

LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 17, No.4 - Winter 1971

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LITHUANIANS IN AMERICA: A HISTORICAL SKETCH

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Lithuanians make up a large but often unnoticed part of the American population. The United States census has reported that in many major cities Lithuanians constitute the eleventh largest immigrant group and in a few areas, even the largest. Lithuanians have been coming to the United States since about 1868 for a large variety of reasons ranging from a search for economic gains to a search for freedom. Between the years 1899 and 1914 alone, a reported 252,594 Lithuanians came to the United States.[1](#)

The first Lithuanians settled in the Pennsylvania hard coal regions. Those who followed them, tended to settle in neighborhoods that already contained Lithuanians and thus, they soon formed their own subcommunities.[2](#)

Sociologists claim that there are three main reasons why ethnic sub communities form. First, since immigrants were all in the same economic condition, they bought houses of approximately the same worth, which because of the physical make-up of cities will usually be found grouped together. Second, cultural likenesses, especially a common language, brought each immigrant group together. Finally, the antagonism found among native Americans forced them to band together.[3](#)

The first two reasons appear to be the main ones which tended towards the creation of the Lithuanian sub-communities. There does not seem to have been any strong antagonism against the Lithuanian immigrants existing among native Americans. Actually, if there was an antagonism strong enough to bring about a banding together of Lithuanians, it existed between the Lithuanians and members of another immigrant group, the Polish. Conflicts arose when Polish organizations attempted to completely assimilate the Lithuanian immigrants into their own subculture. In these early years, there were as yet no Lithuanian organizations but a number of operating Polish ones. As soon as the rift between Lithuanians and Poles appeared, the Lithuanian immigrants began to form their own groups. These organizations were an integral part of the life of the immigrants and served several important functions. Mary Treudley has described these functions in the following way:

these organizations cushion the shock of the transition... by creating a semblance of the earlier social setting. They provide a time and place of seeing familiar faces and hearing the language of one's childhood... Still another cushioning effect comes from the fact that the organization itself is undergoing Americanization.. [4](#)

The first Lithuanian organizations were exactly that, places to see familiar faces. In 1885, Lithuanian fraternal societies appeared almost simultaneously in Pittstone and Plymouth, both in Pennsylvania. These were quickly followed by similar groups in Waterbury, Connecticut;

Chicago, Illinois; Mahoney City, Pennsylvania; and Brooklyn, New York. These groups provided meeting places but did little else, except march in parades.[5](#)

The first Lithuanian organizations were exactly that, period was the Lithuanian Alliance of America founded in 1886. Initially, it was established to unify all the Lithuanian organizations in existence. The major problems it tried to deal with were economic ones. It supported its poorer members and worked to improve the educational level of its members. During that same year, the Alliance split into two different factions. The more liberal group continued to function under the old name while the more conservative and religious side formed the Lithuanian Roman Catholic Alliance of America.[6](#) Both organizations continue to function. They are about equal in members and assets as is shown by these figures for 1955:[7](#)

	Lith. Alliance of America	Lith. Roman Catholic Alliance of America
Members	11,946	10,233
Capital	\$3,045,660.06	\$2,,273,387.46

Insurance Policies	\$6,198,302.00	\$6,559,522.00
Number of branches	312	207

The first Lithuanian newspaper was started by Mykolas Tvarauskas, who had participated in the 1863 uprising against the Tsarist regime in Lithuania. He published his newspaper in 1897 in New York. It lasted only six months before it folded because of financial difficulties. He then tried his hand at publishing American books translated into Lithuanian. In this, he was more successful.

Between 1892 and 1899, twelve Lithuanian newspapers appeared in America. Following a pattern that was emerging in the Lithuanian subculture, six of the twelve newspapers were edited and published by priests.⁸ The number of Lithuanian books in the United States also began to increase at this time. Between 1885 and 1900, there were 193 Lithuanian books published: 59 were fiction; 22, history; 14, religious; 12, political; 11, educational; 11, drama. There were 14 almanacs and 7 textbooks, while the remainder dealt with a variety of subjects.⁹

Much of this early organizational work was performed by priests. This, perhaps, can be explained by two factors. First of all, priests had more time to devote to such activities. Since a twelve hour workday was still the rule, laymen simply lacked the time to establish and manage such organizations. The second factor takes into account the fact that priests were usually the best educated of the Lithuanian immigrants. In Lithuania in the nineteenth century, a seminary was the only institution of higher education available to many persons. This education may have made priests more aware of their heritage and culture and, therefore, more willing to continue the Lithuanian traditions in America.

The first concern of the clergy was to establish parishes. They realized that "the church subsystem is the repository of the sacred values as well as of the national attitudes of the original society."¹⁰ The first Lithuanian church was built in Pittstone, Pa. and was named after the Lithuanian saint, Kazimieras. It was followed by parishes in Mahoney City, Pa., Hazelton, Pa., Brooklyn, N.Y., Plymouth, Pa., Baltimore, Md., all these were founded between 1886 and 1889.¹¹ In 1906, the American Lithuanian Roman Catholic Federation was founded with the purpose of uniting all Catholic organizations. It emphasized education and encouraged the establishment of Lithuanian schools. A convention of priests established the Lithuanian Priests' League which began to publish the newspaper, *Draugas (The Friend)*, which today still enjoys an extensive circulation. Between 1915 and 1925, three orders of nuns were founded. The first of these were the Sisters of St. Casimir. They were followed by the Sisters of Jesus Crucified in 1924, and by the Franciscan Sisters in the following year. An order of priests, the Marian Fathers, was also established during the same period.

The early organizations had few goals besides that of friendship. This was drastically altered in 1906 when, in Philadelphia, the first politically oriented meeting was held. Some 169 delegates from the various Lithuanian colonies met and after lengthy discussions adopted the following resolutions:

1. that Lithuania should receive a constitution which guaranteed freedom of speech, press, and the right of peaceful assembly;
2. that Lithuania should become autonomous with Vilnius as her capital;
3. that all Lithuanian cultural and historical treasures should be returned to Lithuania from Russia;
4. that all Lithuanian political prisoners should be granted amnesty.¹²

In 1914, another Lithuanian conference was called. Every group with 5,000 or more members was entitled to send two delegates, while those with fewer — but more than a thousand — were entitled to one. The some 300 delegates adopted a petition demanding autonomy for Lithuania. Eventually, this petition was signed by more than 500,000 persons.¹³ After Lithuania regained her independence in 1918, a delegation of Lithuanians presented President Harding with a petition in 1921 containing a million signatures asking that the United States recognize Lithuania *de jure*. Recognition was granted in 1922. To further assist an independent Lithuania, Lithuanians in America bought 1.8 million dollars worth of Lithuanian bonds in the course of just three years.

While Lithuanians in America watched with great pride developments in their homeland, it appears that these developments tended to weaken their own organizational life. There was no longer a single unifying factor which could bring all of them together. If he missed his native language and culture, he could easily solve this problem by returning to Lithuania. As a matter of fact, 46,000 persons did just that.¹⁴ After 1918, fewer Lithuanians entered the United States than left it to return to Lithuania. The obvious result of this emigration and absence of unifying goals was a weakening of all Lithuanian organizations.

This dormant period ended abruptly when the Soviet Union annexed Lithuania in 1940. The White House was immediately flooded with telegrams and letters. President Roosevelt responded with the promise that "Lithuania's independence has only temporarily been put aside. Time will come and Lithuania will be free again."

Lithuanian organizations in America resumed their work with renewed fervor. In 1941, representatives of various organizations decided to form a common organization which would support the United States in the war and, after the war,

work for Lithuania's independence. This was the American Lithuanian Council which is still very active. It maintains an information center in New York where it publishes a bulletin. The council emphasizes relations with members of congress. It supports the work of the Supreme Committee for the Liberation of Lithuania and the Lithuanian broadcasts over the Voice of America.

Other groups collected funds to help war stricken Lithuanians. Of the three organizations most active in collecting funds the best work was done by the Catholic organization which collected \$590,136.91.¹⁵ In 1944, a single relief organization was formed, the United American Lithuanian Relief Fund. The other agencies agreed to stop their work and were replaced by the common fund, with the Rev. Juozas Končius as president. According to its by-laws, adopted in April of that year, this organization was to be non-political and non-religious. Its aims were to help the people of Lithuania, especially refugees and deportees.

The first step the Fund had to take was to register with the President's War Relief Control Board. This was opposed by the director of the Board, Joseph Davies, who had served as ambassador to Moscow and felt that the United States should cater to the demands of the Soviet regime. His opposition was overcome and the Fund was finally registered. The next step was to register with the National War Fund which could be expected to supply many of the supplies needed for the work of relief. This registration was vehemently opposed by the Russian Relief Fund. This time, the American Catholic Episcopate assisted not only by expressing their support, but also with a donation of \$5,000. Once again, the Fund was registered. But this was not the final difficulty and even greater obstacles were still to be faced. The Soviet government, which then controlled Lithuania, refused the offers of help. When the Fund turned to the United States government, it merely suggested that the Lithuanians distribute their relief through the Russian Relief Fund. Food, clothing, medicine, to the value of \$100,000, were given for transmission to Lithuania, but it is not known whether this shipment ever reached its destination. Again, the Fund tried to send \$20,000 worth of medicine to four Lithuanian orphanages, through the American Red Cross in Moscow. It was then given to the Soviet Red Cross, but this shipment too disappeared.

At the same time, the Fund was successful in helping Lithuanian refugees in Germany and other countries. During the ten years following the war, it supplied them with \$760,000 in money and with 2.7 million dollars worth of goods.¹⁶ The work still continues and in 1968, the Fund was supporting almost 6,000 Lithuanian families throughout the world, many of them in Siberia. Probably the best evidence for the success of this organization is provided by the Communists themselves. They have never ceased to attack it.

The main beneficiaries of the Fund were refugees in Germany. Most of them were to end up in the United States. A survey conducted in 1947 found that 55% of the refugees were males. Significantly, 24% were 18 years old and under, while those 45 and over amounted to only 14%. Thus, 62% were between 18 and 44 years of age, which explains the high birth rate and the low death rate, in spite of a poor diet.¹⁷ The youth of the average refugee would also help him to adjust to his new life in America.

The first group of displaced persons, containing 138 Lithuanians, arrived in New York on October 30, 1948, on the ship *General Black*. In the following two years, 27,087 Lithuanian refugees entered the country.¹⁸ Most of the arrivals were met by representatives of the United American Lithuanian Relief Fund. Many of the newcomers were given shelter and jobs by the earlier Lithuanian immigrants.

When the Lithuanian refugees came to the United States, they joined many of the existing organizations, especially churches. They also made use of schools and printing presses. Unfortunately, the older immigrants soon began to harbor a certain hostility toward the recent arrivals. They thought the refugees were not appreciative enough of the institutions built with dollars earned with so much difficulty. They were further offended when the new immigrants began to form new organizations and continued those established in refugee camps. It took a number of years before the two became better acquainted and early friendships were resumed.¹⁹

Assimilation for these refugees would take much more time than it did for the early immigrants, that is, assuming that it will occur at all. A number of conditions are necessary for assimilation to take place. These are: acquiring a facility in the use of English, making friends with native Americans, becoming a citizen, earning a living, utilizing abilities and talents, participating in community affairs, and contributing to the cultural and social life of American society.²⁰

One Lithuanian journal boldly claimed that the refugees "whether they are actively involved in Lithuanian activities or not, would never become assimilated into the American culture."²¹ Is this a safe assertion to make? Perhaps this question might be answered if we examine the recent immigrants and how they have fitted in their new environment.

A major factor in the process of assimilation is the making of friendships with native Americans. Sociologists give six basic reasons why immigrants do not form American friendships: 1. They have different cultural interests; 2. Often there is some antipathy for foreigners; 3. A lack of money prevents entertaining and socializing; 4. There is a lack of time; 5. A language difficulty exists; 6. Persons find it difficult to meet people.²² Of the six, there are two factors which, it seems, have prevented Lithuanians in particular from forming American friendships. These are differences in cultural interests and the language difficulty which still exists to some degree. Lithuanians regularly attend Lithuanian plays, concerts, and dinners. There is little need to attend American events since there are more than enough Lithuanian ones. Lithuanians generally

have an adequate facility in the use of English, however, many still feel more at home in Lithuanian. Of course, those who came to America as children and the second generation Lithuanians find English the easier of the two.

Another important factor governing assimilation is employment. In a study done after World War II, a control group of 721 refugees was interviewed. The study found that 520 of this number returned to their former occupations or professions after reaching their new home.²³ This study need not be accurate, but even so, it is clear that many professionals did not return to their previous occupations.

One of the factors which prevents some from returning to their previous occupation is age. Though they may have been highly educated, different professional regulations in the United States forced many to seek more menial jobs because the time and money needed for retraining was lacking.²⁴ Some emotional factors may have been involved as well. Physical hardships had left many refugees in a poor physical and mental condition. The added burdens of initial adjustment, economic uncertainty, anxiety over their future in America, and concern about the future of friends and relatives abroad all worked against the refugee.

The highest percentage of those returning to their original professions was found among physicians, as 98.6% were soon practicing medicine again. The next highest percentage is among academicians, with 89 % returning to the same profession, then come artists at 78%, engineers and musicians both at 67%, followed by journalists at 48.9%, but only because many found jobs on ethnic newspapers. Suffering the most were lawyers, who found the entire legal system different, allowing only 16.7% to return to law.²⁵

As can be seen, the majority of the new refugees were able to return to their previous professions. This is most likely due to the fine personal qualities and rich backgrounds of many of the refugees. According to Donald Kent, "In the entire history of immigration it is doubtful if there was ever so large a proportion of well-educated and talented persons among any other large group of immigrants." ²⁶

Another factor influencing assimilation is housing. The more he is segregated from native Americans, the longer it will take for assimilation. One study of Lithuanians in Pittsburgh found that in 1930, 59% of the Lithuanians were residentially segregated from the native white populations. In 1950, this figure had fallen to 50.3%. In Philadelphia, the same study found a 57.3% segregation in 1930, with a drop to 47.0% in 1950. This same high level was also found in Boston and Chicago with segregation decreasing only slightly between 1930 and 1950.²⁷

Another factor is marriage. Maurice Davie in *Refugees in America* found that refugees usually married other refugees. Of the males he studied, 62.4% married other refugees, while 71.4% of the females did the same. A small number married immigrants who had arrived before 1933. The percentages here are 5.9% for the males and 10.5% for the females. Simple subtraction shows that 30.2% of the male refugees married native Americans while only 17.0% of the women did so.²⁸

As has been noted, the influx of refugees following World War II started a new era for Lithuanian organizations in America. Before World War II, most Lithuanian organizations were small, autonomous, and had no major goals. After the war, most shared the goal of restoring Lithuanian independence. Arnold and Caroline Rose in the book *America Divided* present the following theory concerning clubs and social organizations.

Frequently they have charitable or reform purposes, but they accomplish little or nothing of what they set out to achieve. They drain off a great deal of the minority members' spare time, some of which they would prefer to see in social action rather than sociability. The frustration is manifested in the death rate and splintering rate of clubs... There is one type of voluntary association for which most of the above statements do not hold — this is the protest or defense organization.²⁹

If any single factor is responsible for keeping Lithuanian organizations alive and functioning it is precisely their "protest or defense" nature.

The first group to organize along these lines after the war was the Lithuanian World Community. It is the unifying force of all the separate Lithuanian organizations. The Lithuanian World Community was first established in Germany in the displaced persons camps. It was carried over to America and today is one of the more successful organizations in the United States, but it has also spread to every free nation in the world with a Lithuanian population.³⁰ Its goals are to foster education and culture and to preserve the Lithuanian heritage and language.³¹

Many other organizations were formed after the war. Teachers, journalists, writers, artists, doctors, engineers and architects, agronomists, nurses, foresters, veterinarians, lawyers established their own professional associations. Veterans and former political prisoners are also organized. There is a sports' club in every city with a larger Lithuanian population. Cultural institutions founded in the United States include: the Lithuanian Studies Institute, the World Lithuanian Archives, the Lithuanian Bibliographic Service, and the Lithuanian Art Institute.³²

Probably one of the more political organizations to form in recent years is BATUN, or Baltic Appeal to the United Nations. It was formed in February of 1966 soon after a Lithuanian protest march upon the United Nations building. It is a coalition of Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian groups.

Lithuanian education in the United States has also grown stronger. In 1952 a 3 million dollar high school was built in Chicago called Maria High School. At present, it has about 1,200 students. In 1955 the sisters of the three Lithuanian orders were teaching in 60 parish schools. The Sisters of St. Kazimieras had 312 teaching nuns, the Franciscan Sisters had 172, and the Sisters of Jesus Crucified had 66. There are 125 Lithuanian parishes in the United States and almost half of them have their own schools. The value of this property is about 50 million dollars.³³

Lithuanian periodicals and newspapers also continue to grow. The list of publications started since World War II includes: the cultural monthly *Aidai (Echoes)*, the general magazines *Lietuvių Dienos (Lithuanian Days)*, and *Užuolanka (The Twisting Road)*, two children's magazines and four periodicals for youth, a veteran's magazine, a forester's magazine, a magazine for priests, and an engineering magazine. The list also includes the political journals *Lietuva (Lithuania)*, *Darbas (Work)*, *J Laisvę (Toward Freedom)*, *Sėja (The Sowing)*, *Varpas (The Bell)*, and *Tėvynės Sargas (The Guardian of the Fatherland)*, and at least five religious periodicals.³⁴ Perhaps the greatest literary achievement is a 35 volume encyclopedia written in Lithuanian and now complete.

Not everyone, however, in spite of such figures, regards the future with optimism. Youth organizations in particular have been subjected to severe criticism.

The generation of Lithuanians born in America is in the great part assimilated into the American culture. They neither speak Lithuanian well nor do they identify themselves as Lithuanians. The minority that does participate in Lithuanian choirs, dance groups, youth organizations, etc., does so only of respect for their parents and their heritage. This sentiment does not lead to any idealism or sacrifice.³⁵

The organizations referred to include the Ateitininkai (literally, Federation of the Future, one branch being an association of Catholic university students and a second, of secondary school students), the Lithuanian Boy and Girl Scouts with branches of Academic Scouts, and the Lithuanian Students Association. While what the above writer says is to an extent true, there nevertheless remains a strong core of young Lithuanians.

In 1966 the first World Lithuanian Youth Congress was held which attracted hundreds of young Lithuanians from all parts of the world. More than \$95,000 were collected to support it. On October 24, 1970 a group of Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian youths protested outside the *New York Times* building until the *Times* agreed to give fair representation to the Baltic nations question. The incident was reported over the NBC evening news. Again, on November 27, 1970, 250 Lithuanian students marched to the Federal Building in Cleveland to protest the refusal of asylum to Simas Kudirka. Similar protests were held in Chicago, Boston, New York, Detroit, Wash-inton, and Philadelphia. These actions were covered by the networks and many newspapers. Many of the participants in these demonstrations were either too young to remember their native country or were already second generation Lithuanians.

This paper has thus far been a history of Lithuanians and their organizations in America. More interesting, however, would be a study of the effect of these organizations in preventing or retarding assimilation. I would like to end by presenting some data important for dealing with this question. I have studied five different groups in two different organizations in Detroit and would like to present the results. One might notice that Detroit has chapters of many of the organizations we have mentioned. It enjoys one major advantage over other cities. Nearby, largely as the result of efforts of persons living in the Detroit area, is located a camp owned by the Lithuanian Catholic Federation, which has become a major center for youth activities of all types.

In 1965 there were 24 boys in the Detroit Lithuanian Scout troop. Their ages ranged from 11 to 18. Five years later, 10 of them — 41.6% — belonged to no Lithuanian organization and in fact had lost contact with any Lithuanian influences other than those which might still exist in the home. Three of them — 12.5% — are presently in the armed forces, but were active in Lithuanian organizations before leaving. Seven — 29.1% — are still actively involved not only in scouting but in at least one other organization. Four — 16.6% — have left scouting but are involved in some other Lithuanian organization.

1964, 15 persons graduated from the eight grade of the Detroit Lithuanian Saturday school. Of the 15, 4 — 25.5% — have completely dropped out; one — 4.5% — is in the armed forces, but was active before leaving; and 10 — 66.6% — are involved with at least one Lithuanian organization that meets regularly or have at least married another Lithuanian.

In 1965, 13 persons completed the same school. Five — 38.5% — are no longer active, while 8 — 61.5% — are.

Another 13 persons finished the Lithuanian school in 1966. Of these, 2 — 15.4% — are no longer active; 1 — 7.7% — is inactive because of circumstances at home; 1 — 7.7% — is in the Armed Forces; 9 — 69.3% — are still very active in all types of Lithuanian activities.

In 1968, again 13 persons finished the eight grade. Of the graduating class, 2 — 15.4% — have disappeared entirely while 11 — 84.6% — are still involved with at least one Lithuanian activity.

From this information alone, it is impossible to say what effect the Lithuanian organizations have. Perhaps the more decisive factor is the family situation at home. The data do suggest that about a quarter of the members of a youth organization can be expected to drop out once they reach an age when decisions are no longer heavily influenced by

parents. About half of the members, at least over a comparatively short period of time, can be expected to remain active. These figures will be very much influenced by the group currently in military service. Whether many of them will return to the Lithuanian communities after a long separation remains to be seen.

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- 32 Ibid., p. 66.
- 33 Ibid., pp. 50-52.
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- 35 A. Kučas, p. 5.