

The Little Lithuanian Museum in Chugiak, Alaska



A simple placard greets visitors.



Lithuania's Honorary Consul in Alaska, Svaja Worthington, by her Little Lithuanian Museum, nestled among birch trees.

All photos by Laima Vincė

LAIMA VINCĖ

The Little Lithuanian Museum & Library in Chugiak, Alaska, created by Svaja Worthington, the Republic of Lithuania's Honorary Consul in Alaska, displays artefacts that reflect the culture, history, and historical trauma of 20th and 21st century Lithuania. Svaja's family has a long and distinguished history connected to Lithuania: Svaja's grandfather, Stasys Šilingas, was the Minister of Justice in pre-World War II independent Lithuania.

Stasys Šilingas was also a man of the people. He held governmental and political positions in pre-war independent Lithuania and was active in bringing about Lithuania's independence in 1918. For these activities, the Soviets later named him an "enemy of the state." The 1863 uprising against the Tsar of Russia, was funded by Svaja's great-great Grandfather Count Stanislovas Šilingas, who was exiled to Siberia for 10 years for his role in the uprising. His estate house in Paberžė is now a state museum of the 1863 Uprising.

Svaja, a retired professor of Literature at the University of Alaska, created a website to honor her grandparents', mother's, and aunts' memories. She writes: "My grandfather was then Minister of Justice, a leader in the intelligentsia of Lithuania, and a tireless champion of Lithuanian autonomy and independence. He was a patron of the arts, a poet and writer, and his home, Misiūnai, was a gathering place for artists, writers, poets, philosophers. He was an orator described as 'the Cicero of the North,'

renowned for his 'fiery, patriotic speeches' according to Encyclopedia Lituanica. Others called him 'The Soul of Lietuva' and 'The Father of Lithuanian Independence.' With a full beard and intense, passionate eyes, to me, he always looked like Leonardo da Vinci, or God."

When the Soviet Union invaded and occupied Lithuania in 1940 and then a second time in 1944, Stasys Šilingas, his wife, Emilija, and one of his nine daughters, Raminta, were deported to the Gulag in Siberia, where they endured hard labor and starvation. Stasys Šilingas survived 10 years in prison, living with an Article 58 death sentence, not knowing from one day to the next if that day would be his last day on earth. He survived 10 more years in the Gulag after his death sentence was lifted. Šilingas lived to fulfill his wish to die in Lithuania.

Svaja's mother, Laima, one of nine Šilingas sisters (all of whom had pagan Lithuanian names), realized that under the Soviet occupation only one fate awaited her and her family – deportation to the hard labor camps of Siberia. Together with her husband, Mykolas, they escaped Soviet occupied Lithuania, seeking asylum in the Allied occupied territories of Germany. Soon after they left home, their horse was commandeered by soldiers. The young couple continued their journey on foot to Germany, carrying a wooden suitcase containing all their belongings in one hand and two-year-old Svaja in the other. Covering



Traditional Lithuanian dress on display.

hundreds of kilometers on foot, Laima wore out her wedding shoes and continued the journey barefoot. The route they took is documented on a map displayed in the Little Lithuanian Museum along with the suitcase and its modest contents.



A section in the museum documents the Soviet occupation of Lithuania during World War II. On display are photos of Svaja Worthington's grandmother and young aunt who were deported to Siberia, and the lone suitcase that traveled with Svaja's family when they fled to the West.

Laima was pregnant when she fled Lithuania in August 1944. Svaja's younger brother was born enroute in Czechoslovakia in 1945. The family lived for five years in a Displaced Persons camp in Germany. Svaja was too young to remember life in the DP camp, but she remembers the blue and white checkered blanket that hung over a rope, separating their family's living space from the next family's. The checkered blanket is now on display in the Little Lithuanian Museum as an artefact of that period of the family's life. Only six of the nine Šilingas sisters escaped Lithuania.

In 1949, when Svaja was seven, her family crossed the Atlantic in a boat filled with refugees heading to North America seeking a new life. Her family settled in Lyons, Illinois, a suburb outside of Chicago. The abundant nature of that area reminded Mykolas and Laima of the provincial home they'd lost in Lithuania.

"My mother never got over the loss of her parents and her life in Lithuania," Svaja recalls. "I don't remember that my mother ever laughed."

Svaja's mother told her about the beautiful life they lived in Lithuania and taught her to honor and love Lithuania, even while living abroad. Although Svaja does not consider herself a writer, she has writ-



The pride of contemporary Lithuania – prowess on the basketball court. The Grateful Dead Lithuania T-shirt is proudly on display.

ten about Šilingas and her family in *Proteus* and has translated most of his letters into English. She also translated his poetry: Genesis of a Nation's Songs.

Svaja and her husband Bob Worthington, and four of their seven children, (three were born later in Alaska) came to live in Alaska in 1975. When Svaja was a student, they had spent two summers in Denali National Park where Bob worked as a ranger. They fell in love with the beauty and allure of Alaska and wanted to come back. When a job as a medical technician opened for Bob in Anchorage, they relocated from New Mexico. It was the height of the pipeline boom and all they could afford was a log cabin outside of Anchorage in Chugiak with minimal electricity and water.

"For ten years life was hard for us in Alaska," Svaja recalled.

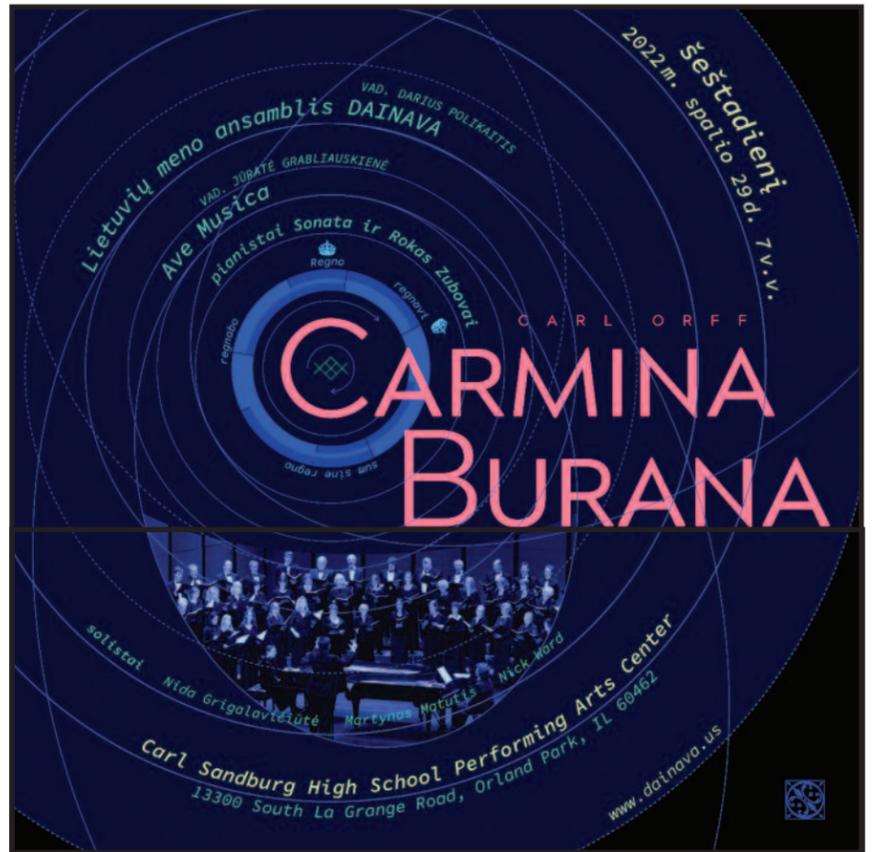
Svaja regrets not having taught her seven children Lithuanian but is proud that they all have Lithuanian names. Her husband Bob said, "Our children can have Lithuanian names as long as I can pronounce them."



Examples of Lithuanian jewelry – Amber

The Little Lithuanian Museum and Library is open to visitors June through September; however, visitors should contact Svaja before their visit to schedule a time. She personally leads each tour through the museum and is extremely generous with her time and expertise.

Svaja may be contacted through her website to arrange a visit: <https://www.lithmuseum.org>



October 29, 2022, 7 pm
Carl Sandburg High School Performing Arts Center
13300 South La Grange Road, Orland Park, IL 60462

Dainava Choir (led by Darius Polikaitis)
 Choir Ave Musica (led by Jūratė Grabliauskienė)
 Pianists: Sonata and Rock Zubov
 Soloists: Nida Grigalavičiūtė, Martynas Matutis and Nick Ward

Tickets can be purchased www.dainava.us.
Tickets for adults \$35, youths under 17 years old \$15



CHICAGO LITHUANIAN CENTER
Family Golf Day
OCTOBER 16, 2022

STONY CREEK GOLF COURSE, 5850 W. 103RD ST., OAK LAWN, IL

- GOLF, shotgun start at 9 am, \$175., – UNDER 21 y.o. \$150. – BRUNCH INCLUDED
- MINI-GOLF, start at 11 am, \$45., BRUNCH INCLUDED
- BRUNCH, 2 pm, \$35. OPEN BAR

CONTINENTAL BREAKFAST available. BRUNCH is a PRO'S CHOICE BUFFET: Italian beef, herb baked chicken, garden salad, baked mostaccioli, garlic bread, and assorted cookies.

BAR opens 8am, A BEVERAGE CART will be on course during the day and a two hour OPEN BAR available after golfing, starting at 1:30 pm.

Bid on a SILENT AUCTION BASKET

REGISTRATION INFO:
<https://chicago-lithuanian-center-family-golf-day.perfectgolfevent.com/>

Questions? Contact: Antanas at 708-369-8324 or email antanas5190@gmail.com
 All revenue and donations go towards the day-to-day operations of The Lithuanian Center.

Making an Estate Plan?
 Include the Draugas Foundation to assure the future of our Lithuanian American media.
Draugas Foundation
 4545 W 63rd St
 Chicago, IL 60629

FIRST RATE REAL ESTATE

Chicago and surrounding areas
 Bus: 773-767-2400
 Cell: 312-805-4851
 Fax: 773-767-9886
 E-mail: ausra.padalino@gmail.com

Aušra Kriščiūnaitė Padalino
 Sponsoring Broker/Owner

Languages spoken: English, Lithuanian, Spanish

35+ years of experience - Residential - Multi-family - Commercial - Property Management - Sales & Leasing

Create IMPACT!
 Advertise in **DRAUGAS NEWS**
 Contact: **Audrey Kizys 630-805-1404**
AudreyKizys@gmail.com