

# DEEP ♥ BALTIC

INSIDE THE LANDS BETWEEN

ESTONIA

LATVIA

LITHUANIA

CULTURE

INTERVIEWS

MEDIA



DECEMBER 10, 2015

# LIVING IN A STATE OF NON-HISTORY: GROWING UP LITHUANIAN-AMERICAN

by Laima Vince, VILNIUS

In 1990 my grandfather, Anicetas Simutis, was Consul General of a government that had ceased to exist forty-six years ago. The following year, in 1991, he would become newly independent Lithuania's first Ambassador to the United Nations, an honor he would achieve at the age of 81. For almost half a century, during the long years of the Cold War, my grandfather stubbornly maintained the New York Consulate of prewar independent Lithuania in a cramped rent-controlled apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side. As the decades slipped past, and as he grew older, and as the plight of the Baltic States was forgotten by the West, he never missed a day of what my grandmother insisted we call service, *tarnyba*, and not work. He commuted to the Consulate from Long Island every day by train and subway. He put in ten-hour days, issuing prewar independent Lithuanian passports to political refugees; finding displaced persons work and shelter in the postwar years; in later years helping displaced persons collect their family inheritances from the clutches of the Soviet government; delivering fiery anti-Soviet speeches on *The Voice of America* and *Radio Free Europe*; defending himself from relentless legal and propaganda attacks from communists both in the Soviet Union and in the United States; and pressuring the Department of State not to recognize Lithuania's incorporation into the Soviet Union.

My grandparents came to New York City by ocean steamer in 1936 at the height of the Great Depression. They were not immigrants. And they were not refugees. My grandfather was a young diplomat in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of an independent Lithuania. He was sent to New York on his first foreign posting to serve as Secretary to Consul General Jonas Budrys. According to his contract, he and my grandmother were scheduled to return to Lithuania in 1939. In 1918, nine years after my grandfather was born, and a year after my grandmother was born, Lithuania became independent from Tsarist Russia and for the first time in several centuries began the process of forming itself as an independent nation with its own system of governance, traditions, and statehood. By 1936, when my grandparents set sail to New York, Lithuania had lived through 18 years of

relative stability and moderate prosperity. Although tensions with neighboring Poland were high, at the time Lithuania had a tolerable political relationship with its other neighbor, the Soviet Union. My grandparents fully expected to return home after serving three years in New York. As it turned out, they waited fifty-five years to go home.

In his journal from 1936 my grandfather describes his first impressions of New York as seen from the window of his Lithuanian-American uncle's car, as a city of trash-strewn streets. He expresses surprise that the streets of Kaunas are far cleaner than the streets of New York. Like most people of his generation, he dreamed of America as an ideal. The reality that greeted him did not live up to that dream. I remember my grandfather telling me about how shocked he was to see bank foreclosed farms abandoned in New Jersey. "In Lithuania you stay on your land, no matter what happens," he said.

My grandfather was raised on a farm not far from the Latvian border in the village of Židikai. His father died in World War I when he was five. Together with his mother and his sister and younger brother, they worked the land and struggled to get by in the difficult years after World War I. His first schooling took place in the home of the writer and aristocrat, Marija Pečkauskaitė, known as Šatrijos Ragana, the witch of Šatrija. "The people in our village called her a witch," my grandfather told me, "because she knew how to use modern medicine to heal and because she spoke German, Polish, and Russian. The people in the village believed that only a woman who was a witch possessed the power to do all that."

Marija Pečkauskaitė took an interest in my grandfather, a poor village boy who was bright and eager to learn, and lent him books from her personal library. She became a lifelong friend and encouraged him to continue his schooling, first in

the city of Telšiai, and then later in Kaunas, where he graduated from high school and studied in the university and the military academy.

When he graduated from the university, at the age of 21, my grandfather went to work for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. When he went to return his military academy uniform and retrieve his suit he found that his locker had been broken into and his suit stolen.

“I was literally left without even the clothes on my back,” my grandfather said. “I had no money to buy a new suit and I needed to report to work the following day. I decided that the best thing to do was to go see my supervisor and tell him; although it was an embarrassing situation. My supervisor listened and he understood. He lent me the money to buy a new suit and I repaid him from my first wages. He was a good man and he trusted me. I never forgot that. He taught me to have faith in others and to help people in their time of need.”

My grandparents’ young faces gaze at me from their sepia wedding photograph, which I’ve scanned and saved on my computer screen. He is twenty-six and she is eighteen. He is wearing a tuxedo with a white bow tie, an accessory that would later become his signature style. My grandmother smiles out at me with the innocent smile of a young girl. Her curly hair is cut into a stylish bob. Her wedding veil has been tossed back; her eyes sparkle. She holds a bouquet of white flowers so big it takes up almost three quarters of the lower half of the photograph. My grandfather’s face is earnest with comprehension of the responsibility he has taken on, and with love. My grandfather’s dark brown hair is oiled and combed back in the conservative style of the thirties. Behind his round rimmed glasses his hazel eyes radiate the sensitivity that captivated my grandmother as a young girl, and which she confessed to in her diary.



*Laima Vince's grandparents, Anicetas and Janina Simutis [Image: Laima Vince]*

My grandparents lived a modest life in depression-era New York. My grandfather worked at the Consulate during the day and in the evenings took graduate courses in Economics at Columbia University, earning his Master in Economics. On weekends he practiced his English pronunciation by repeating phrases from a phonograph record. My grandmother, who came from the intelligentsia, learned to adjust to a lower standard of living in the United States. My grandfather would joke about the first time my grandmother tried to fry eggs for breakfast; she did not know that she was supposed to fry the bacon first and then crack the eggs on top. How would she have known—the maid always cooked her breakfast for her back in Lithuania.

In 1939, after three years of diplomatic service in New York, the same year my mother was born, just as my grandparents were about to return, World War II broke out in Europe. They stayed. Had they returned, they would have been deported by Stalin to Siberia in 1941 along with the rest of Lithuania's diplomats, government officials, military officers, teachers and professors. They would have become one more tragic statistic of the Stalin era.

During their first three years in New York, my grandmother cried into her pillow every night because she missed Lithuania; she missed her parents and her sister. She did not like America. Because of the war, my grandmother did not see her parents and younger sister for ten years. My great-grandfather held a high post in the Ministry of Transportation as an engineer. My great-grandmother was a concert pianist and taught at the Conservatory in Kaunas. Because of their educations, and because of their service to their country, they were declared enemies of the new Soviet State. My great grandparents managed to escape to the Allied-occupied territories of Germany in 1944 and eventually made their way to the United States, where they joined my grandparents and lived out the remainder of their lives in New York under one roof.

My grandfather and the other diplomats-in-exile represented a country that had literally had disappeared off the map of the world. The Consulate's funding was cut after the Soviets commandeered the Lithuanian embassies in Europe and the United States. However, the diplomats in exile remained in their posts and subsisted from small funds set up by the émigré community. The Consulate, out of necessity, was moved into the apartment of Consul General Jonas Budrys. Budrys and his wife lived for decades in a dark bedroom at the end of the hall, giving up their living room and spare bedroom as office space.

The Lithuanian diplomats who remained in their posts in defiance of the Soviet occupation played a waiting game. It was a game that stretched into half a

century. New diplomats could not be appointed because there was no government to appoint them. Therefore, it was important for the diplomats who had been appointed by the prewar Lithuanian government to stay alive. I do not know the particulars, but I do know that at one point my grandfather slept with a revolver under his pillow. We found the revolver packed away in the garage after his death. We showed it to a historian, who identified it as the revolver carried by Jonas Budrys when he led the Lithuanian army into German-occupied territories in the Klaipėda region in 1923 to reclaim them for Lithuania.

Career advancement took place only when higher ranking diplomats died. For this reason, the normal progression of achieving a higher ranking position, which should have occurred over intervals of a few years, stretched out into decades. In 1951 the United States Department of State appointed Anicetas Simutis Vice Consul. In 1967 he was appointed Consul General. The diplomats in exile could not take on other work to supplement their meager incomes, lest they risk the legitimacy of their appointments in the eyes of foreign governments. In our family, my grandmother went to work to help support the family.



*Lithuanian Americans protest against the Soviet occupation [Image: lithspringfield.com]*

My family's fate had been sealed with the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact that divided Europe between Stalin and Hitler. On August 23, 1939 the Soviet Union and Germany signed a non-aggression pact and secret agreement that established spheres of influence in Europe. After the occupation of Poland, the USSR and Germany signed another agreement on September 28, 1939 that decided Lithuania's future. On October 10, 1939, according to the secret treaty with Germany, the Soviet Union forced Lithuania to sign an agreement accepting conditions detrimental to its status as a sovereign state. The government of independent Lithuania agreed to allow 20,000 Soviet troops to be stationed on Lithuanian soil. The Lithuanian army was ordered not to resist. Lithuania's president, Antanas Smetona, fled over the border to Germany. Red Army troops crossed the border on June 15, 1940. Special agent Vladimir Dekanozov arrived in Kaunas from the USSR the same evening. Bowing to his demands, the acting

president agreed to the formation of a “people’s government” headed by the left-wing journalist Justas Paleckis.

On July 5, 1940 elections to the so-called People’s Senate were announced and election results were falsified. The supreme electoral committee announced that 99.51 percent of the electorate had voted and that the Lithuanian Labor Union (the communist party) had polled 99.19 percent of the vote. The parliament declared that Lithuania was a Soviet Socialist Republic and incorporated it into the USSR on July 21, 1940.

All references to independence were destroyed. All associations, organizations, and parties, except for the communist party, were banned. Censors, called *Glavlit*, controlled the press, made lists of books to be banned from libraries, and relentlessly promoted communist ideology in the schools and work places. Socialist and agricultural reforms caused living standards to plummet. Between July 12 and 16, 1940 five hundred public figures, politicians, soldiers and army officers of independent Lithuania were arrested. In autumn 1940 the newly established Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the Lithuanian Socialist Republic (the NKVD) began to purge the country of all anti-Soviet elements. Mass deportations started on the night of June 14, 1941 and lasted until June 18, 1941. Entire extended families, including the elderly and the newborn, were forcibly taken from their homes, often without the permissible 100 kilograms of luggage, and were crammed into cattle cars and deported to Siberia. More than 18,000 Lithuanians were deported to the arctic regions of Siberia in those few days. The women and children were sent to work in forestry, fishing, or to build railroads, while the men were sent to prisons or hard labor camps. The exiles’ property was confiscated and redistributed to communist party loyalists.



*Graves of deported Lithuanians in Irkutsk oblast, Russia [Image: truelithuania.com]*

The war between Germany and the USSR broke out on June 22, 1941. The German army bombarded Soviet military sites on Lithuanian territory from one side and the retreating Red Army pillaged the country and oppressed the people on the other. As they retreated the Red Army massively assassinated political prisoners.

After the Nazis established power in Lithuania, Nazi propaganda succeeded in exploiting the anti-communist and anti-Semitic moods that developed during the year of Soviet occupation. They convinced a minority of Lithuanians that the Jews were responsible for the suffering endured during the Soviet annexation and occupation and formed special Lithuanian units to help the Nazis purge Lithuania of its Jews. Ninety-five percent of Lithuania's Jews were murdered between 1941 and 1944.

*The Red Army enter Lithuania (border post visible on right of picture) [Image: Jan Krogh]*

In July 1944 the Soviet army invaded Lithuania again. The remnants of the Lithuanian army and young civilians between the ages of 16 and 30 formed armed partisan units to resist the Soviets. In 1945 the number of resistance fighters in the forests of Lithuania was estimated at 30,000. Very few were professional servicemen. Smaller combat units were headed by farmers, teachers, and high school students who either had little military training or none at all. They believed in the Atlantic Charter, that no nation that wishes to remain sovereign can be forced to give up control of their own government.

Leaders of the resistance did their best to make everyday life in the camps more spiritual. They composed songs and sang them together, they performed skits for each other, they prayed, they celebrated holidays, and they risked their lives to give their dead comrades proper burial services. Many of the freedom fighters wrote memoirs, poetry, and songs. Their patriotism helped them endure life underground in bunkers, out in the forests, in marginal conditions, and gave them the courage to stand up to a much stronger enemy. Love for their country, and a belief in independence, kept the spirit of the resistance alive. After nine years of

fighting, the last resistance fighter was captured and killed in 1953. It was the spirit of the resistance that kept the desire and the fight for Lithuania's independence alive during the long years of the Cold War.

In total, during World War II and in the decade that followed, the Baltic States lost roughly a third of their populations to targeted killings, partisan warfare, and emigration. During the years Lithuania struggled under three occupations, the corps of diplomats abroad served as a living link to prewar Lithuania's independent government. They carried on the resistance, though their war was a paper war, a matter of endurance. Fortunately, my grandfather was blessed with longevity and he lived to see independence.

In the early nineties I would sometimes go to the Consulate to help my grandfather with the office work. The pace in the Consulate (or *Konsulatas* as my grandmother lovingly called the place) was rather slow before the flood of events in newly independent Lithuania had the Lithuanian-American consular staff of three working at break-neck speed.

In the 1990s, with the independence movement generating an explosion of press coverage, my grandfather decided that it was time to make room for the new by cleaning out the old. One day he asked me to come in to help clean out the files. He told me to throw out anything that no longer seemed relevant. As I sifted through files of what seemed like endless correspondence regarding the living arrangements of displaced persons, notes on their employability (many of them fled without their diplomas), I would stop and ask my grandfather, "Are you sure you want me to throw *this* out?"

"Throw it away," my grandfather would answer, waving his large hand, reminiscent of a farm laborer's hand.

As I spent the day sifting through the files, I was amazed by my grandfather's thriftiness. After almost fifty years, he was still using the original folders, file cabinets, furniture, even typewriter that in 1936 had seen better days. He would use and reuse office supplies with the same economy as a Lithuanian farmer recycles everything from food scraps to paper and glass. It was this thriftiness that stretched the meager Consulate budget for so many years.

As I progressed through the files, I became more and more reluctant to throw anything away. It seemed monstrous to toss away anything that had survived the Cold War years. I opened a partially deteriorated manila file folder. On top there was a newspaper clipping about a minor actress of Lithuanian descent, Ruta Lee. Below this clipping was an article about a Catholic priest accused of heresy by none other than the KGB—typical Cold War mind games. A third newspaper clipping was a recipe for Jewish borsch, same as Lithuanian beet soup, which was probably the reason why the recipe was saved and filed. Who knew who would need it someday? After these three newspaper clippings of seemingly more significance came dozens of newspaper clippings in which Lithuania is mentioned in a sentence or two and duly underlined. I hesitated to throw even these away. My grandfather, sensing my hesitation, would call out from the other room: “Throw it away!”

Paging through the newspaper for any mention of Lithuania had been one of our daily rituals in our house. Lithuanian-Americans felt that if they found evidence, however minor, of Lithuania's existence, they could justify to their American friends, neighbors, co-workers that they actually came from a real place.

Most days, however, we found nothing.

Growing up during the Cold War in an émigré community of displaced intellectuals and artists, we children and grandchildren of the émigrés were hungry for any confirmation to ease our elder's homesickness and to prove to

ourselves that this land we'd been told about, the place that was referred to as “our real home” really did exist. We would get excited over the most obscure finds: a troupe of Lithuanian folk dancers photographed as the background of a touristic advertisement on traditional folk festivals in the state of Maryland; Lithuania referenced in a bad joke on the *Laverne and Shirley* show; the revelation that the actor, Charles Bronson, had grandparents who were Lithuanians who worked in the Pennsylvania coal mines at the turn of the century; the possibility that Elvis Presley could have been of Lithuanian descent because the name “Elvis” sounded like a rare Baltic name.



*Laima during childhood (second from left)*

As I write this, a sudden burst of memory fills my mind. I am a little girl. I am four years old. I am hanging upside down from a willow tree with my best friend, Lisa. “Let’s go to Uga Bla Bla land,” my friend Lisa would call out, meaning Lithuania, the imaginary land that I had created for us to play in. “Yellow, green,

and red”: I rattle off the colors of the Lithuanian flag. But what did the American flag look like? I did not know. I would not know until I began attending kindergarten a year later. Only, then I would feel conflicted when every morning, following the teacher’s instructions, I’d place my hand over my heart and recite along with the others: “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America...” By the third grade I would come up with a solution. I would not be a traitor and at the same time I would not make my teacher angry if I moved my lips during the Pledge of Allegiance, but did not actually voice the words.

The definition of what constituted a Lithuanian was clear to the émigrés, who sought to create a Lithuanian state in exile. They had their own newspapers, journals, magazines, a network of Saturday language and culture schools, summer camps, all organized and operating in communication with one another over four continents. I now know, after years of research, that this strong sense of patriotism and literacy is due to the success of Lithuania’s schools in those two brief decades of independence before World War II. This was a renaissance period in Lithuania’s educational system, when tolerance, literacy, love of nation, self-respect were fostered. It was a movement that did not only benefit urban populations, but took root even in the remotest villages, where highly-trained teachers were sent to teach. It was not without reason that Stalin’s first victims were the nation’s school teachers. They were rounded up and deported to the arctic region of Siberia in the first deportations in June 1941.

During the Cold War years when a free Lithuanian society existed only outside of Lithuania’s borders, you could conceivably travel the world by claiming a Lithuanian heritage. In any major city you could scan the local phone book for a Lithuanian surname, call the number and, speaking in Lithuanian, introduce yourself, and you would be picked up and brought back home and treated as a long lost relative and guest of honor for as long as you needed to stay. This

hospitality was reciprocated when the random Lithuanian traveler showed up on your doorstep.

In Lithuanian émigré families love and approval was doled out or withheld based on how fluently one could chatter in the native tongue or recite a patriotic poem in the perfect accent or burst into a Lithuanian folksong in perfect pitch. To resort to English or Spanish or German was considered a loss of linguistic ground.

New York and Boston Lithuanian émigrés, many of whom were factory workers and who spoke little to no English, spent their summer holidays in the Franciscan Monastery in Kennebunkport, Maine, where back in the day, one heard Lithuanian spoken on the streets of Kennebunkport village. Girls and boys went to summer camp under the tutelage of the nuns in Brattleboro, Vermont.

“Lithuanian girls do not wear jeans!” I remember a priest shouting, banging on the ground with his walking stick at Lithuanian Girl Scouts Camp. I fought back the tears that seemed to come so easily in childhood, because I was the girl wearing jeans, the only pants my mother, who believed that a girl should wear skirts, except when out in the forest, had packed for the week of camp. Balancing the free-wheeling hippy influences of the seventies with the conservative early 20<sup>th</sup> century values of the émigré community resulted in a lot of cultural confusion.

Growing up in America, we were told by the elders not to lay down any roots because one day we would be going home to Lithuania to help rebuild the country. But there was no Lithuania to go back to for us. We could not find it on the globe my parents kept perched on top of the television or on the map of the world at school. We had to take Lithuania’s existence on faith. Growing up in our comfortable suburban homes, we felt homeless. We were all given unpronounceable Lithuanian names with pagan meanings like “little fir tree” or “dew on the grass” or “goddess of the sun,” “goddess of the earth,” “goddess of

the sea,” or my own name, “goddess of fortune,” and instructed to insist on proper pronunciations when our American teachers, colleagues, neighbors butchered our names.

My mother is one of a few American born Lithuanians among her generation. All her friends had been through war-torn Europe and the displaced persons camps. My mother told me what it was like when the first wave of refugees came over from Europe. Writers, artists, doctors, lawyers, highly educated intellectuals, the entire class of people destined for extermination under Stalin’s brand of communism, fled with the clothes on their backs and arrived penniless to start their new lives in America. The archeologist Marija Gimbutas fled Lithuania in a horse-drawn cart with her infant daughter under one arm and her dissertation under her other.

The generation of Lithuanian writers and poets and playwrights who ended up in America after the war lived a particularly difficult cultural legacy. They continued to write in the Lithuanian language as their readers died off and their work was banned in Soviet Lithuania. The American-born Lithuanians never did quite seem able to fully master the Lithuanian language with its seven declensions and a grammar that adjusted itself to subtle changes in tense, time, gender, a grammar like shifting sand. They could converse and communicate, but could not catch the subtle nuances of great literature in the mother tongue.

The refugees worked double shifts at the Domino Sugar factory in Brooklyn and could afford only sub-basement apartments, not even the basements. Saturday evening dances at the church hall in Williamsburg, Brooklyn ended with the guests passed out, lying under the tables after a night of carousing. My mother remembers picking her way across the hall to the door, stepping carefully over bodies.

In the sixties and seventies some of the émigrés prospered while others did not. Prosperity had to do with one's ability to learn English, and earn a degree in a practical, technical, field. I had Lithuanian-American friends whose parents were doctors and engineers, and friends whose parents were cleaning ladies and janitors. However, at social events at the Lithuanian Community Center on Bushwick Avenue in Brooklyn, everyone sat together at the same tables.

“It is because of *detente*,” a professor of Polish descent said to me when I was an undergraduate at Rutgers. “It is much more convenient for the media to blot out the existence of millions, of entire cultures trapped behind the Iron Curtain, than to allude to the existence of the silenced masses.”

I knew what it meant to live in a state of non-history even without my professor's explanation. Lithuania had been so thoroughly wiped off the map, eliminated from current events, pushed out of contemporary civilization, that those of us living in the diaspora clung to the merest mention of our ancestral land as proof that this culture and nation actually did exist. We linked our self-esteem to those moments when we could prove that we legitimately have a cultural identity: “We are *not* Russians,” we stubbornly asserted, along with “Our language is not Slavic.”

*A woman walks into the deep forest after tending graves in the village of Salakas, Lithuania [Image: Laima Vince]*

Politically there has been a tendency to group the Baltic States together with Russia. However, the countries are linguistically unrelated. Although Russia is next door to Lithuania, the two languages do not share a common linguistic ancestor. Modern Russian evolved from Old Church Slavic, which is also known as Old Bulgarian, an extinct South Slavic language used by the Slavic missionaries Cyril and Methodius to propagate the Christian faith. Meanwhile, the oldest form of Baltic is Old Prussian.

During the Cold War years the Saturday morning New York Lithuanian-American radio program began its broadcast with the boast: “This program is transmitted in Lithuanian, Europe’s oldest living language!”

In fact, Lithuanian is not Europe's oldest living language. However, linguists have established that in comparison with other Indo-European languages, the sound system of Lithuanian has not changed very much from that of the Proto-Indo-European language. Thus, Lithuanian is an "old" language in that it has preserved features which have been lost in most other contemporary Indo-European languages. Because the grammatical structures of modern Lithuanian so closely resemble those of Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek, when specialists in Indo-European linguistics try to reconstruct the Proto-Indo-European language, contemporary Lithuanian is important to their research. However, the urban legend about the Sanskrit scholar who conversed freely in Sanskrit with Lithuanian villagers is simply not true.

Nonetheless, the linguistic closeness to Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek is a Lithuanian source of pride. This pride is one of the reasons why during the half-century long Russian occupation Lithuanians stubbornly held out and maintained their language, even though it would have been far more convenient to assimilate. It is the reason why Lithuanian was stubbornly taught to émigré children in America, Australia, South America, and all over Europe, and not just kitchen talk, but literary Lithuanian. It is why when two Lithuanians meet they will automatically converse in the mother tongue, even if the mother tongue has grown rusty and they confuse their declensions and verb forms.

During the Soviet era Lithuania was systematically Russified. Children had more hours of Russian than Lithuanian in school and their exposure to Russian began early, in the first grade. The media was largely in Russian. Russian was Lithuania's state language. Without a thorough knowledge of Russian, one could not have a career. Maintaining the Lithuanian language in the diaspora was one of the strategies of reinstating independence—if the language and culture could be maintained abroad that would influence Lithuanians behind the Iron Curtain to hold onto their culture. Culture became a tool of resistance.

I once asked my grandfather if he was an idealist.

“No,” he answered, “I am not an idealist. I am duty-bound to my country.”

When the Lithuanian community expressed their love for him with annual birthday parties, he would modestly thank them and tell them that they saw in him a symbol of their lost beloved country, and that it was Lithuania they loved, and should love, and not him. He felt that history had placed him in his position, and it was a destiny he must fulfill. Anicetas Simutis fostered the exiles’ hope for independence, but he appealed to them through reason and rational argument. He built the argument that as a trained economist he believed that drains on the Soviet economy would eventually cause the Soviet Union to implode.

In those years, Anicetas Simutis often spoke to the Lithuanian people over Radio Free Europe. On December 29, 1989 he gave this holiday speech over short wave radio:



*Dear Brothers and Sisters in our occupied Homeland,*

*At this time, we are bidding farewell to this year, a year that is memorable because of the various events that have taken place. This new year will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the meeting of two aggressive dictators, Stalin and Hitler.*

*Because of their meeting, Lithuania was occupied by Moscow.*

*This year, in your occupied Homeland, you may speak more freely. You are free to complain about the horrors you experienced during the time of Stalin's regime.*

*Over the last few months, the suffocating bolts of oppression have been somewhat loosened. You may now celebrate Holy Mass in the spirit of a Lithuanian Christmas. You may now speak freely about the occupation, under which you still live. And, you may peacefully demonstrate against that occupation. The conditions of your occupation have become gentler, more civilized. However, an occupation remains an occupation, no matter what color or form it takes. No structure of government imposed by a foreign power can replace a nation's independence. Only a fully independent nation living within its own state can progress, develop its own traditions, culture, and economic well-being. Out of the four nations signed away by the Stalin-Hitler pact, only one, Finland, managed to defend its independence. Before Lithuania was occupied, Lithuania and its neighbors were practically equals with Finland in terms of their cultural and*

*economic well-being. Today Lithuania and its neighbors are far behind Finland because of the results of several decades of oppression, which have led Lithuania into cultural and economic stagnation. Today Finland's exports can be found in all the world's markets. Meanwhile, as you well know, in Lithuania's present state of economic chaos, under the economic plan Moscow master-minded for Lithuania, even the simplest every day products are difficult to come by.*

*Lithuanian-Americans would like to help Lithuania get back on its feet by sending gifts and investments, but while Lithuania is still within Moscow's political and economic sphere, any type of aid to Lithuania would disappear like a spoonful of water in a barrel of sand.*

*From your massive demonstrations demanding Lithuania's freedom, we see that you understand perfectly well the causes of your nation's economic stagnation and are putting huge efforts into obtaining your independence. We are beside ourselves with joy that the Lithuanian nation is still alive, just as Lithuanian statehood continues to live on in the international arena. Therefore, I speak to you today as independent Lithuania's Consul General, as a rightful*

*member of the New York diplomatic corps, which has a membership of the consuls of eighty-eight nations.*

*I greet you this Christmas and New Year, wishing that our common desire for the reinstatement of an independent Lithuanian state be fulfilled as quickly as possible.*

After independence in 1991 my grandparents were finally able to go home. Friends they had parted with in 1936, when as newlyweds they sailed to New York, students and young professionals then, now greeted them at the airport in 1991 leaning in over their canes to shake hands. The few who were still alive, that is. Almost all of them had been through the Gulags of Siberia. After my grandfather died in March 2006, my mother and I found a manifesto written out by hand in elegant script on the back of a black and white photograph taken in 1933 of my grandfather and his three closest friends. The foursome were in their twenties, had just completed their university studies, and had embarked on a tour of Western Europe. Inspired by the sights of Europe, they wrote their manifesto. They vowed to remain close friends until death parted them and to always choose the decent, courageous, and righteous path in life. Ten years later, only my grandfather was still alive. Tucked behind the photograph and manifesto there was a letter dated 1953, the year Stalin died. The letter was from Siberia. In the letter the wife of one of the friends in the photographs describes how her husband died of starvation in a concentration camp in Siberia in 1943. She wrote that his dying wish was that she write to his friend, Anicetas, and tell him.

After my grandfather's death I was cleaning out his house in Long Island when in the garden shed I found cartons and cartons of his writing, accumulated over the years. He wrote for Lithuanian newspapers before the war and émigré

newspapers after the war. He wrote detailed diplomatic *pro memorias* to Lithuania's Ambassador in exile, Stasys Lozoraitis. But he worked out his private thoughts in his personal journals. It was just like him to store his work in the garden shed. He was a modest man, a practical man. Once the writing had served either its public purpose or private function, it was relegated to the garden shed.

I learned from my grandfather's journals that despite his position, he did not hold other people's political views against them personally. In his personal diaries he wrote about how he would secretly arrange to have lunch with former Soviet citizens who had escaped from the Soviet Union in order to learn more about their lives and their thinking. He did this both before the war and after the war. He wrote that he felt sorry for Soviet citizens because of the poor living conditions they endured. When the occasional Cold War escapees from the Baltic States came trickling into the Lithuanian émigré community in New York in the seventies and eighties, my grandfather opened up his home to them, setting politics aside and helping them establish themselves in America.



*Lithuanian Americans protest for Lithuania's freedom, 1990 [Image: everyculture.com]*

It is 1990 and I am standing in Penn Station with my grandfather after a day of tossing out the detritus of half a century of non-history. Lithuania is making real history now. Lithuania is fighting its way back onto the map. The temperature in New York is easily almost a hundred and the humidity is high. My grandfather optimistically suggests we toss down a can of beer to take an edge off the heat. We buy our beers and hide them inside paper bags, keeping a sharp eye out for the transit police. The two of us stand along the tracks,

waiting for our train to Long Island, smirking over our craftiness, taking

clandestine sips, talking about our day. In the spectrum of an extended family's gene pool, I connect most with my grandfather. We look alike. We think alike. We intuit alike. We obsess alike. And we shared the same birthday, February 11, which we always celebrated together with tea and cake. When I read through my grandfather's personal journals after his death, I felt how the space he carved for his own private reflection reminded me of my own fingerprint of thought, for better or for worse.

Now four years have gone by and it is 1994. The Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has purchased the floor of a building on Fifth Avenue and is setting up the Mission to the United Nations and a new Lithuanian Consulate. The landlord of the apartment on the Upper West side that housed the Lithuanian Consulate for half a century had been banging on the Consulate's doors for the past few years, demanding the Consulate liquidate its office, arguing that the apartment is residentially zoned. The landlord's argument was as follows: Why give those East Europeans quasi-charity in the form of a rent-controlled apartment now that they have their country back?

*Laima and her daughter in Lithuania*

The apartment is large by today's New York standards and the neighborhood has improved. With the Consulate out, the landlord could more than quadruple the rent. On this day the Consulate is moving out and my grandfather is delegating the parceling of the old furniture and office equipment. All the important files, the ones I did not throw away, have been moved to the new building. Relevant materials have been donated to a Lithuanian-American collector's museum at the convent in Putnam, Connecticut.

My grandfather instructs me to take the wool rug, insisting that I can use it in my Staten Island apartment. I pack up the house plants in a cardboard box. Gintė Damušytė, who works in the United Nations and who is highly regarded in the émigré community, and who fought human rights abuses against political prisoners for years, destined to later become an ambassador, takes the fax and other practical office machines—items donated when the independence

movement began. I ask my grandfather for his old typewriter, the one that has served him since 1936, the typewriter on which he'd written his *Pro Memorias* and his speeches and his newspaper articles. He gives it to me. Then he bends down and opens the safe. He pulls out a tarnished silver bowl with lovely filigree ornamentation. "It shone so beautifully back then," he says, gazing at the bowl wonderingly. "This was displayed at the 1936 World's Fair as an example of Lithuanian silver craftsmanship."

He offers the bowl to Gintė, but she declines. Then he offers the bowl to me. I take the bowl gratefully and pack it into a cardboard box along with an old German-Lithuanian dictionary in the old style German script. Later, at home, I polish the bowl until the shine comes back through.

*Laima Vince is a writer, playwright, poet, and literary translator. She is the recipient of two Fulbright Fellowships and a National Endowment for the Arts grant. Laima Vince has lived and worked in Lithuania for a total of eight years (1988 – 1989, 1995 – 1997, 2007 – 2011) and visits frequently. She is the author of a trilogy of literary nonfiction works about Lithuania: Lenin's Head on a Platter, The Snake in the Vodka Bottle and Journey into the Backwaters of the Heart. Her play about global issues and immigration, The Interpreter, has been running for three years at the Vilnius Chamber Theatre. Laima's novel about three generations of Lithuanian women, This is Not My Sky, is forthcoming next year.*

*Laima in Lithuania*

© Deep Baltic 2015. All rights reserved.

---

**Share this:**



---

**Related**

Learning Yiddish and Searching for Jewish Lithuania: Laura Esther Wolfson

From Memel to Klaipėda: the Lithuania Minor Revolt 94 Years On

Creators of Independent States: Latvia, Lithuania and Jelgava Gymnasium

*Copyright © 2020 Deep Baltic. All*

*rights reserved*

