

Linās Venclauskas

Moses Beckelman and American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Activities and Accounts: Lithuania in 1940

Key words: Moses Beckelman, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), Lithuania, WWII refugees from Poland, the 1940 Soviet occupation of Lithuania, WWII refugees aid, Chiune Sugihara, Jan Zwartendijk

Summary

The present article regards the crucial period of Lithuania. When WWII started, Lithuania remained independent and neutral, this resulted in more than 30,000 civilian refugees from Poland into the country. Till the first Soviet occupation in the summer of 1940, refugees felt safe in the independent and free Lithuania, but the Soviet rule did not promise anything good. Refugees started to look for possibilities to flee; and those were very limited. In this context, two diplomats in Kaunas – Japanese Vice-Consul Chiune Sugihara and Dutch Honorary Consul Jan Zwartendijk issued transit and final destination visas. But besides documents, huge financial resources were needed for the Trans-Siberian railroad pass. American JDC became more active in Lithuania after the beginning of WWII, but the subsequent Soviet occupation was an additional trigger. JDC was funding refugee life in Lithuania and observing the situation, but when refugees started to flee Soviet Lithuania financial JDC aid for the travel became crucial. JDC representative in Lithuania, Moses Beckelman (1906 – 1955) was an exceptional person, active and courageous, without whose efforts and initiative less aid could have reached refugees in Lithuania. Beckelman himself left Lithuania being afraid of Soviet repressions, but his initiatives helped hundreds of people to obtain visas and reach safe world. The article focuses on Beckelman's accounts of Jewish situation in Lithuania that he sent to the JDC headquarters. Usually, speaking about Jewish refugees' flight from Lithuania main focus is on Chiune Sugihara, but it is clear that he and Dutch Honorary Consul in Lithuania Jan Zwartendijk were key persons in getting travel documents – visas. But successful application for them cost a lot of money as the only way to leave the country was through the Soviet travelling agency *Intourist* services and journey along the Trans-Siberian railroad. At this point only US dollars were accepted for payment. Without M. Beckelman's intensive work in Vilnius and regular reports about Jewish situation in Lithuania, JDC support might have been less intense, and the Jewish world would not get information about anti-Jewish actions taken by the Soviets.

Mozus Bekelmans un Amerikas ebreju apvienotās sadales komitejas darbība un apraksti: Lietuva 1940. gadā

Atslēgas vārdi: Mozus Bekelmans, Amerikas ebreju apvienotā sadales komiteja (JDC), Lietuva, Otrā pasaules kara bēgļi no Polijas, 1940. gada Lietuvas padomju okupācija, palīdzība Otrā pasaules kara bēgļiem, Chiune Sugihara, Jan Zwartendijk

Kopsavilkums

Šajā rakstā ir aplūkots lūzuma periods Lietuvas vēsturē. Kad sākās Otrais pasaules karš, Lietuva bija neatkarīga un ieņēma neitrālu pozīciju, kā rezultātā valstī ieradās vairāk nekā 30 000 civilo bēgļu no Polijas. Līdz pirmajai padomju okupācijai 1940. gada vasarā neatkarīgajā un brīvajā Lietuvā bēgļi jutās droši, bet padomju vara neko labu nesolīja. Bēgļi sāka meklēt migrācijas iespējas, un tās bija ļoti ierobežotas. Šajā sakarā divi diplomāti Kauņā – Japānas vicekonsuls Chiune Sugihara un Nīderlandes goda konsuls Jan Zwartendijk izsniedza tranzīta un galamērķa valsts vīzas. Līdzās dokumentiem bija nepieciešami finansiālie resursi. Amerikas ebreju apvienotā sadales komiteja (JDC) kļuva aktīvāka Lietuvā pēc Otrā pasaules kara sākuma. JDC finansēja bēgļu ikdienas izmaksas Lietuvā un novēroja situāciju. Kad bēgļi sāka pamest Padomju Lietuvu, JDC finansiāla palīdzība ceļa izdevumiem kļuva izšķiroša. JDC pārstāvis Lietuvā Mozuss Bekelmans (1906–1955) bija izcila persona, bez viņa centieniem un iniciatīvas Lietuvas bēgļi saņemtu mazāk palīdzības. Baidoties no padomju represijām, Bekelmans atstāja Lietuvu, bet viņa iniciatīva palīdzēja simtiem cilvēku saņemt vīzas un nokļūt drošās vietās. Pētījumā galvenā uzmanība pievērsta Bekelmana apakstiem par to ebreju situāciju Lietuvā, kurus viņš nosūtījis uz JDC štābu. Chiune Sugihara un Jan Zwartendijk bija galvenās personas ceļošanas dokumentu – vīzu – nodrošināšanā. Taču vīzu ieguvējiem bija nepieciešama nauda, jo vienīgais ceļš, kā izbraukt no valsts, bija padomju ceļojumu aģentūras “Inturist” piedāvātais brauciens pa Transsibīrijas dzelzceļu. Turklāt samaksai tika pieņemti tikai ASV dolāri. Bez M. Bekelmana intensīvā darba Viļņā JDC atbalsts varētu būt mazāks, kā arī pasaule nesaņemtu informāciju par padomju varas vēršanos pret ebrejiem.

Introduction

WWII resulted not only in millions of victims, Holocaust atrocities and mass destructions in economics, politics, social life, but it also caused mass emigration in Europe and outside. Jewish emigration from Europe at the early stages of the Holocaust has already been investigated but consistent research is still needed. The article focuses on the so-called Polish Jews flight from Lithuania to the Far East in 1940–1941 and the help of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC).

Moses Beckelman – an insightful JDC figure

JDC had charitable experience, network and infrastructure from 1914 and helped thousands of Jews all over the world. However, every case has been individual: in Lithuania's case, Moses Beckelman's (1906–1955) presence was crucial.

An American, New York based Jew, professional social worker, he was a good organizer, very persistent and concrete person. Together with his Polish colleague Yitzhak Gitterman he was able to expand the JDC activities in Vilnius after the beginning of WWII. Beckelman worked with refugees' issues all his life, he was elected a director-general of JDC in 1951, until he unexpectedly died in 1955 (Moses Beckelman biography).

In personal accounts of Beckelman, Soviets (after they occupied Lithuania on June 15, 1940) are regarded as present evil, but he was personally attacked by the Nazis: in mid-December 1939 he, together with Y. Gitterman, were captured by the Nazis on their way to western Europe, where Gitterman planned to stay, and Beckelman used uncensored ways to send information about the life of Jews in Lithuania. Beckelman, being American citizen, was released, and Gitterman was sent back to Warsaw where he was killed in the Warsaw ghetto uprising (Gitterman Yitzhak biography). JDC account reads:¹ "Joint Distribution Committee, 100 East Forty-Second Street, New York, New York. Sirs! In accordance with your request made by telephone on December 13, you are informed that an inquiry has been made by telegraph of the American Embassy at Berlin concerning the welfare of Messrs* Moses Beckelman and Isaac Gitterman, who were aboard the S.S Estonia en route from Tallinn to Amsterdam when it was taken by a German warship into the port of Memel. You will be promptly informed when a reply is received* Sincerely yours, For the Secretary of States sgd. J* H. KEELET JR. J. H. Keeley, Jr. Acting Administrative Officer Special Division" (JDC Archives: 15 December, 1939, Letter of USA Department of the State about M. Beckelman captivity by Nazis, folder 123b, file 410659, no page number)

However, this shock did not stop Beckelman from his work, knowing that Nazis have successfully settled few hundred kilometers from Vilnius in Polish territories occupied after the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact that forced thousands of Jews to leave. But also, it is important to understand that Beckelman witnessed the realization of Molotov–Ribbentrop's pact from the other end – Soviet Russia also occupied a part of Poland forcing local Jews to flee and seek shelter.

Jews in Vilnius in 1939 under the Lithuanian rule

While staying in Vilnius, Beckelman remained observant and vigilant. On the one hand, he reported that Lithuanian rule is positive for Jews: "On the whole, Lithuania still continued to be the country which had done most to observe the spirit of the minorities causes of the Treaty of Versailles and in which the position of the Jewish

¹ I am very grateful to my colleague historian Arvydas Pakštalas for sharing with me copies of the documents from JDC archives. He was the first to find them.

minority was economically and culturally the best in Eastern Europe. Yiddish and Hebrew are recognised as languages of instruction in Jewish elementary schools supported by the government, five daily newspapers appear in Yiddish. The general cultural level of the Jewish population is high and though the government's prohibition of the Kehilahh some years ago, (...) the split in Jewish ranks between orthodox and liberal elements has made it impossible to achieve any federation of Jewish communal agencies, Jewish welfare needs are reasonably well met by a variety of independent welfare organisations in the fields of child care, medical aid, care of the aged, poor relief, etc. The Volknbanks, connected with the Foundation, continue to serve not only as the credit and financial centres for Jewish economic activities, but in the smaller towns also as the central points of Jewish community life." (JDC Archives: 1 December, 1939, JDC report on Jewish situation in Lithuania and Vilnius (before the war), folder 730, item no. 489103, no page numbers)

On the other hand, Beckelman explicitly noticed that, when some turmoil took place, anti-Semitic moods among the population immediately arose. He observed this in Vilnius where the population was multinational, affected by the war moods and war refugees, but at the same time the Lithuanian national narrative presented Vilnius as a Lithuanian city, so any collisions on behalf of Lithuanian nationalists would be interpreted as the plot of enemies, sabotage of the Lithuanian rule. Beckelman reported:

"Such a transition period (situation when Vilnius was taken by Soviet troops held in their hands for few weeks and given to Lithuania – L.V.) is bound to have a most undesirable effect on the position of our people. The first repercussions have already made themselves felt. These include: the anti-Jewish riots at the university during October, the pogrom in Vilna, the increasing number of articles in the local Lithuanian press talking about the "foreign elements" in our population (culminating yesterday in an article which hailed the proposed "Jewish State" in Lublin as a solution not only for Lithuania's refugee problem but for the "undesirable elements" in its economic life as well); the proposal for an economic advisory committee for the Vilna district which, it is obvious from the organization machinery proposed, will exclude Jewish representatives, the pressure exercised on the government by the German expulsion of refugees over the Lithuanian frontier which the Nazis turn on and off; and the projected organization of consumer and producer cooperatives in a number of new fields such as flax and tobacco which have in the past been in Jewish hands and from membership in which Jews, following the pattern already set in the food trades, will be excluded." (JDC Archives: November 22, 1939, Letter from Beckelman to Chief, folder 730, item no. 489122, p. 1)

Beckelman also understood that at that time Lithuanian rule was the power to deal with and tried to improve Jewish situation in Vilnius as much as possible. JDC representative's daily activities focused on housing and catering facilities: "It often happened that in spite of the fixed cost of every refugee's meal at 0.90 lits² a day, we were presented with accounts showing that the cost was more than 1 lit. These accounts

² Lit – should be Litas. Litas was Lithuanian national currency (from 1922 till 1941), 1 US Dollar was equal to 10 Litas.

had to be paid by us. This state of things caused us to take proper steps. We managed to come to an agreement with the Lithuanian kooperativas “Lietukas” (should be Lietūkis – L.V.) and “Pienocetras” which supply us with the majority of the necessary supplies at considerably low prices. This enabled us to change the manner in which the settling of accounts with the kitchens had been carried out. The kitchens are supplied with provisions by the committee itself so that there is a possibility of keeping up the proper standard of food, and, on the other hand, costs are kept within the fixed limit of 0.90 lit for each refugee.” (JDC Archives: 1 December, 1939, Report on the Activities of the Committee of Help for Refugees by the Kehillah (Jewish Community) of Vilna November & December 1939, folder 730, item no. 489105, p. 3)

Diversity of Vilnius population, new-coming war refugees, as well as Lithuania’s government position did not make the situation better. First of all, Lithuanian power thought about Vilnius as largely a Lithuanian city, inhabited by Lithuanians, so those people who lived in the city even before and right after WWI had difficulties in getting citizen rights and state support: “The group met to discuss the situation in general, and more particularly to arrive at a common policy in relation to the Red Cross, which had been designated by the Lithuanian authorities as the official body responsible for the refugee relief work. It was estimated that there were then in Vilna 11,000 Jewish refugees, 12,000 Poles, 4,000 Lithuanians, and an additional 3,000 Jewish refugees in the rest of Lithuania (these 3000 Jews were Jews from Suwałki forcefully pushed into Lithuania by Nazi forces in occupied Polish territories – L.V.). The committee also took into consideration some 45,000 Polish residents of Vilna, termed “war sufferers”, who had lost their employment as the result of the Lithuanian occupation (at this point Beckelman’s account contrasts with the Lithuanian position – Lithuanians thought that getting Vilnius was restoring historical justice, but some Polish politicians, and some international actors, as M. Beckelman in this case, interpreted the fact as occupation – L.V.), and 35,000 Jewish residents in need of assistance”. (JDC Archives: 22 May, 1940, Memorandum from Henrietta K. Buchman, folder 730, item no. 489256, p. 1)

At this point, formal handing Vilnius to Lithuania did not make the situation easier – there were several players in the field, but the formal decision and final word was on the Lithuanian state, and, as it was said, the state still had not decided how to treat Vilnius population, especially those who had lived there their whole life, even in several generations. On the other hand, at this point only Soviet leaders knew that this situation would soon end in destruction of the entire Lithuanian state and Vilnius was used as a bargaining chip – to calm down possible Lithuanian reactions to the coming occupation.

Meanwhile Beckelman had to be creative and act as the man-orchestra – to contact with JDC, Lithuanian authorities, Red Cross, other refugee relief organizations based on national backgrounds, local Vilnius administration, Lithuanian businesses, and many others. At the same time, every penny sent to him by JDC was accounted and reported of: “In general, however, the canteens are said to be operating efficiently, and the cost of feeding has been reduced from 1 Lit to 0.80 Lit per person per day,

without sacrificing the quantity or quality of the food. As of the end of January, there were 58 canteens providing food for 8,726 persons (representing an increase of 16 canteens and 2,269 persons within the month) at a total cost of 250,833.43 Lit.

As of the end of January, 7,609 were being housed in 47 refugee homes, etc. at a cost of 157,120.14 Lit. In addition, the Committee expended **17,257.99 Lit for cash assistance to refugees** (bold type mine – L.V.). This included expenditures for photographs in connection with the registration, cables, letters and other incidental needs. Only 2,145 Lit of this sum represented direct monetary grants to individuals for other than the requirements in connection with their registration and in preparation for emigration.” (JDC Archives: 8 May, 1940, Henrietta K. Buchman, Summary of Report of the Kehillah Refugee Relief Committee Activities in Vilna for the Month of January, 1940, folder 730, item no. 489272, p. 2)

This account by Beckelman illustrates the daily life of refugees – not only food and housing were needed, but also a number of bureaucratic procedures: ID papers, registration documents, etc.³ At this point it should be noted that Lithuanian government and local authorities were very cooperative and upon request provided some concessions, exclusion, reductions, etc.

One of the refugees’ leaders and later Minister of Religions in Israel, Zorah Warhaftig in his memoirs “Refugee and Survivor: Rescue Efforts During the Holocaust”, (Feldheim Pub, 1996) explains his own path, primarily with his relatives and pregnant wife he headed to Polish-Romanian border, but got the news that the border was sealed, so they decided to head for Vilnius, since, according to Warhaftig, he got news from Soviet newspapers that Soviets intended to pass Vilnius to Lithuania. So the Warhaftigs reached Vilnius, but since the capital was still in Kaunas, they moved to Kaunas, as a place of better cooperation with Lithuanian officials and foreign Legations.

Till the Soviet invasion, Lithuania was a safe harbour for refugees, some Jews, especially Zionists, were searching for possibilities to leave the country, but with the Soviet occupation on June 15, 1940, the situation changed drastically.

Destruction of Independent Lithuania. Soviet rule menace to the Jewish communities

Soviets from the very beginning started to destroy not only refugees, but also the local Lithuanian Jewish communities that had lived there for centuries: Zionists started to be treated as enemies and international spies, as well as religious Jews, since religion was not tolerated by the Soviets. Various political parties and civic organization members were also treated as enemies, ideological opponents, spies, and potential traitors of the secrets. Those who had Lithuanian citizenship became Soviet citizens, and refugees being stateless found themselves in a short opportunity window to escape.

³ Interviews with Sugihara – Zwartendijk survivors mention that every permission to leave the place of residence and get to another city (to get to Kaunas from Vilnius for example) was charged and was rather costly. For example, the interview with Lucile Camhi (Oral history interview with Lucille Camhi. *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Oral history interviews of the Flight and Rescue collection*. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn508234> (02.04.2024)

From mid-December 1940, refugees were obliged to obtain Soviet citizenship, otherwise they would be arrested. Concerning travel documents (visas), Japanese Vice-Consul Chiune Sugihara and Dutch Honorary Consul Jan Zwartendijk were very instrumental, but in funding of the journey JDC support became crucial. Departing refugees provided good inflow of US dollars to the Soviet budget, but at the same time paranoia about international agents, spies searching for the weak Soviet spots grew, and for this reason Beckelman left Lithuania on February 21, 1941, using the Trans-Siberian route to reach Japan with Sugihara transit visa no. 1890, later going to the USA. His office co-workers in Lithuania later were arrested and interrogated by the NKVD as international spies and profiteers.

Before the departure Beckelman reported: "Between December 1, 1940 and the date of my departure from Lithuania on February 21, 1941, more than 2,000 Jewish refugees in Lithuania had been assisted to leave the country through the activities of the J.D.C. This is the first time that emigration on such a scale has been possible from Soviet territories, and the movement was still continuing when I left. Though, at that time, permission to emigrate was almost exclusively limited to refugees from Poland, the indications were that the question of granting exit permits to Lithuanian citizens then under consideration would be decided favourably, provided that transit opportunities through Japan or other neighbouring countries would be available." (JDC Archives: 21 May 1941, Statement to the press by Moses W. Beckelman, Member J.D.C. European, staff, folder 123b, file 410570, p. 1)

The changing war situation and Soviet attitudes never let the local Lithuanian Jewish population to flee (with just few exceptions), but the following Beckelman's quotation shows how insightful he was in judging the situation with great penetration: "When exit visas began to be issued in large numbers at the beginning of 1941, the J.D.C. turned its attention from the relief program to the problem of emigration. Candidates for emigration consisted chiefly of persons for whom the New Order offered little opportunity, or whose relatives in overseas countries were anxious to have them join their families. A rough classification of the exit visa candidates indicates that approximately 15 per cent represented professional persons – lawyers, journalists, teachers, etc., for whom the possibilities of employment were remote, and an equal number were older persons, or women and children anxious to re-join their husbands and fathers abroad, or other persons similarly separated from their families. Rabbis and yeshivah students, of whom about 2,200 were included in the refugee group, likewise were candidates for exit visas. Much smaller, but a group whose emigration was of the greatest urgency, were the leaders of various Jewish communal organizations, such as Bundists, Poale Zionists, and similar organizations. In addition to the foregoing categories there were also about 1,000 persons who were emigrating to Palestine, When I left on February 21, the emigration process was still continuing, though the number of visas issued daily had decreased sharply because of difficulties in obtaining Japanese transit resulting from the jam of refugees then in Japan, awaiting further movement."

(JDC Archives: 21 May 1941, Statement to the press by Moses W. Beckelman, Member J.D.C. European, staff, folder 123b, file 410570, p. 2 - 3)

At this point, activities of Moses Beckelman could be seen as one of the significant links in the chain of rescuing WWII Jewish refugees from totalitarian regimes and annihilation.

Conclusions

In the context of the present research, Japanese Vice-consul in Kaunas Chiune Sugihara and Dutch Honorary Consul in Kaunas Jan Zwartendijk are the most well-known Jewish rescuers. First, by issuing Japanese transit visas, other fake end destination visas to Curaçao, Suriname, and other Dutch Colonies in Caribbean. Usually, these two Righteous Among the Nations are put in the context of Holocaust, but their activities clearly show that they were acting during the Soviet occupation and saved people from this totalitarian regime primarily. When Nazis invaded Lithuania and Holocaust started immediately, Sugihara and Zwartendijk had been out of the country for 9 months already, their personal departure was caused by the Soviet occupation as well.

Moses Beckelman's departure was much later – diplomats left Lithuania in early fall of 1940, while Beckelman left on February 21, 1941 (he got Sugihara's visa on August 17, 1940), so he intensively worked for 6 more months in order to facilitate the stay and especially departure of the refugees as much as possible.

In his accounts, Beckelman acknowledges the complexity of the situation in Vilnius and Vilnius region, as well as Lithuania's situation, but like in the rest of the memoirs and testimonies of the refugees, he also underlines that life under Lithuanian power for the Jewish refugees was positive and there was no need for massive emigration until the Soviet occupation started.

References

American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) Archives:
folder 730 (New York Office Collection 1933-1944. Lithuania: Administration, General, 1937 - 1940 (May), item no. 489103,
folder 730, item no. 489122,
folder 730, item no. 489105,
folder 730, item no. 489256,
folder 730, item no. 489272,
folder 123b (New York Office Collection 1933-1944.
Lithuania: Administration, General, 1937 - 1940 (May), file 410570.
Oral history interview with Lucille Camhi. RG Number: G-50.494.0003. *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Oral history interviews of the Flight and Rescue collection*. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn508234> (02.04.2024)

- Brokke, J. (2021) *The Just: How Six Unlikely Heroes Saved Thousands of Jews from the Holocaust*. Melbourne, London: Scribe US. 496 p.
- Gitterman Yitzhak biography. *Yad Vashem – The World Holocaust Remembrance Center*. https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206290.pdf (02.04.2024).
- Hillel, L. (1996) *In Search of Sugihara: The Elusive Japanese Diplomat Who Risked his Life to Rescue 10,000 Jews from the Holocaust*. USA: Free Press. 336 p.
- Kranzler, D. (1976) *Japanese, Nazis & Jews: The Jewish refugee community of Shanghai, 1938-1945*. USA: Yeshiva University Press; 2nd edition. 644 p.
- Moses Beckelman biography. *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Holocaust Encyclopedia*. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/moses-beckelman> (02.04.2024)
- Sugihara, Y. (1995) *Visas for Life*. USA: Edwards Brothers, Inc. 167 p.
- Venclauskas, L. ed. (2017) *Casablanca of The North: Refugees and Rescuers in Kaunas, 1939–1940*. Vilnius: Versus aureus. 188 p.
- Venclauskas, L. ed. (2020) *Conventions, quotas, refugees: European jews in 1938–1945*. Vilnius: Versus. 177 p.
- Warhaftig, Z. (1996) *Refugee and Survivor: Rescue Efforts During the Holocaust*. USA: Feldheim Pub. 435 p.
- Žepkaitė, R. (1990) *Vilniaus istorijos atkarpa: 1939–1940 m.* Vilnius: Mokslas. 156 p.