

**Review of the Study *Preconditions of the Holocaust. Anti-Semitism in Lithuania (19<sup>th</sup> c. - First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. (Until 15 June 1940)* of Vygandas Vareikis**

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In terms of both political and economic aspects as well as those of relations with the dominant catholic majority, the situation of the Jewish community in Lithuania in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had been studied very little and in fragments. Therefore, the efforts of Vygandas Vareikis to consider the preconditions of the formation of anti-Semitism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had to face a real challenge. Despite unfavourable historiographic circumstances for the examination of the issue, in my opinion, the author succeeds to highlight the key tensions prevailing between the Jewish and Lithuanian communities. Moreover, historical reality and remaining sources give us everything necessary to hope for even a broader, comprehensive and systematic analysis.

For good reasons the author of the study pays much attention to anti-Semitic tradition of the Church. Almost until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the books that were reprinted for the practice of religion were first published in the 18<sup>th</sup> or even 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and were written on the basis of earlier catholic texts of European countries or simply were their word by word translations. Therefore, the pure understanding of the Middle Ages was spread not only among the ordinary people but also lower ranks of nobility. The modernisation of the Church launched by Valancius and Vilnius bishops did not essentially change the situation and strove at enhancing conscious and strong rather than a ritual belief which is capable of resisting forced conversion to the orthodox belief as carried out by the Russian government. The literature to satisfy religious needs explained that the Jews were the murderers of Christ and listed them among the key enemies of the Catholic Church standing in one line with the Devil, heathens, and heretics. Proves were given that the only right belief was the catholic belief, and the Catholics were not allowed not only to visit the places of worship of other beliefs, take part in their services or read their religious books but also marry those of other beliefs or live with them under one roof. Thus, despite of the call to apply the principle of Christian love to the Jews as well, which

appeared in some preaching or the text in a book, popular religious literature had a dominant image of a Jew as an eternal enemy of the Catholics. In the light of anti-Catholic policy of the Russian government, the high priests and ordinary priests of the Lithuanian Catholic Church concentrated their all efforts on strengthening the catholic identity of Lithuanian peasants as conservative, reserved and intolerant to other beliefs.

Economic preconditions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for anti-Semitism to appear are undoubted. Indeed, the Lithuanian society had different views on the economic role of the Jews and their place in economic life. On the other hand, a positive role of the Jews in economy was recognised for they were the only financial mediators, often local craftsmen, particularly in villages, and neither retail nor wholesale trade could be carried out without them. Hardly any nobleman could do without the services of such experienced and clever businessmen. On the other hand, economic literature of the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had already increasingly encouraged to refuse the services of the Jews and manage realisations of the farm produce by oneself and, thus, retain in one's own hands the part of profit which would otherwise go to the Jews for mediation. However, there was a sector of economic activity where the dominance of the Jews was harshly criticised throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, namely the distilling and selling of vodka. In this respect, the Jews were defined as the 'leeches of the Lithuanian village' to be blamed not only for making the peasants drunk and alcoholic consciously but also for ruining of the whole economy of the village. Although the Seimas of the gentry would often discuss arrangements of how to drive the Jews away from the inns, proposing that the government should take strict measures, nothing was done in practice, since the majority of noblemen were interested in the successful trade in vodka which was ensured by the Jews. As a result, the image of the Jew as that of a leech making peasants drink and the oppressor deep-rooted in the noblemen society, and at the beginning of the abstinence movement, this image was promoted among the Lithuanian peasants by the abstinence activists.

The study is right to notice the division of the spheres of economic life among the Jews and the catholic part of the society. The Catholics both noblemen and peasants dominated agriculture

which was 'close to God' and, according to the beliefs of those days, the work of a peasant was considered to be moral, just, and the capital and property acquired namely in this way were clean and without a sin. For the meantime, the Jews dominated trade and crafts. The ethos of these spheres of economy was very different. Along with the instances of fraud which happened to occur in this sphere the image of the Jew swindler who cared only about profits and material good was developed. This image was even supported with illegal economic activity of the Jews, including contraband, which had been favourably preconditioned by the right of movement that the Jews possessed, contrary to the peasants.

I suppose that the author pays too little attention to cultural, behavioural and life-style differences which were paid much attention to by the noblemen society which was very sensitive towards them. This area of relationships gives much room for considerations. I would only mention that each step away from a cultural isolation of the Jewish community and its differences in behaviour and clothing simultaneously constituted a small step towards drawing closer of the two communities. It was enough for the Russian government to urge the Jews to give up their national dress and wear European clothes, and a young noblemen bravely recognised that the Jewish girls were also beautiful and deserved his adoration. These are only the little nothings of life, but they contribute to the demolition of national barriers. It should be noted that the author missed an important aspect that, being the most conscious part of the society, the best educated noblemen regarded the Jews with favour. In their writings they stated about the erroneousness of a traditional negative position towards the Jews and made public as well as discussed the causes of poverty of their community and gave examples of their moral qualities. Even more important is that in a real life a humane and respectful behaviour of the noblemen towards the Jews gave an example to their peasants and gentry from estates, thus, melting their disrespect and rudeness in the relations with the Jews.

Maybe the author had to lay more emphasis on the fact that negative influence made by the isolationist nature of life of both the societies. Not only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century but already in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Jews were blamed for 'building of a nation in a nation'. The

noblemen were not happy with the Jewish autonomy and their keeping apart from the main issues of the society's life. There was much willingness that the Jews joined them in the confrontations with the Russian government. However, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Jews in Lithuania seemed to have been keeping to the 'strategy of survival' by choosing the political force that had more chances to win. This was particularly evident during the revolts when the Jews manoeuvred between the two confronting parties, and understandably failed to suit both. The society that was torn by repression painfully reacted to how the government promoted the Jews and granted them privileges for anti-revolt activity after the revolts.

The possibilities of rapprochement of the two societies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were very slim. A conclusion can be drawn from some texts that a Jew could be only accepted by the Catholic society after he had refused his religion, morals of his parents, traditions and lifestyles. It seems that in real life the Jews of some professions, for instance doctors, were tolerated. However, all this calls for a special research. In Lithuania the isolation of both the communities was so big that it was not even ruined by the capitalist production which promoted the formation of a civic society in European countries and levelling diversities of national, religious and cultural differences. In Lithuania even industrial enterprises were established on the national grounds, and mostly Jews worked in the factories of the Jewish businessmen and Lithuanians were given preference in the Lithuanian enterprises (e.g. in that by P. Vileišis).

The relations of the catholic and Jewish communities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were diverse and complex. The majority of tensions which came to life in that century grew even stronger and spread among the peasantry. The efforts of the author of the study should be welcome as those which start to untangle the clew of the problems which had been long ignored. Therefore, this work should be undoubtedly continued.