

Description for the general public

The main aim of my project is to analyse the process of institutionalisation of ‘ghetto benches’ at the Stefan Batory University (SBU) in Vilnius between two World Wars. On 26th of November 1937, Priest Professor Aleksander Wójcicki, Rector of SBU, enters a decree on “the order of occupying seats in lecture halls” customarily called ‘ghetto benches’. As a consequence, places for Jewish students are institutionally assigned. Implementation of this decree was preceded by long-term negotiations between Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Education, university authorities, student organizations, unions and corporations, and non-unionised students.

The field of the project explores the historically changing SBU’s policies with respect to participation of Jewish students in academic life, students’ unions and organisations, ability to choose a seat in an auditorium and possibility to study at all. In the course of the project, I intend to both analyse the legal changes on state level enabling introduction of relevant decrees in universities, and study the debate and social practice that preceded and followed them on university and ministry level.

The introduction of the ‘ghetto benches’ at Stefan Batory University in Vilnius was preceded by eruption of violence against Jewish students and resulted in a record number of several hundred disciplinary proceedings and trials related to disturbing the “order at the university”, or “students disorders”. Additionally, before the introduction of the ‘ghetto benches’, almost every year the university was closed for at least several weeks because of anti-Jewish violence. I will focus my work on the analysis of disciplinary proceedings, with particular emphasis on the broadly understood actions against university order. I want to locate the events in a broader historical perspective (key political and historical events, both national and international), which in my opinion will help reconstruct the process of implementation of the rectory decree on “order of occupying seats in lecture halls”. I believe that the analysis of the protocols of the disciplinary proceedings will also reveal the tensions between the various actors, and in a broader perspective will allow to answer one of my research questions: which factors led to the introduction of the “order of occupying seats” regulation? An equally important task is to trace changes introduced in statutes of academic organizations and unions. The biggest changes in the statutes were closely related to the political situation in the country and abroad.

Addressing the entire institutionalization process of the ‘ghetto benches’ at SBU will allow me to locate these specific events in a broader context, both historical, and of activities undertaken in other universities of the Second Polish Republic. I intend to analyse the institutionalization process mainly on the basis of official documents, correspondence and press articles related to these processes. I will analyse not only changes introduced into documents, but the language of the documents itself used both by decision-makers, and other actors, used to describe reality around.

I want to include situations in other universities to my analysis but not as comprehensively as in case of Vilnius, due to the fact that academic institutions were in close contact with each other, sharing experience and repeatedly operate in agreement towards Jewish students. In that case, I will limit research material just to official documents, and correspondence due to the fact, that other cities are only context and background to Vilnius.

The extent, longevity and variety of forms of violence, and finally its institutionalization, raise the question of whether it was an isolated phenomenon, or rather representative for cultural and social processes of Second Polish Republic.