

Lithuanian Americans in the Great War

By Henry L. Gaidis

Many Lithuanian immigrants who came to America during the early 1900s planned on returning to Lithuania and initially had little interest in becoming American citizens or establishing new lives in America.

However, the Great War was a catalyst contributing to their Americanization. When the Great War began in Europe in 1914 virtually all contact between Lithuanian American immigrants and their families in Lithuania suddenly ceased, as did the

immigrants' dreams of return to their former way of life, given the upheavals and uncertainties relating to events taking place in Lithuania proper at the time.

As the Great War began, many Americans had concerns about the large size of the nation's immigrant population and its loyalties. By 1910, nearly a third of the nation's population was foreign born or was comprised of the children of foreign-born parents. This included over a quarter million Lithuanians. To help Americanize its immigrant population, the U.S. government and many political and civic organizations began sponsoring and encouraging patriotic holidays such as the Fourth of July. Such events were enthusiastically supported within the nation's Lithuanian communities where many of its members were already engaged in the assimilation process. The government increased efforts to ensure that immigrants shun foreign loyalties, develop good English language skills, and be willing and able to serve in the armed forces. Accordingly, approximately half a million immigrants from 46 different nations, accounting for about 18% of its entire troops, did serve, loyally, and ably, during World War I.

Today we like to think that most Lithuanians willingly volunteered for American military service, but in reality a large portion only answered the call to duty upon being drafted. Still, they reported to duty and served honorably. Although a number of authors have made outlandish claims about the number of Lithuanians who served, most historians place the actual number at about



U.S. government poster designed to help Americanize immigrants, ca. 1917. (U.S. Library of Congress archive)



WWI American troops in combat. (National Archives)

30,000, including both volunteers and draftees. The immigrant population also contributed on the home front, providing vital support to production of coal, oil, steel, textiles, lumber, clothing, food, and many other wartime necessities. Just to cite one example: 10,000 of the 30,000 Bethlehem Steel Pennsylvania factory workers were foreign born. Many of the foreign workers in industries supporting the war effort were women who were entering the labor force for the first time. Some women volunteered to serve in the ranks of the American military and served with distinction, equal to that of their male counterparts. Regardless whether an immigrant served in the military or on the home front, he or she substantially contributed to the nation's war effort.

While immigrants were serving in the military or working in wartime industries alongside their fellow Americans, they were becoming more American. For many, this was the first opportunity to interact on a personal level with people from completely different backgrounds. The sharing of a common life and death cause led to lifelong friendships. Yankees became friends with Southerners, city slickers with hayseed farmers, bankers with factory laborers, Englishmen with Irish, and

even Lithuanians with Poles. Who they were before or what divided them in the past no longer mattered. They all learned to get along together while fighting or working together as one people sharing a common purpose.

It is estimated that of the 4.7 million Americans who served in the Great War, 116,516 died while in the service, and approximately 420,000 were wounded or became ill from diseases contracted in the line of duty. Of the recorded deaths, 53,402 were in combat and 63,114 were from diseases, especially from the 1918 Spanish influenza pandemic. The State of Maryland provided



Pvt. Mindow Zemaitis. K.A. means "killed in action".

62,424 soldiers, sailors, and marines, of which 645 were killed in action and 884 died of other causes.

A research project was recently completed by members of the American Legion, Lithuanian Post 154, in Baltimore, Maryland, which sought to identify Lithuanian Americans from Maryland who served. This project examined military and census records and through them identified 153 Lithuanian soldiers, sailors, marines, and coast guardsmen. Of the identified Maryland veterans, 76 were born in Lithuania, Russia, or Poland, while another 76 were American born. Many of the names were misspelled or Americanized, but the Lithuanian background of each person was verified through either place of birth or language spoken at home as reported in census records. Fifty-five served overseas, 4 were killed in action, 5 were wounded, and 2 died of illnesses or other causes. Two thirds of the identified Maryland Lithuanian Americans did not serve overseas, but remained in the United States, having been assigned vital support activities, or they were still in training when the conflict ended. Approximately a third of those who went overseas served in support roles behind enemy lines. The number listed as serving overseas was an underestimate, as it failed to count a substantial number who served in the Navy aboard vessels protecting vital American sea lanes beyond the nation's territorial waters. About a third of those going overseas served were involved in front line fighting involving frequent hand to hand combat and suffering attacks from poison gas or from airplanes above battle fields in France, Italy, Russia, and elsewhere. Regardless of where or in which branch of the military they served, each and every one of



Pvt. Zemaitis grave marker in France.

these veterans contributed to the nation's struggle, and some gave all for God and Country.

The contribution of Lithuanian immigrants to the Great War can best be understood through individual stories. As noted above, of the six Lithuanian American casualties from Maryland, four were killed in action, one died from disease, and one from other causes. Space precludes providing much detail about each of the identified heroes, but it is fitting that we at least recount briefly each man's story.

Mindow (Mindaugas?) Leonard Zemaitis was the youngest of our fallen heroes, and was the first to be killed in action. He was born on September 8, 1901, in Lithuania, and brought to the United States as an infant along with his older brother by his immigrant parents. The family settled in Baltimore, Maryland, where his father obtained work in a medical equipment factory. Here his sister was born. Young Mindow was raised in the local Lithuanian Community. We don't know when or why he developed his patriotic American fervor, but when war was declared he immediately attempted to join the U.S. Army. He was initially not accepted, as he was way under age. He

would not be deterred and travelled to Philadelphia where he lied about his age to recruiters. On May 2, 1917, Mindow was accepted into U.S. Marine Corps when he was only 15 years old. Following completion of basic training, Mindow was assigned to the 43d Company, 5th U.S. Marine Regiment. On July 3, 1917, his regiment was one of the first American units sent to France. Upon arrival, he took part in some of the heaviest fighting during the war. His regimental battle honors include the Toulon-Troyon Sector, Aisne, and Chateau-Thierry, names that live in American military history. One year later, on June 13, 1918, while only 16 years of age, Private Zemaitis was killed in action in hand to hand fighting with German soldiers in the Chateau-Thierry Sector. He lies buried in the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery at Belleau, France. He was the youngest of the 6 Maryland Lithuanian Americans who gave their lives for their adopted country during the Great War.

Frank Zitaitis was born in Kaunas and, like many of his fellow countrymen, must have fled his then Russian occupied homeland in the hopes of finding a better life in America. Very little is known about Frank's life, but he appears to have immigrated to America with, or seeking to join, his sister Barbara Narbutus and her husband. At the time he joined the U.S. Army, on September 8, 1917, Frank was residing in a boarding house in Baltimore. After completing his basic training, he was assigned to Company I, 38th U.S. Infantry Regiment, 3rd Division. His unit was sent overseas, and on March 30, 1918, it took part in heavy fighting in the Aisne, Chateau-Thierry Sector, Champagne-Marne, and Aisne-Marne. On July 22, 1918, Private Zitaitis was killed in action in Aisne-Marne dur-

ing intense combat. Frank lies buried in the Oise-Aisne American Cemetery at Fere-en-Tardenois, France, among his fallen comrades.

Witold M. Sokolowsky was born in Vilnius and immigrated to the United States in the hopes of finding a better life. He settled in Baltimore and found work in various local garment shops. Witold was inducted into military service on September 24, 1917, when he was 27 years old. After completing basic training, Private Sokolowsky was assigned to Company C, 313th U.S. Infantry Regiment, 79th Division. On July 8, 1918, Witold and his unit were sent to France. There he fought gallantly in the Avon Court Sector, Meuse-Argonne and the Troyon



Unknown soldier grave marker.



WWI commemorative medal.

Sector until he was wounded. He died on October 12, 1918, never having married; today we know nothing about the family he left behind. He lies buried in the St. Mihiel American Cemetery at Thiaucourt, France.

Anton Stanulis' life, like that of many Lithuanians who came to America before the First World War, is shrouded in mystery. We know from surviving ship, census, and military records that Stanulis born about 1896 in Russia. He arrived in Baltimore aboard the *S.S. Weimar* from Bremen, Germany, in May of 1907. On debarkation he listed his intended designation as Aurora, Illinois. He was either traveling with or became friends with a fellow passenger, Jonas Mickus, about whom we could not find any information; still, we know from ship logs that both listed Lithuanian as their native language.

For reasons unknown, upon his arrival Anton chose to stay in Baltimore and reported a local address when he enlisted in the regular U.S. Army. Upon completion of basic training, on September 22, 1917, Private Stanulis was assigned to Company A, 60th U.S. Infantry, 5th Division. On April 1, 1918, he was promoted to Corporal and two weeks later his regiment was sent overseas. On September 4, 1918, for some unknown reason Corporal Stanulis was reduced in rank to Private. He took part in heavy fighting in France in the Anould Sector; St. Die Sector; Villers-en-Haye Sector; St. Mihiel; and Meuse-Argonne. On the morning of November 11, 1918, Armistice Day, Private Stanulis was killed in action at Meuse-Argonne. His remains were never identified, but he was surely laid to rest among his fallen comrades in the U.S. military cemetery created on the Meuse-Argonne battlefield. In such cases, unidentified remains of American

fighting men are buried under a traditional stone cross bearing the inscription "Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God."

Although not directly combat related, two other Baltimore Lithuanian Americans lost their lives while on active duty during the Great War. Their loss was surely as traumatic to their loved ones as those who died fighting on a battlefield. For this reason, they were added to the American Legion Post honor roll of fallen soldiers.

John L. Zuckas was another Lithuanian immigrant who came to America dreaming of finding a better new life. When the United States entered the war, John, who was living in Curtis Bay, Anne Arundel, Maryland, was inducted into the U.S. Army when he was twenty-five years old. After completing basic training, on August 2, 1918, Private Zuckas was assigned to Casual Company, 154th U.S. Army Depot Brigade, 2nd Battalion, Edgewood Arsenal, Maryland, far from the fighting raging in Europe. Unfortunately, distance from the front provides little safety in war time. While on active duty at the Edgewood Arsenal, John contracted pneumonia and died on October 1, 1918, far from the battle fields of France. While his military records list the cause of his death as pneumonia, many historians today would say he most likely succumbed to the Spanish Flu pandemic that passed through Maryland at the time.

John Rosimas, another single male Lithuanian immigrant, was born on April 25, 1882, in Alvitais, Lithuania (then part of Russia). Like the earlier cited Lithuanian immigrants, John voyaged across the Atlantic in search of a better way of life. On July 24, 1917, John, while living in Baltimore, Maryland, voluntarily joined the Maryland Na-

tional Guard and soon was serving as a Private in Company I, Maryland Infantry. John's demise in many ways is even more tragic than those who died on the battlefield or while hospitalized. Available documentation does not document what devils he fought before his demise or what drove him to end his own life. All we know is that on August 6, 1917, John died alone in Baltimore, Maryland, without any friends, relatives, or fellow soldiers to comfort him, from a self-inflicted bullet wound.

We have no idea what hopes and dreams these heroes had for the future. Surely before their deaths each thought about going home, marrying and raising a family, in the land of the free. They shared the same dreams with virtually every other soldier, sailor, and marine who served or fought in the "war to end all wars." In their cases such dreams never came to pass, for they gave their lives for God and Country.

Final thoughts: Those Lithuanian American Great War heroes who managed to return home to Baltimore and survive, found that their lives had changed greatly. During the war years, the U.S. government had curtailed the normal five year waiting period to become naturalized, streamlined application procedures and waived application fees for servicemen. As a result, over 192,000 returning World War I veterans came home as American citizens. About a third of the returning Baltimore Lithuanians became American citizens in this manner and while serving their country had acquired skills that they carried into civilian life. Many became leaders in the Baltimore Lithuanian Community. I don't believe the situation in Baltimore was at all unique; similar experiences undoubtedly occurred in other Lithuanian communities across the land.