

# bridges



LITHUANIAN-AMERICAN NEWS JOURNAL

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January/February 2021

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LITHUANIAN-AMERICAN  
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# bridges

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## from the editor

Dear readers,

As you very well know, this year, the Lithuanian American Community commemorates its 70th anniversary. It would be great and useful to us all to celebrate the anniversary by remembering the LAC history and the most prominent people involved in creating that history. It would be wonderful if you could contribute by writing your stories to Bridges.

We all know that the LAC was established to help us continue to maintain and foster our "Lithuanianness." However, "maintain" and "foster" are just dry words if they are not infused with the illustrations of our Lithuanian life. Wouldn't it be interesting to read stories about the establishment of Lithuanian centers, schools, and various Lithuanian landmarks (monuments, churches, houses where famous Lithuanians lived, businesses founded by Lithuanians, etc.)? It would also be interesting to hear stories told by the oldest members of your community. They could answer a few questions - what LAC events over the past 70 years they value the most, which of them helped them or their children, and why, which LAC activities helped Lithuania, and why. Perhaps young people could talk to their parents or grandparents, ask them about the history and current activities in the community in your district and write to Bridges in English.

We do not need much. Stories do not have to be very long, formal, or detailed. Not all of them have to be serious. They could be fun and funny. Even a page-long essay about a member of your community, an event, or a landmark would be like a little piece of a huge canvas of our history - Lithuanian American history.

The LAC publishes ten 32-page magazines a year. It means we could share with our readers about a hundred of your stories. We can share those stories among ourselves, and we can learn from them. We also have to remember that our future generations will be able to read about us.

It would be ideal if your essays were in English and were illustrated with three or four photos (300 dpi jpeg). If you have any questions, please write to me at [kariledalia@yahoo.com](mailto:kariledalia@yahoo.com).

Sincerely,

Karilė Vaitkutė  
Editor



# LET'S CELEBRATE THE COMMUNITY TOGETHER!



We welcomed the new year 2021 looking forward to celebrating the 70th anniversary of the LAC. The successful LAC history was created by Lithuanians of all ages and generations - our grandparents, great-grandparents, parents, and us. The Act of Establishment of the Lithuanian American Community was adopted by the Interim Organizing Committee and was officially proclaimed and solemnly signed during the Lithuanian American Community celebration on November 18, 1951, in New York.

Today, we are proud that the Lithuanian American Community is the largest and strongest Lithuanian organization outside Lithuania, which actively contributed to the restoration of Lithuania's independence and continues to assist Lithuania in resolving important economic and political issues.

"The future of the community in the United States of America (as elsewhere) depends on us. <...> The idea of the Lithuanian Community is great. It seems to us that the fate of Lithuanianness coincides with it. That is why all living and conscious Lithuanians should support and develop it in every way," wrote Stasys Barzdukas, one of the LAC founders and the first President of the LAC National (then called Central) Executive Committee. (Aidai ( Echoes), 1957, No. 1 (96))

In commemorating the anniversary of the Community, we would like everyone to find their own connection with

this symbolic date -- a personal story, an emotion, and/or tradition of celebrating. We are not celebrating one date. We are celebrating a 70-year history that we have all created together. Therefore, throughout the year, we will be offering events, exhibitions, competitions, commemorations, and projects and invite you to share your stories.

We will seek to honor our history, celebrate the present, and encourage the creation of a successful future for the Lithuanian American Community. Mark three dates on your calendar: February 16, March 11, and September 24-26. Festive events will take place in various places and communities; they will require friends, tricolor flags, and a good mood and love for Lithuania and our community.

Let's spread the word about the Lithuanian American Community, be proud of its successful existence, encourage people to join, create a memorable present and future of the community, where every Lithuanian or person who works for Lithuanians is held the most important.

If you have ideas and would like to join the celebration preparation committee, please write to us at [executive.president@javlb.org](mailto:executive.president@javlb.org) or [spec.projektai@javlb.org](mailto:spec.projektai@javlb.org)

More information is available at [www.javlb.org](http://www.javlb.org) and <https://www.facebook.com/JAVLietuviuBendruomene>

## 2020 Brought Ebbs and Flows to the Child's Gate to Learning Activities and Projects Ramunė Kubilius



Children from the Šypsniukas center went on an excursion to the Baltic Sea

Given the disruptions most of us experienced in our lives due to the pandemic during 2020, it is understandable that Lithuanian American organizations also had to change their plans and activities. In doing a "year in review" exercise, the Child's Gate to Learning can track how it was affected, what changed, and what was accomplished between the first 2020 joint officers' and directors' in-person meeting on January 25th in Lemont, Illinois and the last (virtual) meeting of the year on December 10th.

First, to re-cap, the Child's Gate to Learning (in Lithuanian, *Vaiko vartai į mokslą*) is a volunteer nonprofit organization based in Illinois, with supporters throughout the United States. The organization's roots go back to November 1997 when educator Rita Venclovas galvanized colleagues after she and others attended a session of the 10th Lithuanian Symposium on Arts and Sciences held in Chicago, Illinois. They were deeply moved by what they heard. Speakers from Lithuania described that children of many at-risk families were not attending school. (At the time, these children were called "street children" and

social systems were not yet in place to work with the truant children or their families). The Lithuanian American grassroots group sought ways to help from the U.S., formalized into a nonprofit organization in 1998, and established a support model for those who work with Lithuania's children, particularly those from troubled homes. During the years since its founding, the organization has provided annual financial support to centers. A special Child's Gate to Learning committee wrote five character-building programs. Seminars were organized and financed in Lithuania for the centers' staff. Grant support was sought to fund various special center projects.

In 2020, the Child's Gate to Learning provided support for nine after school centers in Vilnius, Kaunas, Kazlų Rūda, Rukla, Rumbonys, Šateikiai, Užpaliai, Varėna, and Žemaičių Kalvarija that continued to work with children from at-risk families, even during the pandemic and quarantines. The Child's Gate to Learning support, usually spent on food for after school meals, school and crafts supplies, and hygiene products, expanded to include food





The Child's Gate to Learning officers on a rainy day in October at the World Lithuanian Center fair

for children and their families, personal protective equipment (masks and gloves), sanitizing supplies, and gas in cases when centers' staff used personal automobiles to deliver food and supplies to children's homes.

The annual update session of February 9th at the World Lithuanian Center in Lemont was one of the last "normal" in-person events that the Child's Gate to Learning was able to organize in 2020. During the session, officers provided highlights about the 2019 activities and financial support. Artūras Žilys, then director of the World Lithuanian Center in Lemont, Illinois (who later returned to live in Lithuania), shared memories of his visit to the organization-supported center in Šateikiai. He was impressed by the dedicated and child-centered work the center does. Young 2019 summer volunteers provided personal stories about their volunteer experience in Lithuania, saying that they enjoyed working and playing with the children. They shared that after hearing about many children's challenging home lives, they learned to appreciate their own families and what they have all the more.

## Volunteers

The Child's Gate to Learning is a volunteer-based organization. Officers and directors are volunteers, and the organization could not conduct its fundraising activities in the United States without volunteers who help out at fundraising events - lunches, evenings, and fairs. They staff booths, bake cookies and cakes, and, when needed, as in the fall of 2020, prepare fundraising letters for mailing. Volunteer coordinators conduct fundraising activities in Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia, Washington DC., and Sunny Hills (Florida).

A successful volunteer initiative began in 2000 when the Child's Gate to Learning officers began training ses-

sions for the Lithuanian language-speaking volunteers, now totaling 110, and coordinated their "match-ups" to work for several weeks at the supported centers in Lithuania. The 2019 volunteers who spoke at the February 9, 2020 update session were from a larger group of high school upperclassmen and new graduates who had prepared together and traveled to Lithuania with a volunteer adult coordinator, then separated into smaller groups to work in five supported centers throughout Lithuania. The volunteers' families supported their trip expenses. It is hoped that a group can again begin planning and preparations for a volunteer trip to Lithuania.

Since the Child's Gate to Learning first began working in Lithuania, it has been heartening to see a positive movement - the growth of local volunteerism. In recent years, Lithuanian American and Lithuanian young volunteers have worked together in the centers and at their summer camps. The value of volunteerism is felt not only by the centers' staff and children but also by the volunteers themselves. At the beginning of the 2020/2021 school year, an invitation extended by the Vilties Angelas (Angel of Hope) center in Vilnius, for locals to come work as volunteers, included these words (translated from Lithuanian): "For those who like working with (and serving) children, have the time and the willingness, it won't be easy, but it certainly will be interesting."

## In Lithuania: A Glimpse at January to December 2020

The Child's Gate to Learning officers stay in regular touch with the organization coordinator in Lithuania, Lina, a social worker based in Vilnius, as well as with directors and staff at supported centers. Communication in 2020 became even more important, as it provided the Child's Gate to Learning officers with firsthand accounts of how the centers in various Lithuanian regions were operating, especially since the peaks and waves of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting quarantines differed in the U.S. and Lithuania.



The Vilties Angelas in May after the first quarantine ended in Vilnius



A sand sculpture on the Baltic seashore

The year started normally enough, with the centers commemorating Lithuanian historic days, January 13th and February 16th. Inga from the supported center in Šateikiai sent a brief update and photos of January-February activities: holiday news sharing, homework assignment completion, life skills lessons, January 13th historical event commemorations, pre-Lenten masks, and cake and pizza baking. Making meals is a popular activity.

By March, official word came that after-school centers that work with children and the disabled, as well as senior centers, were ordered to cease activities (initially) from March 13-27, 2020 and staff must work on non-contact duties only. So began routines at the Vilties angelas and other centers of letter writing and activity packets put in bags of food that needed to be delivered (in their own cars) if families could not come to pick them up.

In the Vilties Angelas website posting in April, Lina reminisced about what was missing from the life of the center when there weren't any in-person meetings with the center's regular young visitors. During quarantine, contact was maintained by phone, internet, and through notes in meal parcels. The centers in Šateikiai, Varėna, and Rumbonys sent word that all were well so far. As the sisters in Rumbonys shared, though food and personal protective equipment were important to their center families, prayer also has value and they remembered the Child's Gate to Learning benefactors in their prayer on Monday after Easter.

In mid-April, Dalia wrote from Varėna about how the Svajonė (Dream) center's children were keeping busy during the quarantine. She was pleased to report that the

children's mothers were doing crafts with them, preparing meals and treats, and that older brothers and sisters were playing nicely with their younger siblings. The week before Easter, hot meals were delivered. The parcels included puzzles and coloring books for children to work on during their spare time (time not spent on school assignments). She wrote that although the center staff misses the children, all will survive this. The efforts of social workers were targeted towards virtually engaging their center's children, making sure they did their homework (and sometimes they made food deliveries). The children responded with drawings, often with the words "we miss you".

On May 18th, Lithuanian after-school centers were allowed to resume their activities. When they re-opened, there were new limitations, appropriate to the centers' physical facilities. The Vilties Angelas center captioned one photo as "masked everyday life". Social worker Dalia wrote that at the Svajonė center, four to six children



In Varėna





Zoom seminar in September with participants from the U.S. and Lithuania. The project was funded by the Lithuanian Foundation

from different families came four days a week - all that was permitted in a center of their size. Everyone was careful and followed guidelines, including measuring out the five square meters to separate each person. Staff oversaw children doing their homework, enjoying arts and crafts as well as outside games, and meals were provided, as was the custom.

Plans moved forward for day camps and away camps for the summer in the hopes that by then, the routine of new guidelines would be well-established. Sites and activities were selected with safety in mind. On June 1st, the children of the Sau center in Rukla participated in a local pro-

ject commemorating International Children's Day. They drew flowers on Rukla sidewalks and back at the center, drew posters to depict children and society's future with rights to have healthy and safe lives.

In mid-June, Inga wrote about the summer day camp in Šateikiai, called "Super". Children were divided into two groups and enjoyed different activities supervised with assistance from the teachers at the local school. One group made fishing poles and tried their luck at the nearby small lake, and the other group used creative talents to decorate t-shirts.

During the Vilties Vėrinėliai (Little Strings of Hope) center's day camp, called "Hope, Faith, and Love", children and youths finished the school year together with activities, discussions, and outings in and around Žemaičių Kalvarija. Family members were invited to join in for some of the activities.

On July 6th (Lithuania's statehood day), the Vilties Angelas youth group traveled with adult staff from Vilnius to the Baltic Sea for a school year-end camp featuring bike rides and educational excursions. The center's younger children's group camp began on July 15th, when camp counselors brought supplies to the group campsite in the village of Bijūnai. On the next day, the young campers arrived to enjoy games and new discoveries. Each group brought home experiences that helped the children and youths grow.

Educational specialists Saida and Virginija wrote about



In Šateikiai



the summer camp of the Užpaliai school center Saulutė on July 30-31 and August 3-4. In days that flew by, the happy young campers, driven safely by driver Žydrūnas, traveled to a petting zoo and a bird sanctuary, swam in a lake, and went to a planetarium.

The children of the Šypsniukas (Smile) center traveled from Kazlų Rūda in three small vans for their camp near the Baltic Sea on August 4-7. They visited the Klaipėda Zoo and the beautiful Catholic Church, Mary Star of the Sea. It was the first time some of the children saw the Baltic Sea. Later in the fall, the LRT, the national radio network, broadcasted a report by journalist Vita Ličytė called "Children and the Sea" that featured brief interviews with the center's staff and children. Memories of the summer trip to the Baltic seashore were interspersed with observations about the everyday life at after-school centers.

After a brief summer vacation, the school year began again on September 1. The Vilties Vėrinėliai center's Facebook page featured a sincere message to cherish the center's community spirit.

As the new school year began, social worker Anžela at the Vilties Angelas wrote on the center's website about the challenges and joys of working with the adolescents. The Šateikiai center organized a fall excursion for its young participants to Telšiai, the regional capital of Žemaitija. They visited a village museum and were part of an educational program that helps them learn about the everyday life of another era, including the duties of young animal herders. In October, the Vilties angelas FB page wrote about their new "everyday reality."

At the Vilties Vėrinėliai, artist Vaida coordinated the participation of the center's children in an international poster contest with its theme of "Peace" that was sponsored by the Lions Club (through its Plungė Region chapter). Several submissions were selected to receive prizes.

The Child's Gate to Learning first planned a seminar in May, then re-scheduled for September 25-26 in Vilnius, for a program supported by the Lithuanian Foundation. One officer from Chicago was to be part of the networking professional event. When travel and in-person events had to be canceled, a virtual seminar via Zoom on September 25 became Part 1 (an on-site Part 2 is planned for 2021), with three officers and a director joining in from Chicago. Representatives from all nine supported centers participated in a round-robin discussion of center life during the pandemic. Organization coordinator,



The Child's Gate to Learning annual update session took place in February 2020 at the World Lithuanian Center in Lemont, Illinois. Pictured are some of the 2019 volunteers with coordinator, Daina Čyvas (first from the left.) There were 16 volunteers in all.



The Vilties Vėrinėliai in Žemaičių Kalvarija

Lina, moderated the discussion and psychiatrist, Monika Micevičė, shared her expertise, highlighting the Lithuanian translation of the book, “The Connected Child.”

By the end of October, the Vilties Angelas FB site posting after the first week of quarantine (second round) conveyed the mood. One-on-one consultations with the center’s children were restricted to different spaces throughout the Vilnius Caritas building (in which the center is based) or, often, outside. Student volunteers were studying virtually and were unable to come to work at the center. Consultations among staff were small and held only for the most important matters. That was the daily reality after which, it was hoped, everyone would be more resilient and stronger.

In the fall, while handling the challenges of coordinating staff and children under ever-changing guidelines, centers’ directors were also busy filling out the forms required for the new after-school center accreditation process for centers that receive Lithuanian government funding. By year’s end, the Child’s Gate to Learning received word that three of the larger centers it supports had successfully passed the accreditation process. (In all, there are about 400 after-school centers in Lithuania; only about half applied for accreditation in that first round).

The second quarantine guidelines moved the older children to remote learning, and, for a while, the younger children were still coming to the centers -- doing homework and making holiday decorations. Centers were required to close by mid-December for the winter holiday season, and centers’ staff then were busy trying to virtually conduct some holiday events in lieu of the usual popular in-person festive gatherings. Since many at-risk

families don’t have holiday traditions, as several directors wrote in December, they still wanted to provide something special for the children. They were busy purchasing gifts and arranging their deliveries.

### A Temporary New Normal

During 2020, centers’ staff had to keep adjusting to new government regulations in Lithuania. Meanwhile, in the United States, the Child’s Gate to Learning officers moved forward with modified plans, participating with appropriate distancing in two outdoor events at the World Lithuanian Center in Lemont, Illinois, and conducting a fundraiser by mail. Supporters stopped by the table at the August 30th picnic and left donations. However, the tables filled with packaged home-baked goods and Lithuanian items at the October 18th outdoor fair were not able to be on full display, given the rainy and chilly Chicago weather. Throughout 2020, supporters, often remembering dearly departed family members and friends were generous with donations to the Child’s Gate to Learning. The year ended with a successful fundraiser conducted by mail and organized in lieu of the usual fall in-person fundraiser events. The Child’s Gate to Learning appreciates its benefactors’ generosity. Through them, it will be possible to plan continued support for after-school centers in Lithuania.

There have been challenges but also positive signs of progress. The spirit of volunteerism has grown and is alive and well on both sides of the Atlantic. Over the years, the social work infrastructure in Lithuania has evolved. It is heartwarming to hear from directors of supported after-school centers about success stories. Former center attendees have grown to productive adulthood with professional lives and families. Some now donate or even volunteer at the centers they once attended. Others stay in touch with center staff and share family news.

Still, social problems (truancy, delinquency, substance abuse, depression, and economic challenges) continue to be problematic in Lithuania for at-risk families. After-school centers work with the children from these families to ensure that they stay in school, receive counseling and other support, and learn social and life skills for productive adult life. The Child’s Gate to Learning has guidelines for the type of support it provides centers in Lithuania to help fill gaps in supplies and services not covered by other funding sources the centers receive. 2020 was a challenging year. However, with the help of generous members and benefactors, the Child’s Gate to Learning will move forward in 2021 and will continue supporting centers in their work to ensure a promising future for children and youths from Lithuania’s at-risk families. More information can be found on the website, [www.childgate.org](http://www.childgate.org).



Gifts to children at the Žaliakalnio Centras in Kaunas



# Fighting for Lithuania

## Excerpts from General Stasys Raštikis's Memoirs

A Short Biography of Gen. Stasys Raštikis  
by the Translator, Roland Giedraitis



General Stasys Raštikis

It is a bit curious, maybe even coincidental, that Stasys Raštikis (b.1896, Lithuania – d.1985, Los Angeles, CA) began his military career as a Junior Lieutenant in the new Lithuanian army in 1918 and finished his career as a General. His life paralleled the ups and downs of the newly independent country until the final farewell to Lithuania in 1944. In his life, Raštikis experienced the terror of close combat and bombardment; the joy of a happy marriage and three healthy daughters; the elation of rapid advancement in the ranks; and the deep sadness of not only losing his country but also his three daughters.

Novels and even a TV series could be written about his joys and sorrows. I will mention some pertinent moments of his life. Anticipating conscription to the Russian Imperial Army in 1915, he volunteered anticipating better treatment than a draftee. For one who had only middle school school education, he did well. After basic army training, he completed non-commissioned, then officer training. He was awarded the rank of praporshchik or a junior officer in the Imperial Russian Army. He mainly served in the Caucasus front.

As the Czarist Army was disintegrating due to the Communist revolution, Stasys Raštikis left the ranks to return to his native Lithuania. He entered the Kaunas Seminary to be a priest, but his native land was in disarray. Lithuanian leaders decided this was an opportunity to declare independence which was done on February 16, 1918. The Soviets and Poles had other ideas.

A call was put out for all former soldiers, especially officers. Raštikis left the seminary to fight for his country.

He fought against the Poles and the Bolsheviks. He was severely wounded in a battle in what is now Latvia and taken prisoner where he spent 20 months as a POW in Soviet military hospitals, concentration camps, and in the Lubyanka prison in Moscow. Finally, in 1921 during a mutual prisoner exchange, he was allowed to return to Lithuania where he was welcomed as a hero.

He rejoined the army as an officer. Again, due to his diligence he advanced quickly. He was sent to Germany to attend an advanced officer staff training school where he spent almost two years. Upon return, he was promoted to Lt. Colonel.

He also found time for some social life. He met and married the niece of President Antanas Smetona: Elena Marija Smetonaitė, a teacher. The connection to the President did not hurt his career even though the two were at odds over some issues. Eventually, he was promoted to General and Chief of the Armed services.

He vigorously fought to modernize and streamline the armed forces. He also sought to keep the army out of politics. One example: when the civilian judges found somebody guilty with the penalty of death, they called upon the army to provide a firing squad. Raštikis was very much against this practice. It was bad for morale and the image of the army to the public. He wanted to relate more closely to the people with army open houses and military concerts. This made him popular.

When World War II started, the Soviets attacked Poland. They occupied not only eastern Poland but also the coveted Vilnius region. Raštikis was part of the delegation that flew to Moscow to negotiate the return of Vilnius. They succeeded but with a price. The Soviets wanted to station 20,000 of their troops in Lithuania. The Lithuanians agreed since guarantees were made not to interfere with the civilian rule. The Soviets did not keep their promises. The country was occupied in 1940 forcing the Lithuanian army to change their uniforms to Soviet ones. Raštikis, fearing arrest, after agonizing discussions with his wife, escaped to Germany.

He returned when the Nazis attacked Russia through Lithuania. Again, there was a call for an independent country but the Germans refused. They first asked then demanded that Lithuania would recruit a Waffen SS legion to help the Germans. With Raštikis in the lead, the Lithuanians refused unless it was under their control and used for the fight for Lithuanian independence. It never happened. The Soviets were winning the war.

During the Soviet occupation, when Raštikis was in Germany, the Soviets arrested his wife and kidnapped his daughters sending them to Siberia. His wife, who was held separately, freed herself during the chaotic Soviet withdrawal. She and Raštikis fled to Germany to await the end of the war. They were in Regensburg, Bavaria when

the Americans arrived. Life followed in DP camps along with thousands of other Lithuanians who fled.

In 1949 they immigrated to the US. where eventually he found employment as a teacher of Russian to the American armed forces until his retirement. He died in Los Angeles in 1985, never seeing his daughters. His remains were returned to the newly independent Lithuania in 1993 and reburied with full military honors.



Volume 1 of „Kovose dėl Lietuvos“ by Stasys Raštikis.

*This is an excerpt from Gen. Stasys Raštikis' memoir book "Kovose dėl Lietuvos" ("Fighting for Lithuania"). At this point, he had only completed middle school education in Zarasai.*

I wanted to learn more. I thought of entering a surveyor school in Pskov or a feldsher (tr. paramedic) school in Vilnius. The problem was there was no money. I worked for a while in the Dūkštas railroad station baggage office, then in a cooperative store. With the earned money, I purchased books and manuals. I worked, and I studied. In the meantime, the First World War started. The Rus-



sians began mobilizing men and horses. Women cried as their men were marched off to war but such scenes did not bother me. I had read many historical books, and in my young head, I had a romantic view of war. This was reinforced by Russian war propaganda. Illustrated journals printed long sequences of officers and soldiers who were called “our heroes.” They had all distinguished themselves in war and were awarded the St. George’s cross and medals for their valor. There were also legendary heroes such as the cossack Kuzma Kriuckov who, during one battle, all by himself killed 11 or 14 Germans. Kriuckov’s image was not only in newspapers and journals, but also on cigarette packets and candy boxes. I have to confess that the military life, as I could comprehend from books and war propaganda, instilled in me a desire to also distinguish myself. The war did not scare me but actually attracted me. At this time, young men were not being drafted so I could wait. However, it could happen soon. If the conscription is inevitable, then it’s probably better that I enlist voluntarily, perhaps with a few privileges which the draftees would not have. I discussed this with my father, and he agreed. I traveled to Zarasai where I placed my request and was accepted. The point was noted that I was a volunteer and a bit educated. I was assigned to the 75th infantry regiment whose reserve battalion was in the Varėna artillery training grounds. Varėna at that time was full of Russian troops, and all the barracks were full of soldiers. The town of Varėna was rich and lively. The town Jews were doing good “gesheft” or business. There were eateries, tea parlors, beer halls, sandwich shops, and, of course, regular stores. The Varėna railroad station was a couple of kilometers south of town and the military base. But one railroad track went straight to the base. While the town was rich, the local farmers were poor. The earth was infertile, sandy. But local people were very brave. Over the years, as there was nearby a Russian artillery base, the locals girded themselves to collect the artillery shell fragments and the unexploded shells, picking them up even when they were still warm. This dangerous practice was done not only by men but also by children and women. They did not pay attention to the armed guards and their threats. But there were incidents of conflicts with the guards.

Our initial battalion expanded to a large regiment. I served in the 7th company. The head of the battalion was colonel Petrov. He rarely ventured to our barracks, but during field exercises, he came frequently, on a white horse, as if everybody could see him from afar. He was very strict, and so all were afraid of him. Discipline was harsh. Daily, during the lunch hour, near the company’s window, frequently stood several soldiers in punishment with their rifles on their shoulders and their knapsacks full of bricks.

The food was very good. We could not even finish all



Stasys Raštikis as a czarist army cadet in officer training

the bread we were given. Near the gates of the base, a few women would gather to trade for the bread. They offered sugar, berries, eggs, cheese. The lowly private recruit could buy little with his wage, which was 50 kopecks per month. We would get a generous portion of meat every day and some good soup twice a day. The suppers were delicious with bacon cracklings in buckwheat porridge. For dining, the recruits were divided into groups of ten. These ten would eat from a common pot. If somebody wanted to eat more, they would need to hurry. With soup, it was easier since we could get extras. It was worst with the porridge since rarely we would get more. However, it was very good. The secret to get more was your spoon. The bigger, the better. Thus each one of us was eager to obtain the biggest spoon. They were wooden, varnished red. Heaven forbid if you lose your spoon - you will go hungry! So a spoon was highly prized and closely guarded. The safest place for it was in your right boot.

I began my military service, as it should be, as a private. Basic army training was not hard for me, and I did well. Marching drills, field exercises, familiarization with weapons, shooting, rules and regulations, and gymnastics.



The infantry of the Russian Imperial Army during WWI



Imperial Russian troops kneeling before Czar Nicholas during WWI

Soon I began training other soldiers. As it was, Varëna was the receiving point of recruits. In their midst were a couple hundred Estonians and a bunch of lowlanders or Žemaičiai Lithuanians. All the Estonians, before they were issued their military garb, appeared like city folk: well-to-do with nice shoes, well-groomed hair, rich and sophisticated. It was just the opposite with the Russian recruits and our Žemaičiai: poorly dressed, sloppy, and disorderly. Almost all the Russians had shoes made of bark or straw. Neither the Estonians nor the



A Russian army private



Žemaičiai spoke Russian. The Žemaičiai really did not speak, but some of the Estonians understood but did not want to admit it. They seemed to not speak Russian out of principle. For the Russian noncoms who had to explain to them all these military concepts and commands, this presented a big problem. The Estonians showed solidarity and did not disclose that they understand Russian. The company sergeant Lebedev appealed to the company commander, and he agreed that Raštikis would aid the Russian noncom to teach these Žemaičiai and, if necessary, translate for them some details. The Žemaičiai were jubilant that I could explain in Lithuanian what the terms “na lievo, na pravo, smirno, ravnaisia, krugom, etc.” meant. The officers and the sergeant, seeing that I am successful with them, assigned me to instruct them. The Žemaičiai were very healthy, handsome, tall, and strong men. One

of them was a giant. He stood first on the right wing of the company, which consisted of about 250 men. They were all peasants, unschooled and a bit awkward, but all good, sincere souls. Eventually, the Russian noncom took over their training. The Estonians were especially united and stubborn. This tried the patience of the officers and noncoms, so they were especially strict with them. After a while, they seemed to relent and began to understand and learn. But some truly did not understand the Russian instructions. These were separated into a special group and assigned to me. I knew a bit of German, and some of them understood that language. The Estonians and the Žemaičiai knew that I was not a Russian, so they listened to me. I succeeded in teaching them what was necessary.

*To be continued*



A group of Russian imperial army infantry in Kybartai in 1916. Photo taken from epaveldas.lt

# Champion who disappeared

## Franco's Spain, alcohol, and longing for Lithuania

Rytis Kazlauskas, LRT.lt



Mykolas Ruzgys

Mykolas Ruzgys, an American-Lithuanian basketball player, hoped to find peace in Lithuania and later in Western Europe. But fate brought him back to the United States, where his life ended mysteriously.

In 1940, Ruzgys was forced to flee to the US, while his pregnant wife Danutė stayed in Lithuania. Five years later, he returned to Europe to fight in the Second World War with the US army. After the war, he led a perplexing life in France, Monaco, and Spain.

We present the newly discovered tragic life story of Mykolas Ruzgys, an American-Lithuanian basketball player and a European champion. The third and final part of the story covers Ruzgys' work in Western Europe, a brush with Franco's Spain, fears of communism, and his death in the US. Read part one and part two of the story.

New page

In the second article of the series, I mentioned a woman called Bettina who was looking for Mykolas Ruzgys in the Little Lithuania online forum 15 years ago. She told me about the second family and four kids that the American-Lithuanian basketball player had in Spain.

"After the war, he stayed in France. There, he met a French lady – my husband's mother," she said.

Bettina and her husband Michel – Ruzgys' son – tried to look for the basketball player not only online, but also in Chicago. Unfortunately, the couple could not find Ruzgys' grave or any other useful information about his life in America.

But after our first conversation on the phone, Bettina sent me a surprising email.

"My husband decided to write a memoir about his father. We are trying to gather information from Michel's brothers and sisters, but you have to understand that this is a very sensitive story," the woman wrote.

A few weeks later, I was holding the memoir in my hands. I promised Bettina not to use any personal details from Michel's and his relatives' lives in this article.

### Career in France

Ruzgys finished his military service on January 26, 1946. He had a clear career plan and decided to share his basketball expertise in war-ravaged France.

"After France's liberation, an American who stayed in the country contributed to teaching locals about basketball and improving their training technique," French basketball history book *Le Basketball* wrote about Ruzgys' work.

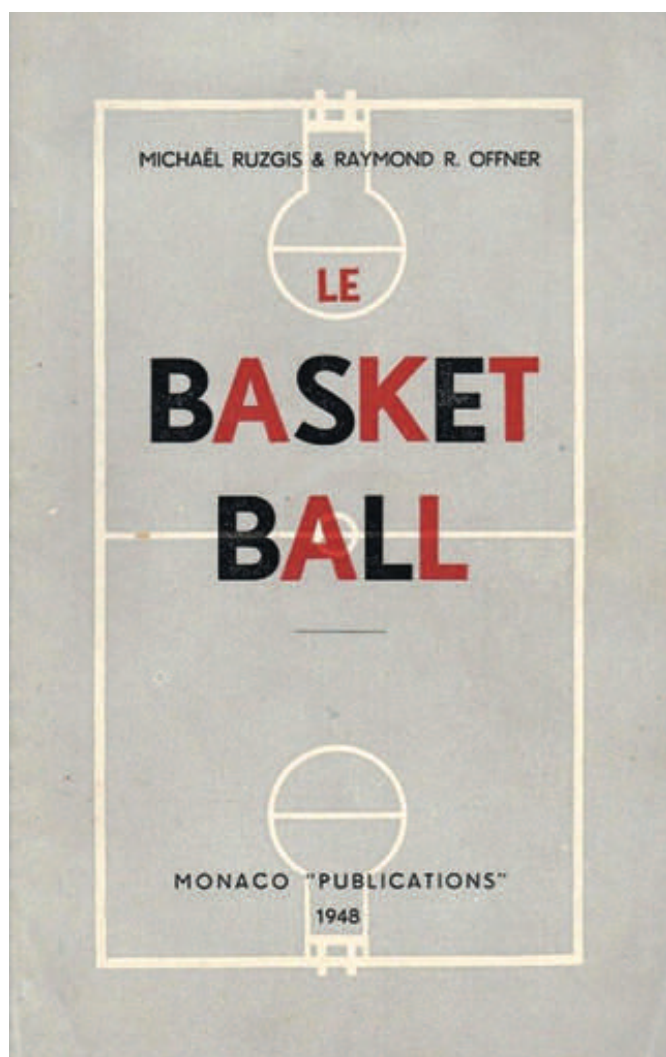
He coached the French national



basketball team in 1946–1947 and also lectured at a sports institute and introduced locals to various novel basketball tricks.

In 1947, Ruzgys' second wife Andree gave birth to their first daughter. In the same year, Ruzgys went to the European basketball championship in Prague as the head coach of the French national team. Much was expected of him.

But after a good start, the French players lost several games in a row and finished fifth in the championship. After the disappointing result, Robert Busnel replaced his teacher Ruzgys as the head coach of the French team. The American-Lithuanian athlete, meanwhile, continued his career in Monaco.



A book on basketball co-written by Ruzgys. / Personal archives

#### Short stop in Monaco

Ruzgys' son Michel wrote that, in France, his parents were friends with a famous painter Jacques Boussard and his wife Janine.

"In Paris, my parents lived next to the French Institute. In the evenings, mom's best friend Janine Boussard was accompanying them to Montparnasse restaurants, where they listened to jazz music," Michel said.

"Intellectuals, sportsmen, celebrities, journalists, and musicians were all part of the same group that lived in the atmosphere of freedom. [...] Thanks to the Boussard family, my dad fell in love with Paris and the French culture," he added.

But Ruzgys was forced to leave France after the disappointing European championship. In 1948, he started coaching Monte Carlo basketball club in Monaco. There, Ruzgys was quite successful. His team played in the final of the French basketball league and his wife gave birth to their second child, Michel.

Together with Raymond Offner, he even wrote a basketball manual, entitled *Le Basket Ball*.

The following year, Ruzgys got acquainted with Raimundo Saporta, who later became the head of Real Madrid and popularised club basketball across Europe.

Saporta, who became a vice president of the Spanish basketball federation at the age of 22, noticed Ruzgys' work while he was still coaching in France and invited him to come to Spain.



Francisco Franco, Spain's dictator. / AP

#### Politically motivated move to Spain

While Ruzgys' relation with Saporta influenced his decision to move to Spain, there was also a political side to it.

"We can ask why Mykolas Ruzgys agreed to move to Spain in 1950, even though he was greatly respected in France?" Michel wrote in the memoir. "Of course, there must have been some circumstances that justified such a risky career step."

As Michel explained, Ruzgys' family would not have left France if it were not for the American government.

In 1939, after the civil war, far-right General Francisco Franco rose as the leader of Spain. Franco openly declared his hostility to leftists and communists. In 1945, Spain was denied membership in the United Nations. The country was sanctioned and isolated.

But during the post-war years, the US became concerned about containing the expansion of communism. Berlin blockade, the Korean War, and the communist threat in Europe forced Americans to reconsider their relationship with Spain.

In 1950, US President Harry Truman provided 62.5 million dollars in grants to Spain and established military bases in the country to prevent Franco's overthrow.

The American government also sent its prominent citizens to Spain to make friendly connections. One of them was Ruzgys who was given an important position in the Spanish Basketball Federation.

Basketball was not popular in Spain at the time. There were only a few professional players and no understanding of training techniques. Since the civil war in 1936–1939, the development of the sport had stopped.

The new basketball era had to begin in Spain after the arrival of the American–Lithuanian expert, as the country's national team was preparing to participate in a major international tournament for the first time since 1935.



Spain's national basketball team. Ruzgys is standing first on the right. / Personal archives

### Disappointment in Buenos Aires

The first World basketball championship took place in Argentina in October–November 1950. Ruzgys had a Sisyphean task of putting together a national team in Spain that did not even have appropriate basketball courts.

According to Michel, his mother Andree travelled to Buenos Aires together with the Spanish national team. She often remembered the difficulties experienced during the trip.

"It was impossible to organise the championship in Europe, as the continent was still recovering after the war. So they had to travel to Argentina. [...] French and Spanish players spent 36 hours on the flight and endured

multiple landings," Michel wrote. In fact, the Spanish and French teams travelled on the same plane that stopped in Madrid, Lisbon, Dakar, Natal, and Rio de Janeiro.

"During the trip, the plane was shaken by storms and lightning. When they reached Argentina, the players were very weak and sick," Ruzgys' son said.

The tournament itself was not successful. The Spanish team lost all matches and was given a technical victory against Yugoslavia that refused to play against the team representing Franco's regime. With this single victory, Spanish players came in second to last in the first-ever world championship.



A diploma awarded to Ruzgys for his work with Spain's national basketball team, 1952. / Personal archives

### Leaving Spain for good

During their time in Madrid, Ruzgys' wife Andree gave birth to their third child, a second son. After the world championship, Ruzgys stayed in Spain and continued coaching, but his contract with the national team ended in 1952.

His fate in Spain was again decided by the American government. In 1953, Ruzgys' family was sent to Ferrol, a small but strategically important town on the Atlantic coast that was Franco's birthplace and home to a large naval shipbuilding company Bazan.

In Ferrol, Ruzgys started training the local team, also called Bazan, and made sure that a proper basketball court was built in the town.

"Together with my father, I was going to Bazan training sessions in the Arsenal territory, which was a massive guarded military complex," Michel remembered. "My dad made sure that a basketball court with a wooden floor was built there."

Together with the Bazan team, Ruzgys achieved many important victories. In 1954, a second daughter was born to the family. Andree was teaching French to local naval officers. For a few years, the family was living a careless



life in Ferrol. But eventually, things started to change.

"In 1956, when I was eight years old, my father and I were met by three officers on our way back from Arsenal. One of them took me home, while dad got in the car with the other two. The one who was escorting me introduced himself as a representative of Franco's political police and said that there was nothing to worry about," Michel said.

"Dad came back home after a few hours and said that everything was fine. But he warned me not to walk close to roads from now on and scream to attract people's attention if a car stopped next to me."

Mysterious episodes continued. Soon after the encounter with the officers, Ruzgys' family was visiting friends some 30 kilometres from Ferrol.



Bazan club coached by Ruzgys. / Personal archives

"While I was playing in the garden, a man started reading words from a notebook and asked me if I ever heard them at home. The words were 'Leningrad', 'anarchists', 'secret service', 'Budriūnas', 'NATO', 'FBI', 'Kaunas', 'republicans', 'Vilnius', and some others that I cannot remember. I recognised these words," Michel wrote.

It is possible that the Spanish government accused Ruzgys of collaborating with communists, but no information could be found to back up this assumption.

Michel said that after these episodes, tensions rose in the family. Ruzgys started arguing with his wife who wanted to go back to France.

"His [Ruzgys'] mental health deteriorated. Doctors advised him to spend some time in a clinic. When he came back, he was healthier, but depressed," Ruzgys' son wrote in the memoir.

"The atmosphere at home was worsening. Dad started talking about the wonderful country Lithuania," he added.

Ruzgys was considering going back to the US and starting a new life. He wanted to bring his family along, but soon they were separated.

"I don't remember when exactly, but officers came to

our house and took Ruzgys with them. He kissed us and promised to bring us to the US," Michel said.

The following day, Ruzgys' wife and children were relocated to Santiago de Compostela, a town some 100 kilometres south of Ferrol. Andree started teaching French and literature in the local university.

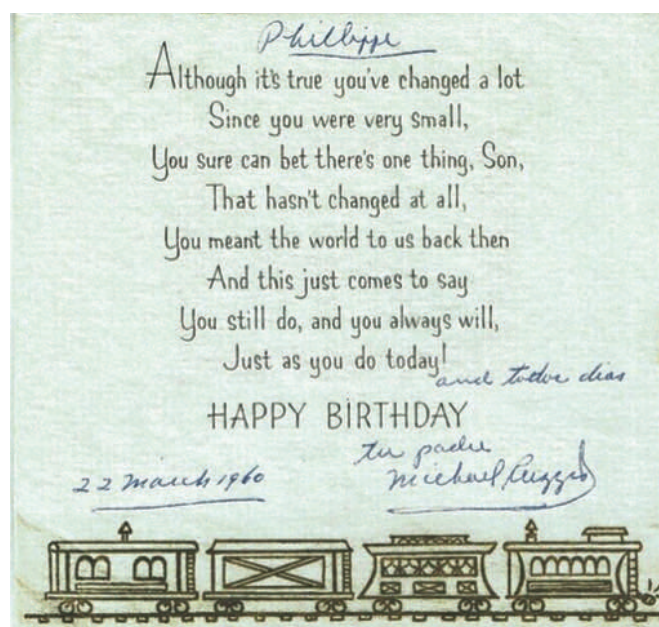
"People at my school advised my mother to introduce herself by her maiden name so as not to cause any problems because of the American one," Michel wrote.

Champion who disappeared

Dosuments in US archives reveal that Ruzgys left Spain on December 1, 1956, and arrived in Miami two weeks later, before going back to Chicago.

There is not much information about his life in the US except for a few photos and letters that he sent to his friends and family.

"The last letters from dad reached us in the 1960s. Before that, he was sending us letters for birthdays and Christmas," Michel said.



A birthday card for his son sent by Ruzgys, 1960. / Personal archives

Ruzgys' first wife Danutė Vitartaitė-Ruzgienė was also trying to reach out to him. While visiting the basketball player's grandson Tomas Preišagalavičius in Vilnius, I went through his collection of family photos and letters and found Ruzgys' letter to his first wife sent from the US and dated 1964.

Here is what he wrote:

"As you know, after the war, I was in France, Monaco, and Spain and was their national teams' coach. Now, I work here in Chicago. My health is good and you will be happy to hear [...] that I have not drunk alcohol in seven years. [...]"

"I tell you this because I want you to know that I am not a beggar.

"I have no one to talk to in Lithuanian. [...] I have learnt a lot about life and people. One could say that I matured. I work every day and I go to many basketball matches. [...] I also read a lot of books and especially newspapers. I have a couple of friends that I sometimes meet, but I am always with you in my mind.

"My family is scattered all around. My mother and father are both dead. My sister Monika and her husband George also died. I do not meet with my sister Helen. She took all my belongings while I was in Europe.

"My brothers live in California. So I am all alone. [...] Kiss Lidija from me. I think she will be a very pretty woman. Make sure that she kisses you from me. [...] I think that is enough for now. [...] It is very hard to write because so much time has passed."

Ruzgys was openly telling his first wife about his alcohol

problems. Former Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus, who had met Ruzgys, also said that the former champion tried to treat his addiction while in Chicago.

"I haven't heard anything from him [Ruzgys] in a few months," Aleksas Lauraitis, an American-Lithuanian, wrote in a letter to Vitartaitė-Ruzgienė in 1981. "I've heard he started drinking again."

Lauraitis lives in Chicago and was able to remember a little bit about Ruzgys' life in the US.

"In Chicago, he had a new girlfriend, who had a small restaurant. He worked as a shop assistant there. [...] When he was young, he liked being in the company of people and drinking. But at the end of his life, he overcame his problem and stopped drinking," Lauraitis said in a phone interview.

Ruzgys died on December 15, 1986. No American-Lithuanian publications reported this. Many years after his death, Ruzgys was still considered missing.



Mykolas Ruzgys / Personal archives

Ruzgys' family in Spain faced many challenges after his departure. Left a single mother, Andree was not able to provide for four kids, so the family was separated. Two of the kids ended up in a children's home.

Lidija, Ruzgys' first daughter in Lithuania, won gold and bronze medals in athletics in 1957, when she competed in a tournament for the deaf. In 1965, she won one gold, one silver, and two bronze medals.

Lidija Ruzgytė died in 2019 at the age of 79. Her 86-year-old mother died in 2005.

Many questions about Ruzgys' life remain unanswered. But as Michel remembered, his father often quoted Blaise Pascal: "The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know."



## Christmas at the Saulėtas Krantas Lithuanian School

By Kimberly Ward Manning

In this year of COVID, the Saulėtas Krantas Kalėdų Šventė was a bit different. With separate performances for our kindergarten and older classes to allow for proper social distancing, and masks for all – the holiday cheer at our long-awaited Christmas celebration could not be diminished.

Our school was transformed into a beautiful winter scene, complete with a fireplace adorned with Christmas Stockings. Our students had a magical time! Everyone worked hard to recite poems and sing to an audience of their parents. Due to the rampant virus, Santa could not come to the celebration, but shared a virtual Christmas Greeting and presents were distributed to our students by his auxiliary elves.

We want to thank all who contributed to this wonderful Christmas celebration: our school teachers for their creativity as Santa and elves, and our parents.



## Lithuanian Americans Commemorate Freedom Defenders Day

In Commemoration of Freedom Defenders Day and the 30th anniversary of the January 13th

The history of every country has days on which the fate of the entire people of that country is decided, and the nation's will and unity are tested. For us, January 13th is such a day. Recently, we have commemorated its 30th anniversary. Wishing to remember the defenders who died for our freedom, the Lithuanian American Community invited all Lithuanian Americans to come together with our families, friends, and all of Lithuania on January 10, 2021, and light unity bonfires or set memory candles in the windows, share memories of our road to Independence, sing freedom songs, celebrate the noble deeds of our Motherland, and think about what FREEDOM means for each and every one of us.

On January 10, 2021, over forty members of the Lithuanian American Community in Washington, D.C. and the staff of the Lithuanian Embassy participated in the Freedom Relay thus commemorating the 30th anniversary of Freedom Defenders Day. Due to the pandemic, the plans of the traditional Run on the Path of Life and Death had to be adjusted. The participants ran thirty symbolic kilometers from the US Capitol to the Lithuanian Embassy, handing the Lithuanian tricolor flag to one other. This way, they marked each year of the freedom that was defended, from 1991 to 2021. At the end of the relay, the flag was raised at the Lithuanian Embassy in Washington, D.C.

To commemorate Freedom Defenders Day, photographer Romualdas Požerskis' exhibition "We Remember why we are Free" was opened at the Embassy.



"Today, here in Chicago, at the monument to Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas, the leader of Lithuanian freedom fighters, we pay tribute to those fighters for Lithuanian freedom, who sacrificed their lives so that we and our future generations would live in an independent homeland," Mantvydas Bekešius, Consul General of the Republic of Lithuania in Chicago, spoke to those who came to commemorate January 13th in the courtyard of the World Lithuanian Center in Lemont, Illinois. Austėja Sruoga, the NEC Executive Vice-President, and Vesta Valuckaitė, Chairwoman of the LAC Midwest Chapter, also addressed the participants of the event. Violeta Valaitytė, the participant of the events of January 13th and Chairwoman of the LAC Lemont Chapter, shared her memories. Wreaths were placed and candles were lit at the monument to Adolfas Ramanauskas Vanagas. The fallen defenders of freedom were honored. After the commemoration, participants gathered around the bonfires, shared memories, and enjoyed hot porridge and tea provided by members of the Lithuanian Riflemen Union.

On Sunday morning, Chicago Lithuanians participated in the traditional Run on the Path of Life and Death, honoring the 14 freedom fighters who lost their lives during the January events.

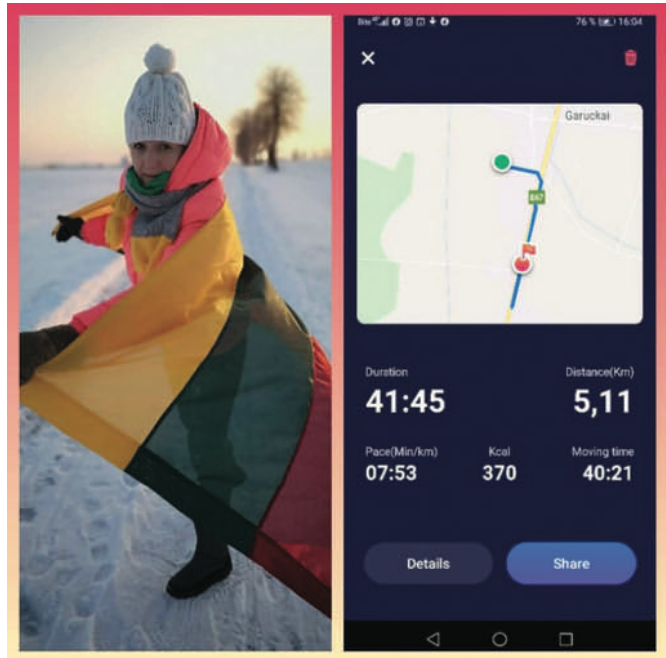




As the 30th anniversary of Defenders of Freedom Day was approaching, several thousand forget-me-not flowers, which became the symbol of January 13th and fights for freedom, bloomed on the Pacific Ocean beach in Santa Monica. Dressed in Lithuanian national costumes, several dozen Lithuanian Americans of Los Angeles came to see this unforgettable meadow of forget-me-not that bloomed for the first time on the West coast. They shared memories and honored the memory of the defenders of freedom. Rollerskaters and skateboarders flew the Lithuanian tricolor flag along the ocean coast. It was a pleasant surprise for many Lithuanians to see the famous Santa Monica Ferris Wheel be adorned with forget-me-not flowers on the eve of January 13th.



For the third year in a row, the Colorado Lithuanian School and the Colorado Lithuanian Community participated in the Run on the Path of Life and Death in commemoration of January 13th. 54 runners participated: 37 runners ran together in Colorado, 17 runners ran remotely, and 7 runners ran remotely in Lithuania, in spite of the temperature being -4°F. The total distance that the runners covered was 120.4 miles.



Lithuanian Americans of Omaha, Seattle, and other Lithuanian communities came together to honor the memory of the defenders of freedom and share memories of our road to Independence.



## our community

### Young people care about the Lithuanian language

Marija Čyvaitė, LAC Vice President for Youth Affairs

When the LAC Strategic Plan was first presented to the public, it was no surprise that our youth was one of the Community's priorities. For many years, we have been thinking that we need to educate young people, that it is important to involve young people in all of our activities, and that our young people are the future of our nation and our community. Even the Lithuanian Charter states that 'Lithuanians create and maintain youth associations'. The strategic plan proposes several goals for youth activities. And nobody but young people themselves can best achieve those goals.

The Strategic Plan Committee invited young people to participate in the plan implementation and encouraged us to form a team of young people who would like to contribute to this work. After a few Zoom calls, the current but certainly not the final team was formed. It consists of Vilija Liffick (Seattle), Rima Lintakaitė (Chicago), Veronika Gaškaitė (Michigan), Alina Orentaitė (Washington DC), Anika Muliolis (Cleveland), and Marija Čyvaitė (Chicago). We are happy to hear that recently Naglis Bukauskas (NY) and Aidas Jakubėnas (Boston) joined the team. We very much hope that there will be more young people who want to join us.

What goals do we want to achieve? One of them is to create more opportunities for young people to get together and communicate in the Lithuanian spirit. The second one - the one that we have spent the most time on so far - is to improve our Lithuanian language. Over the past few years, we have noticed an increase in conversations about the Lithuanian language among young people. When we were kids, we didn't care so much about language, and now we often hear in conversations or see in our correspondence: "And which case should I use here? Is this word really Lithuanian? Does it sound

better this way or that way if I want to say....? How do you say 'download' in Lithuanian? Is it pabalsuoti or prabalsuoti? Can you check for errors? Should there be a nosinė?". I think that there are a lot of young people who are starting to understand what level their Lithuanian language is in and how much more they can refine, improve and learn Lithuanian.

With these thoughts in mind, we began our first discussion about the Lithuanian language among young people. Then we started thinking about how we can create accessible and attractive conditions for young people to improve their Lithuanian language? Everyone answered this question differently and came up with good ideas. Some said there would be a need for a platform to ask your language question and have someone write an answer within 24 hours. Others suggested compiling a list of all virtual Lithuanian language courses (and there are many of them) and uploading that list to make it accessible to young people.

We got a lot of such ideas. And we have finally decided that all the information we need should be in one place - a smartphone platform for young people. This platform would be dedicated not only to learning the Lithuanian language but would also have other functions (for example, a common calendar of events, information on scholarships and internships, etc.). While this may seem like an ambitious idea, we have people on the team who are familiar with such platforms and could help us implement the idea. We are still at the beginning of this project but we very much hope that in a year, our young people will be able to get the necessary information or improve their Lithuanian language within five minutes by taking the phone out of their pocket.

## Culture

This year we are celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Lithuanian Opera. To commemorate this beautiful anniversary, the Chicago Lithuanian Opera, together with the LAC Cultural Council, arranged a virtual New Year's concert called "There has not been such a ball yet." The concert could be viewed before the New Year on the LAC Facebook account. It featured the most popular opera arias performed by the Chicago Lithuanian Opera Choir led by Nida Grigalavičiūtė and soloists: Vilma Skučienė, Linas Sprindys, and Algimantas Barniškis. After the restoration of Lithuania's independence, Lithuanians in Chicago worked together with Lithuanian professional art-

ists on numerous occasions; therefore, Lithuanian opera soloist Egidijus Bavikinas participated in this concert.

The Lithuanian Opera dance group led by Giedrė Elekšytė-Knieža presented several delightful dances. The event authors were Daina Miežlaiškis, Nida Grigalavičiūtė, and Žygis Janus. The audio and video work was done by Žygis Janus and Arvydas Reneckis.

Before and during the concert, congratulations were sent by Arvydas Urbonavičius, President of the National Executive Committee, Giedrė Knieža, Chairwoman of the Cultural Affairs Council, musicologist Danutė Petrauskaitė, singer Deivis Norvilas and his wife, Renata,



and conductor Vytautas Lukočius – people who live in Lithuania but maintain close ties with the Chicago Lithuanian Opera.

The concert received a lot of attention (to watch on Youtube, please search by entering Čikagos Lietuvių



Opera choir singers enjoy performing

Opera 2020 Koncertas Tokio pokylio nebuvo). The main sponsor of the event was the Lithuanian Foundation.



At the end of the year, congratulations and thanks came from Arvydas Urbonavičius, President of the National Executive Committee, and Giedrė Kniežā, Chairwoman of the Cultural Affairs Council. Photo by the Chicago Lithuanian Opera

## In Our Community

Several Christmas trees decorated by Lithuanian Americans participated in the Christmas tree competition organized by the Lithuanian government organization, Globali Lietuva (Global Lithuania.)



Christmas tree decorated by Irena Valienė, Woodstock, CT



Christmas tree decorated by Raminta Urbonavičienė, Omaha, NE



# our community

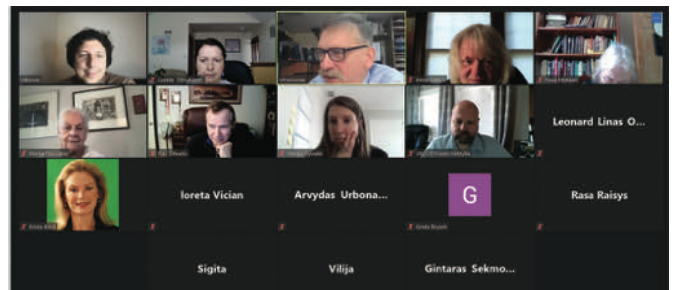
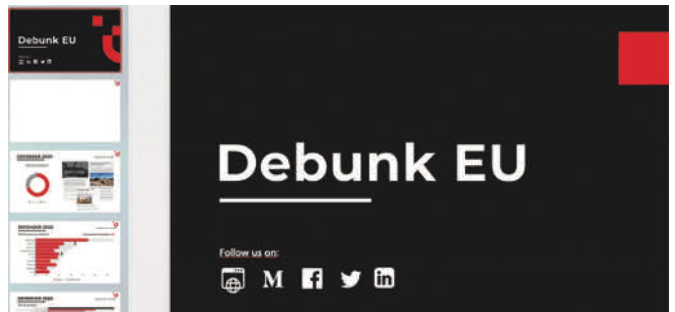


Christmas tree decorated by St. Casimir Lithuanian School, Cleveland, OH

On January 18, 2012, a virtual meeting of the staff of the Embassy of the Republic of Lithuania in Washington, D. C. and members of the LAC National Executive Committee and representatives of the communities took place. During the meeting, the possibilities of further cooperation were discussed. Dovydas Špokauskas, Chargé d'Affaires of the Embassy of the Republic of Lithuania, presented the embassy activities and future plans and introduced the embassy staff. They briefly described their duties and what services the embassy provides to the citizens of the Republic of Lithuania. The Chairman of the LAC Executive Committee Arvydas Urbonavičius introduced the future projects of the organization, shared his thoughts on the LAC's upcoming 70th anniversary, the upcoming dance festival, and the celebrations of February 16th and March 11th. The event was moderated by Krista Bard, LAC Vice President for Public Affairs.



On January 23, 2021, a virtual meeting with Viktoras Daukšas, the head of DebunkEU.org, was organized by the LAC Public Affairs Council. After hearing a report on disinformation directed against Lithuania and the European Union, the participants of the virtual meeting had the opportunity to ask questions. The Debunk EU is an initiative that brings together members of the public, the media, and representatives of the state in fighting against fake news that is confusing and undermines confidence in the country. The Debunk EU initiative has received attention and funding from Google, the world's largest search engine, as well as such media giants as The Financial Times and Deutsche Welle. The organization has presented its activities to 17 countries, including the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Serbia, and others. "We have been shown great interest and received a lot of encouragement to develop our project further because the fight against disinformation is currently a global problem," Daukšas said. More information at Demaskuok (debunk.eu)





The LAC Cultural Council invites children of Lithuanian descent to participate in a talent competition. The finals in music, singing, and dance will take place in May 2021. The registration and video screenings will begin in January 2021. Children ages 12-18 from all over the United States are invited to attend. The finalists will be awarded cash prizes. For more information, please write to [kultura@javlb.org](mailto:kultura@javlb.org) or call 708-288-6662 (Giedrė), 630 640 9817 (Žygis), 773 547 0520 (Daina).

An online calendar of events for the Lithuanian American Community is here! Publish your events here: <https://renginiaiav.org/>

The Lithuanian American Community has formed a group of volunteers who, during the COVID-19 pandemic, collect and coordinate information on the assistance needed by Lithuanians in the United States and the assistance offered. If you need help or could offer help during this difficult time, please fill out one of the three questionnaires at <https://covid19.javlb.org/>. Stay healthy and safe.

Starting February 1, 2021, the LAC Department of Social Affairs will be providing social services at the LAC Office at the World Lithuanian Center (14911 127th St, Lemont, IL 60439). The entrance will be on the north side of the building (on the floor plan, the room will be marked with a red dot). Services will be provided on Tuesdays and Thursdays; pre-registration is required. Please call at 630-257-8788 and leave a message with your phone number.

## In Memoriam

The Lithuanian American Community has lost a prominent figure who has worked hard and sincerely for the benefit of our Homeland. The bright memory of Consul General of Lithuania Vaclovas Kleiza (February 18, 1933 - January 3, 2021) will remain in the hearts of those who knew him; his meaningful work should be an inspiring example of how to foster Lithuanianness for all of us. In the painful hour of loss, we extend our sincere condolences to the family.

Algimantas Žemaitaitis, director and actor at the Lithuanian Drama Group in Los Angeles (February 15, 1932 - December 31, 2020). Algimantas Žemaitaitis graduated from the University of Connecticut with a degree in theater and art. He played in Broadway performances, Lithuanian cultural events in Boston, New York, and Detroit, and worked in Hollywood making educational and feature films. Žemaitaitis came to Los Angeles in 1965 and joined the Los Angeles Drama Group as an actor and director. For many years, he also taught expressive reading at St. Casimir Lithuanian School. Until the pandemic, he was irreplaceable when the Lithuanian community needed a reliable performer, event host, or organizer. In recent years, Žemaitaitis has represented the Lithuanian American Council organizing joint events together with the LAC Los Angeles Chapter.

Algimantas and Audronė (Alminaitė) raised a beautiful Lithuanian family – daughters, Daina and Laima, and son, Saulius.

Marija (Marytė) Teresė Sušinskienė, 86, died on December 19, 2020, due to the Covid virus. Marija is warmly remembered by the Lithuanian St. Andrew's parishioners and the entire Lithuanian community. For both, the community and the parish, in particular, Marytė was an indispensable helper. While her children attended Vincas Krėvė Lithuanian School, Marytė worked there as a kindergarten teacher.

## current events

### Security

...Within the voluminous \$2.3 trillion 2021 Federal Budget is \$732 billion for the U.S. Defense Appropriation Bill, which includes \$169 million for security assistance to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania through the newly created Baltic Security Initiative. The strategic plan includes goals, objectives, and milestones for air defense, maritime situational awareness, ammunition, special forces and command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR).

...Lithuanian Airports, which operates the three international airports in Vilnius, Kaunas, and Palanga, is upgrading its X-ray scanners and has solicited bids. The Seimas Committee on National Security and Defense (CNSD) is looking into a bid by Nuctech, a Chinese state-controlled company, as a threat to national security because it would collect data on passengers and baggage, which under Chinese law would be available to Chinese intelligence and security services.

...Two Lithuanian citizens have been accused of spying for Russia via a member of the Kaliningrad Border Board of the Federal Security Services of the Russian Federation. Both citizens were politically active and became targets of the Russian FSB agent who spoke perfect Lithuanian and directed them to photograph Lithuanian objects, gather information on specific people, attend certain events, gather specific publications, and carry out other orders. The payment was in the form of cash and funding for some of the events by the Baltic Youth Association. One defendant was warned that his contact was a Russian FSB officer and carrying out his requests would be considered spying, but he continued this unlawful contact.

...Lithuania's State Border Guard Service plans to reduce the guard zone with Kaliningrad to 10 % by eliminating the guard zone along the Nemunas, Šešupė, and Širvinta Rivers and using CCTV. The guard zone will remain near some bridges and viaducts and Lake Vištytis. Reasons for this change is to reduce administrative cost and increase recreational activity and tourism. Persons who desire to enter the zone will be required to submit applications more than 10 working days before access.

...Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda agreed with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's suggestion to create the Crimean Platform to implement a policy of multilateral non-recognition of the annexation of Crimea and cite violations of human rights in the peninsula. He also advocated strengthening the cooperation between

...Ukraine and NATO and strong support for settling the conflict around Donbas. Presidents Nausėda and Zelensky agreed with the European Union's sanctions against Alexander Lukashenko's Belarusian regime.

...One of the reasons offered for the U.S. withdrawing from the Open Skies Treaty with Russia was their refusal to allow U.S. overflights of Kaliningrad, which is suspected to harbor nuclear weapons and is within the range of major European capitals. The Treaty was proposed by President Eisenhower in 1955, revived by President George H.W. Bush in 1989, signed in 1992, and entered into force on January 1, 2002. There was 34 states party to the treaty before the U.S. withdrew in November 2020.

...The National Cyber Security Center reports that a Trojan. Emotet virus has infected Lithuania's National Public Health Center and other institutions. This malware typically enters a network via a careless user opening a phishing email. Once inside the evolving virus can move laterally and infect an entire network and is often the vanguard of a bigger attack.

...The Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has allocated 75,000 euros to provide humanitarian aid to those affected by the armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. The funds will be transferred to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) which will use the funds to register the missing, seek out their status, visit detainees and provide medical assistance to the wounded. Lithuania will also allocate 100,000 euros to the ICRC for aid to Ukraine and the 3.4 million residents that the U.N. reports need humanitarian assistance.

...Lithuanian Justice Minister Evelina Dobrovolska has asked the European Commission to protect Lithuanian judges from prosecution by Russia for their participation in the trials of 50 Russian citizens for their actions during the January 13, 1991 attacks on civilians in Vilnius. Vilnius Regional Court Judges Ainora Macevičienė, Virginia Pakalnytė-Tamošiūnaitė, Artūras Šumskas, and Aiva Survilienė were charged in absentia by the Russian Investigating Committee, which makes them subject to an international arrest warrant.

### COVID-19

...The European Center for Disease Prevention and Control ranked Lithuania as having the second-highest infection rate of COVID-19 in the European Union (1,178 cases per 100,000 people) only behind Luxembourg. In mid-December, the COVID-19 death toll reached 1,143 plus at least 464 infected people who died of other causes.



...Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė said that the country is overwhelmed by the fast pace of the virus's spread, and the Health Ministry can no longer trace the ways that the contagion is spreading. This lack of specific curbs has resulted in new wide-reaching restrictions, including a stay-at-home lockdown until the end of January except for work, essential shopping and caring for the sick, funerals, and walks. She and President Gitanas Nausėda criticized former Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis for not earlier imposing stricter measures. Police have set up 300 checkpoints to enforce the ban on inter-municipality travel and over 16,000 cars were made to turn around over one weekend in December. Besides potential fines of 500 -1,500 euros for not wearing facemasks, etc., the checkpoints have uncovered draft dodgers and improper car documentation.

...The three Baltic States plan a joint repatriation flight out of Britain because other flights have been canceled due to a new more transmissible variant of COVID-19. The 150 spaces will be equally divided, with priority given to those with health emergencies or urgent family matters such as funerals. The passengers must purchase tickets and provide a negative COVID-19 test within the previous 48 hours or self-quarantine for ten days upon arrival.

...Russia has been reporting COVID-19 deaths only where an autopsy confirms that the virus was the main cause of death. At the end of December, the official number stood at 55,265. However, the Russian Federal State Statistical Service and TASS reported that the number of deaths from all causes recorded between January and November 2020 had risen by 229,700 compared to 2019, and the Deputy Prime Minister, Tatiana Golikova said that "More than 81% of the increase in mortality over this period is due to COVID-19". Eighty-one percent of 229,700 is 186,057 not 55,265! Oops, something is wrong!

### Business

...Thermo Fisher Scientific, the world leader in servicing science, is expanding its manufacturing and R&D presence in Vilnius that will add 140 new jobs to its current workforce of 1250 employees. It will produce molecular, protein, and cellular biology products used in the study of gene structure and expression and for the development of new diagnostic methods for innate, hereditary, and infectious diseases. Thermo Fisher Scientific has 75,000 employees with annual revenue of \$25 billion.

...Cureline, a South San Francisco based clinical operations and research (CRO) team will establish a base in

Lithuania with MS and Ph.D. level professionals to provide human biospecimens to the global biomedical research community. Its primary focus is on providing primary cell line specimens for oncology including solid tumors and hematologic malignancies, and normal tissue. It also can provide specimens from synovial fluid and serum from patients with inflammatory diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis and lupus as well as longitudinal clinical data tracking clinical outcomes and treatment efficacy. Its current partners include leading pharmaceutical companies in Europe, Japan, Korea, and the U.S. plus major universities including Stanford, Harvard, and the University of California - San Francisco.

...Cambridge, MA-based biotech giant Biogen launched operations in Vilnius as well as operations in Latvia and Estonia to carry out clinical trials in its development of drugs to treat neurological diseases such as multiple sclerosis, spinal muscular atrophy, and Alzheimer's disease. It is also developing several treatments for depression. With about 7,000 employees, its 2019 revenue is over \$14 billion.

...One factor that is supporting U.S. life sciences companies' growth in Lithuania is the mutual recognition agreement between the regulatory U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Lithuanian State Medicine Control Agency. This agreement signifies that the Lithuanian agency is capable of conducting inspections that meet U.S. requirements.

...Ria Money Transfer, a global leader in the cross-border transfer industry, and a subsidiary of Euronet Worldwide, Inc. (NASDAQ: EFTT) has obtained a Lithuanian Payment Institution license, which will expand its European digital capability. Ria operates the world's second-largest financial network with 447,000 locations offering cardless ATM payout service in 165 countries and is the largest bank account deposit network encompassing 120 countries and 3.6 billion bank accounts and growing at an average of 23% per year.

### General

...A long lost work of art by Lithuanian artist Kazys Varnelis has been found stored in a Chicago garage. His distinctive style of optical and 3-D illusions was based on geometric abstractions and minimal forms. The painting known as "Quiz" was created in 1973 and was shown in Varnelis' one-man show at the Milwaukee Art Museum in 1974 and then taken to Iowa University and not seen since then. Born in 1917 and educated in Lithuania and Vienna, the artist emigrated to the U.S. in 1949 and pro-

# our community

duced stained glass, bronze, and marble works. He later refocused on painting and sculpture and became a full professor at Olive-Harvey College. In 1978 he moved to Villa Virginia in Stockbridge, Massachusetts where he had a private gallery for his works and collections. After Lithuanian independence, in 1993 the Vilnius City Council gave him two houses and with the assistance of the Ministry of Culture and Vilnius Academy of Art, he established the Kazys Varnelis House-Museum, which became a branch of the National Museum of Lithuania in 2003. In 1998 he was awarded the Knight Cross of the Order of the Lithuanian Grand Duke Gediminas, and in 2007 he was awarded the Commander Cross of the Order for Merits to Lithuanian. He died in Vilnius in 2010. The owners of "Quiz" plan on restoring it and making it available to lend. Other Kazys Varnelis works have sold for \$7,000 - \$10,000. One is owned by the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

...The new year will bring some economic changes in Lithuania. The minimum monthly wage will increase from 602 to 642 euros before tax deductions. One million pensioners will receive between 30-50 euros more per month up to 10%, and the amount will be indexed each year. The average pensioner with the required work experience will see their pension increase from 400 to 440 euros per month. For workers furloughed by COVID-19, a full salary will be offered for a period of time. Child benefits will increase from 10 euros to 70 euros per month per child. The tax system will become more progressive in that the 32% income tax levy will apply to incomes over 81,162 euros from 104,277 euros. Interestingly, state employees, politicians, and judges will see an increase in their base salary by one euro!



Steve Gilberg and Robert Zizzo only recently discovered they were in possession of a painting by Kazys Varnelis/lrt.lt



Kazys Varnelis' other works at his museum in Vilnius / K. Stoškus / LNM

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