LITUANUS
LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 33, No.1 - Spring 1987
Editor of this issue: Antanas Klimas
ISSN 0024-5089
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LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN WEDDING TRADITIONS IN UPTON SINCLAIR'S *THE JUNGLE*

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Except for two Lithuanian scholars, most scholars, critics, and biographers have so far neglected dealing with *The Jungle* in relation to actual Lithuanian immigrants' experiences in America.[1] Beginning in the late 19th century, a great number of Lithuanians, together with the "new" immigrants from Southeastern Europe, came to America, and a great proportion of them settled in the anthracite mining towns of Pennsylvania as well as in Chicago industrial districts such as Packingtown.[2] By the turn of the century Lithuanian immigrants constituted one of the most important ethnic groups in the Chicago Stockyards, district, so that it is no wonder that they attracted Sinclair's attention when he visited there in late 1904.

In fictionalizing these Lithuanian immigrants' lives, Sinclair did try to be faithful in some important points, though in general he left out much of it. Especially in the first six chapters, in which the author portrays the process of the Lithuanian immigrants' adaptation to American industrial environment, he tried to be faithful to what he saw and found about Lithuanian immigrants' life in Chicago Stockyards. Probably the most striking historical touch is the opening chapter in which he describes the *veselija,* the wedding celebration, of the main hero, Jurgis Rudkus, and his bride, Ona Lukoszaite. When the reader comes upon this scene, he/she is likely to be strongly impressed by its exotic description. At the same time, one is also likely to feel bewildered to find such exuberant life evoked in the supposedly lifeless industrial "jungle." The protagonists' dogged attempts to preserve their old wedding customs, even going into debt over one hundred dollars after the wedding, is also a source of readers' confusion. A few scholars have recognized the dramatic and thematic value of this scene, pointing out that it is "a major passage in American literature" and "the best thing Sinclair ever wrote."[3] But they are not specific about why it is one of the great passages in American literature. One answer to this question is probably due to the author's grasp of some of the immigrants' typical experiences in an urban industrial environment.

Old Lithuanian wedding customs, like other aspects of their cultural life, went through inevitable transformations in the new environment. In his book, *Lithuania Past and Present,* for instance, E.J. Harrison writes that Lithuanians in their home country used to follow a very specific set of procedures to get married, such as the preliminaries initiated by the matchmaker, the wedding ceremony, and the wedding feast. Each step of this wedding procedure was also supposed to be accompanied by a song of greater or lesser length. Especially notable in their traditional wedding customs were all sorts of games played during a wedding. Among these games, dances were the most popular and they included "the dance of the hat which is executed only by men," "the dance of the rue performed only by young girls," and "others in which the two sexes join." "At the same time," Harrison points out, "these dances are not simply movements to music, but, as in ancient times, constitute the expression of specific ideas and sentiments."[4]

According to Sinclair's text, especially in the first six chapters, Lithuanians seem to have preserved much of these traditional wedding customs in America, though in somewhat modified form. Among others, the detailed descriptions of the wedding feast, *veselija,* show graphically to what extent they tried to preserve their old customs in a new environment.

For Lithuanians, as for other people from agrarian countries, serving abundant food and drinks during the wedding was a very important tradition. Sinclair has clearly noted this tradition: "It was one of the laws of the *veselija* that no one goes hungry, and, while a rule made in the forests of Lithuania is hard to apply in the stockyards district of Chicago, with its quarter of a million inhabitants, still they did their best, and the children who ran in from the street, and even the dogs, went out again happier."[5] The amount and kinds of food like meat bones and bologna sausage might be different from those served at home in the traditional wedding feast. But Sinclair has fully demonstrated the old tradition to serve the guests with abundant food and drinks.

According to Reverend Jonas Zilinskas, "the first historian of the social and cultural life of the Lithuanian immigrants in America," the Lithuanians in the old days "would collect gifts for the married couple."[6] Sinclair observed this custom and wrote: "When the guest has finished (dancing), he finds himself face to face with Teta Elzbieta, who holds the hat. Into it he drops a sum of money — a dollar, or perhaps five dollars, according to his power, and his estimate of the value of the privilege. The guests are expected to pay for this entertainment; if they be proper guests, they will see that there is a net sum left over for the bride and bridegroom to start life upon."[7] What finally turns out in the novel is that the size of the gift collected during the wedding is far smaller than it should have been.

Probably the most important feature of the Lithuanian wedding feast is the songs, music, and dances, and Sinclair has wonderfully portrayed them in the novel. From the beginning of the feast, for instance, the musicians play "in a mad frenzy" to the extent that their music "changes the place from the rear room of a saloon in back of the yards to a fairy place, a wonderful, a little corner of the high mansions of the sky."[8] The music continues the whole afternoon, sometimes interrupted by Marija's songs and old Dede Antanas' speech. During the evening ceremony, which continues until three or four o'clock in the morning, there is almost an uninterrupted series of dances, some by couples; the Lithuanian dance reaches a climax with "a furious *prestissimo,* at which the couples seize hands and begin a mad whirling," and "the *acziavimas* which continues for three or four hours and involves one uninterrupted dance."[9] These dances, or course, are always accompanied by music, both Lithuanian and American. By three o'clock in the morning, the guests and the musicians are all exhausted, but still they keep on dancing as if hypnotized.

The specific ideas and sentiments expressed in the music and dances, however, seem to be quite different from the traditional associations. According to the traditional wedding customs, every song or dance was a sort of dialogue between the guests, the wedding couple, and the supernatural being. In one way or another, this dialogue expressed such ideas and sentiments as blessing the newly-married couple with prosperity, health, love, and a large family; celebrating the couple for becoming an important community member; and thanksgiving which is the inherent meaning of the Lithuanian word, *acziavimas*.[10] By contrast, the dominant ideas and sentiments expressed in Sinclair's portrayal of the wedding feast in general, and the songs and dances in particular, are homesickness and a moment's release from the various oppressions of a new and hostile environment.[11]

As important as the description of music and dances, however, is Sinclair's grasp of the inner conflicts between younger and older Lithuanian immigrants. The seemingly joyous wedding feast itself is a product of such conflicts. For instance, Jurgis and Ona had at first wanted their wedding without the costly wedding feast. To such an idea Teta Elzbieta, Ona's stepmother, would respond: "What! she would cry. To be married on the roadside like a parcel of beggars! No! No!" Dede Antanas, Jurgis's father, also responds in a similar manner. "There was a fear in the souls of these two," the narrator writes, "lest this journey to a new country might somehow undermine the old home virtues of their children."[12] Though they agreed to having a wedding feast, it ultimately turns out, especially for the older generation, as a pathetic struggle to preserve those few remnants of old traditions in a new environment. "Bit by bit these poor people have given up everything else; but to this day they cling with all their power of their souls — they cannot give up the *veselija.* To do that would mean, not merely to be defeated, but to acknowledge defeat — and the difference between these two things is what keeps the world going."[13]

Not only is the *veselija* the product of conflicts between old and young, but towards the end of the feast Jurgis's family further finds themselves in jeopardy because of the conflicts created in the new country. As mentioned above, the guests are expected to contribute enough money for the newly-wed to pay for the feast as well as to start life with. But Jurgis's family are surprised and dismayed to find things are different now.

> A trouble came upon (the Jurgis's family). The *veselija* is a compact, a compact not expressed, but therefore only the more binding upon all. Every one's share was different — and yet every one knew perfectly well what his share was, and strove to give a little more. Now, however, since they had come to the new country, all this was changing; it seemed as if there must be some subtle poison in the air that one breathed here — it was affecting all the young men at once. They would come in crowds and fill themselves with a fine dinner, and then sneak off. One would throw another's hat out of the window, and both would go out to get it, and neither would be seen again. Or now and then half a dozen of them would get together and march out openly, staring at you, and making fun of you to your face.[14]

Such conflicts between young and old are also reflected in their dress, language, and dancing. Sinclair shows a keen eye for the subtle shades of such conflicts:

> Of these older people many wear clothing reminiscent in some detail of home — an embroidered waistcoat or stomacher, or a gaily colored handkerchief, or a coat with large cuffs and fancy buttons. These things are carefully avoided by the young, most of whom have learned to speak English and to affect the latest style of clothing. The girls wear ready-made dresses or shirtwaists, and some of them look quite pretty. Some of the young men you would take to be Americans, of the type of clerks, but for the fact that they wear their hats in the room. Each of these younger couples affects a style of its own in dancing. Some hold each other tightly, some at a cautious distance. Some hold their arms out stiffly, some drop them loosely at their sides. Some dance springly, some glide softly, some move with grave dignity.[15]

As to the general accuracy of the novel's wedding scene, Lithuanian scholars unreservedly give credit to Sinclair's achievement. For instance, Antanas Musteikis says that the laws of the *veselija* as portrayed by Sinclair (such as hospitality, informality, singing, music, dancing, and the *acziavimas)* "do truly belong to the Lithuanian culture," and that "the author discovers their deep meaning."[16] Algirdas M. Budreckis, compiler of a "chronology and fact book," *The Lithuanians in America, 1651-1975,* cites part of the first chapter of *The Jungle* in a chapter in the "DOCUMENTS" section. At the beginning of this quotation, he makes some introductory comments: "(Sinclair) also captures the folk mores and

customs of Lithuanians, and even displays a rudimentary knowledge of the language. Social historians should pay special attention to the graphic and true description Mr. Sinclair gives of a Lithuanian old-style wedding."[17]

Excepting for minor differences, almost in every point Sinclair's description of the Lithuanian wedding is also supported by Jonas Zilinskas's observation made at the turn of the century. In general, he says, Lithuanian weddings, "though retaining their Lithuanian character, have adopted, to a large degree, the milder, more restrained American manner of social activities." He then points out general features of the American-Lithuanian wedding customs which Sinclair portrayed: the endless dancing and drinking; several kinds of dances; the gift-collecting custom for the newlywed, and the tendency for the size of the gift to get smaller as years went by; wedding expenses in America; and the violence which involved fights and sometimes even killings.[18] In Sinclair's version of the wedding feast, there are, of course, no such violent scenes, though the presence of the policeman suggests this possibility.

As to conflicts between generations, there is ample evidence that Sinclair was true to reality. For instance, Mary McDowell, who spent almost her whole life in the Stockyards district, saw such conflicts reflected in the hats and costumes of the immigrants, and connected these changes with American democracy and the influence of the department store:

> When the American hat displaces the traditional headkerchief a psychological change has begun. This is a more far reaching break with the old country customs than we understand. The democratic bee is in the American bonnet, and less and less do we see the kerchief indicative of class distinctions except the black silk ones on the heads of women over 50 years of age. The influence of the department store with its readymade costumes and standards too play a part in Americanizing the foreign born. A wedding gives a unique picture of this process.[19]

Louise Montgomery also studied immigrants' life in the Chicago Stockyards and observed the same phenomena as McDowell. According to Montgomery, many young immigrants, including Lithuanians, were very sensitive to the latest American fashions and sentiments, while the older people held fast to traditional customs. Especially in the case of young girls, they placed "an exaggerated importance upon the possession of a fashionable hat that brings girls of all classes and all nations to one level." These young people, Montgomery went on, were also very sensitive to dress and speech. Their parents tended to cling to their native speech, the young took little pains to preserve it though they did not forget it entirely. Montgomery then concluded that dress and speech were "the visible signs of the distance between parents and child."[20]

For Lithuanian immigrants, as for other immigrants, these conflicts were a very serious and important issue. According to Fainhauz's historical survey, the tendency became more and more prominent as years went by.[21] Mentioning these conflicts, however, should not obscure the fact that Lithuanian immigrants, like other ethnic groups, often preserved their own traditions and customs in a new environment. The important point here, however, is that these traditions and customs were more or less modified in the new conditions.

However, Sinclair's descriptions of Jurgis's relations with his family members, fellow Lithuanians, fellow workers, religions, and socialism seem to be inaccurate, as Musteikis and Šešplaukis have pointed out. The pictures of other Lithuanian heroes also seem to be much exaggerated.[22] Rarely pointed out by any scholars, however, is the life-like portrayal of Teta Elzbieta, Ona's stepmother. Though Teta does not occupy a major place in the novel's action, she appears almost throughout the whole novel and is consistently portrayed as a plausible old immigrant woman.

Elzbieta's distinctive character is best illustrated when she persistently tries to preserve old Lithuanian customs. For her the old traditions are not only the means with which she faces life but also the sources of her identity, energy, and sense of meaning in life. A vivid example of this is found in Chapter VI:

> The very first Sunday (Elzbieta's six children) had all been taken to mass, and poor as they were, Elzbieta had felt it advisable to invest a little of her resources in a representation of the babe of Bethlehem, made in plaster, and painted in brilliant colors. Though it was only a foot high, there was a shrine with four snow-white steeples, and the Virgin standing with her child in her arms, and the kings and shepherds and wise men bowing down before him. It had cost fifty cents, but Elzbieta had a feeling that money spent for such things was not to be counted too closely, it would come back in hidden ways. The piece was beautiful on the parlor mantle, and one could not have a home without some sort of ornament.[23]

Out of a similar idea of future reward, she insists on having some form of traditional funeral whenever a family member dies. When her three-year-old child Kristoforas dies of eating "the smoked sausage," for instance, she opposes Jurgis's practical suggestion that, since they have no money for a funeral, the child be buried by the city. Eventually, she begs money from the neighbors, and arranges for her dead child to have "a mass and a hearse with white plumes on it, and a tiny plot in a graveyard with a wooden cross to mark the place."[24] At the deaths of other family members like Jurgis's father, Ona, and Jurgis's son, Elzbieta shows the same concern for seemly funerals. Considering the importance of the funeral in the old Lithuanian traditions, Elzbieta's concerns about it do not seem to be mere exaggerations.[25]

Elzbieta's steadfast adherence to traditional customs, of course, does not mean that she ignores the bitter realities around her. Whenever the family is caught in difficult situations, she solves the problems according to Old World common sense. When Ona dies in Chapter XX, for instance, she arranges a mass and simple funeral with money begged from the neighbors. Soon after this, she thinks about more important problems of the survival of the rest of the family; she does not just sit idly grieving. Among others, she sees the possibility that Jurgis might run away, so endeavors to "impress upon Jurgis, pleading with him with tears in her eyes" not to leave others alone. Before this incident when her children died, she also confronted reality in a similar manner, thinking of the rest of the family rather than of the dead. Sinclair characterized her will to survive with these parallels:

> She had to bury one of her children — but then she had done it three times before, and each time risen up and gone back to take up the battle for the rest. Elzbieta was one of the primitive creatures; like the angleworm, which goes on living though cut in half; like a hen, which, deprived of her chickens one by one, will mother the last that is left her. She did this because it was her nature — she asked no questions about the justice of it, nor the worthwhileness of life in which destruction and death ran riot.**26**

After years of harrowing experiences in America, she has learned what is of vital importance in life — securing daily bread. Previously she used to value decency or respectability, since "she had been a person of importance in her girlhood — had lived on a big estate and had servants."**27** Gradually, however, she learns that surviving and eating are of utmost importance in America. Such a realization is best illustrated in the scene near the end of the novel, where Jurgis tells her about Socialist movement and she responds to it.

> Jurgis . . . went home to Elzbieta. He ... started to tell Elzbieta about the revolution! At first she thought he was out of his mind, and it was hours before she could really feel certain that he was himself. When, however, she had satisfied herself that he was sane upon all subjects except politics, she troubled herself no further about it. Jurgis was destined to find that Elzbieta's armor was absolutely impervious to Socialism. Her soul had been baked in the fire of adversity, and there was no altering it now; life to her was the hunt for daily bread, and ideas existed for her only as they bore upon that.**28**

The characterization of Teta Elzbieta, though not fully developed, seem to be the most convincing of all the novel's characters. Sinclair intentionally made Jurgis convert to socialism after a series of harrowing experiences. Most of the others also turn out to be victims of an industrial society, ultimately crushed piece by piece or degenerating into the life of a prostitute like Marija. Though Elzbieta also becomes a victim like the rest of the family, however, she neither becomes a Socialist, nor is she crushed or degenerated. Like the angleworm and the hen, she survives. She also shares many characteristics with stockyard workers actually living at the turn of the century.

In addition to the picture of Elzbieta, there are other themes which historians recognize as true to historical reality. One of the most important of these is Lithuanian immigrants' serious desire to have their own home as part of the process of migration to America.**29** However, Sinclair was more interested in exploiting particular motives than in portraying a plausible and comprehensive social picture of Lithuanian-American life in an industrial society. In a letter to the *Appeal* reader, Sinclair specifically stated his hidden motive for his elaborations on Lithuanian protagonists. These elaborations, he wrote, were intended to "make the reader acquainted with an atmosphere and an environment." A deeper motive, he went on to write, was "not merely to set forth a tragedy, but to drive home to the dullest reader the truth that this tragedy is, in its every detail, the inevitable and demonstrable consequence of an economic system."**30** In other words, some realistic descriptions of Lithuanian immigrant life in the novel are just byproducts of Sinclair's intention to denounce "a modern economic system."

1 For the two Lithuanian scholars, see Antanas Musteikis, "The Lithuanian Heroes of *The Jungle," Lituanus,* XVII (Summer, 1971), pp. 27-38; Alfonsas Šešplaukis, "Lithuanians in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle," Lituanus,* XXIII (Summer, 1977), pp. 24-31.
2 For general literature on immigration, see Edmond Brunner, *Immigrant Farmers and Their Children* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1927); Marcus Lee Hansen, *The Immigrants in American History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1942); John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1955); Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973); Dean R. Esslinger, *Immigrants and the City* (Port Washington, New York: National University Publications, 1975). For literature on Lithuanian immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, see Antanas Kaztauskis, "From Lithuania to the Chicago Stockyards — An Autobiography," *Independent,* LVII (Aug., 1904), pp. 241-248; A. Kaupas, "Lithuanians in America," *Charities and the Commons,* XIII (Dec., 1904), pp. 231-235; U.S. Industrial Commission, *Slaughtering and Meatpacking,* Vol. 13, Part II of *Reports of the Immigration Commission: Immigrants in Industries* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1911), pp. 17-88, 199-228; Konrad Bercovici, "The Lithuanians in the United States," *Century Monthly Magazine,* CXI (Nov., 1925), pp. 36-42; Robertas Selenis, "Lithuanians in America: A Historical Sketch," *Lituanus,* XVII (Winter, 1971), pp. 44-58; Algirdas M. Budreckis, ed., *The Lithuanians in America, 1655-1975* (Dobbs Ferry, New York: Oceana Publications, Inc., 1976). Most important of the recent works on Lithuanian immigrants' life in America written in English are Victor Greene, *For God and Country: The Rise of Polish and Lithuanian Ethnic Consciousness in America, 1860-1910* (Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1975); David Fainhauz, *Lithuanians in Multi-Ethnic Chicago Until World War II* (Chicago: Lithuanian Library Press, Inc., 1977).
3 Michael B. Folsom, "Literary Radicalism and Genteel Tradition,"' Ph.D. diss., University of California, 1972.
4 E. J. Harrison, *Lithuania Past and Present* (Adelphi Terrace, London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., 1922), pp. 160-162. For detailed discussions on the traditional Lithuanian wedding customs, see Casimir Peter Sirvaitis, "Religious Folkways in Lithuania and Their Conservations Among the Lithuanian Immigrants in the United States," Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 1948, pp. 64-95.
5 Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1906), p. 3. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from *The Jungle* are from the first edition of Doubleday, Page & Co.
6 Jonas Zilinskas, "The Early Immigrants in Pennsylvania," in Budreckis, p. 86.
7 The Jungle, p. 14. According to Sirvaitis's research, the presentation of gifts was "almost the biggest ceremony at a Lithuanian wedding" during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Besides, the custom of presenting gifts differed among Lithuanian immigrants. See Sirvaitis, pp. 471-472.
8 *The Jungle,* p. 5.
9 *Ibid., p.* 13.
10 Harrison, pp. 160-161; Sirvaitis, p. 94.
11 See *The Jungle,* p. 21.
12 *Ibid.,* pp. 75-76.
13 *Ibid.,* p. 14.
14 *Ibid.,* pp. 16-17.
15 *Ibid., p.* 11.
16 Musteikis, p. 33
17 Budreckis, p. 90. According to Carl William Thompson's observation made in 1907, Lithuanians in the Stockyards district used to have the wedding celebration for a week. See Thompson, "Labor in the Packing Industry," *Journal of Political Economics,* XV (Feb., 1907), p. 93.

18 Zilinskas, pp. 85-86.
19 Mary McDowell, "The Foreign Born," in Caroline M. Hill, ed., *Mary McDowell and Municipal Housekeeping* (Chicago: Miller Publishing Co., 1938), p. 18. McDowell gives more evidence of such conflicts exhibited in the young immigrants' attitude toward shoes, dresses, music, and dances. See *Ibid.,* p. 16.
20 Louise Montgomery, *A Study of Chicago's Stockyards Community: The American Girl in The Stockyards District* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1913), pp. 59-60.
21 Fainhauz, pp. 25-32.
22 See Musteikis, pp. 27-38; Šešplaukis, pp. 24-31.
23 *The Jungle,* p. 76.
24 *Ibid.,* pp. 150-151.
25 According to Carl William Thompson's observation made in 1907, Lithuanians in the Stockyards district spent three to four days for each funeral. See his article, "Labor in the Packing Industry," *Journal of Political Economy,* XV (Feb, 1907), p. 93.
26 *The Jungle, p.* 231.
27 *Ibid., p.* 75.
28 *Ibid., p.* 379. In his article Alfonsas Šešplaukis has made a comment on the Elzbieta character in one sentence: "Among other erroneous descriptions inconsistent with Lithuanian character is 'aunt' Elzbieta's surrender to Jurgis's new ideas, which he himself does not yet firmly uphold" (pp. 28-29). As the quoted passage shows, it can hardly be said that she "surrendered" to Jurgis's new ideas, socialism. On the surface, Jurgis seems to have mastery over her, but it is not exactly so. Her seemingly surrender to the new ideas, as a matter of face, is merely a disguise to make Jurgis help support the family.
29 For a detailed analysis of the Polish and Lithuanian desire to have their own property, see Victor Greene, *For God and Country,* especially Chapter One, "The Soil and the Spirit," and Chapter Two, "American Impact on Rural Aliens."
30 Letter, Sinclair to the *Appeal* reader, n.d., reprinted in *Appeal,* March 4, 1905, p. 1.