

# Vilnius Household Registers: The Latest and Greatest in Litvak Records

by Russ Maurer

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The Polish system of tracking residents through household registration was implemented in the city of Vilnius during the period of Polish control of eastern Lithuania and adjoining Belarus between the two world wars. More than 13,000 household registers survive, containing millions of lines of detailed data about Vilnius residents and visitors, many of whom were Jewish. The purpose of LitvakSIG's Vilnius Household Registers project (VHR) is to extract and make available the information about Jews in these records.

## How Did the Registration System Work?

The instructions for building managers were included in the blank registration books. The full instructions, translated into English, are available at <https://tinyurl.com/VHR-instructions>. Instructions were quite detailed and specific, but the following is the heart of the matter.

Registration cards, provided by the registration offices and the Central Office, were of two types: white for residents checking in, blue for checking out. Each person more than 14 years old had to have a separate card. At the time of check-in, the resident was required to fill in the white registration card, using the resident's personal identification document. The manager was obliged, immediately after arrival or departure of a resident, to complete the registration card and on the reverse side write the line number at which the resident was listed in the register, sign and date. Within the register, each person, including children less than the age of 14, was listed on a separate line. Within 24 hours of the resident's check-in, the manager was obliged to present the register to the police station registration office together with the registration card and the personal identification document, which he subsequently returned to the resident.

Check-out cards were used to check out residents leaving the premises for any reason: death, leaving Vilnius, joining the army, going to the hospital, to detention, to an unknown destination and so forth. The manager completed the form and within 24 hours had to present it, together with the register, to the police station.

The personal information included in the register was copied from the registration card completed by the resident. At the police station, the register entry was compared to the registration card and personal identity document, corrected if necessary and stamped to indicate approval. A duplicate copy of the register was maintained at the police station. The register was much more than a casual list of residents

maintained at the discretion of the house manager; it was a highly organized and regulated system of official civil registration.

## What Years Were Included?

The records were created from the middle of 1919 to early 1940. Of course, many people who were alive in those years were born earlier, and their parents, whose names were included in the registers, were born still earlier. Researchers should be aware that information in the registers reaches well back into the 19th century.

## What Places Were Included?

To our knowledge, the registers have survived only for addresses in Vilnius city, but Vilnius (known as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania") drew Jews from many areas because of its leading role in Jewish life, as well as in education, medicine, the arts and commerce, to say nothing of the severe population dislocations of World War I and the subsequently changed national boundaries. Each register entry records several places in a person's life: place of birth, place of most recent residence, current residence, and even the intended destination upon departure. The registers are full of mentions of places away from Vilnius, everywhere from familiar major cities such as Berlin, Bialystok, Grodno, Kiev, Lodz, Minsk and Warsaw, to foreign countries, e.g., America, Argentina, Germany and Palestine, as well as small towns and villages.

## What Information Was Included?

The registers' 17 columns have the following headings:

- Line number
- Surname and given name, and maiden name of married women
- Given names of parents, and maiden name of the mother
- Apartment number
- Date of birth
- Place of birth
- Marital status
- Nationality
- Religion
- Occupation or means of support
- Prior address
- Check-in date
- Personal identification document details
- Date of registration (stamp)
- Date of check-out and destination
- Date of check-out (stamp)
- Annotations

Starting in 1931, a different register format was used that omitted maiden names, place of birth, and marital status. In the new format, each person was registered either as a visitor or a resident. The new format also included a space to record a person's military service.

### Family Relationships

Other than marital status, i.e., married, single, divorced, widowed, or child, the registers recorded no specific information about individual relationships. In this way, the register is different from a census listing or family list that has a designated head of household and everyone's relationship to that person is explicitly noted. Nuclear families are easy to determine in the registers because the parents are named in the child's listing, but extended family may be difficult to distinguish from unrelated people, such as friends and neighbors, wards, and so on. Secondary clues, such as having been born in the same place, age, living in the same apartment, having the same surname, or moving in tandem, may, however, lead to reasonable inferences about family relationships.

Although families are not explicit in the registers, the project has assigned a code (family registration number) to each person, using the same code for people who are likely to be related. As this is a judgment call, these codes should be treated as suggestions. When VHR records appear in the All-Lithuania database (ALD), they will be grouped according to these codes. A different set of codes is used for each register. If a person appears in more than one register, as frequently happens, they will have different codes and their records from the different registers will not be grouped in the ALD.

### Events That Triggered a Register Listing

In addition to a conventional move, a check-in or check-out would be prompted by returning from, or going to, the army, the hospital, jail, or a temporary absence for a business or pleasure trip out of town, or going to a summer residence. The instructions do not address a specific minimum time of absence required to trigger a registration. When a registered person died, that was treated as a check-out, and at the other end of life, births were treated as check-ins. When a woman married, she checked out of her apartment and then registered again, often to the exact same apartment, using her married name. In addition, if someone received a new personal identification document for some reason, they would close out their old registration and make a new one using the new identification document.

### Reregistration in 1927 and 1931

When the new register format was introduced in 1931, house managers inaugurated the new register by entering everyone then in residence. Conveniently, this provides a snapshot of who was there in early 1931. VHR marks these entries as re-registrations in its translations to indicate that they were purely administrative and did not indicate any change in the person's circumstances. Something similar occurred around

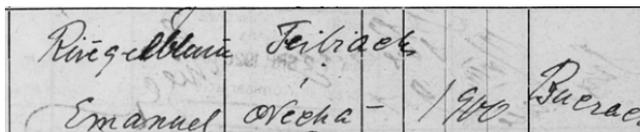
### Fifty Years in the Lives of Sisters

Fifty years in the lives of sisters Cyna and Tajba B. are documented in the household registers.

- 1887–1890 the sisters were born in Salakas (with names of their parents).
- 1912 they came to Vilnius.
- 1919 they registered at Zawalna 66 in July, then moved to Zawalna 24 in October.
- Cyna was married to Szloma A., uncertain when.
- Cyna, Szloma, and Tajba were visited by Ester B. from Riga for a week in 1923.
- Tajba briefly went to Warsaw in July 1925; she was married by this time.
- Administrative registration in 1927; by this time, Tajba was divorced.
- Administrative reregistration again in 1931. Szloma went to a different apartment in the same building for a few months.
- The sisters, plus Szloma left Zawalna 24 for good in 1938.

the beginning of 1927, despite no new register format at that time.

Because of the variety of triggering events and administrative reregistrations, many people appear multiple times in the registers, allowing one to develop a picture of their lives in the interwar years with several details. This is what makes the registers so special. As an example, see the box above, which shows how 50 years in the lives of two sisters were documented in the household registers.



*The name of Emanuel Ringelblum as it appears in the register for Wielka Pohulanka 17.*

### Historical Echoes

Not surprisingly, one occasionally encounters people of note, or who later became notable, in the registers. As one example, Emanuel Ringelblum, noteworthy as the founder of Oyneg Shabes, the secret archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, registered at Wielka Pohulanka 17 on September 1, 1926, having come from Warsaw. This was about the time he was completing his doctoral dissertation at Warsaw University. He received his PhD in 1927.

The registers also reflect the stream of refugees fleeing Poland after the German invasion in fall 1939. The registration system was still functioning at that time, and one can see the efforts made to accommodate and register the refugees. Sometimes the registers show dozens of people registering to the same apartment on a single day, leaving together a few days or weeks later. We assume that other refugees may have sought shelter individually with family or

friends in Vilnius. We have also come upon the names of people who eventually made their way to Kaunas and were saved by Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese vice-consul there.

### Progress and Prospects

The project was introduced at the 2018 conference of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS) in Warsaw. To date, we have completed and made available nine data batches including more than 45,000 lines, about 10 percent of the total project. More batches of 5,000 lines are in process and are expected to appear, on average, every few months for the foreseeable future.

### Where Are the Spreadsheets Posted?

The spreadsheets currently are not posted, except for Batch One, which can be downloaded from the VHR home page listed at the end of this article.<sup>1</sup> For now, the subsequent batch spreadsheets are available only to those who make a qualifying donation of \$50 (per spreadsheet) to the project. Donors receive an emailed link to download the spreadsheet they have requested. After about 18 months, each batch will be added to the ALD, which is freely searchable by everyone. VHR data, beginning with Batch One and continuing with subsequent batches, is slated to begin appearing in the ALD this spring.

### Free Batch Previews

To allow researchers to assess their interest in each VHR batch before making a donation, the project provides free batch previews, which include the full name and date of birth (or age) for each person in a batch. The data previews

document—link also at the end of this article<sup>2</sup>—is updated whenever a new batch is ready, so the link will always include previews of all available batches.

### Notes

1. Project home page: <https://tinyurl.com/VHR-home>
2. Data previews (automatic download): <https://tinyurl.com/VHR-previews>

*Russ Maurer is a member of the board of LitvakSIG, its Coordinator of Records Acquisition and Translation, and Coordinator of the Vilnius Household Registers Project. He also is a member of the board and research chairman of the Jewish Genealogy Society of Cleveland, a volunteer translator and collaborator with Polish colleagues in the documentation and preservation of the Jewish cemetery in Jodlowa, Poland.*

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