the Kėdainiai Jewish community were not eliminated. That was most probably the only local conflict in Lithuania that extended to all groups of the Jewish community and extended to all the local synagogues and houses of prayer.

## Conclusions

The 1927 Instructions for Election to Boards of Jewish Synagogues and Houses of Prayer, late as it was circulated, gave a new organisational impulse to Jewish communities and was a legal instrument freeing Jewish communities from uncertainty regarding election procedures.

Five elections to the boards in question helped Jewish communities to develop their socialising skills and offered a chance to renew community structures.

Violations, irregular application and misinterpretation of Instructions provisions resulted in election defects.

The process of elections, paradoxical as it may seem, caused animosity in Jewish communities, in a few cases they even led to more serious friction. But they were successfully dealt with in the majority of cases.

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# Žydų maldos namų ir sinagogų valdybų rinkimai Lietuvoje 1927–1940 m.

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## Santrauka

Straipsnyje pristatoma lietuviškojoje istoriografijoje menčiau ištirta Lietuvos žydų religinių institucijų struktūrinių darinių formavimo praktika bei pavieniai jos sklaidos aspektai. Pastariesiems procesams tikslingą impulsą suteikė vėluojanti, tik 1927 m. paskelbtoji Instrukcija. Ji kryptingai reglamentavo žydų sinagogų ir maldos namų valdybų rinkimo procedūras, kurių pažeidimai ar skirtingas interpretavimas lemdavo rinkimų „broko“ turinį. Aptariamuoju laikotarpiu fiksuotos 5 rinkimų kampanijos – 1927, 1930, 1933, 1936, 1940 m., paliudijusios skirtingą pavienių žydų bendruomenių kolektyvinės elgsenos raišką, buvusias vidines susiskaldymo tendencijas. Rinkimų organizacinės realijos lyg lakmuso popierėlis išryškino ir įsisenėjusias tarpgrupines žydų bendruomenių problemas bei nesutarimus.

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