Lithuanians in Baltimore

by Henry L. Gaidis

Due to the existing social structure and bleak existing economic situation in Lithuania during the 1860–1870 period, many adventurous Lithuanian single males started coming to America in the hope of making a fortune and later returning home and purchasing a farm to improve their standard of living. There were few viable economic options in Lithuania under Czarist Russian occupation. Although most Lithuanian families by then owned their own farm homesteads, these were small in size and could not support a family if divided. As a result, the eldest male child would inherit the family farm, while it was hoped that other sons would survive by becoming priests, finding some type of Russian government employment, or entering the military. Russian military service would normally involve the recruit to be away from Lithuania for an extended period of time, and it was not uncommon for families to hold funeral-like wakes prior to their departure, as few ever returned.

Similarly, it was hoped that female children would marry a fellow farmer, become nuns, or find some type of suitable position with a local wealthy farmer or government official. As a result, America became one of the few avenues for many in Lithuania to improve their life. Over time, families even started to pool funds to pay for boat passage to America for the second-oldest son. The idea was, that after finding employment and a suitable living situation, he would repay the family investment by sending money home to pay for his younger brothers' passage. Once all of the male members of the family had immigrated to America, the family in a similar manner would frequently send their unmarried daughters to join their brothers in America, in the hope that the women would find suitable husbands among their brothers' friends and coworkers.

Baltimore Lithuanian Hall, 1914-1921 reconstructed façade.

Wherever they settled, Lithuanian immigrants tended to live together because it made life easier. With the arrival of single women and more often already established Lithuanian families, they began establishing their own communities. Although the work was hard, many of the immigrants prospered, and rather than going home started to establish their own permanent communities. As a result the modest Lithuanian immigration which began in the 1860s continued into the 1880s and by 1900 was quite substantial.

The vast majority of the first immigrants settled in Pennsylvania where men quickly found jobs in coal mines. For others, it was work in the mills and in the booming garment industry in New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Baltimore. Soon Lithuanian immigrants spread into Illinois, Connecticut, and New Jersey, and by 1910 there where sizable Lithuanian communities in Chicago and Cleveland.

The first permanent Baltimore Lithuanian Community became established shortly after the arrival of Vincas Jokubauskas and Vincas Bielys, two Lithuanian tailors who

had initially settled in New York but came to Baltimore in 1881 because of better opportunities in its flourishing garment industry. After they found good jobs they began encouraging their family members and friends both in New York and Lithuania to join them in Baltimore. As a result, within in four years there were at least two hundred and fifty Lithuanians immigrants living in Baltimore in 1885, at which time they established their own Catholic fraternal organization, the St. John the Baptist Society. They soon invited the Reverend Casimir Polujanskis (Polianski), a Lithuanian priest from Bremond, Texas, to cater to the religious needs of the embryonic Baltimore Lithuanian parish, In 1887, Cardinal Gibbons granted permission for the society to establish its own Roman Catholic parish and by 1889 the society had raised enough money to purchase the historic Lloyd Street Jewish Synagogue. Upon renovation the Synagogue became the St. John the Baptist Church, the first Lithuanian house of worship in city. During the organizational period a number of temporary priests catered to the spiritual needs of the parish.

It was in the early eighteen nineties that the great tide of emigration fell upon most American cities along the Atlantic Coast. The small St. John the Baptist Church was soon outgrown and in 1904 it was sold in order to acquire a larger house of worship. The parish acquired a former Protestant Church with a rectory and basement hall suitable for parish functions which was rechristened as the St. John the Baptist Church. Soon the parish became the home of two fraternal benevolent societies, the Knights of St. Casimir and the Knights of St. George, which functioned similarly to the Knights of Columbus, but in the era before social security benefits, these societies also provided some modest sickness, death, and unemployment benefits to its dues paying members in emergencies.

St. Alphonsus Church main altar.

The church remained the home of the Lithuanian community until 1917, when Cardinal Gibbons, the Archbishop of Baltimore, transferred the historic former German St. Alphonsus Catholic Church, established in 1845, with its rectory and grammar school, to the ever-growing Lithuanian parish. With its Gothic Revival style, this church is one of the most beautiful in the city.

A Lithuanian-run grammar school had been established at St. John the Baptist in 1909 and it was continued at the parish's new location. From 1921 onward the parish school was taught by the Sisters of Saint Casimir. During the 1949 through 1978 period, a Lithuanian Saturday School was operated for students seeking to improve their language and learn more about Lithuanian history. Several historical religious figures have been associated with St. Alphonsus Church. Besides Saint John Nepomucene Neumann, who served as the church pastor from 1848 through 1852, the Lithuanian Archbishop Blessed George Matulaitis also visited and stayed at the parish during his 1926 visit to America.

In 1893, the Reverend Joseph A. Lietuvnikas (1865-1943), a Lithuania-born priest, was ordained in America and became the church pastor. For his service to the Lithuanian community, the Lithuanian government in 1935 bestowed the Order of Gediminas medal upon Lietuvnikas. After Lietuvnikas' death in 1943, Reverend Monsignor Louis J. Mendelis (1898-1982) became church pastor. Mendelis became noted for his zeal in organizing support for Catholic Missions and Charities and his work with Miraculous Medal Novena services. During his almost 40 years as pastor of St. Alphonsus Church, fr. Mendalis was assisted by a number of notable Lithuanian priests who were associated with the parish, including Rev. Anthony J. Dubinskas (1903-1979), Rev. Casimir F. Keydash (1906-1985); Rev. John Mendelis (1900-1982); Msgr. Joseph Antoszewski (1927-1992); Rev. Casimir A. Pugevicius (1928-2000); and the Rev. Anthony S. Dranginis (1917-1991).

Most of the early Lithuanian American immigrants obtained employment in the tailoring industry, which was one of the primary sources of revenue for Baltimore at that time. During its heyday, there were some twenty-eight Lithuanian tailoring establishments in the region and it has been estimated that 85 percent of the population was en-

Lithuanian American activists meet with Mayor Wm. E. Broening, 1920.

gaged in this industry. The immigrants established their very own independent Lithuanian Tailor's Union in 1915, which later became the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Local 218. As these new immigrants obtained wealth and education, they soon spread into other professions and businesses, including physicians catering to their own community. There were Lithuanian dentists, lawyers, nurses, public school teachers, civil engineers, pharmacists, real estate dealers, undertakers, photographers, insurance and steamship agencies, general insurance agents, bakeries, lunch rooms, public garages, grocery and provision stores, and taverns.

The Baltimore Lithuanian Community in its prime included its own church, grammar school, three halls, four building associations, ten beneficial organizations, seven clubs, three local branches of fraternal organizations and one Lithuanian library. The Community organized its own Lithuanian American Athletic Club in 1915, affording its members the opportunity of physical development under proper instruction. Lithuanian Americans engaged in the political life of their adopted nation through Lithuanian Republican and Democratic Clubs.

Besides the St. John the Baptist religious society there was a great number of other Baltimore Lithuanian non-sectarian fraternal societies formed during the early part of 1900, which catered to nonparochial needs of the community. One of these was the Lithuanian Learned Society (*Lietuvių Mokslo Draugystė*), founded in 1889 by Jonas Šliūpas, the historic Lithuanian political activist. Others included the American Lithuanian Association (*Tevynės Mylėtojų Draugystė*); the Amateur Theatrical Society (*Teatro Mylėtojų Draugystė*) which produced some 30 plays written by Vincas Nagornoskis during the 1897-1915 period; the Choir of the Knights of Lithuania (*Lietuvos Vyčiai*); and the Women's Citizens Club (*Lietuvių Moterų Piliečių Klubas*). In 1905 these societies joined together to form the Council of Lithuanian Societies of Baltimore (*Baltimorės Lietuvių Taryba*) in a building owned by the *Kęstutis* Society in South Baltimore, which had been serving as a civic center for the colony. In 1918, the building was sold and the obtained funds used to build a new facility.

The Lithuanian Hall Association (*Lietuvių Kooperatives Svetainės Bendrovė*) was incorporated in 1914 and a new building acquired which was officially opened on October 21, 1921 after some renovation and remodeling. The building was financed through joint contributions of the various beneficial and fraternal orders and by way of shares sold to its members. Funding raised for this civic enterprise totaled some three hundred thousand dollars.

The area in southwest Baltimore surrounding the Lithuanian hall quickly became known as "Little Lithuania". It is estimated that over 10,000 Lithuanian Americans lived within Little Lithuania at that time. One of Little Lithuania's most prominent non-Lithuanian residents was H.L. Menken, the noted Baltimore political humorist, who held his local neighbors in great respect.

Vyt. D. 500 mt. sukakt. minėjimas Baltimorėje. Atvaizde: Iškilmių eisenos komiteto automobilis, prie vairo p. S. Leonavičius
500 th anniversary commemoration of Vytautas the Great in Baltimore. Picture: Ceremonial procession, automobile of the committee; Mr. S. Leonavičius at the wheel

Baltimore Lithuanian Community 500th. Vytautas the Great was the lead parade float, 1930.

Since the time of its founding, the Lithuanian Hall has functioned as the cultural center for the Baltimore Lithuanian Community. Among the organizations which have considered the Lithuanian Hall home are the Lithuanian National Library founded in 1908; the Council of Lithuanian Societies of Baltimore; the American-Lithuanian National Association; the Lithuanian Alliance of America; and the Baltimore Lithuanian Athletic Club. Over the years the hall has been the meeting place for the United Lithuanian Relief Fund of America, Incorporated. The hall is also the home of the American Legion Baltimore Lithuanian Post 154, which was formed in 1943 by World War I and World War II veterans and the Baltimore Lithuanian Museum.

Since its inception, several national conventions of Lithuanian American organizations have been held in the Lithuanian Hall and a number of historical Lithuanian figures have visited the building, including Steponas Darius and Stasys Girenas, the transatlantic flyers during a fund raising event in 1932, and President Antanas Smetona in 1942 following his flight from Lithuania consequent to its occupation by the Soviet Union.

President Antanas Smetona at St. Alphonsus Church, 1942

Throughout World War II and the Cold War period, the Lithuanian Hall provided a gathering place for victory support rallies and planning anti-Nazi and anti-Soviet occupation demonstrations. After World War II, about 700 Lithuanian refugees from Soviet oppression, the so-called "*dipukai*", settled in the city and greatly contributed to the survival of its Lithuanian community.

Football great Johnny Unitas during an LT Radio Hour appearance, 1968.

Being geographically close to the President and Congress located in nearby Washington, D.C., the Baltimore Lithuanian community became a major player and source for volunteers involved in the liberation of Lithuania movement. Since the restoration of the Republic of Lithuania in 1991, the Hall has hosted events for Lithuanian Presi-

"Klaipėda" transatlantic crossing yacht during Baltimore visit, 1989.

dents Vytautas Landsbergis, Valdas Adamkus, and other dignitaries.

Among the many historical figures associated with the Baltimore Lithuanian Community were Dr. Jonas Šliūpas, a noted Lithuanian political leader; William F. Laukaitis, a distinguished lawyer, jurist, and the Postmaster of Maryland; Thomas G. Gray (Grajauskas), attorney and Maryland U.S. Attorney; Paul Weisengoff, a lawyer and Chairman of the Baltimore City Council; Elena Armaniene, attorney and political activist; Nadas Rastenis, lawyer and noted poet; Juozas Žilevičius, organist and composer; Peter Kumpa, newspaper reporter and columnist; and Johnny Unitas, Baltimore Colt football star; to mention a few. For many years, Albert Juskus and Kestutis Laskauskas produced the Lithuanian Melody Times (*Radijo Programa Lietuviams*), which provided the community with its own ethnic radio program.

Baltimore Folk Dance Group Malūnas performs at outdoor festival, 1979.

Today Lithuanian Hall members and its visitors can still hear concerts and see a variety of shows presented by ethnic visiting performers, as well as take part in a variety of cultural activities and banquets. The noted "*Ratelis*" and "*Malūnas*" Lithuanian folk dancing groups frequently appear at Lithuanian Hall events and at the annual Baltimore Lithuanian Festival. After 100 years of service, the Lithuanian Hall continues to be the gathering places for all things Lithuanian, from meetings of the Lithuanian American Community, Baltimore Chapter, to the Baltimore Lithuanian Festival Committee. Hopefully those Lithuanian Americans who visit Baltimore will take the time to visit the Lithuanian Hall and experience this part of our history.