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MUSHROOM HUNTING IN VERMONT – LITHUANIAN STYLE

by Laima Vincė

Every autumn in Lithuania mushroom hunters descend by the thousands into the pine forests, searching for mushrooms in the underbrush. In southern Lithuania, where the mushroom crop is most abundant, the roadsides are crowded with

mushroom sellers, hawking their goods from the hoods of their cars— fresh mushrooms and dried mushrooms, displayed in glass canning jars, carefully measured out and sold by the kilogram.

You could say that Lithuanians are obsessed with mushrooms, and that would be an understatement.

Mushroom picking is such a deeply ingrained part of Lithuanian culture that there is even a verb to describe it, *grybauti*. And then there is the verb *nugrybauti*, which means stepping off the trail and getting lost in the forest while mushroom picking or losing the thread of a conversation.

Lithuanians boast countless dishes made with mushrooms, salads, rolls with mushrooms baked inside of them, mushroom dumplings. There are folk legends and popular children's books about mushroom hunting, the most well-known written by the poet, Justinas Marcinkevičius, *Grybų Karas*, or *The War of the Mushrooms*. And then in the town of Varėna, there is the annual Mushroom Festival.

This year the Lithuanian-American community sought to recreate that mushroom frenzy in the forests of Vermont. Lithuanians are a social people. Nothing attracts Lithuanians more than communal living, the opportunity to work together, cook together, drink together, and share stories. Our meeting place is Camp Neringa, a 50-year-old Lithuanian Heritage Camp in Marlboro, Vermont. The programs Neringa offers have grown as its original campers have grown into parents and grandparents. This year's mushroom hunting weekend is a new program with the goal of blending love of the outdoors with good community spirit, allowing us to be campers for a weekend.

Since we are an intellectual bunch, we cannot simply descend on the forests of Vermont with baskets in hand. We are eager to know all things about fungi. So,

we invite a pair of academics to guide us: Dr. Rytas Vilgalys, world renowned mycologist and head of the Vilgalys Mycology Lab at Duke University and Dr. Linas Kudzma, an organic and medicinal chemist who worked 32 years at Baxter Healthcare.

These two childhood friends grew up together in the concrete jungle of Queens, New York, but always felt more at home in the forest. Both are the children of World War II refugees from Lithuania. Born in the 1950s, they are of the generation that had to navigate life in the New World while balancing the heritage of the Old Country.

Rytas Vilgalys first learned how to differentiate which mushrooms were poisonous and which were edible from his grandmother, a World War II refugee from Lithuania. His grandmother and his aunts were passionate about mushroom picking and took Rytas along with them when they went out into the forest to gather mushrooms.

For these two city kids, and many other children of Lithuanian refugees growing up after World War II in New York, Boston, Hartford, and the other cities of the East Coast—where their parents, who often spoke little or no English, could find work—the forests of Vermont were a breath of fresh air, both literally and figuratively. Love of nature and spending time outdoors is a key component of Lithuanian culture. This is also true of Latvia and Estonia, and Scandinavia. The

Lithuanian heritage summer camp in Vermont fueled a passion for nature, coupled with shaping a Lithuanian ethnic identity in the diaspora. Summers at Camp Neringa in the forests of Vermont shaped the course of both Rytas and Linas's lives, as it did for many of us children of refugees.

Our day starts when the thirty-eight or so participants gather, baskets in hand, to set out for the forests. Our instructions are to pick all fungi. We will learn what is edible and what is poisonous later. Some of our mushroom pickers are natives of Lithuania, recent immigrants to the United States. They grew up mushrooming. However, Rytas cautions them not to assume that what is edible in Lithuania is edible in North America.

"Mushrooms are specific to their region and that local knowledge is handed down the generations. You never hear of Lithuanians poisoning themselves with mushrooms," Rytas says as we enter the forest. We only need to walk a few

footsteps before we begin finding mushrooms of all shapes, colors, and textures. I enjoy strolling in the forest and taking in the scenery. After spending a few hours picking mushrooms with Linas and Rytas I fear I will never look at the forest the same way again. I soon learn to scan the underbrush and to keep my eyes glued to the ground.

As we move deeper into the forest, Rytas disappears. We joke that he has succumbed to the verb—*nugrybauti*. It is easy to be led deeper and deeper into the forest in search of that perfect mushroom. Eventually Rytas reemerges with his basked filled to capacity. There is a certain mushroom he is hunting for his research he explains, and it grows only in the northeast.

When we return to camp, we spread out our mushrooms over several picnic tables. Rytas counts and finds that we have collected 60 different species. For the next hour, Rytas and Linas hold up various mushrooms and talk about their traits, their Genus, and their uses. Most of the mushrooms we have collected are what Lithuanians refer to as *šungrybai,* meaning mushrooms that are only good for the dogs. Actually, very few mushrooms are safe for human consumption. However, many of these same mushrooms are vital to scientific research.

After a lunch of mushroom salads and dumplings, I sit down with Rytas and Linas and we talk.

“My first mushroom hunts as a teenager involved looking for enlightenment,” Rytas jokes. “It was only when I was in high school and college that I shaped my interest as a naturalist into a career.”

“I was very much interested in insects as a child,” Linas says. “Coming to summer camp gave me the opportunity to study the natural world from close up.”

“A major influence for me was Orsen K. Miller, author of *The Mushrooms of North America*,” Rytas says. “He started identifying mushrooms by their Family or Genus instead of knowing every species.”

“Rytas was one of the first to use molecular biology techniques and DNA data to look at mushroom taxonomy,” Linas adds. “I built my work on the work he is doing. He used techniques that led to current taxonomies.”

In the late 1990s numerous other scientists also started to use molecular techniques to identify mushrooms using DNA.

“Rytas has trained the upcoming generation of mycologists,” Linas says. “He has been in the field since 1986.”

“You could say I’m the grandfather of mycologists right now,” Rytas says and laughs, “when I go out to collect samples I feel as though I’m going out with my academic grandchildren.”

I ask Rytas why the study of mushrooms is important and whether global warming has impacted mushrooms.

“Fungi are critical to a healthy ecosystem,” Rytas says. “A lot is unknown about what their function is. They are the primary decomposers and recyclers of the forests. They control plant disease. Many tree species cannot survive without fungi on their roots. Global warming is causing changes in the ranges of plants. Nobody knows the effects, but the fungi are an essential part of any ecosystem, and many of those ecosystems have been threatened by deforestation.”

“Have we lost many habitats?” I ask.

“The biggest changes have been in Europe over the last 100 years. Europe has lost many species. The hydrology has changed. Mushroom species have disappeared as their habitats have disappeared. North America still has some pristine forests.”

“How much do we know?”

“There are thousands of species, but much of that activity takes place underground. We only see the fruit. Although there are thousands of species of fungi, most have not been categorized. We would not even know it if they were gone.”

“So, you are studying an unseen world?”

“Exactly. Most fungi is not visible. They are cryptic organisms. We see less than 5%. We don’t know much. There is a lot going on in the forest that we never see.”

“So how does it work?”

“There are three categories. The decomposers, the pathogens, which treat diseases, and the symbiotic mutualists, meaning trees cannot live without the mushroom majority. All plants have microscopic fungi.”

I ask Rytas and Linas whether it was an urban legend that in Lithuania the mushrooms were radioactive in the years following the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl due to the radioactive fall-out in the region.

“Certainly not an urban legend,” Rytas replies. “The Paxillus involutus mushroom (among many others) absorbs heavy metals. They accumulate in the mycelium”

I learn that the mycelium is the thread-like organism that is the actual “body” of fungi. Mushrooms are the “fruit” that produce spores for reproduction.

"If fungal relationships break down," Linas adds, "the entire ecosystem will break down." Rytas explains that there is a theory in anthropology that cultures can be divided into mycophobes and mycophiles.

"The English, for example, are mycophobes and associate mushrooms with darkness and decay. This could be due to the influence of Christianity. Lithuanians, Balts in general, Central and Eastern Europeans, and Asians, love mushrooms. One can find pagan symbols that incorporate the mushroom in Baltic mythology."

I pull out my *svarelis* (a little weight), which I brought back from Lithuania. It was made by an archeologist who modeled it according to thousands of its fellows found on archeological digs all over Lithuania. A *svarelis* is a bronze pendulum. The ancient pagan Lithuanians used it to test if water or food was safe to drink or eat. You hold the *svarelis* steadily over the food or water, anchoring your elbow. Eventually, the *svarelis* begins to swing, picking up momentum. If it swings forwards and backwards that indicates a yes, the substance is safe. When it swings horizontally, that indicates a no. I ask Tadas, my childhood friend from summer camp, to slip mushrooms under my nose without the identifying labels Rytas has prepared that indicate whether the mushroom is poisonous or not. Using the *svarelis*, I test many samples of mushrooms, both poisonous and edible. The *svarelis* is always right. I propose my own theory: that the ancient Lithuanians used this method of divining to find out whether a mushroom is safe to ingest or not. After all, as Linas kept reminding us out in the forest, "Some of these mushrooms you will taste only once."

“There is no scientific basis for that,” Rytas says to me, shaking his head at my woefully unscientific method.

Linas agrees.

A few other women snicker.

I am alone with my folk theories.

We set out into the forest again in the afternoon to bring back more mushrooms. Wonderful conversations emerge as we comb the forests together. We find ourselves discovering new places where we hadn’t ventured before. A sense of peace and well-being and camaraderie pervades. I begin to realize that mushroom hunting is not just about finding the mushrooms, it’s about building relationships as well.

That evening our kitchen crew delights us with a magnificent meal of all things mushroom and locally grown or hunted, including venison. For desert we are treated to a special Lithuanian confection—gingerbread mushrooms slathered with frosting and sprinkles. The mushroom pastries are constructed in the shape of cute little mushrooms. Each mushroom is modeled after a few of the popular edible types, in Lithuanian: *baravykai, voveruškos, ūmedės, voveraitės*. These days gingerbread mushrooms can be purchased in the supermarkets in Lithuania. In the old days, they were baked only on holidays.

In the evening we sit in battered armchairs beside the blazing fireplace and watch slides of mushrooms as Rytas delivers another lecture. The next morning we are taught how to make the mushroom stools of our childhood by fastening an upholstered seat to a birch log. As small children at camp we would perch on these mushroom stools, our camp furniture, made by our counsellors, the generation of refugees or their children, and listen to folk tales or lessons. The process of constructing the mushroom stools becomes a foray into memories of the deep past as we exchange stories from our childhoods. Rytas, seated on a painted boulder under the old crab apple tree, serenades us with tunes on the accordion.

After a glorious communal weekend out in the Vermont woods, toting our baskets of mushrooms under one arm and our mushroom stools under the other, we all say good-bye for now and head off for home, wishing that camp could be our home. It is the villager who still lives inside of us, even in America.

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 this year.

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