



Elena Keidosiute (Ph.D. Candidate)

Lahnstein Scholarship 2011, Vilnius University

Email: elena.keidosiute_at_gmail.com

Jewish Conversions in Lithuanian Territory in the 1st Half of the Twentieth Century: The Influence of German Christian and Anti-Semitic Ideas

Conversion has always been one of the most extreme ways for Jews to attempt to enter Gentile society. My research will concentrate on the phenomena of Jewish conversion in Lithuanian territory under the influence of German Christian and anti-Semitic ideas in the 1st half of the twentieth century. Already in 1832-1921 Königsberg's missionary society (Missionsverein zu Königsberg) published the first periodical in Lithuanian "Stories about the promotion of Gospel amongst the Jews and pagans" (Nusidavimai apie Evangelijos praplatinimą tarp žydų ir pagonu) which represented possibly very influential Christian missionary trends coming from Germany through Poland to Lithuania. These trends gained new often institutionalized forms determined by the radically changing political situation and the modernization of the society. Thus, in the interwar period in Lithuania (including Vilnius diocese, under Polish rule at the time) several initiatives to promote Christianity amongst the Jews, both organized and individual, were undertaken. The Section for Jewish conversion was established in 1929 alongside the Internal Missions and was dedicated to missionary work amongst the Jews. Polish and German language courses were arranged for adult Jews and a reading-room in Vilnius opened to offer access to the popular religious literature and the readings of Bible which took place twice a week. In 1935 the Vilnius Metropolitan Curia issued a Questionnaire about the Jews and the "Jewish Question" in Poland to every parish in Vilnius diocese. The diocese parsons' answers to the Questionnaire give us a perspective on how strong the ideas of converting Jews in the Vilnius bishopric were, and of the Catholic clergy's attitudes towards the Jews. In the consciousness of the clergy there was a conflict of a traditional society (concerning Jewish insularity and otherness) intertwined with a newly born conflict typical of a modern society (concerning the dissolving cultural borders between the Jews and Gentiles and the imaginary threat towards national identity and competitive ability). The economic hostility towards the Jews was particularly strong – the image of the Jews being irredeemable materialists and usurpers of the economic space makes "the Jewish question" more political than religious.

Historiography has already widely discussed the question of the role of the Church in the growth and spread of the anti-Judaism, the emerging anti-Semitism of the nineteenth century and the anti-Semitism in its worst during the interwar period and the Second World War in Lithuania and Vilnius region. However, the fact that Christian institutions and representatives were trying to get in touch with the Jewish community in the period under discussion and even to convert them has evaded scholarly scrutiny. The issue of voluntary Jewish conversions in the wake of and during the Second World War in Lithuania was also left aside. Similarly, debate as to the extent to which German Protestant missionary ideas influenced conversion trends in predominantly Catholic Lithuanian territory, as well as communication with local Jewry have also been disregarded. Finally, the issue of whether local Jews followed western trends, especially the extensively discussed acculturation of the German Jews, to use baptism as the means for integration, has not been discussed. I will also explore how these preoccupations were rethought or gained new meaning in the late 1930s when Jewish baptisms took place within the context of a peculiar relationship between the Jews and the Church, a relationship which was no longer based upon the potential social guarantees that a convert would receive, but rather on the possibility of gaining inviolability. Moreover, the project will reconstruct and evaluate the influence of Nazi policy on the conversion trends in the region in the 1930s, and how the broader political situation influenced relations between the Church and Jews, and what transformations the clergy's attitude towards the Jews underwent in the light of major political changes in the neighbouring countries, especially Germany. Moreover, it will explore the official and everyday stand of the clergy itself, and how anti-Semitic Nazi and German Christian ideas translated in the region when communicating with the Jews.

Sirutavičius V., *Katalikų Bažnyčia ir modernaus lietuvių antisemitizmo genezė (Catholic Church and the genesis of modern Lithuanian anti-Semitism)*, Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademijos Metraštis XIV, (Vilnius, 1999), p. 73, (pp. 69-77).