

United Lithuanian Relief Fund of America

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Through the United Lithuanian Relief Fund of America the Lithuanian community in the United States has been able to assist thousands of Lithuanian refugees in Europe and elsewhere with some much needed food, clothing, and medicine — the value of which is very conservatively placed at well over 4 million dollars. Part of this aid originated in non-Lithuanian sources — the National War Fund in the early years of the organization and, more recently, in the form of food commodities from the U.S. Department of Agriculture surplus stocks. Significant aid and clothing contributions came from the Catholic hierarchy. The rest came mainly as personal donations from thousands of Lithuanians in numerous parishes, Clubs, and societies throughout the United States.

Over 2 and one-half million pounds of food and a slightly larger amount of clothing have been forwarded to the needy Lithuanians since the Fund began its operations.

But one cannot compute the full value of this aid by citing statistics alone. Special shipments of school supplies enabled many a kindergarten and grammar school to operate. Many a student was able to finish his college training course because of a scholarship or some direct financial assistance received from the Lithuanian Relief Fund. Many a sickly and undernourished child, because of special campaigns in the United States, enjoyed a few weeks in a Fresh Air Camp.

This varied assistance, meager though it was as compared to the actual needs, nevertheless became an important morale lifter in the numerous D.P. camps and sanitariums. It gave the unfortunate victims of war and Communist tyranny a sense of some slight security in the knowledge that their fellow-Lithuanians in America were thinking of them and trying to help them. The activities of BALF, as the Fund is popularly known (the full name is Bendras Amerikos Lietuvių šalpos Fondas), were a matter of interest and concern to the entire homeless lot. The activities of the Fund, through its various centers in Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, and elsewhere, helped to sustain the refugees' struggle for existence and offered them some hope for the future.

Through its membership in the American Council of Voluntary Agencies for Foreign Service, its participation in a cooperative relief venture known as CARE, its membership in the National War Fund and the attendant publicity with millions of leaflets and radio and newspaper announcements; through its association with the American Red Cross, the International Red Cross, and numerous U.S. government officials and agencies and through its extensive operation on two continents, the United Lithuanian Relief Fund was able to make a powerful impression upon the world's conscience not only as to the immediate needs of the thousands of Lithuania's dispossessed, but, indirectly, as to the plight of the Lithuanian nation as a whole.

When the American people, in a deeply humanitarian act and through appropriate laws in Congress, opened their doors to all who through Soviet treachery found themselves without home or country, Lithuanian Relief Fund went to work and, in affiliation and cooperation with War Relief Services (NCWC), Church World Services and similar agencies, was able to process and bring over to America about 30,000 Lithuanians and offer them, as it were, a new lease on life. All of these new immigrants, practically without exception, soon established themselves in various jobs and positions and have become respected members of their respective communities. It is gratifying to note that many of these same refugees are

now themselves ardent supporters of the work of the Lithuanian Relief Fund and, in turn, are helping others of their brethren who are unable to emigrate.

Two factors have contributed to the success of the Fund: the Lithuanians' deep love and sympathy for their suffering kinsfolk and their ability to form and maintain a good, well-managed organization.

It was in 1945, a year after the Fund was organized, that the President's War Relief Control Board accepted the Fund into its roster of officially approved relief agencies. The Fund was formed to include all Lithuanian factions, with only the Communists excluded. It was the Communists, of course, who in the formative stages of the organization did all in their power to prevent the formation of the Fund. They tried to convince the U.S. government that the proper place for Lithuanian charity efforts was through the Russian War Relief. But because of the uncompromising stand taken by the Fund's officers in their many personal conferences in Washington and the powerful intercession of Cardinal Mooney of Detroit and other Lithuanian friends, the Fund was soon able to join the National War Fund and share in the substantial benefits which were put to prompt use for the thousands of Lithuanians who had been forced to flee before the tidal wave of uncivilized Soviet hordes and who now found themselves in dire circumstances. Thus, notwithstanding the various Communist pressures, the Lithuanians were empowered to take care of their own needy people through their own Lithuanian organization.

In Europe, too, the Relief Fund had to beat off more than one attempt by the Communists to snatch some of the D.P.'s and ship them back behind the Iron Curtain. The most publicized case was that of little Terese Strasinskaite, whom the Soviets claimed as their own and whom they would have snared but for the interception of BALF before the American military court. In many instances UNRRA personnel, in its overly enthusiastic cooperation with the Soviets, displayed eagerness to hand over the Lithuanians to the Russians, but, after strong protestations on both sides of the Atlantic, forceful repatriation was ruled out, the legal rights of Lithuanian citizenship were not to be denied, and BALF was able to administer its aid unmolested.

Much credit for the Fund's accomplishments must be given to Kanauninkas Dr. Joseph B. Končius, who, as the Fund's president since the very beginning, has given the organization an exceptionally strong and effective guidance. Since 1947 the central office and warehouse has operated from 105 Grand Street, Brooklyn. It is from here that the officers and board of 21 members maintain contact with the branches and members and supporters throughout the country.

Though the quarters are small and the staff equally so, much is being accomplished even today. At the present the Fund is very active in gathering and processing job and housing assurances, which must be submitted to Washington by the end of this summer, and which will enable two to three thousand additional Lithuanian refugees to emigrate to the United States. Seven or eight thousand of our refugees, however, because of age, ill health, or other reasons will face the bleak prospect of having to remain where they are indefinitely. The United Lithuanian Relief Fund is determined not to forget these victims of history's unfriendliest neighbors. The work of the Fund will necessarily continue. One thought that persists in the minds of the officers and the workers of BALF is that the day may soon come when they will be able to administer their acts of charity, if necessary, among those in Lithuania itself.