

# Footprints of Lithuanian Americans in the struggle for Independence



Lithuanian American National Council Convention, Madison Square Garden, New York, March 13-14, 1918.

Photo above in the right: Lithuanian American National Council, delegate pin Whitehead Hoag, New Jersey.



A FREQUENTLY OVERLOOKED HISTORIC FACT IS THAT LITHUANIA'S DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE OF FEBRUARY 16<sup>TH</sup>, 1918, DID NOT OCCUR OVERNIGHT. IT WAS, INSTEAD, THE CONSEQUENCE OF A SERIES OF SIGNIFICANT EVENTS AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS. THIS, OF COURSE, DOES NOT DETRACT FROM THE ACHIEVEMENT WHICH THE DECLARATION'S SIGNATORIES BROUGHT ABOUT. HOWEVER, IT MUST BE REMEMBERED THAT THERE WERE MANY OTHERS INVOLVED IN THE STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE INCLUDING MANY LITHUANIAN AMERICANS WHO ENERGETICALLY JOINED IN AND EFFECTIVELY CONTRIBUTED TO THIS CAMPAIGN.



## THE NATIONAL AWAKENING

It is generally agreed that the Lithuanian National Awakening of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the resultant Lithuanian Independence movement stemmed from the Polish-Lithuanian Insurrection of 1863–1864. While that struggle did not succeed, it energized the nation to continue its efforts to free itself from Czarist rule. The consequent brutal suppression of this insurrection led to an even greater resolve to resist tyranny. The Russian regime outlawed the publishing of books in the Lithuanian script; they had to be printed in Russian Cyrillic type. At the same time, industrialization of the urban areas and the transformation of the agricultural sector were taking place across the Western world. In Lithuania, like most other countries, the resulting economic turmoil led to the departure of one-fourth of the Lithuanian nation. Emigrants sought a better life overseas, mostly in America. One would think that the loss of a quarter of the country's population, in one generation, would have a devastating demographic effect. Actually, this flight not only enabled the nation to survive but eventually contributed significantly to achieving its long-sought independence.

## THE BOOK SMUGGLERS

While Lithuanian American immigrants embraced the liberty and riches offered by the



Book smuggler Vincas Juška.



Lithuanian American Liberty Bell Medal, 1919 awarded for significant donations.

new world, they did not forget their homeland and the families they left behind. It is suggested that the Lithuanian National Awakening would not have been successful had it not been for the participation and financial contribution made by thousands of Lithuanian Americans and their organizations. Lithuanians on both sides of the ocean were directly involved in preserving and drawing inspiration from the nation's glorious past. There were many outstanding leaders and writers in Lithuania. At the time, however, they did not have at their disposal the economic resources necessary to pursue this struggle. Publishing was controlled by the Russian government and the printing in the Lithuanian language essentially prohibited. As a result, printing of Lithuanian publications took place in neighboring East Prussia (also known as Lithuania Minor). A clandestine network of book smuggling was established to deliver these books into the hands of the Lithuanian people. This was a perilous undertaking requiring courage and an ability to outmaneuver the Russian border guards. Surreptitious funding of this effort was received from American Lithuanians and their organizations. In many ways, it was the Lithuanian American funding of the nation's book smuggling effort that kept the flame of the Lithuanian independence alive. Without the support of Lithuanian Americans through their writings, political action, and financial aid, the Book Smuggling Movement would have failed and with it the hope of independence. It was these enthusiastic and perhaps sometimes impatient Lithuanian Americans, who reveled in all things Lithuanian, who were the first (in 1917) to declare Lithuania's

Independence — complete Lithuanian political sovereignty a year before it was declared in Lithuania!

## A LITHUANIAN MONARCHY?

The Lithuanian independence movement only gradually evolved in the homeland. Initially, the leaders of the movement merely sought some modicum of political autonomy, some accommodation within the framework of Czarist Russian Empire. In 1905 the Russians were routed in the ill-fated Russo-Japanese War. This resulted in an easing of the Lithuanian publication restriction. With the advent of World War I and the ensuing occupation of Lithuania by German forces in 1914, the Lithuanian independence movement considered the option of a Lithuanian kingdom within the framework of the Imperial German Empire. As part of this effort, some Lithuanian leaders even offered a crown to a proposed new Lithuanian monarch, a member of the Wittenberg dynasty who claimed a remote lineage to the Lithuanian King Mindaugas. He would have been known as King Mindaugas II. Were the Lithuanian political leaders being opportunistic or were they just being practical given the conditions they faced at the time? In any event, this proposal did not pan out and was soon abandoned.

## LITHUANIAN AMERICANS TAKE ACTION



Lithuanian State Bond 100 Aukšiniai, 1919 purchased by American Lithuanians to support Lithuania.

Let us now recount the Lithuanian Independence Movement from a Lithuanian American perspective. The Lithuanian Americans were also experiencing their very own version of a Lithuanian Awakening and their patriotic organizations gradually developed over the years into nationwide networks. Following the first attempt at Lithuanian autonomy at the Great Vilnius Seimas in November 1905 Lithuanian Americans held their own, First Lithuanian American Political Convention, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on February 22,





**Fifty dollar Lithuanian Liberty Loan Certificate, 1920.**

1906. There they demanded Lithuanian political autonomy. By 1908, the many smaller local Lithuanian community patriot organizations joined together to form the National Society of Lithuanian Patriots, which began funding Lithuanian publications and supported various activities promoting Lithuanian independence. The Lithuanian language publications and articles penned by Lithuanian Americans were sent to Prussia along with funds to support the Lithuanian book smuggling movement.

As World War I raged in Europe, Lithuanian American, especially, Catholic organizations across the country raised money for Lithuanian War Victims Relief, which under a U.S. government system was disseminated to all war victims of the Czarist Russian Empire. As a result, these funds only helped those Lithuanians who had fled their homeland during the war and resettled in Russia.

Finally, the Lithuanian Roman Catholic Federation of America, called a special conference on January 10-11, 1917, in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, to discuss Lithuanian Independence. The coordination of efforts promoting Lithuania's freedom was undertaken by the Lithuanian National Council of America which in Lithuania was known as Amerikos Lietuvių

Taryba, a precursor to the Lithuanian American Council (LAC) which continues to operate to this date.

At the conference, members, representing approximately twenty-five percent of the total Lithuanian world population, in the name of their nation passed their own Declaration of Independence, a full year before it was done in Lithuania.

## INFORMING PRESIDENT WILSON AND THE VATICAN

In accordance with the Lithuanian National Council of America, the Reverend Jonas Zilius and Dr. Julius Bielskis were to present copies of this Lithuanian Independence Declaration to President Woodrow Wilson and the representative of the Vatican and other foreign ambassadors in Washington, D.C. This was done a full year before independence was called for in Lithuania.

Also, through Dr. Bielskis' efforts, a Lithuanian Information Bureau was established in Washington, D.C., which was commissioned to inform American political leadership, the media and the public at large that the conference has passed a Lithuanian Declaration of Independence. (Today the Lithuanian Information Bureau's work continues to be performed by the Lithuanian American Council through its agency Joint Baltic American National Committee in Washington, DC).

Although these Lithuanian Americans had been the first to proclaim Lithuanian Independence, they fully realized that a national

government has to exist in Lithuania for the nation to be genuinely free and independent. As a result, when a subsequent Lithuanian Declaration of Independence was passed on February 16th, 1918, in Vilnius, they immediately recognized and supported the newly established government.

## ATTENDED PEACE CONFERENCE

The Third National Congress of Lithuanian Americans was held on March 13, 1918, at Madison Square Garden, New York, wherein both Catholic and national political leaders representing over 700,000 of their countrymen jointly called for the U.S. to recognize the Vilnius declaration and the government formed under it. This resolution was forwarded to President Wilson and other foreign representatives. Although President Wilson delayed recognition of Lithuanian independence and the new government, he authorized the Lithuanian American representatives to attend the anticipated Paris Peace Conference. As a result, Lith-



**Lithuanian attendees at the Conference of Lausanne in Switzerland, 1918. From left: Rev. Juozas Dabužis, Kazys Pakštas, Antanas Smetona, Martynas Yčas, and Balys Mastauskas (Frank Mast).**

uanian American delegates were in attendance at the 1919 Versailles Peace Treaty Conference.

Also, Lithuanian Americans substantially financed the Lithuanian government operations for several years through their purchase of Lithuanian loans and bonds. Several Lithuanian government officials at the time attested to the fact that the nascent Lithuanian government would not have survived but for that financial support. There is no question that Lithuanian Americans were directly involved in the Lithuanian Independence Movement and their support was crucial to the establishment of Lithuanian statehood in 1918.

## MILITARY ORGANIZATIONS OF LITHUANIAN AMERICANS

Prior to the 20th century, immigrants arriv-



**World War I: The Making of Americans**





Lithuanian American Council representatives at Lithuanian Liberty Bell, June 8-11, 1919, fund raising event.

ing to the United States did not find the government social support programs available to immigrants of today. There was no Unemployment Insurance, Medicaid, Food Stamps, etc. to help them in case of disability or job loss. To obtain a degree of security in case of hard times, immigrants formed mutual aid societies based on religious, occupational, or other common interest. Veterans who arrived in Baltimore achieved this mutual aid goal by forming two Lithuanian American veteran fraternal societies that became the root organizations for The American Legion Lithuanian Post 154. The Knights of St. Casimir was formed in 1887 and the Knights of St. George was formed in 1903. Both organizations proudly wore their organization's uniforms during community, religious and patriotic events. Both organizations supported America's Great War effort and many of their members quickly volunteered for military service when WW I was declared. They and their families proudly served their new country in the military and civilian war effort with distinction. Sizable Lithuanian American Communities in other U.S. cities also formed veteran mutual aid societies, volunteered for military service and supported the war effort in similar fashion.

After WW I ended, most of the returning Lithuanian American veterans rejoined their earlier military fraternal organizations, but now with a new prospective and expanded goal. In 1918-1920 knowing that their friends and relatives in their ancestral homeland were fight-

ing a bloody three pronged war against Czarist White Russians, Communist Russians, and Polish forces for Lithuanian independence, many of these veterans were spurred into action. They had seen first-hand the hardship of life under foreign occupation (Russian Czar). After experiencing freedom and democracy in America, these veterans felt duty bound to help their families and friends in Lithuania fight to achieve the same freedoms.

## THE LITHUANIAN AMERICAN BRIGADE

President Wilson's call for the restoration of freedom to all people of Europe was heard by every immigrant in the United States. Even before the smoke of First World War battles had dissipated, Lithuanian American war veterans, upon returning home, began to seek ways to help their homeland. As a result, most Lithuanian American veterans chose to avoid joining the newly established American Legion in favor of forming their own veteran organizations with objectives that included not only caring for their fellow veteran comrades, but also helping the struggle for Lithuanian independence.

Though there was much Lithuanian American support for this idea, the concept was opposed by the United States Department of State which was committed to supporting the Czarist Russian government which had been one of its allies during the First World War. Even though the Soviet had already overthrown the Czar, many government officials still hoped that the Czar could somehow be restored to the Russian throne. To appease though who called for Lithuanian support, Colonel E. J. Dawley an America military advisor was sent to Lithuania to review the situation. Upon his returned, Colonel Dawley recommended that the American provide military aid to Lithuania nothing tangible materialized. With the ever growing disappointment over the United States delay in providing assist the Republic of Lithuania, the Lithuanian American community began to take action into its own hands. To coordinate



Members of the Lithuanian American Brigade in Kaunas, 1920. From left: Capt J. J. Bielskis; unknown Lithuanian warrior from Australia, who worked in the British military mission; mjr. Orsino F. Newkirkas; Col. (later a Brigade General) Williamas N. Swarthoutas and Capt V. Lazdynas.





1912 Thousands Marching, Thousands Watching! Our National Army, Chicago, Aug. 4, 1917.

Lithuanian Americans also were among the U. S. troops, sent to Europe in World War I: Private Mindow Leonard Zemaitis, age 16, Killed-in-Action, (above in the right) and Antanas Walczyckas (below) from Baltimore.



nizer of the Freedom Guards. He immediately relinquished his position on the council and devoted his full time to the formation of a Lithuanian American Brigade. Bielskis was soon joined by Colonel William N. Swarthout, a volunteer American military officer, who had been sent to the United States by Colonel Mykolas Gedgaudas in Paris to investigate the possibility of forming the proposed Brigade.

At that time, Bielskis estimated that approximately 10,000 volunteers were ready to go to Lithuania, but due to the existing political situation the U.S. government would not allow these soldiers to leave the country as a military force. As a result, a clandestine operation had to be developed by Bielskis and Swarthout for Brigade volunteers leave the country traveling first to Canada as laborers and from there sail to Riga to join the Brigade in Lithuania. Under this plan, the recruitment and travel expenses of such volunteers were to be financed by the Lithuanians with some unpublicized indirect support from the U.S. government.

Upon their arrival in Lithuania, the volunteers were to then be formed into two infantry regiments, a technical regiment, a cavalry battalion, an artillery battery, and engineer battalion, consisting of 205 officers, 1,115 non-commissioned officers, and 4,600 soldiers and serve as a unified unit. A Brigade staff contingent consisting Colonel Swarthout, Major

the effort to establish a Lithuanian American military force, Dr. Julius Bielskis was appointed the Inspector General of the proposed Brigade. Bielskis had previously served as the Director of the Lithuanian Information Bureau and served as the President of the Lithuanian National Council in Washington, D.C., from May 1917 to the end of 1919.

Manpower for the proposed brigade came from returning Lithuanian Americans World War I veterans who wanted to help in the defense of Lithuania. These men were proven combat veterans, fully trained and prepared for action. Many of these veterans began forming together upon their return to the United States in anticipation of returning to Lithuania and helping to liberate the nation from its oppressors. From small ad hoc groups several larger organizations evolved the most notable being the Freedom Guards (Laisves Sargai), the American Lithuanian Legion (Amerikos Lietuviu Legionas) and the Alliance of American Lithuanian Soldiers (Amerikos Lietuviu Kareiviu Susiveienijimas). In one published May, 1919, account estimated that some 75,000 men were ready to go to Lithuania, though most historians estimate that an accurate number was probably somewhere in the 10,000 proposed range.

## 10,000 READY TO GO TROOPS

The following account concerning the Lithuanian American Brigade comes largely

from an interview with Dr. Julius J. Bielskis by the noted historian Alfred Erich Senn that was published in Lituanus Magazine, Volume 21, No. 3, Fall 1975. The Lithuanian American Congress meeting in Baltimore, Maryland, in early 1919, appointed Bielski as the chief orga-



The Freedom Struggles, Panevėžys, 1919: the officers of the Separate Joniškėlis Partisan Death Battalion (from 1919 12 09 — the Infantry Regiment). Sitting from left: the Commandant of the District Security Staff Artūras Pušmanas, the Commander of Joniškėlis Staff Petras Monvyd-Olechnavičius, the battalion commander Antanas Stapulionis, the head of battalion's provision branch Mulevičius and the adjutant Antanas Kazilevičius. A skull with crossed bones was a symbol of the battalion.





The Lithuanian American Brigade members, 1919. Ltn. J. Zamkus is sitting the 3<sup>rd</sup> from left, next to him — 1<sup>st</sup> class Ltn. P. J. Purvis.



Lithuanian American WWI veterans, Worcester, Mass 1919, among the thousands who had volunteered to fight for Lithuanian Independence.

Oscar F. Newkirk, Captain Julius Bielskis, and Captain Vladas Lazdynas, traveled to Lithuania in the fall of 1919 to coordinate final travel for the volunteers and the establishment of the Brigade in Lithuania.

Though the American government continued to oppose the concept of a Lithuanian American Brigade going to the aid of Lithuania, a large number of volunteers had actually been formed and was ready to travel to Lithuania. These volunteers not only consisted of

recent Lithuanian migrants, but Lithuanians born in America as well as a good number of none Lithuanian Americans. Most of the volunteers served in the American military in World War I and were ready to fight and die to establish a free and democratic republic in Lithuania. Still even with such willing freedom fighters and the hard work of the leaders in the Lithuanian American community the dream of a Lithuanian American Brigade did not come to fruition. Only a small number of those

volunteering to serve in the Lithuanian American Brigade actually arrived in Lithuania.

## LOST CHANCE TO CHANGE THE HISTORY?

Bielskis attributes the failure to form the proposed Lithuanian American Brigade not to the U.S. government, but directly to the opposition of Lithuanian Foreign Minister Augustinas Voldemaras. At that time, Voldemaras was engaged in a power struggle with President



Lithuanian Americans Poster —  
Lithuanian Liberation Army,  
gen. Žukauskas, 1920.



Pranė Glemžaitė-Lazdynienė and Capt. Vladas Lazdynas, a Lithuanian American Brigade Officer, before their return to Lithuania, 1919. Capt Lazdynas is wearing a uniform of the Lithuanian American Brigade.



Dr. Jonas Julius Bielskis, the founder of the Lithuanian American Brigade.







Lithuanian American Legion of America, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Convention, Brooklyn, N.Y., November 18, 1934.

Antanas Smetona over the direction the nation was to travel. He was quit blunt when he meet with representatives of the Lithuanian American Brigade. He thanked the Lithuanian Americans for their support of the Lithuanian cause, but demanded that the that the American Brigade volunteers not serve together as a single unit, but be broken up among existing units of the Lithuanian army. He refused to accept the position of the Brigade representatives that it not be broken up as it's members were not all Lithuanians, did not all speak Lithuanian language, and were used to a completely different life style than those now serving in the Lithuanian army. The Brigades' position that these volunteers serve together in a similar fashion as the American forces had served in France during the Great War was rejected by Voldemaras. Though the proposed Lithuanian American Brigade was supported by General Silvestras Zukauskas, Colonel Antanas Merkys, and other high ranking officers, the Brigade failed to materialize through the stubbornness of one man. Voldemaras reportedly feared that the arrival of such a large number of Lithuanian Americans would jeopardize the position of native Lithuanians in the military and government.

As a result only about 500 of the Lithuanian Americans volunteers traveling alone arrived in Lithuania. These volunteers upon their arrival were disbursed among existing Lithuanian units as desired by Voldemaras, but served Lithuania with great distinction. Several were decorated with the Cross of Vytis for their bravery in combat. Still one has to wonder if the proposed Lithuanian American Brigade would have changed history. Surely such volunteer clearly demonstrated the conviction and will of the Lithuanian American community to help its ancestral homeland. Today we can only speculated what if?

There is no doubt that the political will and financial support provided by these early Lithuanian Americans directly contributed to the successful establishment of the Republic of Lithuania. Their demonstrated action in providing information and education to the President of the United States and members of Congress eventually led to the United States to recognize and support the fledging new government. These Lithuanian Americans did not then sit back and consider their job as done: They continued to provide both financial and political support to the Republic of Lithuania. These early heroes realized that if Lithuania were to survive it would require the ever continuing support of Lithuanian Americans. For this reason, Lithuanian Americans maintained there their established political organizations which immediately came to the assistance of Lithu-

ania when occupied by Soviet and Nazi forces. This effort did not come cheaply, but these early Lithuanian Americans were more than willing to financially bear the burden of liberty.

## LITHUANIAN LEGION OF AMERICA

After Lithuania achieved its independence, many of the Lithuanian American Brigade volunteers started forming small local veterans groups. On February 16, 1930, under the leadership of Peter Jurgela, Lithuanian veteran groups from New York, Boston, Chicago, New Britain, Bridgeport, Waterbury, Hartford, New Haven, and Baltimore met in New York. They decided to join together and establish the national Lithuanian Legion of America organization. The organization was incorporated on December 19, 1934, and established its headquarters in Brooklyn, New York. Its first Commander was Baltimorean Dr. John A. Buchness (Bucnis) who had served as a Captain in the American Army during the WW I. Buchness subsequently served as the organization's National Surgeon and was one of Lithuanian Post 154's charter members.

Although the Lithuanian Legion of America remained a separate organization from The American Legion, its basic goals and dedication to God and Country were virtually identical. The primary difference was that Lithuanian Legion of America accepted all former soldiers, sailors, and marines of Lithuanian extraction, regardless in which country's armed forces they had served. The American Legion admitted only U.S. veterans. With its rich cultural and ethnic pride, membership in the Lithuanian Legion of America increased.



Lithuanian American Legion of America members in uniform.



By 1938, the Lithuanian Legion of America had nine posts with hundreds of members. The largest posts were in Chicago and New York. The Japanese December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor quickly changed the independent thinking of Lithuanian Legion of America members. Although they continued to be very proud of their ancestral heritage, they were Americans first and foremost. As a result, these proud Lithuanian Legion of America members pledged their support to the American war effort and sought membership in The American Legion. Fifteen Lithuanian Legion of America members from Baltimore applied to The American Legion for permission to form a post in Baltimore.

On March 19, 1943, these fifteen Lithuanian Legion of America Baltimore Post veterans were delighted to learn that their request to form an American Legion Post had been approved and they had been issued a Temporary American Legion Charter. To their added joy, these old veterans also learned that The American Legion had authorized their new Post to use its "Lithuanian Post" designation as its official name and to carry the Lithuanian National Flag during official functions.

It is believed that Lithuanian Post 154 is the only American Legion Post authorized to bear such an ethnic designation in its official name. Post members worked diligently recruiting other Lithuanian American veterans. By June 19, 1944 when they received their permanent American Legion Charter, the Post's membership had grown to fifty two. ■

By Henry L. Gaidis/ Draugas

Photo credits: Balzekas Museum, the Lithuanian War Museum, Henry L. Gaidis archives, Glemžų family's archive, Vytautas the Great War Museum.



American Legion Baltimore Lithuanian Post 154 Flag Detail, which was honored by the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, NY, by being invited to take part in the academy's 2010 annual Commemoration Ceremony honoring Lithuanian General Thaddeus Kosciuszko, the academy's founding Father.



American Legion, Lithuanian Post 154, 75th Anniversary Swearing in Ceremony, July 21, 2018.

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American Lest We Forget WWI Commemorative and American Legion Education Medal — Gaidis Collection.