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Municipal improvements and sanitary issues in towns in West Belarus area (1919–39)

Abstract. The article deals with the sanitary issues in West Belarus area during the inter-war period, as well as state and municipal governments' efforts to improve the urban amenities. Financial difficulties of local authorities, underestimation of sanitary issues by the municipal officials, neglecting hygiene standards by the local people were among the main factors that prevented them from overcoming the critically low level of hygiene and sanitation. These are analyzed based on the archival materials.

Key words: sanitation, improvement, town government, West Belarus area

Introduction

The Belarus area, which the Russian Empire acquired at the end of the 18th century as the result of the division of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, became the scene of wide-scale military-political disturbances during WW I and the following Russian-Polish war. In 1915, its western part, up to the line of Dvinsk-Pastavy-Smarhon-Baranovichy-Pinsk was occupied by the German troops. After the end of WW I and withdrawal of the German troops, the further fate of Belarus land was decided in the Polish-Soviet war in 1919–20, based on the results of which Poland got its western part up to the line of West Dvinar River-Molodechno-Stowbtsy-Njasvizh-the Sluch River. West Belarus area remained part of Poland until 1939; after the start of WW II, it was included into the BSSR (Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic).

Belarus lands as part of inter-war Poland remained primitive agricultural 'outskirts' with a low level of manufacturing industry as compared to the Russian Empire. Moreover, the war destructions in the period of German occupation of 1915–18, and then the Polish-Soviet war, had devastated the area and aggravated its general economic backwardness, which had developed in the previous period. Industry had almost ceased to exist in those years; the decline in the agriculture during the Polish and Russian hostilities caused famine in towns. The critical situation in the towns in

that area related to neglected sanitation, low level of accomplishment, numerous problems in healthcare, education, social security as well as backward communal services made the municipal authorities face uneasy problems.

This article is devoted to the research of sanitary issues and accomplishment in west Belarus towns during the period between the wars. This topic has been poorly studied and has not been touched upon in historiography, though there is a certain tradition in sanitation studies of European¹, American² and Russian³ towns in modern days. These works are mainly useful from the methodological point of view.

Main body

The town governments that were established in 1919, straight after the occupation by Polish troops, were responsible for town improvements and sanitary maintenance. Particularly, they had to pave the streets and keep them clean, construct public wells, toilets, provide rubbish bins, arrange sewage service, etc. At the same time, lots of jobs were assigned to the residents, who had to keep clean their own houses and backyards, as well as build sidewalks in adjacent streets, all by themselves, sweep them, take part in road construction for free as 'sharwerk' (compulsory road service), etc.

¹ Barles S. Urban metabolism and river systems: historical perspective – Paris and the Seine, 1790–1970. *Hydrology and Earth System Sciences*, 2007, no. 11, pp. 1757–69; Brimblecombe P., Bowler C. Air pollution in York 1850–1900. *The Silent Countdown: Essays in European Environmental History*, edited by P. Brimblecombe, C. Pfister. New York, 1990, pp. 182–195; Brimblecombe P., Bowler C. The difficulties of abating smoke in late Victorian York. *Atmospheric Environment*, 1990, vol. 24 B, no. 1, pp. 49–55; Bruggemeier F.-J. The Ruhr basin 1850–1980: A case of large-scale environmental pollution. *The Silent Countdown: Essays in European Environmental History*, edited by P. Brimblecombe, C. Pfister. New York, 1990, pp. 210–230; Diederiks H., Jeurgens C. Environmental policy in 19th-century Leyden. *The Silent Countdown: Essays in European Environmental History*, edited by P. Brimblecombe, C. Pfister. New York, 1990, pp. 167–181; Douglas I., Hodgson R., Lawson N. Industry, environment and health for 200 years in Manchester. *Ecological Economics*, 2002, no. 41, pp. 235–255; Environmental problems in European cities in the 19th and 20th centuries, ed. by C. Bernhardt. Münster, 2001; *Resources of the City: Contributions to Environmental History of Modern Europe*, ed. by D. Schott, B. Luckin, G. Massard-Guilbaud. Aldershot, 2005; Schramm E. Experts in smelter smoke debate. *The Silent Countdown: Essays in European Environmental History*, edited by P. Brimblecombe, C. Pfister. New York, 1990, pp. 196–209.

² Cronon W. *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. NY, London, 1991; Melosi M.V. The place of the city in environmental history. *Environmental History Review*, 1993, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 1–23; Melosi M.V. Urban physical environment and a historian: prospects for research, teaching and public policy. *Journal of American Culture*, 1980, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 526–540; Melosi M.V. *Garbage in Cities: Refuse, Reform and the Environment*. Pittsburgh, 2005; Tarr J.A. The metabolism of an industrial city: the case of Pittsburgh. *Journal of Urban History*, 2002, vol. 28, no. 5, pp. 511–545.

³ Friedgut Theodore H. *Iuzovka and Revolution*. Vol. 1: Life and work in Russia's Donbass, 1869–1924. Princeton, 1989; Friedgut Theodore H. *Iuzovka and Revolution*. Vol. 2: Politics and Revolution in Russia's Donbass, 1869–1924. Princeton, 1989.

There were no special sanitary services, with rare exceptions, in West Belarus towns. The control over fulfilling the hygiene standards was entrusted to county doctors, who worked for the county government or state administration and the police. Only a few big towns in the area alimented town doctors and sanitary controllers.

In 1921, the union of Polish towns carried out a survey to find out the sanitary conditions in the towns. More than 256 Polish towns took part in it, including 13 towns of Novogrudok and Polesye provinces⁴. As the organizer of this research J. Polak noted, it reflected significant difference between the Polish regions, which had been parts of different states before WWI, whereas the sanitary conditions of towns inside certain regions were surprisingly similar. Serious backwardness of West Belarus towns was shown up on almost all points, against the background of poorly developed improvement of Polish towns. There were no pavements in four of them (31 %), seven towns (54 %) had 'poor' paving, per Polak; two (15 %) were of 'medium' quality; advanced technologies were not used anywhere. In the whole of Poland, the relevant numbers were six, 44, 34 and 16 %. 'Medium' quality implied that there were wooden sidewalks in the towns, and all the streets or their major part were paved with feldspar, which was considered a backward technology at that time; 'poor' quality meant that only some streets were paved in that way. Water supply in all West Belarus towns was marked as 'poor', which implied absence of plumbing as well as tubular wells; water in existing shaft wells was often unsuitable for drinking. In total, 58 % of Polish towns had 'poor' water supply, 24 % had tubular wells, 18 % had plumbing. There were primitively arranged sewage services only in bigger towns of West Belarus area: the dirt was dumped into the barrels and taken away from the towns by carts. There were no sewage services in smaller towns at all. There were no garbage removal services in any West Belarus town. There was no street lighting in eight towns (62 %), or it was represented by a rare network of kerosene lamps; five towns (38 %) had electrical lighting, 'very poor', in Polak's opinion. There was no gas lighting anywhere. The relevant average numbers for Poland were 46, 39 and 15 % respectively. Public baths worked only in two West Belarus towns (16 % compared to average Polish 40 %). Per Polak, east province towns were devoid of greenery. There were hospitals in less than third of the towns, none had any school premises meeting the sanitary-hygienic standards, nor there were any slaughterhouses⁵.

⁴ The term 'West Belarus lands' implies the areas of modern Republic of Belarus, which used to be part of Poland in 1920–1930. The administrative-territorial division of these areas included Novogrudok province, a major part of Polesye province with the centre in Brest, as well as six counties in Vilensk province (Braslav, Vileyka, Disna, Molodechno, Oshmyany and Postavy) and two counties of Belostok province (Grodno and Volkovysk).

⁵ Polak J. Stan higieniczny miast polskich [Public Hygiene in Polish Towns]. *Samorząd Miejski*, 1924, vol. 3, pp. 78–86.

Despite numerous urgent needs, effective actions to improve the sanitation in West Belarus towns were not taken straight away. At the same time, the financial difficulties of municipal governments in the first half of the 1920s were not the only reason to postpone the improvement of life in the town communities. Among numerous obstacles in local authorities' productive work, the top place was often taken by the low standard of domestic and hygienic culture of town residents as well as lack of understanding the necessity to follow the sanitary-hygienic recommendations. The municipal officials tended to underestimate the significance of the town improvements and sanitation issues. On the background of misunderstandings within the parties and international confrontations, their irresponsibility and incompetence often became the main reason for the total non-interference of the municipal government into this sphere.

Overall, the situation remained unchanged during the first half of the 1920s. For instance, the county doctors' reports on the sanitary conditions in Polesye province⁶ counties in 1926 depict a grim image of ill-provision in the towns. The need for water was met with the help of wooden shaft wells and nearby water reservoirs; there were very few tubular wells. The water used by the town residents was bad for drinking, as a rule, because it was often contaminated with dirt through the soil. The towns of the countryside housing type were not kept clean. The same was true with regards to private houses and homestead land. There were no rubbish bins, so the garbage was piled up in the backyards and household buildings. There was no sewerage in any town; there were private toilets in the backyards only in Brest. The residents were content with the cesspools, where neither walls or the floor were covered with anything, and so the contents were not taken away or disinfected, which caused soil contamination because of the sewage. The county elder ('starosta') Stolin noted in his report in 1926: "The overall grubbiness of people, especially Jewish, makes it difficult to fight the anti-sanitary situation in the backyards of the towns. Making a record does not help because the administrative fine is very low – one-three zlotys. The backyard owner considers it easier sometimes to pay a couple of zlotys as a fine than keep the backyard constantly clean. Sanitation commissions were established on the whole territory of the county, but they were hardly ever in action, which can be explained by the municipal government neglecting these sanitary issues"⁷. There were no toilets or rubbish bins in the public areas in big towns, especially in the market places, which caused pollution of the nearby private territories. The major part of the town roads remained unpaved; lack or unsuitability of side gutters caused large pud-

⁶ The administrative division of Poland was as follows: there were voivodships (*provinces*) which consisted of powiats (*counties or districts*), which further comprised gminas (*communes or municipalities*). A voivode (*governor*) was head of the voivodship; starosta (*elder*) was head of the county. The communes (*gminas*) were urban and rural.

⁷ State archive of Brest oblast (SABO). F. 1. Op. 5. D. 67. L. 36.

dles of dirty water in many parts of the streets, where the dwellers of nearby houses poured their dirt and wastes.

A lot of townspeople were busy with cattle breeding, which was reflected in the street hygiene. As an example, as it was noted in the annual report of the county commune union of Kossovo in 1926, when the weather was warm, the central streets in Kossovo and Rouzhany used to be constantly dirty with manure left by the walking cattle⁸. The lack of baths was also noted, many of which were beyond the sanitary standards. There were many mikvahs – Jewish ritual baths, and the Christian population did not usually attend them.

Per the report of Z. Domanski, head of healthcare department, regarding the sanitation in Novogrudok province, made in 1927, the state of the baths and mikvahs was “so deplorable that an ordinary person would not dare use them without fear of catching lice”. The situation with sewage was no better; the residents kept on burying their excrements in soil on the territory of their property as usual. At the same time, the municipal authorities did not consider conducting a sanitary inspection necessary as to spend money on it. Per Domanski, it took a lot of effort to persuade the public servants to arrange a sewage service; thanks to the province administration’s pressure, the municipal governments in Baranovichi and Novogrudok started building new baths, whilst other towns were waiting for appropriate credits⁹. Per Grodno authorities, no more than 25 % of dirt was taken out of the town by sewage service at the end of 1920s; the rest remained in the town causing soil and water contamination¹⁰.

Towns lacking conveniences were a great danger to their inhabitants. The absence of street lighting and terrible state of sidewalks in Beryoza made burgomaster Dovnar fall in 1928 and break his arm; another remarkable public figure Kuharski fell as well, which resulted in his broken leg¹¹.

Under such conditions, the initiative of improving the towns, often came from the state administration. Soon after J. Pilsudski’s coup d’etat in 1926, General F. Slawoj-Skladkowski, educated as a physician, ex-head of Polish military health service, was appointed minister of internal affairs. Giving much importance to hygienic issues, the new minister took a vigorous action to improve the sanitation in Polish settlements. The decree was issued, obliging the local authorities to provide clean streets, markets and private backyards, arranging regular sweeping of the streets, ordering and plant-

⁸ Ibid. Op. 4. D. 155. L. 8–9.

⁹ State archive of Grodno oblast. F. 564. Op. 1. D. 121. L. 1.

¹⁰ *Kanalizacja miasta Grodno. Kronika m. Grodno. Z. 2*, pod red. R. Sawickiego. Grodno, 1928, pp. 23–24.

¹¹ *Express Poleski*. 27.12.1928, no. 358, p. 4.

ing greenery; whereas every household had to have a latrine¹² and closed rubbish bins.

This central authorities' initiative coincided in time with the improvement of business conditions in the second half of the 1920s; improved finances gave the local authorities an opportunity to be more active. The pressure from central and province authorities and the improvement of financial situation were advantageous, but they were not crucial factors in improving the towns; further changes above all depended on the personalities of the people responsible for it. Although there were competent and efficient people in administration at any level, many positive things were achieved from the scratch. In other cases, the municipal authorities were not eager to act, despite pressure from above, and the sanitation remained poor because of their passive attitude.

A typical situation happened in Brest. The critical level of anti-sanitation and lack of facilities in the center of the province was one of the topics to be covered in central Polish media ('Illustrated Daily Courier', 'Warsaw Gazette', 'Morning Express'), so the governor of Polesye, J. Krahelski had to report the situation to the minister of internal affairs in June 1929. The governor confirmed the squalid state of Brest: "Minor part of the streets had been paved, sidewalks were ruined so much that it was impossible to walk on them, houses haven't been renovated since the war time or since their restoration after the war, that's why the stucco and eaves peeled off, the balconies were about to fall off, the stairs were destroyed; besides, the ruins were still protruding since the war time and were about to collapse; the criminals were nestling in their basements, all kinds of dirt were taken there." Per Krahelski, the systematic actions to improve the town started in 1928, and the municipal government was entrusted to do them. However, the conflicts between the parties made the work of the town council and magistrate¹³ fruitless; and despite the governor's pressure, the town economy was in total decline. This caused the dismissal of Brest Council, but the newly elected councilors did nothing either. Thus, Krahelski appointed Brest county 'starosta' F. Baran responsible for the sanitation in the town¹⁴. He started with summoning a council meeting in March 1929, with head of *Urząd Wojewódzki Poleski* health care department Zaroski, representatives of magistrates, police and the society of Brest property owners, where he required to achieve fundamental improvement in three months. Brest magistrates issued the order, but the residents ignored it as usual, and

¹² Per the requirements, it should have been a wooden shed lined above with boards or bricks or a cemented cesspool; the population began to call these toilets 'sławojkis' after the minister of internal affairs who was not squeamish to supervise personally the compliance with the regulations during his numerous journeys around the country.

¹³ The municipal government consisted of town council and magistrate. The council was an administrative and supervisory branch and the magistrate (renamed as 'administration' in 1933) was an executive one.

¹⁴ GABO. F. 1. Op. 5. D. 33. L. 214.

the municipal authorities were still not going to take any actions. Then Baran, as it follows from his memo to the governor of Polesye sent in August 1929, decided to improve Brest on his own initiative with the help of 'starostwo' (eldership) personnel and the police. He divided the town into four boroughs and was personally inspecting the houses and backyards in one of them to check the fulfilling of sanitation standards; other boroughs were under the control of his deputy Usayevich, county doctor Rometski and the head of criminal investigation department of starostwo Palyushkevich. The magistrates' representative Pashkovski took part in the inspections during the first few days. Multiple inspections of every household together with retaliatory measures like fines and arrests convinced the town inhabitants of starosta's determination¹⁵. Per the governor, by the end of June 1929, Brest improvement had been completed by 80 %, and the town changed a lot: there were latrines and rubbish bins in every household, almost all the buildings were renovated, homesteads were fenced off, ruins demolished, etc. Whereby Krahelski stated that starosta's demands found understanding among the inhabitants as a rule, and the punitive actions were quite moderate: out of 4,000 property owners, only six were imprisoned for up to two weeks for the refusal to improve their households, and 19 had to pay small fines. 57 wealthy residents, several being in the town government, had to pay substantial fines of 100 or 200 zlotys for demonstrative refusal to observe the sanitation standards¹⁶. The situation looked different from another point of view. Doctor V. Borkowski inspecting healthcare establishments in Brest and Pinsk in May 1929, witnessed how Brest residents driven by the fear of arrests for not improving the households on time, were hastily painting their fences by the orthodox Easter. Borkowski admitted the progress in town improvement¹⁷.

It should be noted that starosta's determination was strong enough to significantly improve one of the largest towns in the area, and his mobilization method saved a lot of finances for the state and municipal treasury. However, Brest was an exception, where the local state administration had to fight the resistance of municipal authorities to improve the town. In most cases, the situation depended on the municipal authorities, their responsibility and efficiency. Unlike Brest magistrates and the council, the municipal administrations in several other West Belarus towns followed the state instructions on sanitation and improvement issues successfully.

Per the reports of the local and province authorities, by the beginning of 1930s Pruzhany and Beryoza in Pruzhany county had improved the sanitation greatly. As Pruzhany county doctor Franciszek Imiolk reported in 1931, Pruzhany had all the roads paved, whereas in Beryoza it was only half of them that were done. All the

¹⁵ Ibid. L. 203.

¹⁶ Ibid. L. 215.

¹⁷ Ibid. Op. 4. D. 1207. L. 48.

households got latrines and rubbish bins; the backyards were put in order and renovated. Greenery was planted intensively in Pruzhany; the street trees were cut and whitewashed annually. In 1930, Pruzhany magistrates built nine shaft wells with pumps¹⁸. Pruzhany starostwo's report of the first half of 1931 outlined that "the towns' outlook was generally good, the efforts in keeping the greenery were noticeable, the town streets and squares were swept and cleaned well and on time"¹⁹. The county starosta R. Walewski considered Imiolk's "exceptional efficiency and responsibility" to be the reason for the improvement in the county's sanitation; and in 1929, he was granted a Silver Cross for his merits. Walewski also suggested that Polesye governor expressed a written gratitude to Beryoza burgomaster Jan Dovnar, as under his guidance all the streets got paved sidewalks, the town market got indoor stalls at the community's expense; the same gratitude was expressed to the heads of local police posts²⁰. At the end of the 1920s–early 1930s, starostas' and county doctors' reports noted the satisfactory sanitation in the towns of Luninetsk and Kossovo counties.

However, the municipal authorities very often remained uninterested in the sanitation issues; the inhabitants were not going to change their habits, and there were not so many active and determined starostas like the one in Brest, enough for all the towns. As an example, in the annual report of 1931, the county doctor from Stolin wrote that "the habit of living in dirt, [belief in] quackery firstly played an important role in spreading contagious diseases, and secondly contributed to the preservation of anti-sanitary conditions. Despite constant reminders and punishments of separate residents, there were still no latrines in the households, and not all the wells responded to the hygienic standards. Belief in quackery makes it really difficult to control contagious diseases because it is impossible to record the widely-spread disorders." Only two streets were paved in Stolin, and none in David-Gorodok²¹. The county doctor blamed the burgomasters and magistrates for ill-provision in the towns, as well as blamed the state police officials who did not take any effective measures to sort out the mess²². At the end of 1929, the local authorities reported the sanitation success in Pinsk and Logishin: the number of renovated houses increased from 1100 to 2700 in two years' time, the number of rubbish bins with lids increased from 1800 to 3900; the latrines responding to the sanitation standards increased from 1950 to 4000²³. However, the province inspection of Pinsk municipal authorities in October 1930 revealed a completely different picture: the town economics was downhill, the

¹⁸ Ibid. Op. 5. D. 90. L. 113–114.

¹⁹ Ibid. Op. 4. D. 1217. L. 34.

²⁰ Ibid. Op. 5. D. 33. L. 114.

²¹ Ibid. D. 90. L. 111.

²² Ibid. Op. 4. D. 1217. L. 156.

²³ Ibid. Op. 5. D. 33. L. 104.

“community jobs to prevent diseases and maintain the proper sanitation were totally neglected”. As an example, since 1927 the municipal authorities had built only one well, and the street paving improved within several months preceding the inspection, which was explained by the Ministry of Internal Affairs’ ratification of the town council’s decision to transfer the expenses of the maintenance of the streets onto the owners of adjacent households²⁴.

Therefore, if at the beginning of the 1920s, the sanitation and well-being in all the towns was critically low; by the end of the 1920s–early 1930s, there appeared noticeable differences, which depended on the effective actions taken by municipal authorities. Overall, the achieved results were usually limited and did not mean any quality changes.

G. Rudzinski, a doctor from Vilno, chairman of the province section of Vilno Medical Association, who later was head of healthcare department of Vilno province board, published an extensive article on healthcare in Vilno province in 1932. In his opinion, the “dynamic action in compulsory improvement of the country had brought appreciable results”. The outlook and the well-being of the province settlements had changed greatly by joint efforts of the state government and the local administration: the private estates were put in order, the town streets were paved and greened, the residents started observing the hygienic instructions regarding keeping the wells, elimination of dirt, etc. At the same time, Rudzinski pointed out that out of all the province towns except Vilno, only county centers Vileika and Postavy were remarkable with regards to the high level of improvement. The other towns represented mainly narrow, improperly built-up settlements with the lack of greenery. “In their current state, there are no conditions to put them in proper sanitation,” the author witnessed, contradicting his own positive assessment. He describes Glubokoye with the population of 6,000 people jammed between two lakes, with narrow streets and dirty backyards. The residents poured dirt into the lakes, which were at the same time the source of drinking water, so there had always been fierce typhoid fever there²⁵. It was necessary to build a water-pipe to solve the problem, but Glubokoye authorities did not have money for that. Due to the spread of epidemic starting late in the 1920s, the healthcare department of Ministry of Internal Affairs was discussing the possibility of financing the construction of the water-pipe from its own funds stipulating that the magistrates should develop a plan at the expense of the town. But even that condition was difficult to be implemented as it was beyond town’s financial opportunities²⁶.

Rudzinski’s optimism was not shared by D. Kieziewicz, the sanitary doctor in Baranovichy, who presented an informative report on the sanitation issues in Vilensk and

²⁴ Ibid. Op. 4. D. 36. L. 16–17, 22.

²⁵ Rudziński H. Zdrowotność publiczna na Wileńszczyźnie [Public health in the Wilna area]. *Pamiętnik Wileńskiego Towarzystwa Lekarskiego*, 1932, no. 4–5, pp. 228, 269, 277.

²⁶ SABO. F. 1. Op. 4. D. 284. L. 22.

Novogradok provinces at the convention of peer representatives in 1931. This report was highly appreciated by the editorial board of the journal 'Town government', the central authority of the Union of Polish towns, where it was published. "More than half of the streets are not paved. Greenery is scarce. The inspection of the wells shows significant pollution; there is very high mortality of children under one year old; tuberculosis 'collects a rich harvest' annually," as Kieziewicz witnessed. The unpaved streets resembled marshes that were impossible to navigate through, where residents poured dirt and threw their rubbish away. The planted trees were often destroyed by the children, who were not aware of their value. The numerous instructions from the town authorities and sanitation inspections of private properties and enterprises helped improve the situation to a certain extent. In Kieziewicz's opinion, there were two factors which prevented such improvement: "first, the inhabitants' mentality, their education and habits; secondly, the inhabitants' difficult financial situation. Under the pressure of the administration and the sanitary inspection, the residents acquired the required sanitary facilities (latrines and bins – *A.D.*), but hardly ever used them and often protected them from any dirt... The residents avoided any expenses on sewage and continued secretly digging cesspools, as well as other underground facilities or otherwise used the procedures prohibited by the sanitary inspection; they even tried to drain their wastes to the neighbor's property compliant with such regulations". Kieziewicz fairly assumed that the desired effect could be achieved only by introducing hygienic education at schools: "It is a long, however still a reliable way"²⁷.

Indeed, the improvements achieved under the pressure of the state authorities did not often last long. Performing duties in sanitation and any improvement was burdensome for the town residents, who in many cases lived in the state of desperate poverty, did not attach any importance to the hygienic issues and were ready to follow the instructions only under duress. Any weakening of control led to the loss of achievements. This happened in 1930, after the economic crisis began, which limited the restricted opportunities of the local communities to improve their living conditions. Per Krahelski's letter to starostas dated 1930, the inspections showed that "in many cases, the intensity of improvement and the intensity of taken actions weakened significantly, compared to previous years". "The private properties, both in towns and villages, are kept dirty; the streets are either not swept at all or swept rarely and carelessly; the butchers', grocers' and restaurants are messy and untidy... the renovations of the houses and the numbering of the properties have not been maintained since the previous year." It appears that the example of Brest starosta F. Baran impressed the governor, and giving his personal account regarding the sanitary issues, Krahelski main-

²⁷ Kieziewicz D. Zagadnienie sanitarne miast wschodnich [Sanitary Issues in Eastern Towns], *Samorząd Miejski*, 1931, no. 16–17, pp. 904, 906–907, 909.

tained: “In the counties, where the starosta is personally interested in the improvement, the outcome would be always successful”²⁸.

In the 1930s, the financial difficulties incited the municipal authorities to use sharwerk more actively during the improvement works, which meant that every able-bodied inhabitant had to work a certain amount of days for community without any remuneration every year. As an option, they could pay a certain amount of money in exchange for the actual work. On the background of such a critical financial state, for most towns sharwerk became the main means for the local authorities to conduct such works with the help of the residents at the least possible expense. On the other hand, it meant extra burden for the town residents; the imposition of improvement duties on them proved the low efficiency of the municipal authorities' activities. In bigger towns of the area, in the mid-1930s and onwards, the improvement issues were solved by the community works for unemployed people, organized with the help of credits and state subsidies.

The main attention was paid to streets paving. Thus, in the interwar period in the towns of Pruzhany county, 12.5 km of roads were paved, which cost about 270 thousand zlotys. 21.5 thousand zlotys out of that sum came from the state subsidies; the rest was from the own resources of the municipal government. Other improvement works included construction of a town market in Beryoza worth of two thousand zlotys; the municipal authorities spent about 22 thousand zlotys in Pruzhany to arrange the market place; the public toilets and 28 tubular wells provided the town with enough amount of clean water²⁹.

As it follows from the report of the Brest community authorities, during the period of 20 years of their work, by 1939 24 km of roads had been paved by them, which accounted for 29 % of their total length. As a comparison, 30 km of roads had been paved by WW I, and the same length remained unpaved. 42 sq.km were paved by concrete tiles during the interwar period. To control food quality in 1932, the municipal authorities established a food laboratory with a bacteriological department, whose service was to be used by all the towns of Polesye province. Besides, at the end of the 1930s, all the properties in the town had latrines and rubbish bins³⁰. Greenery works went on. As an example, in 1936 the Brest administration held a contest for the residents for the best decoration of windows, balconies and gardens with flowers, where the winners got money as a reward. At the same time, it was decided to express gratitude to the town gardener for keeping their two town parks established in the 1920s at a high artistic level³¹. More than 15 thousand trees were planted in the town during the interwar period³².

²⁸ SABO. F. 1. OP. 5. D. 55. L. 5.

²⁹ Ibid. Op. 1. D. 1040. L. 16, 23.

³⁰ Ibid. D. 1022. L. 32, 33, 39.

³¹ *Samorzqd miejski*, 1936, no. 16–17, p. 1101.

³² SABO. F. 1. Op. 1. D. 1022. L. 33.

As before, the effectiveness of municipal authorities' efforts depended first, on the people responsible for it, on their ability to organize the residents' labor effectively and use their meagre resources. In places where burgomasters, who were appointed governors and starostas in the 1930s, turned out to be skillful managers, the current situation was greatly improved. One of the examples was the activity of Gracjan Lapczynski, retired captain of cavalry, who was appointed burgomaster of Vysoko-Litovsk early in the 1930s. As the official Brest newspaper 'Express Poleski' reports, his energy and organizing skills demonstrated notable success in the town improvement: for the first time in the interwar period, all the roads were paved, the sidewalks were laid out, the public gardens had a clear marking, an athletic field and a beach were opened, the private houses were renovated and so on. It was done with the help of sharwerk without any considerable expenses from the town budget³³. The information from the newspaper is confirmed in Brest starosta's report sent to Polesye governor in 1934, which points out that owing to Lapczynski, the sanitation and the outlook of Vysoki had changed drastically. In starosta's opinion, this fact greatly contributed to the elevation of Polish authority among the town residents³⁴.

However, in most West Belarus towns, the authorities did not manage to improve the well-being and sanitation so significantly, as evidences from the 1930s create quite an unfavorable image. As an example, in Pinsk by the end of the 1930s, 37 % of the streets had been paved; there were 41 public artesian wells, 24 of which were built during the 20-year period between the wars³⁵. 36 % of the roads were paved in Lida in late 1930s; there were 17 tubular wells out of 1000³⁶. In mid-1930s there was only one paved street in Stolin, whereas there were none in David-Gorodok³⁷.

Judging by the Brest starostvo's report of 1935, the primitive toilets and bins overfilled with dirt and waste in the private properties of Brest did not often meet their purpose. The sewage service was entrusted to businessmen who refused to take the dirt away from the town to specifically allocated fields; and despite the fines, they poured them inside the town in derelict properties and in the town park. By mid-1930s, there had not been any public bath in Brest, only a small Jewish mikvah was in use; and most the population of the province center did not have a chance to maintain their personal hygiene³⁸. Horses and cattle bred by the residents directly in their

³³ *Express Poleski*, 1933, no. 264, p. 4; Ibid. 1934, 22 sierpnia, p. 4.

³⁴ SABO. F. 1. OP. 2. D. 3505. L. 13.

³⁵ Ibid. F. 2005. Op. 1. D. 126. L. 6, 9.

³⁶ Lauresh L. Прамысловасць горада Ліды ў 1920–1930-ягады [The industry in the town of Lida in 1920–1930s]. *Працэсы ўрбанізацыі ў Беларусі: XIX – пачатак XXI ст.* [Urbanization patterns in Belarus: 19th – early 20th centuries], рэдкал.: Я.А. Роўба і інш. [in Rouba Ia. A (ed.)] Grodno, 2010, pp. 181–188.

³⁷ SABO. F. 1. Op. 5. D. 151. L. 31.

³⁸ Ibid. D. 60. L. 2, 4.

households made it difficult to keep clean even the central streets of the town³⁹. Per Brest county doctor O. Anselm, the efforts taken in 1929 to improve the Brest sanitation were continued by the municipal authorities, but they could not achieve any significant results due to inadequate performance and lack of sanitary personnel. In 1932, the state administration had to take control over the sanitary issues in the town again, appointing 'sanitary guards' from the starostvo ranks as well as magistrate employees, who had to inspect the private properties together with the police and make the town residents obey the prescribed instructions⁴⁰. In 1935, the Brest starosta deputy F. Usayevich suggested giving back the statutory obligations to control the sanitation issues in the town to the municipal government in Brest⁴¹.

The significant success in improvement of Pruzhany and Beryoza, which was described above and was reported by the municipal authorities, was not obvious to everyone. Inspections held in 1933 by Pruzhany starosta Lisovski in Beryoza and the province inspector of municipal bodies Hmelevski in Pruzhany revealed squalid streets, "a lot of dirt and disorder"⁴². There was an anonymous message attached to the inspection report, which said that Pruzhany inhabitants, especially the Christians, were outraged by the unfair assignment of sharwerk, as they were "to work in the streets near the market where the Jews live", "while the streets where Christians live are flooded with water, excrements and dirt. Dombrovski Street, for example, is impossible to cross, and children do not go to school because of the dirt. Despite mentioning it regularly to the burgomaster, people have been drowning there for three years; whereas cats, dogs and other carrion have been decaying in ditches ... but the burgomaster neglects people's health, which does not require any finances..."⁴³. At the same time, one of Beryoza residents sent a letter addressing the Ministry of Internal Affairs and complaining about the domination of Jews in the town administration. Per this document, the deputy burgomaster N. Zakheim, the "local king and god", was oppressing the Christians at every opportunity; for example, there were paved streets only in the Jewish part of the town, and "the rest of the streets were good only to drown dogs". Dissatisfaction with the municipal government's actions resulted in the request to replace them with a commissar, who "would have all the powers in the town, so that it would be all in order"⁴⁴. Although one cannot entirely trust the anonymous, they reflected the mood of at least part of the town residents.

In the opinion of C. Galasiewicz, who was head of the department of self-administration on the Novogrudok province board, a lot of things to improve the sani-

³⁹ Ibid. Op. 4. D. 1205. L. 10.

⁴⁰ Ibid. Op. 5. D. 151. L. 2–3.

⁴¹ Ibid. D. 60. L. 2.

⁴² Ibid. Op. 4. D. 37. L. 43, 93–94.

⁴³ Ibid. L. 110.

⁴⁴ Ibid. L. 196–197.

tation and well-being of the towns in Novogrudok province were done during the Polish control, but there were still more things to be done. As before, there was shortage of clean water, the lack of baths was acute, the “dirt and grubbiness reign supreme in our towns and villages”. Galasiewicz considered educating the residents, which meant wakening them from the state of “passivity and apathy; inciting their personal initiative, encouraging the desire to live under civilized conditions” – that was more important than any state investments in the development of the towns⁴⁵.

As a matter of fact, the anti-sanitary state of west Belarus towns was based on the residents’ unawareness of the necessity to meet any sanitary-epidemiological requirements. As an example, in 1937, the annual report of the Brest county explained why erection of concrete wells instead of wooden ones in Polesye did not improve the quality of water. Their point was that due to their habits and prejudices, the local people did not believe the statements that the water cleaned in deeper layers of soil gets into the well through its bottom part and the spaces left between the concrete rings, which did not prevent the pollution and made such construction useless⁴⁶. Two public lectures on sanitation planned separately for the Jews and the Christians in Pruzhany in 1930 did not take place as nobody wanted to attend them⁴⁷.

Conclusion

Thus, the level of well-being and the sanitary state in west Belarus towns in the 1920–30s remained critically low, and the improvement was hindered by the following factors: financial difficulties experienced by the local authorities, underestimation of the sanitation issues by the municipal employees, and the inhabitants neglecting the hygienic standards.

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