

THE LITHUANIAN DISPLACED PERSON IN AMERICA

RASA GUSTAITIS

MISS RASA GUSTAITIS is a political science major at the Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio. Participant in Washington Semester Program 1955, where she wrote a research project on the administration of the Refugee Relief Act of 1953.

There is no lack of literature about the American immigrant. Theories from many treatises have gained general acceptance, and certain premises are taken for granted. However, new situations prove old theories inadequate and challenge their premises. Therefore, in trying to understand the displaced person in America today, we have to take a fresh look and appreciate the uniqueness of his particular situation. Many people, for instance, take it for granted that the refugee, the immigrant, has come here with the intention of adopting as quickly as possible the customs and the ways of his new country, the United States, and that he is anxious to relinquish his native values and customs. But a person of this opinion is disconcerted when he finds that even when given the opportunity to become assimilated, the D.P. clings to his old culture, does not attempt to become dissolved in the melting-pot, refuses to be integrated. Some of the reasons for this attitude are the same as those which caused old German Quarters, and Chinese and Jewish sections to appear in American cities. Others are new.

The D.P.s of the Second World War are refugees from political, religious, and social oppression, as have been many of the previous American immigrants. However, there is an important distinguishing characteristic. The majority of them have come to America as a result of the war which, at the same time that it made them refugees, put their previously free and independent homelands under Soviet domination. Many of the earlier immigrants came here because of oppression, but it was usually oppression of the particular minority to which they belonged. There is no precedent for the situation of the D.P.s whose whole countries were overcome by disaster at the time of their emigration. And these countries were intensely conscious of their national aspirations. Many of them had been enjoying political independence only since the First World War.

This is a very important thing to remember in trying to understand the D.P. He does not merely come from the "old country"; he comes from the "enslaved country". He is not homesick only for his friends and relatives overseas: he is also homesick for his nation. This is clearly seen in the literature produced by the Lithuanian D.P.s which is full of longing for Lithuania and deals almost completely with the past and with future hopes rather than with the present. The feeling of national belongingness among exiles is perhaps even more intense than "free home nationalism" was. Therefore, the D.P. feels it a duty to do what is possible to liberate his country and then to rebuild it. Many hope to return to live there after liberation, when it comes. This nationalistic feeling of duty is intensified by the sense of moral duty which always falls upon those who have been lucky in a situation where others were not. Because they got away and others did not, the former have a moral obligation to fulfill. Most D.P.s have lost relatives and friends through Soviet deportation; all have some who still are in Lithuania, and occasionally a letter slips through the censors which gives a glimpse of life in the homeland.

People from countries where nationalism is allowed to express itself and where there is political freedom do not feel the same obligation as do the D.P.s toward their native land. For in Lithuania, there is a drive to make the people lose their national consciousness and become not only physically but also spiritually a part of the Soviet Union. Because there they are not free to protest, because any expression of Lithuanian national consciousness there may lead to death, the job of protesting devolves onto those Lithuanians who are in free countries, i.e., the D.P.s. These things make the D.P.s not merely immigrants but also fighters for a common cause.

National aspirations and the moral sense of duty naturally cause the D.P.s to resist assimilation :in addition, the factors which have in the past caused national cohesion among immigrants are present also. It is a natural human trait to love what is familiar, and for that love to increase when in strange surroundings. The familiar is also secure, and thus national grouping gives security and protection where the new community is hesitant to welcome newcomers or even is hostile to them. It is true that the D.P.S generally found a very warm welcome in the United States. There was general sympathy for their position, as expressed by the D.P. Act passed by Congress in 1948. Although for the past hundred years the traditional Golden Gate of immigration had been closing gradually (the McCarran Act left only a slight crack to squeeze through), and though the sentiment was becoming more and more hostile to further immigrant influx, there was a change for a period of time immediately after World War Two: The United States, one of the few nations not greatly damaged by the war, felt its responsibility towards a ravaged world.

But even with the warmest welcome, their lack of knowledge of the English language, their monetary status, and the fact that they were newcomers limited the opportunities for adjustment in the American community for the D.P.s. Unlike the majority of the earlier American immigrants, many of them are members of the European intelligentsia: educated people, professionals, people familiar with higher culture, specialists. Here they usually find themselves in the cheaper dwelling areas of large cities. The Americans most of them meet are people of lower culture with little education. Very few newcomers can utilize their education in obtaining jobs. Thus, many are forced to leave their skills and professions and do manual labor in the factories. Engineers and scientists generally find that they can use their training in obtaining jobs, but lawyers, former government employees, liberal arts people in general, usually cannot. Thus people from the upper and middle classes of the European countries find themselves forced into a lower-class environment in the United States. They do not find much in common with their neighbors at home and at work, and therefore quite naturally seek fellowship elsewhere among their fellow D.P.s. In the activities of the nationality groups a person can use the talent and ability which is stifled elsewhere. And so the intellectuals write for magazines and newspapers published here in their language, form the leadership of exile political groups, join clubs of various kinds, express here their need for action. D.P.s not belonging to the intelligentsia also prefer to remain with their national fellows, of course. There is acceptance here — a small, rather compact community where they do not feel strange. Social clubs and athletic groups form. Talent can show itself and be appreciated for the arts are encouraged and supported, and there is opportunity (for those who wish to take it) for participation in various ways. Lithuanian choruses, choirs, and exhibition folk-dancing groups are seen by many American audiences, as well as by Lithuanian ones.

A large number of young people seek higher education in the colleges and universities, and among the students, therefore, another section of the national community has developed. Its leaders are generally the older students who had begun their higher education in Germany and Austria and are finishing it here. At this time most of these have already completed their college study, and the younger group is taking over. The students are organized in several student organizations, the most important of which are the Skautai (scouts), the Ateitininkai, a Catholic organization, and the Santara, which attempts to bring together independents of all political and religious opinions. All students are members of the Lithuanian Students' Association Inc. In cities where a large number of Lithuanian students are found — New York, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland and others — these organizations plan activities of a cultural, social, and political nature. Students who find themselves isolated, too far from these centers to participate, join in when they can. Conventions, or so-called "study days", are held from time to time, on regional and national bases, and to these the isolated students often come. It is not at all unusual to find someone going from Chicago to Cleveland, from Cleveland to New York, or from Washington to Philadelphia for a weekend convention. It proves an opportunity to exchange ideas and opinions, see old friends, meet new ones. The Lithuanian student travels a great deal, considering his financial status, for that is the only way he can keep some sort of liaison with the other members of the scattered student community. The students are very important because they form the future intelligentsia, the leadership.

And so we see why and how the D.P. communities stay together. The feeling of duty and the sense of mission and loyalty to the group are supported by social pressure, as all mores and mora's in all societies are, and the individual is drawn towards the national group by the combination of these various factors. But it is not in vain that America has been called the great melting-pot. Many influences tend to draw these communities apart, inhibit their activities, scatter their members, and slowly force the groups to dissolve.

One of the greatest factors hastening assimilation is the small number of Lithuanians in this country. There is a tendency to concentrate in the large cities such as New York and Chicago where the largest Lithuanian centers are. One may go to a certain beach on Lake Michigan, for instance, and seem to be in a different country. The restaurants serve "barščiai" and sour milk with steaming boiled potatoes, a tango by šabaniauskas sounds from the juke-box, and English seems a foreign language there. But such islands are few in number. Many people find themselves in communities where they become separated from their countrymen. The children meet American friends at school, learn American ways, not having the memory of the war and of Lithuania, grow up Americans. Parents try to teach them the language, to instill into them their own interest and feelings. But their efforts are rarely successful and they sadly and helplessly watch a generation grow up which is very different from their own in its loyalties.

Many students also drift away. They develop interests and ideas which lead them from the nationality group if they find no one within it to share these things with. Occasionally, sitting around a campfire and singing the lovely, melancholy songs of

their homeland, they feel a longing and a restlessness. But then the current of their lives carries them away from the campfire, and they find this feeling grow weaker.

The nationality group struggles for its existence and the whole struggle is based on one premise that there will be a time to return. Exile politics has little meaning or influence on the international scene, for exile governments have nothing to govern. Their sole purpose now is to serve as a reminder that the status quo in the countries behind the Iron Curtain must not be accepted as satisfactory. And when such reminders are inconvenient to the great powers they are ignored. Thus the present is looked upon merely as a waiting period: there will come a day when D.P.s will be exiled no more, and, while waiting for this day, the remnant must carry on the life of the nation.

Unfortunately this fight for the survival of the national group can become stifling to individual creativity. For the sake of this sole purpose — the fight for the liberation of his enslaved country and its correlative, the survival of the national group in exile — and the unity necessitated by such purpose, ideas, opinions, and the general outlook of an individual are sometimes greatly affected with respect to these ends-in-view. Associations can become superficial, petty differences loom large, and differences become obscured. Restlessness and unused energy may bring petty splits and disagreements. The phenomenon is not at all unusual among exile groups

Faced with this situation, some disappointed people decide to break away completely. And so disillusionment, the scattering of the community, lack of a positive goal, and the influence of the American environment are coal under the United States melting pot.

Each Lithuanian then, is caught in the struggle between opposing forces. He is pulled towards the national group and away from it, tossed this way and that. The conflict is most powerful in the case of young people. They are the most susceptible to change, the most flexible, and because of this the pressure of the Lithuanian community is concentrated on them. In the dilemma many see only this choice: either participate very actively in the group, at the cost perhaps of sacrificing some personal interests or follow those interests at the cost of turning your back upon everything Lithuanian. Marriage is a point which most often forces a decision, and becomes a crossroads for many. The intermarriage of Lithuanians with Americans means almost without exception that the next generation will be completely American. Therefore, a person marrying an American becomes a loss to the Lithuanian nation. To avoid the disapproval of the group and further conflict, such a person often isolates himself from the group and stops participating in its activities, especially if he has not been extra-active earlier. The group dwindles

The problem is great: surely it is the duty of every D.P. to keep reminding the world of his unfortunate countrymen who have no means to speak up. Surely it is his duty to prevent the civilization and culture, of which he is a part, from dying. On the other hand, it is inevitable and not undesirable that he find a permanent place and a home here in the United States, and unrealistic to believe that intermarriage and assimilation can be prevented. What other choice is there? Some Lithuanians, especially educated people, find a third possibility. They find that there need not be a conflict of loyalties. Supporting Lithuanian activity, they also become Americans. Their friends are of both nationalities. These people are then in the position of being able to enrich both the Lithuanian and the American cultures by interpreting each to the other, and they have a better chance of avoiding the dangerously narrow parochialism which nationalism often brings with it. The weakness of this alternative lies in the fact, however, that the psychological process of sublimation and integration is quite difficult to achieve.

Looking into the future, the fate of the Lithuanian D.P.s seems clear. If a change in world affairs does not come fairly soon to lift the Soviet yoke from the shoulders of the oppressed countries and make it possible to return to Lithuania there will be few in America who will still feel a loyalty as strongly as they do now. That might mean death of an old and venerable nation and of a beautiful language and culture, thus causing a loss to the human family. But not necessarily, even then — for over a hundred years preceding the First World War the Lithuanians were under Russian rule, and it was forbidden to teach the language in schools or to print books or newspapers in it. But in spite of these restrictions, the Lithuanians preserved their language, their traditions, and their desire for self-rule. In the absence of any immediate better hope, we can at least hope that this will happen again, while those here who remember keep the rest of the world from forgetting.