Reconstruction of contested history

VILNIUS, 1939–1949

Vilnius residents gather near an advertising column on Didžioji Street at the start of the first Soviet occupation in September 1939.

PHOTO: PAVEL TROSHKIN/ NATIONAL MUSEUM OF LITHUANIA

by **Giedrė Jankevičiūtė**

abstract

The narrative in this article is based on a reconstruction of my personal curatorial experience while working on the exhibition "A Difficult Age: Vilnius, 1939–1949". The exhibition's chronological framework – 1939 to 1949 – was established with a focus on historical realities and aimed to frame the narrative of the guest exhibition. The public knowledge of the history of multi-national Vilnius is full of conscious and unconscious omissions, in large part caused by oblivion, but no less by the unwillingness to remember, ignorance, and the refusal to know or even fear of finding out. The narrative based on the history of visual art and artists' lives is a way to bring up controversial topics and open new perspectives.

KEYWORDS: Communism, occupation, Vilnius, Holocaust, contested history, migration, art.

This article is framed in a context of the complex problem of the ways and possibilities to communicate difficult pasts through art, such as the trauma caused by World War II, particularly such related processes as massive deportation, expatriation and colonization, and their consequences. All those issues still belong to the grey zone in the histories of many Central and East European countries, including the Baltic States, Lithuania among them. Those issues were discussed in a productive and inspiring way at the symposium "Prisms of Silence", as explained in the introduction of this Special Issue.

The narrative in this article is based on a reconstruction of my personal curatorial experience while working on the exhibition called "A Difficult Age: Vilnius, 1939–1949". The exhibition, which was scheduled to open on August 2020, was postponed to January 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is devoted to an

PHOTO: PAVEL TROSHKIN/NATIONAL MUSEUM OF LITHUANIA

Polish refugees at the Vilnius railway station, September 1939.

extremely complex historical period – the decade that radically changed life in Vilnius and the shape of the city itself. The aim was to re-create at least in part the image of the still unknown past through the works of artists who were active in that period in Vilnius. It might seem a very simple task, but it is not, as the notion of the events of this decade and their consequences still creates many controversies. In other words, public knowledge of the history of multi-national Vilnius, particularly that of the 20th century, is still full of conscious and unconscious omissions, in large part caused by oblivion, but no less by the unwillingness to remember, ignorance, and the refusal to know or even fear of finding out. It is not so simple to approach this minefield, where the same personalities are seen as national heroes by one group, and as cowards and traitors by others. Passions run high, but hopefully the narrative based on the history of visual art and artists' lives can be helpful, as it is more universal compared to that seen from the angle of political history. The actual state of collective memory of this period in Lithuania could be illustrated by the fact that there is no synthesis of the history of that period so far, except the chapters in the two-volume overview of Lithuanian history written by poet, translator and public intellectual Tomas Venclova.[1]

IT IS IMPORTANT to note that the exhibition was conceived and is planned to be displayed by the private MO Museum in Vilnius, that has been operating since 2018.[2] It is not a secondary circumstance, as none of the public museums in Lithuania has enough enthusiasm or probably even courage to deal with this sensitive and uncomfortable subject. The reason for this cautious behavior is not only the general controversial attitude towards mid-twentieth-century history, but also a possible rejection from a certain part of the audience based on the reluctance to see artworks that raise uneasy questions and represent an unacceptable historical reality. For example, some members of the older generation, who directly experienced Soviet repressions or heard about this experience from their family members, refused to visit the exhibition "Under the Red Star: Lithuanian Art 1940–1941", which I curated ten years ago, presenting propaganda works created by Lithuanian artists in the years of the Soviet occupation and Soviet visual production that circulated in Lithuania in that period.[3] The main visitors of that exhibition were people of my generation, i.e. born after 1960 and younger, who perceived the presented historical period as a dramatic past that had painful consequences but was already over.

The exhibition context

The baseline for the MO Museum's decision to hold the exhibition "A Difficult Age, Vilnius 1939–1949" is quite close to the position of the curators of the exhibition "Artige Kunst – Kunst und Politik im Nazionalsozialismus", held in Bochum, Rostock and Regensburg, as it stated in the exhibition catalogue summing up the idea of the show: "[…] museums, as places of cultural, (art) historical, and socio-political education, absolutely can and should encourage debate on controversial issues."[4] It was the aim of sharpening society's sensitivity to inconvenient themes and offer new material for their reflection, built on this particular understanding of the museum's mission, that encouraged the MO Museum to initiate an exhibition devoted to a fragmentarily familiar and mythologized period in the history of Vilnius. The exhibition that I curated represents a tendency that has become distinct in contemporary curatorial practices, testifying to the efforts to give some clarity to the perception and interpretations of a convoluted historical period, while at the same time rewriting the national canon of the history of art. This aim can hardly be achieved without cooperation with specialists in political history. For example, the exhibition "Post Zang Tumb Tuuum. Art, Life, Politics: Italia 1918–1943" (2018, curator Germano Celant), held at the Fondazione Prada in Milan, which corrected the canon of the mid-20th century history of Italian art, was heavily based on research on both art and political history, in particular, historian Emilio Gentile's research.[5] It is not by accident that the historical narrative accompanying the exhibition started with his text, which was published in the catalogue after the curator's statement.[6] The basis of my exhibition narrative is a timeline prepared by a well-recognized specialist in World War II, associate professor Nerijus Šepetys of Vilnius University.

PHOTO: JAKOV KHALIP/NATIONAL MUSEUM OF LITHUANIA

Gediminas Avenue near the Chamber of Industry and Trade, where the Vilnius Field Command Office had been established during the Nazi occupation, after the entry of Soviet forces into the city, July 1944.

The exhibition curated by Celant became not only a significant cultural event of the year in Italy, but also one of the landmark events of contemporary curatorial practices devoted to rethinking the heritage of the era of European totalitarianisms. It will remain in the history of curatorship not only because of its conception, which basically generalizes the process taking place since the late 1970s,[7] but also because of an exceptionally successful and effective collaboration between the curator, the architects, the designers, the museum itself and the entire team of collaborators, which allowed the creation of a clear, powerful and historically valid narrative provoking lively interest from the local and international audience.

The case that I am presenting is, certainly, not comparable to the above-mentioned German and Italian exhibitions from the viewpoint of their scale, visibility or international impact. However, it undoubtedly is a fragment of the mosaic reconstructing the inconvenient European past, without which the big picture would remain incomplete.

"IT IS NOT SO SIMPLE TO APPROACH THIS MINEFIELD, WHERE THE SAME PERSONALITIES ARE SEEN AS NATIONAL HEROES BY ONE GROUP, AND AS COWARDS AND TRAITORS BY OTHERS."

THE IDEA OF HOLDING an art exhibition devoted to Vilnius in the years of the occupation and terror in the MO Museum emerged after the museum decided to host the exhibition "Perspective of Adolescence: Szapocznikow, Wróblewski, Wajda" staged by the renowned Polish curator Anda Rottenberg, which was transferred from the Silesian Museum in Katowice.[8] Rottenberg's aim was to reveal how the war experiences determined or influenced the work by three "war-affected" Polish artists: sculptor Alina Szapocznikow (1926–1973), film director Andrzej Wajda (1926–2017), and one of Poland's most prominent artists of the second half of the 20th century, painter Andrzej Wróblewski (1927–1957), who was born and raised in Vilnius, and took the first steps of his artistic career there. In 1945, the Soviets forced Wróblewski together with his mother and brother (his father died in 1941 under the Nazi occupation), as former Polish citizens, to move from Vilnius, which was annexed to the Soviet Union, to the Republic of Poland, which was under Communist rule, but somewhat freer. All three artists are well known not only in Poland, but also internationally. During her creatively most important years Szapocznikow lived in Paris, while Wajda's films, not once given an award at international film festivals, belong to the classics of European cinema, and are perceived and acclaimed in many countries as significant facts of reflection on culture and twentieth-century political history. Wróblewski's work passed beyond Poland's borders in 2010. In that year, an exhibition of his works was held at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. In 2015, a famous exhibition of his two-sided paintings *Recto-verso* took place at the Warsaw Contemporary Art Museum, and in 2016, it travelled to the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid.

However, bringing Rottenberg's exhibition to Vilnius without showing how the artists presented there are related to Vilnius would have been risky. For the exhibition to catch the interest of the Lithuanian audience and to be received in the way envisioned by the organizers, the life and works of its protagonists had to be placed in the field of attention of the local audience. On one hand, Polish art is quite well known and liked in Lithuania;

on the other, as a result of the historical mistrust between Lithuanians and Poles, largely stemming from the so-called "Vilnius issue", the same events of the past are still being viewed from two different perspectives – Lithuanian and Polish. Above all, it concerns the period between the two world wars, as well as the war and early postwar years. So, my task was to try to connect these two different viewpoints.

The main figures of Rottenberg's exhibition are three talented people, artists whose lives and work were marked by a traumatic experience in adolescence and early youth, leaving unhealed and painful scars and a gaping, unfulfillable void. The Vilnius exhibition recounts the irreversible changes that took place under dramatic circumstances in the city optimistically looking into the future, which radically transformed it, and about the traces of vanished hopes, losses, suffering, fear, anxiety, blood, betrayal and cruelty, still emerging in various forms, followed by a constant longing for normality and a realization that a fulfilment of this longing is hardly possible. For both exhibitions, a common title describing those aspects was chosen: "A Difficult Age". The subtitle for the Polish exhibition included the names of the three artists: Szapocznikow, Wajda, Wróblewski; and the subtitle of the Lithuanian exhibition pointed the place: "Vilnius" and the date: "1939–1949".

A Difficult Age is a literal translation of the title of the work *Trudny wiek* by Alina Szapocznikow. This figurative sculpture of a young nude girl is held at the Art Museum of Lodz. According to Anna Nawrot, a researcher and connoisseur of Szapocznikow's artistic heritage, "This is not a mere nude – *A Difficult Age* is also an affirmation of human dignity and power in the face of the grim reality of the post-war world."[9] Nawrot also noted that at the same time our attention is drawn to the awakening sexuality, and "the beauty of the figure is supplemented with a sense of rebellious self-confidence."[10] Thus, the title of the sculpture *A Difficult Age* points both to a complicated historical period and a complex stage in human life – transition from adolescence to youth. However, the history of a concrete artwork only provides an additional explanation to the title whose meaning is clear enough without this commentary.

Briefly about "The Vilnius issue"

Lithuania and Poland were part of the Russian Empire on the eve of World War I. Both proclaimed independence in 1918, and started to fight their own independence wars. However, Vilnius, or Wilno in Polish, became "an apple of discord": for Lithuania it was its historic capital, the city of Lithuanian rulers and the heyday of the Lithuanian state from the 14th to the 17th century, and for Poland – a center of Polish culture and part of the territory inhabited by the Polish majority. So military forces commanded by the Polish general Lucjan Żeligowski occupied Vilnius on October 9, 1920 after a successful military campaign. The city and the surrounding area called "Central Lithuania" was incorporated into the Republic of Poland in 1922. The annexation was recognized by the international community in 1923, with the exception of Lithuania and, with some reservations, the Soviet Union. According to the secret protocols of the bilateral Non-Aggression Pact signed on August 23, 1939 by the German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and the Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov, the Vilnius region was recognized as part of Lithuania, which in its turn was relegated to the German Reich's sphere of influence. After the Soviet invasion of Poland on September 17, 1939, Bolshevik forces took Vilnius. A Treaty on Friendship and Demarcation of Borders between the USSR and Germany signed on September 28, 1939 formalized the de facto partition of the Republic of Poland. A new secret protocol between the two powers redefined their spheres of influence, ceding Lithuania and the Vilnius region to the Soviets, who placed it under Lithuania's control in accordance with the Mutual Assistance Treaty with the USSR, by which the Soviet Union effectively transformed Lithuania into its protectorate and directly annexed a large portion of the former Vilnius region.

"1939 MARKED THE END OF THE POLISH PERIOD OF VILNIUS AND THE START OF A NEW HISTORICAL ERA IN THE CITY."

THROUGHOUT THE INTERWAR period, Lithuania fought a symbolic struggle for occupied Vilnius. Poles were the worst enemies of Lithuanians, and vice versa. Certainly, diplomatic relations were out of the question. The border was closed, and even trains to Vilnius took a huge detour via the Latvian city of Daugavpils, which was also the postal route. The relations between the two states started to get back on track after an ultimatum given by the Warsaw authorities in 1938, demanding to establish diplomatic relations. In October 1939, in exchange for military bases in the territory of Lithuania, Vilnius was returned to Lithuania by the Soviets who were Nazi allies at that time and who had occupied the eastern part of Poland. This marked the beginning of the most dramatic period in the last-century history of Vilnius: The Soviet occupation that lasted from June 1940 to June 1941, followed by the Nazi occupation. In July 1944, the Nazis were expelled from Vilnius by the Soviet army, and a new period of Soviet occupation started, this time lasting for several decades until 1990. The events of the war and postwar periods dramatically changed the fate of the larger majority of the residents of Vilnius – Lithuanians, Poles, Jews, Russians, Belarusians and Karaims alike. Among them was one of the characters of Anda Rottenberg's exhibition, Andrzej Wróblewski, and his family.

The challenges of the exhibition

Having received an offer from the MO Museum to curate an exhibition that would provide a local context to Anda Rottenberg's exhibition, in other words, to introduce to the Lithuanian audience the problematics addressed in the presented artists' work, I decided to create a related but at the same time separate narrative. To put it another way, I saw it as the first opportunity

Ludomir Sleńdziński, *Vendor of Religious Gifts*, (1940), oil on wood, 104×119.5 cm, Museum of Warmia and Mazury, Olsztyn.

in the museum space of Lithuania to reveal painful and often neglected subjects to the local audience through visual artefacts: the drastic Lithuanization of Vilnius, the destruction of the city's Jewish and Polish communities,[11] and the early consequences of Sovietization. It was also a chance to introduce the artists who are known only to specialists and art history enthusiasts in Lithuania, and show their work whose larger part is held in the collections of Polish museums and other memory institutions. Finally, curating this exhibition also gave me a possibility to shatter some barriers of joint heritage research. For example, while looking for information on Andrzej Wróblewski's early biography and the beginning of his creative activity in Vilnius, I was lucky to find documentary sources and artefacts so far unknown either to Lithuanian or Polish researchers. The finds allowed me to correct the previously available information: to specify the artist's birth date, the addresses at which he lived, and the place and time of his studies.[12] For Lithuanian art historians, Wróblewski has been a Polish artist, not related in any way to the history of Lithuanian art and, thus, not a subject of special interest, while Polish art historians did not even try to look for these data in Lithuanian memory institutions, as psychological barriers that stand in the way of exploring the common past exist on both sides.

The exhibition's chronological framework – 1939 to 1949 – was established with a focus on historical realities and aimed to frame the narrative of the guest exhibition. As already mentioned above, 1939 marked the end of the Polish period of Vilnius and the start of a new historical era in the city, during which the brief Lithuanian administration was replaced by Soviet and Nazi regimes, and then, once again, by a resumed Soviet occupation.

In the exhibition context, emphasis was placed on the fact that these events are above all related to the beginning of WWII, which is dated back to the joint aggression of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany against Poland in September 1939. It was important to emphasize this fact, as many people in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, let alone other ex-Soviet states, still associate the beginning of WWII with the Nazi occupation, which started in June 1941; actually, they still use – many of them unconsciously – the narrative of the so called Great Patriotic War constructed by the Soviets.[13]

It was equally important to show that the tragic events of autumn 1939 forced Lithuanians and Poles at least in part to forget the "apple of discord" and look for the ways to live together. After the Soviet invasion in Poland, Lithuania was flooded with Polish refugees. Refugee camps were created all around the country. However, when Lithuanians entered Vilnius at the end of October 1939, the drastic Lithuanization of the city began, without paying much attention to the habits, desires and interests of the local inhabitants. Of course, the Poles were angry and tried to resist. However, in June 1940 everyone in Vilnius was hit by the same disaster: the Soviet occupation, which was replaced a year later by an even worse Nazi occupation. Lithuanians were marginalized, Poles were turned into second-class people, Jews were condemned to death. In July 1944 the city came back to the Soviets, this time for almost half a century. In December 1945, the expulsion of Poles from Vilnius to Poland began. On the one

PHOTO: THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY DIGITALIZATION DEPARTMENT

Stanisław Rolicz, *I Build a New Europe*, (1942), woodcut, 18.7×11.5 cm, Nicolaus Copernicus University Library, Toruń.

PHOTO: THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY DIGITALIZATION DEPARTMENT

Jerzy Hoppen, *Maiden of the Plague*, (1940), copper plate, 31.5×23 cm, Nicolaus Copernicus University Library, Toruń.

hand, expatriates hoped that in Poland the restrictions of the communist regime would be not so hard as in Lithuania; however, for those who were born in Vilnius and had spent their whole life there, it was a terrible drama, which caused a deep trauma.

1949 saw yet another significant shift in the history of Vilnius: the intensification of Sovietization, the end of the great Polish exodus, the restriction of Jewish activity resulting from state-sponsored anti-Semitism, the apogee of the Soviet regime's war on the Catholic Church,[14] the start of a systematic restructuring of the city's material framework through the demolition of war-ravaged buildings and even entire neighborhoods, and the building of a Soviet Lithuanian capital through not only political, administrative, and ideological means, but also through physical changes produced by new urban planning and architecture.[15] It was also the year of the massive flight of ethnic Lithuanians from the countryside to Vilnius, caused by two huge campaigns of deportation to the gulag, held on May 22–23, 1948 and March 25–28, 1949 (the total number of deportees exceeded 75,000, a third of whom died in deportation); the deportation was aimed to strengthen collectivization, which, in its turn, forced farmers deprived of their land and other property to flee to the city.

Despite all this mosaic of events pointing to the activization of Sovietization, in official historiography, the year 1953 is still considered to be a breakthrough year, which is related to the changes that took place after Stalin's death. Nerijus Šepetys and I have no illusions that the timeline presented in the exhibition will encourage historians to change the established chronology, but we do hope that it will at least ignite a discussion on this subject.

THE EMOTIONAL BACKGROUND for the brief descriptions of historical events presented in the timeline is created by documentary photographs, postcards and postal envelopes. Views of Vilnius captured by Soviet war correspondents are published for the first time; the photographs are printed from negatives held in the collection of the National Museum of Lithuania, which have not been published so far. Previously unseen photographs sharpen the viewer's gaze and thus help to bring the past time of others closer to the present, at least partly feel it as one's own, all the more in that it represents familiar locations in the city. The philately exhibits are courtesy of the collector Vygintas Bubnys. Resisting the destructive force of the time, the laconic and clear forms of postal ephemera – envelopes, stamps, and postcards – testify to the political turning points of history. The exhibition's timeline installation also includes a copy of the unfinished film *Vilniaus miesto paminklai* [Monuments of Vilnius] by filmmaker Alfonsas Žibas, returned from the Krasnogorsk Film Archives to the Lithuanian Central State Archives several years ago. Originally commissioned by the Vilnius Art Museum, Žibas began filming in 1944 after obtaining permission from German censors, a fact confirmed by recently discovered documents. The film romantically captures Old Town neighborhoods destroyed after the war, such as the Great Synagogue and its surroundings. It is likely that Žibas was allowed to film this part of the city, which had been turned into the ghetto territory, because in the winter

of 1944, the Vilnius ghetto was already emptied: those ghetto inmates who were not killed in the mass shooting in Ponary near Vilnius were taken to Treblinka and Auschwitz, the Kaiserwald concentration camp in Latvia, or the Kloga concentration camp in Estonia.

The exhibition structure and content

The timeline leads to the main part of the exhibition – a display of prints, drawings, and paintings, which consists of five sections: "The Colourful Youth of the City", "The Illusion of Noble Persistence", "Facing the Catastrophe", "Loss: Trauma, Nightmares, Nostalgia", and "Migrating Identities: Who Are We, Where Is Our Home?"

Having assembled the primary body of artworks, I came up with several reference points for a possible narrative. I chose five: 1–2) Vilnius in the presence of war, and its vision in art both as a young modern city and as an ideal place frozen in time; 3) the traces of war in artworks created during the war; 4) war memory in artworks of the late 1940s and following years, and consequences of post-war Sovietization for the city's physical body and the state of mind of its residents; 5) two cases of "migrating identity", embodied by Krystyna and Andrzej Wróblewski and Lili Janina Paszkowska/Paškauskaitė.

The vision of Vilnius at the end of the Polish period was dual: Vilnius was imagined and represented both as a young city with a bright future full of optimism, and as an immovable historical island. The last vision was cherished by the older generation, primarily intellectuals and visual artists. It was also quite popular among young artists and newcomers, i.e. Lithuanians. Vilnius residents, regardless of nationality, shared those two attitudes, which means that they saw their city with the same eyes.[16]

1) "COLOURFUL YOUTH OF THE CITY"

Young Polish, Lithuanian, Jewish, and Belarusian artists: All of them depicted modern buildings, bars, cafés, cinemas, a real or imaginary daily life, developing a vision of a growing metropolitan place. Of course, peaceful rustic suburbs with wooden houses and gardens was a favorite motif as well. Baroque church towers in this image of Vilnius are overshadowed by factory chimneys. For the students at the University's Faculty of Fine Arts, they embodied a new era, desirable changes, and energy. It is possible to distinguish the figures of workers in the colorful and variegated crowd: elegant ladies in outdoor cafés under umbrellas or in the textile department of a luxury shop, athletic swimmers on the riverbanks, a group of fun-lovers in the city garden. Even in 1941, already under the Soviet occupation, optimism and hope continued to flow. For instance, in the spring of this terrible year, the young Polish painter Placyda Bukowska depicted a naive and cozy market scene, although such a world had already collapsed.

2) "THE ILLUSION OF NOBLE PERSISTENCE"

This section shows artworks by Polish and Lithuanian artists based on historical views of Vilnius – paintings and etchings, as well as photographs by the most distinct representative of Polish pictorialism, photographer Jan Bułhak. Bułhak's romantic and extremely powerful vision of Vilnius was equally popular both in Poland and interwar Lithuania. Artists who represented Vilnius used his photographs not only as prototypes, but also even as direct sketches. It was particularly relevant for Lithuanians in Kaunas, who yearned for the historical capital and fought a symbolic battle to regain it, but who had often never seen Vilnius in reality.

"THE WAR CATASTROPHE WAS SO HORRIBLE THAT ONLY THE DISPASSIONATE EYE OF A PHOTOGRAPHIC OR FILM CAMERA COULD TRULY DOCUMENT IT."

However, the central work of the section is the painting *Sprzedawczyni dewocjonaliów* [Vendor of Religious Gifts], a 1940 composition by Ludomir Sleńdziński, a third-generation Vilnius painter, professor and dean of Stefan Báthory University's Art Faculty. At the time, the fifty-one-year-old Sleńdziński was unemployed: the Lithuanian-run government had closed "the Polish University" and its Art Faculty in December 1939. However, Sleńdziński's painting is a tranquil, peaceful and therefore simply joyous view of Palm Sunday in Vilnius, seemingly commemorating enduring, centuries-old city icons: the red-brick walls of Gothic-style St. Anne's Church and the Bernadine Monastery, cobblestones locally known as "cat heads" (*kocie łby* in Polish), and a woman wearing a typical plaid kerchief over her shoulders, knitting a woolen sock while selling prayer books, wax candles, rosaries and, obviously, small color prints of Catholic saints. In the lower left corner of the painting we see a portrait of the artist's family purchasing traditional Vilnius palms: Sleńdziński with his daughter, his wife Irena and her sister Helena Dobrowolska. An elegant group of city dwellers connects the historical image of Vilnius created by Sleńdziński with the era of the painter himself and his characters, even if the stylishly dressed artist's family is the only sign of modernity in the painting. Viewed from today's perspective, this painting is not so much a testimonial to the reality of a city already living in the shadow of war (even if the magnitude of that fact was not yet fully comprehended), but rather a nostalgic farewell to a wonderful, historical city belonging to a world on the verge of oblivion.

The painting was created to be just that: a vision meant to evoke the feeling of longing. It was painted as a memoir and thus resembles a film still – a frozen image clipped from a longer movie reel. We know that it was not based on nature study not only from the unnatural lighting, but also from the uncomfortable postures of its subjects and their clothing: pilgrims walking to church clad only in shirts, Irena Sleńdzińska wearing a summer coat, and her sister and daughter clad in short sleeves and light summer skirts. This doesn't exactly coincide with reality: Palm Sunday in 1940 fell on March 17, and it is never warm enough in mid-March in Vilnius to stop wearing coats, scarves and gloves.

In other words, Sleńdziński's work is a multifaceted source speaking about the history of a crumbling Vilnius.

3) "FACING THE CATASTROPHE"

The Lithuanian period in Vilnius ended in June 1940, when Lithuania was occupied by Soviets together with Latvia and Estonia. All residents of Vilnius, regardless of their nationality, became stateless people and partially lost their civil rights. The process was completed by the Nazis who occupied Vilnius in June 1941. Poles were declared inferior, *untermenschen*, and Jews were deprived of all rights, including the right to live.

The war catastrophe was so horrible that only the dispassionate eye of a photographic or film camera could truly document it. For artists, the encounter with reality was almost insufferable, and most sought creative inspiration not in reality, but in an imaginary Vilnius they or others had conjured. The seemingly real but simultaneously semi-fictional city of graceful, skyward-reaching Baroque church steeples, tree-covered hills, winding Old Town streets and cobblestoned courtyards depicted in prints or oil paintings on canvas and cardboard helped artists and their audiences turn their eyes away from the reality of poverty, dirt, despair, suffering, death, refugees, ruins, and the sight of soldiers and officers in foreign uniforms. The powerlessness of individuals trapped in the whirlwind of war and their simultaneous drive for survival, confronting the destructive chaos with a belief in the reality of order and values capable of ensuring normal human coexistence, was impressively embodied in a series of colored linocut prints by Vladas Drėma, a Vilnius artist and an alumnus of Stefan Báthory University's Art Faculty. From one etching to the next, Drėma created a monotone variation of the same medieval Upper Castle on the hill scattered with trees, changing only an odd detail or color pattern. The Lithuanian Art Museum collection contains 78 prints from this series. However, it is difficult to say how many there could be in total, as some prints from the series are held in other collections. Drėma's series is a special, unique and, in its scope, monumental testament to self-therapy through art.

"ART CREATED IN SUCH DEHUMANIZING CIRCUMSTANCES HAS A PARTICULARLY STRONG IMPACT."

There was virtually no critical perspective in wartime or occupation-period art. There was also practically no direct reflection of war or depiction of war scenes. Clearly, the image of an occupied city only served to suppress, rather than stimulate, creativity. Artists lived with the same tension and paralyzing uncertainty as everyone else. In order to convincingly portray contempt, arrests, torture, hunger and death – a reality which had no developed iconography and whose depiction had to be invented – demanded extraordinary strength. Such strength did not exist – it had to be conserved in order to live and survive. The fingers on two hands would suffice to count the exceptions to this general rule.

At the very start of the war, Jerzy Hoppen, a long-time resident of Vilnius, graphic artist, painter, restorer, and lecturer at Stepan Báthory University, created an allegoric copper plate etching titled *Dziewica Moru* (Maiden of the Plague, 1940). The image was inspired by a mythological character featured in the epic poem *Pan Tadeusz* by poet Adam Mickiewicz, the most famous representative of Romanticism both for Poles and Lithuanians. According to the legends circulating in Vilnius area, the Maiden of the Plague would appear as a harbinger and bearer of great misfortune, wandering through villages, sowing death with a wave of her bloody kerchief. She could only be stopped by someone determined to sacrifice his own life and that of his loved ones. In the legend, a brave nobleman appears and, brandishing a sword engraved with the names of Mary and Jesus, severs the murderous woman's head, vanquishing evil but condemning himself and his family to death. Hoppen also placed various cultural treasures at the feet of the Maiden of the Plague, in an expectation that the recently started war would spare the artistic heritage so cherished by Hoppen and his colleagues.

Hoppen turned fifty just before the war, so he was no longer a young man and had considerable life experience. He chose the allegory genre and ancient symbols not only out of love for the classics and respect for the cultural heritage of the past eras, but also because he understood that a direct visual language, sarcasm, or irony could be just as dangerous as working for an underground printing house, which he successfully did in the years of the Nazi occupation, producing fake documents for members of the underground resistance.[17]

Hoppen's student, the young graphic artist Stanisław Rolicz, experienced the war drama in a different way – with greater sensitivity and intensity. Rolicz resorted to Renaissance and Baroque iconography to create his allegory *Wojna* [War], (1941) and classic mythology for his diptych *Porwanie Europy* [The Rape of Europa], (1944). In this diptych, Rolicz presents a contrasting comparison of Europa's rape "yesterday" and "today". The earlier rape takes the form of the usual interpretation of this mythological story: An attractive, young nude woman with wavy blonde hair is carried across the warm waves of the seas by a bull. The tranquil, idyllic scene is accentuated by garlands of flowers cascading around Europa and Zeus transformed into a bull, as well as by flying fish cavorting in the water and air around the two main characters. The Europa of "today" is conceived by Rolicz as a naked, unconscious young woman, frozen in a crucified pose. She is held firmly by Hitler, the new Zeus, partially emerging from an airplane bearing the insignia of the Luftwaffe. By depicting the Führer in this way, Rolicz ran the risk of arrest and condemnation. The second half of the Europa diptych was not the only anti-Nazi artwork by Rolicz. He dedicated his composition *Buduję nową Europą* [I Am Building a New Europe], (1942) to the same subject. At the center of the piece we see the Grim Reaper with Hitler's face, embracing a bomb dropped from a passing airplane before it explodes over a city – an apocalyptic scene conveying a civilizational rupture in the language of caricature. Rolicz's self-ironic, even brutal self-portrait *Chimera XX wieku* [20th Century Chime-

ra], (1943) is also a fruit of the existential exploration of the wartime reality. This disturbing image paraphrases the iconography of the mythological gorgon creature Medusa, with her head crowned in snakes and her face deformed by suffering, fury and disgust. Other self-portraits by Rolicz are simpler, based on realistic visualization strategies. Like the absolute majority of wartime portraits and self-portraits, they convey an atmosphere of nightmares, uncertainty, anxiety, and despair, often including signs of oppressive poverty. The same mood and the same facial expressions can be found in works by Lithuanian, Polish and Jewish artists who captured the authentic state of individuals living through extreme circumstances. If we consider the fate of the subjects and artists of such portraits, the most moving are the images created in the Jewish ghetto.

THE VILNIUS GHETTO was established on September 6, 1941 and liquidated on September 23–24, 1943. The period from January 1942 to the autumn of 1943, when mass killings were temporarily halted and the ghetto had relatively few inhabitants – mostly young and healthy, and those who were able to work – came to be known as the "stabilization period". During this time, the ghetto saw the founding of the Writers' and Artists' Society and the opening of a theatre whose first production premiered on January 18, 1942. The theatre hall also hosted art shows as well as lectures on art and more practical matters such as personal hygiene, diseases, etc. Ghetto residents had different views on the artistic activity taking place there. Some were angered by entertainment taking place in the shadow of death, but the majority saw it as a way to forget the grim reality, so audiences flooded in to see performances and concerts. The overall mood is also evidenced by the statistics about the reading habits: Among the most popular authors requested at the ghetto's library were Edgar Wallace, Margaret Mitchell, Vicki Baum, Jules Verne, Karl May, and Thomas Mayne Reid – authors of historical, romance and adventure novels.[18]

Everything was in shorty supply in the ghetto: food, clothing, medication, not to mention art supplies. Thus, drawing paper and watercolors were used only for the most important artworks – first and foremost, portraits of ghetto prisoners. We don't know how many such portraits were created, but the greatest number of surviving works were those by Rosa Sutzkever. During the "prosperous" times, Sutzkever painted portraits in watercolor, but in the "lean" times she had to settle for pencils and sepia. Her portraits were shown at exhibitions organized at the ghetto theatre, and her portrait of the deceased Jakob Gerszstein was related to one of the most memorable events in the life of the community. Gersztein was a well-known music teacher, composer, choir director, and respected member of the community, beloved by parents and children alike. His death was reported by many of the ghetto's newspapers. At a *shiva* held at the ghetto's theatre one week after Gersztein's death, on October 4, 1942, fourteen-year-old Isaac Rudashevsky, while listening to solemn speeches, Gersztein's favorite songs sung by the talented Lyuba Levicka, and a new poem by Abraham Sutzkever written in memory of the late Gersztein, contemplated Rosa

A portrait of Jacob Gersztein among artefacts found hidden in the Vilnius ghetto, drawn by Roza Suckever, (1944). Owned by the Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History.

Roza Suckever, *The Deceased, a Portrait of Jacob Gersztein*, (1942), sepia drawing on paper, 34×41.2 cm, Owned by the Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History.

Ludomir Sleńdziński, *Wilno (Oratorium)*, (1944), oil on paper glued to cardboard, 41×35 cm, Sleńdziński Gallery, Białystok Museum, repro by Tadeusz Nieścier.

Sutzkever's image of Gersztein. "A violinist performed several pieces. I looked at a portrait of the deceased. It looked as if he were sleeping, lulled by the melody..."[19], wrote Rudashevsky in his diary. Sutzkever also drew (or repeated) Gersztein's portrait at his *sloshim,* held to mark the end of thirty days of mourning on October 27, 1942. In all likelihood, the artist based her portrait on a sketch of her subject. What she created is an authentic visual document addressed to contemporaries who could not directly participate in the event, as well as to the future generations – to us. Both then and now, viewers are impacted by the similarity between the portrait and its subject, between image and model – something that the renowned specialist of image theory Hans Belting has analyzed as "likeness and presence". In 1942, there was so much death around that it often ceased to appear unique or even significant. A work of art encouraged and helped viewers to understand the importance and uniqueness of the depicted event, transporting daily life to another level – imbuing it with meaning and nobility.

The Lithuanian Central State Archives' collection of announcements of the ghetto's cultural events also includes a notice for Gersztein's *shloshim* commemoration. The text of the notice was written by a skilled professional hand, clearly one of the ghetto's artists, perhaps Rosa Sutzkever herself. In its form, the poster's elegant calligraphy sends a message about the respect for the deceased and his accomplishments held by the organizers of the event. Music, lofty and meaningful speeches, and the sense of unity radiating from a gathering graced by such details as an artistic depiction of the deceased and a beautiful invitation announcement helped the attendees feel human again, if only for a moment, in such a dehumanizing reality.

Gersztein's portrait affirms that images created by artists are like time capsules, bringing us closer to the reality that inspired and lived behind that image. Images or groups of related imagery can easily be transformed into a personalized history or its origins. That is why images have the power to awaken imagination, without which it would be impossible to make the time of "others" relevant. Photographs are not enough. Art created in such dehumanizing circumstances has a particularly strong impact. We see such works as an attempt to withstand the pressure of the environment and to preserve personal dignity and identity.

‹4) "LOSS: TRAUMA, NIGHTMARES, NOSTALGIA"

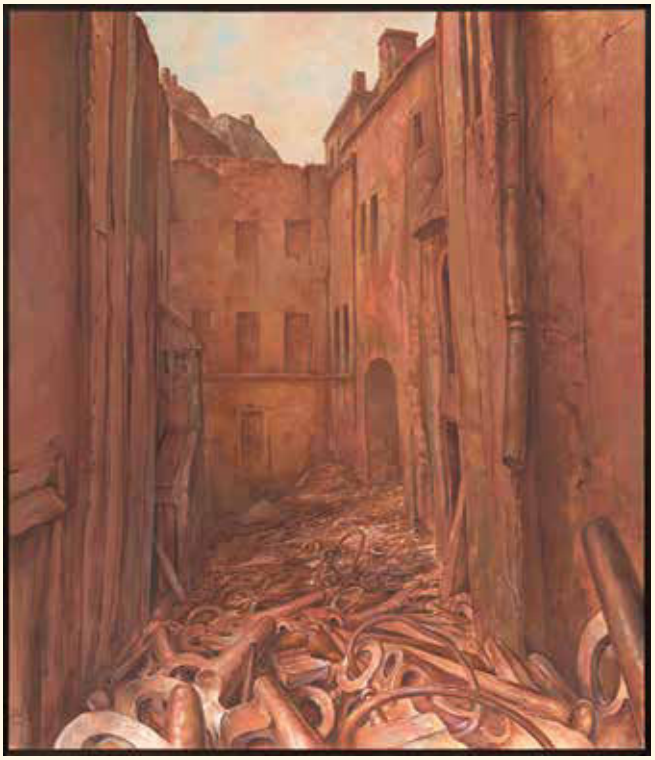
The fourth part of the exhibition about Vilnius and its art of 1939–1949 is devoted to art born from efforts to escape nightmarish memories, which, strangely enough, also emerged from a nostalgia for a past which had left incurable spiritual scars. Alongside portrayals of ruins by the Jewish artist Rafael Chwoles and the Lithuanian Mečislovas Bulaka, there are also two paintings by the Holocaust survivor Samuel Bak. Those pictures born from a deeply traumatized imagination represent attempts to survive under the unbearable weight of trauma. Bak's vision witnesses a disrupted order, an inverted, distorted, disfigured world. There are no people in his cities – only empty houses and things without owners lying around in the streets and courtyards. *Vilner Hoyf* (2000) displayed in the exhibition represents an empty courtyard of the Old Town of Vilnius. Blind windows forming a closed courtyard open to a pile of myriads of useless keys to the doors that nobody needs to unlock anymore, as neither those who have the right to open them nor those from whom they were meant to protect exist anymore. An image of an object left without its owner or, more precisely, a multitude of similar objects, is no less powerful than the piles of shoes, glasses and bowls in the museums of concentration camps. Most probably that is where Bak drew these images from; it is an aptly chosen prototype. In the composition *Mark of Identity* (2007), the second of Bak's works presented in the exhibition, the artist appropriated one of the most reproduced images of the Holocaust – a photo of a little boy, captured by Nazis together with the other Jews who took part in the Warsaw Ghetto's uprising in 1943. The boy's identity is unknown, but the photo became an icon of children murdered during the Holocaust. Samuel Bak turned the boy with his back to the viewers and placed him in front of the wall with an enlarged Star of David. For the painter who was forced to leave his home and move to the Vilnius ghetto when he was only eight years old, the image of this child from Warsaw became his *alter ego*, the embodiment of his family, the destiny of his people.

Another important work in the fourth part of the exhibition is Ludomir Sleńdziński's composition *Wilno. Oratorium* [Vilnius. Oratory], (1944). The panoramic view painted by Sleńdziński clearly represents Vilnius, but the outlines of the baroque towers stretching vertically into the clouds, as if through billowing steam, are more reminiscent of a mirage or an optical illusion than a real scene. The painting includes a dedication: "Poświęcam córce" [For my daughter]. It is a father's testament, left to his daughter as his most precious possession in the face of exodus: a romantic vision of the city each of them could claim as their birthplace, captured by a brush and paint, a heart-wrenching painting of an irrevocably lost past. The world-renowned poet and Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz, once a pupil of Sleńdziński at the Sigismund Augustus Secondary School in Vilnius, called this piece "both a glorious hymn to Vilnius' beautiful architecture and a song of pain." Miłosz remembered the painting and its author at a gathering of Nobel prize winners in Vilnius on October 2, 2000, also attended by the Polish poet Wisława Szymborska and the German novelist Günter Grass. According to Miłosz, Sleńdziński was one of the most prominent painters of interwar Vilnius and a prominent public figure. "For a time, he taught painting at my school," Miłosz recalled, "then he had his own studio at the university. He was a true citizen of Vilnius and a descendant of a painters' dynasty – both his father and grandfather had been painters. As he was leaving Vilnius in 1945, Sleńdziński painted a dreamy portrait of the city as a feast of church steeples and clouds. He called it *Oratory*."[20] Within the context of this exhibition, Miłosz's concluding remarks take on a new meaning: "And this lament of an exile will remain part of the city's history forever; even after no one remembers the division into winners and losers."[21]

5) "MIGRATING IDENTITY: WHO ARE WE, WHERE IS OUR HOME?"

Sleńdziński's *Oratory* gives the key for a better understanding of the message of the final part of the exhibition, which presents, as was already mentioned, two case studies: works and biographical documents of print artist Krystyna Wróblewska and her son Andrzej, and the Polish-Lithuanian artist Lili Janina Paszkowska/Paškauskaitė.

A separate narrative about the Vilnius period in Andrzej Wróblewski's biography, which has not received enough research attention in Poland, definitely had to become a connecting link to the Anda's Rottenberg exhibition. Having started the work, I didn't know if I would manage to find anything new and interesting in Lithuanian memory institutions. Yet I didn't doubt that at least I would tell the family's history, which is very important for learning about Vilnius' cultural heritage. Andrzej's parents were typical figures of the modern Polish Vilnius of interwar period – young specialists who had moved to the city liberated after long years of the Russian imperial administration to build Polish science and culture there: He was a lawyer, and she was an artist. Having started a family and a home, they gradually put down roots in Vilnius, but soon lost everything due to the catastrophe that befell all Europe. The first blow to Wróblewski's happy and carefree life was delivered by Lithuanians, who closed down the university and fired Polish professors. The Soviet occupation was equally devastating to all residents of Vilnius. Having replaced the Soviets, the Nazis deprived Polish artists, Krystyna Wróblewska among them, of the possibility of public activity in their professional field, and her children could no longer legally study at the gymnasium: Poles were entitled only to primary education. The great tragedy struck the Wróblewski family on 26 August 1941, when the Nazis broke in to search their house on Rožių Alėja [Alley of Roses], and Bronisław Wróblewski collapsed with a stroke and died in front of his wife and his fourteen-year-old son Andrzej. A visit to the storage of the Lithuanian National Museum of Art helped me to discover prints by Krystyna Wróblewska and Andrzej Wróblewski never previously reproduced or exhibited, and work in the Lithuanian State Archives allowed me to supplement the biographies of all the family members. The great discovery was the documents found in the Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art, testifying that in January 1945 Andrzej Wróblewski was accepted as an external student at the Graphic Studio of the Vilnius Academy of Arts.[22]



Samuel Bak, *Vilner Hoyf* [Vilnius Courtyard], (2000), oil on canvas, 177×157.5 cm. ©Samuel Bak. Owned by the Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History.

A separate micro research project addressed not only the case of the mother and son Krystyna and Andrzej Wróblewski; if I wanted to reveal the variety of the phenomenon of migrating identity, I had to find a Polish artist, male or female, who remained in Vilnius and successfully integrated in the Lithuanian

art scene of the Soviet period. I am happy that this necessity allowed me to draw fresh attention to revive the personality and work of the excellent graphic artist Lili Janina Paszkowska/Paškauskaitė (1925–2012), who was famous in the Soviet period, but has been almost forgotten for the last twenty years. Born to a Polish family in Vilnius, in her birth records and youth documents she was identified as Paszkowska-Węckowicz. Her life is a romantic and simultaneously deeply dramatic story worthy of a film or a novel, which cannot be told in a few sentences – a separate text would be needed. Here I will only note that the exhibition and its catalogue will present the life of this artist through the prism of the political and cultural history of Vilnius, differently than it has been done in historiography to date. Until now, the artist's work has been analyzed in the aspects of content, genre and technique, but it has not been related to her biography, her links to Vilnius, her Polish origin and the traumas that it entailed. Besides, Paškauskaitė's revival encouraged the founders and owners of the MO Museum to acquire some of her works of different periods for the museum's collection, in which this artist was not previously represented.

"A PART OF LITHUANIAN SOCIETY STILL REMAINS ATTACHED TO THE NARROWED-DOWN VIEW OF HISTORICAL EVENTS OF THE MIDDLE OF THE 20TH CENTURY, BASED ON A PURELY LITHUANIAN NARRATIVE."

In the place of conclusion

The size of the exhibition "A Difficult Age. Vilnius, 1939–1949" does not allow the reflection of a wider panorama of artistic life of Vilnius in the mid-20th century. This inability is partly compensated by the catalogue or, to be more precise, the book, which will accompany the exhibition. The articles by curators of both exhibitions in the catalogue are supplemented by essays by specialists from various fields – a psychologist (Danutė Gailienė), who explains the concept of psychological trauma, a philosopher (Viktoras Bachmetjevas), who discusses identity, a political scientist (Andrzej Pukszto), who overviews the political situation of the time and its memory in our days, an architectural historian (Marija Drėmaitė), a feminist art critic (Laima Kreivytė), a Jewish art researcher (Laima Laučkaitė), and a film historian (Anna Mikonis-Railienė). The genre of the exhibition catalogue allowed them to disregard the requirements of an academic text; their articles are aimed at a wider audience, and it is quite likely that having found itself next to artworks, a textual narrative itself will acquire the power of an artwork, provoking the viewers' empathy alongside their interest and wish to find out more about the controversial historical period and finally get to understand it.

A PART OF LITHUANIAN SOCIETY still remains attached to the narrowed-down view of historical events of the middle of the 20th century, based on a purely Lithuanian narrative. Without getting into wider considerations on the subject, it would be enough to mention the exhibition "Vilnius in Art: 1939–1956" (curator Rima Rutkauskienė), held in the summer of 2019 by the Lithuanian National Museum of Art. The extremely dramatic period of Vilnius history was shown as a collection of monotonous urban landscapes, mostly from the summer season, almost devoid of any marks of the war, occupations and Sovietization. The exhibition presented almost exclusively the works of Lithuanian artists and their idealized view of Vilnius.[23] Of course, one can always say that the curators' aim was merely showing an image of the city in a specific period, represented by the traditional means of painting, graphic art and sculpture. It would undoubtedly justify distancing oneself from the political, social and even cultural contexts, but would leave an unanswered question: What message did that exhibition carry? Whom was it addressed to? The exhibition thus constructed, rather than bringing closer the past that the viewer is interested in, once again cast a veil of illusion over this past, placing the aesthetic reality and the reality of life in opposition. In a certain sense, the exhibition was ideological. It is not by accident that this ostensible decontextualization as a theoretical problem has been singled out and discussed by contemporary museum criticism.[24] I made this point in my review, criticizing the exhibition organizers' attempt to present the art of the period of Nazi occupation and postwar Sovietization solely as artists' attempts to withstand the all-consuming tragedy.[25] It was also a part of the background or context in which I assessed and reflected on the invitation of the MO Museum to offer my own take on the image of the controversial history of Vilnius in the art of WWII and early postwar years.

Giedrė Jankevičiūtė is a senior researcher at the Art History and Visual Culture Department of the Lithuanian Culture Research Institute

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references

1 Tomas Venclova, *Lietuvos istorija visiems* [Lithuanian Histor y for Everyone], vol. 1–2 (Vilnius: R. Paknio leidykla, 2018–2019).

2 The article was finished in June 2020; the opening of the exhibition was scheduled for August 2020, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was postponed to January 2021. The MO Museum's activity is focused on the dissemination and revival of Lithuanian visual arts of the second half of the 20th century and the 21st century, both giving a wider dimension to these works from the viewpoint of cultural geography and broadening their perception in the political, social and anthropological contexts. The museum does not have a permanent exhibition; it holds temporary exhibitions every several months in its two halls – big (1,099 m²) and small (174 m²). For more, see: *MO muziejus / Vilnius, Lietuva: vadovas. MO Museum / Vilnius, Lithuania: Official Guide* (Vilnius: MO muziejus, 2018); also, the museum's website: https://mo.lt/en/.

3 The exhibition was held from June 15, 2010 until July 15, 2011 in Kaunas, at the former Presidential Palace converted to the History Museum, which is a branch of M. K. Čiurlionis National Art Museum; cf. the Lithuanian-English book based on the material of this display: Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, *Po raudonąja žvaigžde: Lietuvos dailė 1940–1941. Under the Red Star: Lithuanian Art in 1940–1941* (Vilnius: Lietuvos kultūros tyrimų institutas, 2011).

4 Editors' Foreword, "*Artige Kunst*": *Kunst und Politik im Nationalsozialismus / "Compliant Art": Art and Politics in the National Socialist Era*, ed. by Silke von Berswordt-Wallrabe, Jörg-Uwe Neumann, Agnes Tieze (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, [2016]), 195.

5 His book, Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo di pietra* [Fascism in Stone] (Rome-Bari: Editori Laterza, 2007), is particularly important for the history of visual culture.

6 Emilio Gentile, Italy 1918–1943, *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum. Art, Life, Politics: Italia 1918–1943*, ed. by Germano Celant (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 2018), 46–61.

7 In the exhibitions illustrating a breakthrough in research in the first half of the 20th century, the exhibition and catalogue *Les Realismes entre Révolution et Reaction, 1919–1939* curated by Jean Clair at the Pompidou Centre in Paris (1980) is traditionally considered a landmark. However, when e.g., outlining the genesis of the exhibitions that helped to rethink the artistic heritage of the fascist era and integrate it specifically in the history of 20th century Italian art, the exhibition and catalogue *Gli anni Trenta. Arte e cultura in Italia*, ed. by Nadine Bortolotti (Milan: Mazzotta, 1982) should be mentioned among the earliest examples, and among later examples – the exhibition and catalogue *Anni '30. Art in Italia oltre il fascismo*, ed. by Antonello Negri a. o. (Florence: Giunti Editore, 2012). Along with several dozen other survey and monograph exhibitions, they built the basis for Celant's panoramic exhibition.

8 *Perspektywa wieku dojrzewania: Szapocznikow, Wróblewski, Wajda / Perspective of Adolescence: Szapocznikow, Wróblewski, Wajda*: catalogue, ed. Anda Rottenberg (Katowice: Muzeum Śląskie, 2018).

9 Quote from Anna Nawrot's text from: *Correspondences. Modern Art and Universalism*, ed. Jarosław Lubiak, Małgorzata Ludwisiak (Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2012), 542. The website of the Art Museum of Lodz: https://zasoby.msl.org.pl/arts/view/323 [accessed on May 28, 2020].

10 *Ibid.*

11 Vilnius as a place of contested history is often compared to Lviv in Galicia or Trieste, which is probably the best-known city of this kind. Literary essays, among them the books by Italian writer Claudio Magris, which were translated into various languages, made Trieste famous on the international scale as a border city. Besides his magnum opus *Danubio* (1986), see the book: Angelo Ara, Claudio Magris, *Trieste. Un'identità di frontiera* [Trieste. A Border Identity] (Turin: Einaudi, 1982). One of important issues under discussion is the question of who were the genuine residents of the place, or whom Vilnius belonged to: the Poles who constituted 48% of its residents (the city and its area was included in the territory of the Republic of Poland in 1922 after the Polish-Lithuanian war and a two-year period of negotiations), the Lithuanians, who were a rather small minority in the city at the time, but claimed their right to the historic capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, or the Jews, who were the second largest group of the residents (around 30%), and imagined Vilnius, or Vilne in Yiddish, as the Jerusalem of Lithuania, underlining the extraordinary significance of the place to the Eastern European Jewish community.

12 See the exhibition catalogue: *A Difficult Age*, ed. Giedrė Jankevičiūtė (Vilnius: MO muziejus, 2021), 53, 147–159.

13 For more, see: Nerijus Šepetys, *Molotovo-Ribbentropo paktas ir Lietuva* [The Pact of Molotov-Ribbentrop and Lithuania] (Vilnius: Aidai, 2006); Sigitas Jegelevičius, "SSRS-Vokietijos karas: Sovietinės istoriografijos klišės" [The War Between the Soviet Union and Germany: Clichés of Soviet Historiography], in: *Lietuvos sovietinė istoriografija*, ed. Alfredas Bumblauskas and Nerijus Šepetys (Vilnius: Aidai, 1999), 77–100.

14 The intensification of an anti-religious and "anti-cosmopolitan" policy resulted, in addition to other events of similar nature, in the closure of Vilnius Cathedral and the destruction of the State Jewish Museum, opened by ghetto survivors in 1944; its exhibits were divided among the LSSR Museum of the Revolution, Lithuanian Art Museums, the State Archive and the National Library; besides, criticism against the monument commemorating Holocaust victims built by Vilnius' Jewish community in 1948 in Paneriai – a massacre site – was initiated, and ended in 1952 with its demolition.

15 Crucial changes in the physical body of Vilnius began after the resolution "Regarding the Measures to Rebuild the City of Vilnius", approved by Stalin, and published by the Soviet Council of Ministers on April 1, 1948; the clearance of ruins and implementation of new construction projects were accompanied by the systematic destruction of undesirable landmarks and parts of the city, mainly the Jewish quarters, including the Old Synagogue and its surroundings, and the creation of symbols promoting the Soviet regime.

16 This presentation is based on the articles by Giedrė Jankevičiūtė and Laima Laučkaitė in the exhibition catalogue: *A Difficult Age*, ed. Giedrė Jankevičiūtė (Vilnius: MO muziejus, 2021), 101–169.

17 See: Romuald Warakomski, *Wileńskie dramaty w czasie wojny i PRL* [Vilnius' dramas during the war and in People's Republic of Poland], Kszeszowice: Kubajak, 2006.

18 David E. Fishman, *The Book Smugglers: Partisans, Poets, and the Race to Save Jewish Treasures from the Nazis* (ForeEdge, 2017), 45.

19 Icchokas Rudaševskis, *Vilniaus geto dienoraštis. Togbukh fun Vilner geto. 1941–1943* [The Diary of the Vilna Ghetto, 1941–1943], ed. and trans. Mindaugas Kvietkauskas (Vilnius: Lietuvos žydų bendruomenė, 2018), 109.

20 Czesław Miłosz, "Wyrosłem w tym mieście" [I Grew Up in this City], *Lithuania* (Warszawa) 1 (38) (2001): 155.

21 Ibid.

22 Personal file of the student Vrublevskis Andriejus, Bronislavo (started January 10, 1945), Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art, f. 266, ap. 4, b. 958, l. 1–3ap.

23 *Vilnius dailėje / Vilnius in Art 1939–1956*: catalogue, ed. Rima Rutkauskienė (Vilnius: Lithuanian Art Museum, 2019).

24 Cf.: the articles by Debora J. Meijers, Mari Carmen Ramirez, Walter Grasskamp in the volume *Thinking about Exhibitions*, ed. by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson & Sandy Nairne, London & New York: Routledge, (1996) 2000.

25 Cf.: Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, Vilniaus paveikslas 1939–1956 metais: tamsūs laikai, šviesūs vaizdai [The Image of Vilnius in 1939–1956: Dark Times, Bright Pictures], *Naujasis židinys-Aidai*, 2019, no. 5, 42–47; https://nzidinys.lt/giedre-jankeviciute-vilniaus-paveikslas-1939-1956-m-daileje-tamsus-laikai-sviesus-vaizdai-nz-a-nr-5/ [accessed on June 17, 2020].