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LITHUANIAN LUTHERANS IN NORTH AMERICA

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Lithuania is a country located on the eastern coast of the Baltic sea. It is one of the Baltic countries, surrounded by Latvia in the north, Belarus in the east, Poland in the south, and Kaliningrad District in the southwest.¹ Lithuania was one of the last countries of Europe to accept Christianity as its religion. The first attempt of Christianization occurred in the mid-thirteenth century when Christianity was accepted together with the king's crown from the hands of the pope of Rome. The attempt was unsuccessful because the person who received the crown was assassinated shortly afterwards. A second attempt to baptize the country was closely related to Poland, when the Grand Prince of Lithuania accepted in 1387 the crown of the Polish kingdom united both countries into one commonwealth, and promised to Christianize Lithuanians. Because Christianity came to Lithuania through Poland and since the Reformation movement, which was widely spread in the country in the sixteenth century, was almost completely suppressed by the Counter-Reformation in the seventeenth century, predominantly by the efforts of the Jesuit order, the great majority of Lithuanians are Roman Catholics. Protestant churches comprise a small minority there. This minority became even smaller due to the Second World War.

This paper, however, is not about Protestant churches in Lithuania, but about the Lutherans who came from Lithuania to North America.

The first wave of immigrants to North America from Lithuania arrived already in the seventeenth century. According to Algirdas Budreckis:

the first Lithuanian settlers were nobles, soldiers of fortune, artisans and would be scholars, protestant in religion. They left the religious and national strife of mid-seventeenth century Lithuania to settle down in the tolerant Dutch and English colonies on the shore. Most of these early colonists married into Anglo-Saxon families and in a generation lost their Baltic heritage.²

As I mentioned above, the main reason why people were leaving Lithuania was the Counter-Reformation and religious persecutions. Some authors provide very interesting information about one such immigrant to North America, Dr. Alexander Carolius Curtius, a Lithuanian nobleman, formerly a professor in Lithuania.³ He became the first schoolmaster of the first school of higher education in New Amsterdam (present-day New York) in 1659. He taught Latin at the school and also functioned as a physician. He left America in 1661, however, and never returned.

One of the biggest emigrations from Lithuania to America started in the second half of the nineteenth century with the prohibition of serfdom in 1861 by the Russian Tsar. Lithuania then was a part of the Russian Empire. This wave of emigration was completely different from the previous ones. The majority of these immigrants were uneducated and they came here in search of better living conditions, with the primary plan of earning some money and returning back home to purchase land. "The land, then, occupied a central and honored place in peasant culture. Both Polish and Lithuanian masses were men of the soil with deep psychological identification with it."⁴ Only a small number of immigrants ended up farming, however. The majority worked in coal mines, built railroads, or worked in the stockyards, becoming members of the labor class. Their changed situation created completely new understanding of the self-identity of the immigrants. This was the rise of nationalism. National identity movements in Europe started at about the same time. The new context of life in America allowed the immigrants to develop their national identity much more rapidly.

Before the change occurred, Lithuanians were usually identified as Poles if they were Catholics, or as Germans if they were Lutherans, primarily because of their church membership. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century Lithuanians started to organize their own congregations and even societies. We do not have much information about the Lutherans from that period because of the antagonism between Lithuanian Catholics and Lutherans.

Nationality Identification Problems. In a newspaper published by Catholic priests I found one scene from the turn of the age which describes this point. A catholic priest in Chicago had heard that a Lithuanian family was living at a certain address and went to visit them. When he entered that apartment building, he asked a woman if she had heard anything about the Lithuanians living in the house. Her reply was that she did not know them. At the same time a neighbor opened her door and identified herself as the person the priest was looking for. Apparently, both women were Lithuanians, but the first woman considered the second woman and her family "Prussians" because they ate meat on Friday. Thus, she did not bother to get acquainted with them.⁵ The epithet "Prussians" was used by Catholics to identify Lithuanians of the Lutheran confession. This points to another problem of identifying Lithuanian Lutherans. The problem concerns those Lutherans who were coming not only from Lithuania but also from Prussia, even earlier than the nineteenth century, and who were of Lithuanian nationality. I tried to find traces of Lithuanians among the notes about Germans in America. I found virtually nothing except some Lithuanian sounding names.⁶

Problems of identification of nationality occurred because of hostility between the proponents of those two religions, because Lithuanians lived not only in Lithuania proper, and also because United States immigration service started to register Lithuanians as a separate nationality only from 1899.⁷ There are other signs, however, that were Lithuanian Lutherans living in America, and that they were quite active.⁸

An interesting story has been told about the founding of Bridgeport, which is now a part of Chicago but at the beginning of 1800s was uninhabited land. After the revolutionary movements in 1848 in Germany many persons sought peace in the United States. There were also some Lithuanians from Prussia among those Germans. Some of them settled in Pennsylvania, and some came to Milwaukee. Anas Portas (Hans Port), a Lithuanian from Tilzit, purchased a piece of land south of Chicago, now the intersection of Halsted Avenue and Archer Road. There was a bridge across the Chicago River nearby. People from Chicago came here to buy vegetables and other farm products. Next to the bridge was a place to load barges arriving for farm products. This place at the beginning was called Bridge of Port, but later it was shortened to Bridgeport.⁹ There is evidence that the son of the founder of this Lithuanian colony could speak German, Lithuanian, and, of course, English.

Organizing Lithuanian Congregations. At the end of the previous century the greatest concentrations of Lutherans from Lithuania were located in New York, Illinois, Connecticut, New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts. Even though they were in America, they did not have their own congregations organized until 1897.¹⁰ That year marks the starting point of the first Lithuanian Lutheran church on the American continent. Actually, the congregation as such was begun in 1895 when Pastor Martynas Keturakaitis arrived from Lithuania and settled in Philadelphia, PA. He was an extraordinary man. After his theological education he worked for a while in Lithuania Minor (Prussia) and later in Lithuania, where he was noted not only for being a good preacher and pastor but also as a worker in charity establishments and a disseminator of the Lithuanian press.¹¹ For this activity he was exiled to the Caucasus. He later escaped and through Turkey returned to Prussia, and shortly after he left for the United States. Keturakaitis has the honor of founding several Lithuanian Lutheran congregations here. After he moved away from Philadelphia, congregational life was continued by Pastor Petras Drignaitis, who arrived in the United States in 1890 and studied theology in Springfield, IL.¹²

In 1900 Pastor Keturakaitis moved to Collinsville, IL, where he founded a new congregation. The congregation, which later was called the Lithuanian Lutheran Congregation of Jerusalem in Collinsville, at the beginning bought a parish-house for their worship services. Later they built a church which was dedicated on October 25, 1903. The congregation as such belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Wisconsin Synod ¹³at least until 1931, when Adolph Ulkus became a pastor of the congregation. He was the first pastor of the congregation who was born in America of Lithuanian parents. I have to mention an interesting pattern in regards to the pastors who served the congregation, belonging to one or another Synod. After he left the church (1911-1913), Pastor Vilius Keturakaitis, son of the founder, became a minister of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. Pastor Plonaitis, who served two sequences there (1913-1920 and 1929-1931) and was the author of the constitution of the church, apparently did not change his denomination. When Pastor Korys (Kories) left the congregation (he served it 1921-1928), he became a minister of LCMS.

Lithuanian Lutherans in Chicago. Chicago has a unique place in the history of Lithuanian immigration to the United States. At the beginning of this immigration, Pennsylvania's coal mines attracted great numbers of Lithuanians.¹⁴ Later such an attraction point became Chicago, with its stockyards. Even to the present time Chicago with its suburbs has the biggest concentration of Lithuanians outside Lithuania proper. Already in 1899 Lithuanian Lutherans founded there the "Lithuanian Lutheran Relief Society" but it was not until 1903 that they had worship services in Lithuanian. The originator of these services was M. Keturakaitis, who from time to time visited the Chicagoans. A congregation, called the Zion Lithuanian Lutheran Church, was founded only in 1910, however, with active help from Pastor Drignaitis. The congregation purchased a small wooden church building, which was dedicated in November, 1915. The first pastor was Jonas J.D. Razokas (1911-1921). Just before the death of the pastor the congregation went through a crisis:

And now the congregation has its pastor and church building. Everyone was happy from the bottom of their hearts and were praising God for such great gifts. Pure word of God was sown every Sunday into the hearts of parishioners. However, where is God's word sown there and devil is not forgetting to sow his evil seed of jealousy and hatred. We have great disagreements among parishioners present. Some are working with the pastor while others are working against him. Some were trying to build the church while others to destroy it. Some were listening of the pure teachings of their church while others were attracted by different sects. The congregation because of that started to vanish. Many of them joined Russelists (Bibelforschers) or those who were declaring the coming of the Millennial kingdom of Christ; others became Pentecostals and bolsheviks.¹⁵

The second pastor of the congregation was Jonas Rozakas, a cousin of the late pastor. He served from 1921 until 1934. The congregation started to grow and it needed another building, which they bought in 1922. It was used until 1975, when the congregation moved to a new (present) building in Oak Lawn.[16](#)

Other localities. Congregations were also founded in other places. Pastor Keturakaitis organized a congregation in 1903 at St. Louis, MO. Pastor P. Drignaitis organized a congregation in New York, which was served by him and later by Jurgis Macaitis (Georg Matzat). A congregation in Boston[17](#) was served by pastors P. Drignaitis, G. Macaitis, A. Brustaitis and others. All of them had been born in Lithuania but received their theological education in America, at Springfield seminary. There were also Lithuanian Lutheran congregations in Brooklyn, NY, and in Bridgeport and Naugatuck, CT.[18](#) The congregations were not only gathering places for worship but also for social activities. Some of them had Saturday schools, wind bands, women's and men's organizations, and so on.

The Post-World War II Immigration. A major immigration of Lithuanians to America occurred right after the Second World War with the flood of people leaving a devastated Europe. The majority of Lithuanian Lutherans came to America with the help of American Lutheran organizations and funds. The people were invited through the Missouri Synod as well as through the churches-predecessors of ELCA. People who had arrived somewhat earlier also tried to help the sisters and brothers of their faith and of their fate to enter the country. Thus, for example, Rev. Jonas Pauperas, who arrived in the United States in 1948 and served as pastor (1949-1971) of the Zion Lutheran Church in Oak Lawn, personally sponsored about 800 newcomers[19](#) to this country.

A number of old congregations were reactivated or even revived at this period. This happened with the congregations in Boston and New York as well as in Collinsville. Several new congregations were also founded: one each in Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles; three in Toronto, and one each in Hamilton, Montreal, and Delhi, Canada. These congregations were served by several pastors. Some of them were of the older generation and had lived in the United States all their lives; others came together with the new wave of immigration. The merging of two different Lithuanian emigrant generations immediately showed up the differences between them. The older generation tended to be more conservative and usually worked in the frame of the Missouri Synod (congregations in Collinsville and Oak Lawn). There were two tendencies among the newcomers: either to collaborate with the American National Lutheran Council, [20](#) the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA), [21](#) or to be totally independent.

Canadian-Lithuanian Lutherans. According to Canadian statistics 1622 Lithuanians of the Protestant faith arrived in the country after the Second World War. Toronto hosted most of them (400-500).[22](#) These people in Toronto started their organizations already by the end of 1940s. In January of 1950 they founded the "Susivienijimo Sajunga" (Union of Merge), which had some 400 members. The Union embraced Lutherans as well as members of the Reformed Church. There were several unsuccessful attempts to invite different Reformed or Lutheran Lithuanian pastors from Germany. Some members of the Union started to attend the Missouri Synod Church worship services. The Synod found a lay preacher, Leon Kostizen, who was fluent in Lithuanian. In November of 1950, when the parishioners agreed to have him as a pastor, he was ordained and the First Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church was founded.

At the same time a Senior of the Lithuanian Lutheran Church in Exile, A. Keleris, who then resided in Germany, asked the president of the Union to influence his parishioners to join the ULCA and invite him through the same church to be their pastor. While they were waiting for the pastor to arrive the congregation was served by Rev. Ansas Trakis, who came usually once a month from Chicago; from time to time by Rev. Petras Dagys; and two other pastors of the Reformed Church from Chicago. Rev. A. Keleris was denied permission to live in Canada. Then a controversy arose around the issue of who was going to serve the congregation. ULCA, Trakis, and Keleris strongly recommended the lawyer M. Kavolis; however, the majority of the parishioners wanted to have Rev. P. Dagys as their pastor. The parishioners opposed the zealous insistence of ULCA regarding its candidate. As a consequence, the Union split into two camps: those who disagreed with the ULCA founded the independent Lithuanian Evangelical Union Church in Toronto with Rev. Dagys as minister, and the remaining part organized the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church, which was a part of St. Andrew's Lutheran Church. So, together with the first congregation founded in 1950, there were three Lithuanian Protestant Churches in Toronto.[23](#)

Social, Cultural, and Educational Activities. The 23-year period of life of all these congregations was rich with a variety of some cultural and educational activities. There were Sunday schools, confirmation classes, women's organizations, various choirs and many other activities. The leading position among the congregations was taken by the Teviškė Church (Lithuanian Ev. Luth. Home Church in Chicago). This congregation was organized by pastors A. Trakis and M. Preikšaitis in the second half of 1951. At first the congregation made use of the hospitality of St. Paul and Peter Slovak Lutheran Church, which was on Halsted Street and 19th Place. Shortly after that Rev. M. Preikšaitis moved to Los Angeles and Rev. Ansas Trakis became the pastor of the congregation. At the end of 1957 the congregation bought and renovated a synagogue building, where it still gathers for worship. The church had its Sunday school, youth organization, brass band, choir, women's society. The church founded a Lithuanian cultural school, called Saturday School, (Kristijono Donelaičio Lituainistinė mokykla) which evolved into a prestigious institution named after Kristijonas Donelaitis.[24](#) It was the first of its kind where children of Lithuanian heritage could learn to read and to write in their parents' native tongue; where they could learn the history of Lithuania; and learn to dance folk dances and to sing folk songs.

The congregation was very active in the Lithuanian community in Chicago and elsewhere, participating in various events to commemorate Lithuanian national holidays, in festivals, and other cultural activities. The choir of the church was led by professionals and was very highly regarded for their performances in Lithuanian community. Some composers even wrote original songs for the choir. It performed as men's, women's, or mixed choir. The unit recorded in 1962 and 1972 two long plays with some folk hymns and original choir music. There were different voice ensembles and a number of soloists.²⁵ The biggest event of the choir was (and still is) a concert presented annually on Palm Sunday. The compositions range from the classics, such as Schubert or Bach, to Lithuanian folk songs and hymns.

Present Day Congregations. At the present time there are only three active Lithuanian Lutheran congregations: the Zion Lutheran Church, served by Rev. Jonas Juozupaitis; Teviškė or the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Home Church, served by Rev. Hans Dumpys, who also serves as a bishop of the Lithuanian Lutheran Church in Diaspora; and the Lithuanian Lutheran Church of the Savior in Toronto, served by Rev. Povilas Dilys until June of 1994, who is a superintendent of Lithuanian Reformed Church in Diaspora.

The numbers of parishioners have been diminishing; however, congregational life is still quite active. All three congregations have women's organizations that hold regular meetings and organize other activities for their congregations. There are quite active choirs, Sunday schools for children, and confirmation classes. There has been, however, a change in the focus of these congregations. Currently the major focus of these churches is to help out in the revival of various congregations in Lithuania now that Communism has fallen.

What was, and in some cases is, the force moving Lithuanians to preserve their identity? What has held them together? The answer is complex or, actually, there is no one answer to this phenomenon. Even now many persons drive 30-50 miles to get to a worship service at their church. Members of the first organized congregations, I would guess, were unconsciously following the existing patterns. The majority of the Lutheran Churches in the United States were organized according to the nationality of the people. There were Churches for persons of Norwegian, Finnish/German, and Swedish origin. Lithuanians, as well as other nationalities, lived quite compactly and in order to preserve their identity (remember the emergence of national identity in the mid-nineteenth century) they started to organize their own congregations. Because Lithuanian Lutheranism was very closely related to Prussia, people at the beginning attended German services and later emerged as separate groups in structures related to the Prussian Lutheran Church in the United States.

The wave of exiles from Europe after the Second World War brought people with a quite different self-identity. Many of them were educated in Lithuanian national or in European universities. These people understood who they were and what they wanted. Consequently, they had to go through enormous psychological and other modifications to adapt themselves to such a radically changed situation. There is an anecdote circulating among Lithuanians. A tailor going to his workshop in the morning sees a man sweeping the sidewalk. The man is wearing a white shirt and a bow-tie. Both men know each other. "Good morning. General!", says the tailor. "Good morning, Mr. Tailor," answers the former general and continues to sweep the sidewalk.

This anecdote truly captures the spirit of the changes these immigrants had to undergo. It is clear that these changes did not come easy and to endure them was easier in a community of similar persons where painful reality did not have to be faced every single moment, the reality of an unwillingly lost motherland, of losses of position, familiar environment, culture, family members — everything that constituted one as a person in society, the church, the family, and oneself.

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1 Kaliningrad District is the present-day Soviet-given name for East Prussia, with the central city of Königsberg. Historically present-day Kaliningrad District and some territories of present-day Poland, in the western part of this country were occupied by a now extinct Baltic tribal union called Prussians. These tribes were conquered by Teutonic Knights in 1251. Under the influence of the Reformation the last Great Master of the Order secularized it and founded the Prussian duchy. East Prussia, because of the great percentage of a Lithuanian-speaking population and because of the political relationship, was also called Lithuania Minor and later became the cradle of the Lithuanian written word.

2 *The Lithuanians in America, 1651-1975.* Edited and compiled by Algirdas M. Budreckis. p. v.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 68-70; Viktoras Karosas, *Lietuvos Ryšys su Amerika.* p. 18.

4 Victor Greene, for *God and Country*, p. 16.

5 "Pasiuntinys", 1937 June, No. 1.

6 When reading "The Lutheran Church in Pennsylvania 1638 - 1800" by Theodore Schmauk, I came upon at least one name of Lithuanian origin, namely *Johann Kelpius.*

7 Alfonsas Eidintas, *Lithuanian Emigration to the Countries of North and South Americas.* p. 9.

8 Greene describes a conflict between a priest of one of the Lithuanian Catholic churches in Chicago with the leaders of the congregation when they wanted to rent the Church hall to Lithuanian non-Catholic groups, p. 152.

9 Aleksas Ambroze, *Chicagos Lietuvių Istorija.* p. 15-16.

10 *Philadelphia*, in *Lietuviška Enciklopedija.*

11 In order to russify Lithuania, Russians forbade any literature printed in Lithuania. This kind of oppression began in 1863 and lasted until 1905. Lithuanian literature, both of religious and of secular content, was printed and published in Prussia (Lithuania Minor). People like Pastor Keturakaitis risked their lives smuggling this literature to Lithuania proper across the border.

12 Kristupas Gudaitis, *Lietuviai Evangelikai.* p. 199.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 172.

14 "Few Americans realize that there are over half a million citizens in Pennsylvania who are of Lithuanian stock." Budreckis, *The Lithuanians in America*, p. v.

15 *Paslas* No. 10, 1927. Taken from K. Gudaitis, *Lietuviai Evangelikai.* pp. 181-182.

16 *Svečias*, No. 2 & 3, 1975-

17 K. Gudaitis, pp. 196-197.

18 Rev. Jonas Juozupaitis, who is presently serving as pastor of the Zion Lutheran Church in Oak Lawn, has told me that while he was serving his first congregation in Connecticut in the mid-sixties, he found about 50 persons who were the descendants or even former members themselves of those congregations. He tried to serve them as much as he could, but after a year or so he stopped doing so because the people lost their interest.

19 *Svečias*, No. 1 & 2, 1976. p. 71.

20 Rev. Ansas Trakis, one of the founders of the independent Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Home (Teviškė) Church in Chicago, for a while was working for that Council. The Council also published the periodical "Evangelijos Žodis" (The Word of the Gospel), whose editor was Rev. Trakis. He also worked as a visiting professor in systematic theology at the Rock Island Theological Seminary. *Lietuviška Enciklopedija*; Gudaitis, *Lietuviai Evangelikai*; *Svečias* No. 1(5), 3(7), 1956.

21 Rev. Martynas Kavolis was ordained in 1953 by ULCA Canadian Synod president Jacobi. In independent Lithuania he was a lawyer. He had studied some theology in Lithuania, however, his main theological training was received after the war in Germany. *Lietuviška Enciklopedija*; Gudaitis, *Lietuviai Evangelikai.*

22 Gudaitis, p. 202.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 202-209.

24 Kristijonas Donelaitis — classical Lithuanian poet of the 18th century. He was introduced to the English speaking world in a special commemorative issue of *Lituanus* 10:1 (1964) 5-7.

25 The booklet "Teviškės Parapijos 40 Metų Jubiliejus" published to celebrate 40 years of the congregation. 1992, Chicago.