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TALKING THROUGH LETTERS
Collaborative Writing in Early Lithuanian Immigrant Life

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> She brought the letter to the village and was besieged by curious folk. All those able to read, and there were at least a score who could, took turns reading the letter to Mrs. Gurkin and to those who were illiterate. The latter stood about with eyes full of wonder and mouths open and they listened and listened...
>
> For several days the learned folk of the village kept reading and rereading the letter. One by one, like stitches, they unraveled the individual letters to make out the words. Every reading of the letter matched the others, so that there was nothing to do but accept what the letter said as the truth. Twenty learned people could not make the same mistake.
>
> Stoyan Christowe. This is my country. 1838.
>
> I, Jonas Juktonis, along with my family, greet you my brother Antanas and your children, wishing you much happiness and good fortune in your lives and the best of health for you and now we wish my brother Povilas much happiness and a long life, and now we thank him for the letter, heartily thank him that at least we can talk through letters.
>
> Letter from Jonas Juktonis in Lithuania to his brother Paul in the United States. 1961.

Although Stoyan Christowe's depiction of the villagers gawking openmouthed at the letter may seem to modern readers overly simplistic and even condescending, this scene from his 1938 autobiography reflects collective reading practices that were common throughout much of Central and istorians refer to today as the Great Wave of immigration, encompassing the years 1880 to 1920. Christowe is writing about his native Celo in Bulgaria, but the village could have been one in Lithuania, where individuals who were able to read helped those who could not, and a letter from the United States was passed from hand to hand until most of the letter writer's friends and relatives were acquainted with its contents. Letters were public property; they belonged to the village or the boarding house, as opposed to the individual. Although the writing of letters was not quite as public an endeavor as the reading of them, it was nonetheless a collaborative act, one that engaged the abilities of family members and friends.

Personal letters have been and continue to be one of the most popular forms of writing, traversing lines of gender, culture, class, and age. They have been used as a means of personal empowerment and as a spur to continued literacy. Women in the United States, for example, excluded from formal schooling before the mid-nineteenth century, urged each other to improve their letter writing, offering recommendations concerning mechanics and style.[1] Communication with family and friends in Mexico via letters is a major motivating factor in the literacy acquisition of many present-day Mexican immigrants.[2] An indication of the continued popularity of letter writing, although in a different medium, is the ever-increasing use of electronic mail.

The personal letter, in addition to being the most common of written genres, is the writing form most conducive to collaboration, whether that collaboration includes friends and family or occurs within a business context, with the writer employing the services of a professional scribe. We see multiple instances of collaboration in letter writing in Shuman's

study of adolescents in a Philadelphia high school, Kalman's research of scribes and their clients in Mexico, and Thomas and Znaniecki's collection of letters written by Polish peasants to relatives in the United States. What composition instructors and writing centers directors encourage through discussion and the modeling of desired interactions occurred more or less naturally in the above scenarios, as a response to the contingencies of everyday life.

Despite its widespread importance in the history of writing and communication, as well as its potential as an exemplar of collaboration, the personal letter as a genre has received limited attention by scholars of literacy and composition, as Besnier and Kalman have pointed out.[3] Our preoccupation with traditional school-based forms of literacy has led us, until fairly recently, to ignore a more authentic definition of literacy; a set of practices where an individual's reading and writing abilities are utilized for particular purposes in specific social situations. The emphasis on the individual in Western culture has also blinded us to how social relationships affect literacy acquisition and, conversely, how literacy transforms these relationships.

One of the purposes of this article is to contribute to the small body of work dealing with collaborative literacy practices from a historical perspective. The sections that follow begin with a brief introduction to Lithuanian life and reasons for immigration. I continue with a discussion of the social and personal functions letter writing performed in the lives of Lithuanian immigrants. Correspondence was viewed not as an optional activity, one that might be undertaken at one's leisure, but as a serious personal obligation. I then argue that writing letters was difficult for these immigrants not because they were unable to read but because writing, specifically penmanship, was a new, unfamiliar technology, a previously unnecessary skill. I continue by examining the dynamics of collaboration that occurred in letter-writing sessions. I conclude with a series of questions for future study, focusing on those that have applications to classroom practice.

In research for this study I utilized historical documents, such as letters and newspapers, as well as ethnographic interviews with the children of Lithuanian immigrants. Among my most important participants were the sisters of the Order of St. Casimir, a Lithuanian congregation founded in Pennsylvania in 1907. I spent several afternoons at the moth-erhouse on Chicago's South Side talking to the sisters, most of whom are more than eighty years old, about their families, all of whom had emigrated from Lithuania around the turn of the century; their early childhood experiences with reading and writing; their educational backgrounds; as well as the kinds of reading and writing they engage in today.4 I wish to thank the following for their time and willingness to share their life stories with me: Sister Agnesine Deering, Sister Dilecta Krauchunas, Sister Cyril Krasauskas, Sister Anita Petroshus, Sister Cordia Vaisvilas, and Sister Angela Balcunas. I am also grateful to Father William Wolkovich-Valkavičius, with whom I had a chance to talk in person on a visit to Massachusetts in the late 1990s; Violeta Kelertas; Irene Guilford; Christine Konstant; and Father Tony Markus, who provided me with the letter from Jonas Juktonis.

Historical Background

From 1881 to 1920, more than 23 million people entered the United States, an unprecedented number of immigrants.5 Included in this figure were more than 300,000 individuals from Lithuania, the southernmost of the three countries often collectively referred to as the Baltic States. Actual immigration figures are problematic because there was no separate U.S. census category for Lithuanians until 1910; before this, they were grouped with the Russians, whose subjects they had been for more than a century.[6]

In fact, it was to avoid enforced and lengthy conscription into the army of the czar that many young Lithuanian men left the country. The major reasons for emigration, however, were economic. The increase in the number of landless peasants brought about by the disintegration of feudalism in the mid-nineteenth century and the growth of industry that could not accommodate them resulted in high levels of unemployment. Young Lithuanian men of agrarian background, fewer women, left for the United States, spurred on by stories of fellow countrymen amassing enough wealth to return home and buy land.

For the most part, these peasants came with little or no education. In nineteenth-century Lithuania, economic motivations for learning to read and write were few. The long working hours and physically demanding labor typical of the agrarian Lithuanian life made formal learning difficult. Literacy acquisition was also adversely affected by political oppression. The czarist press ban of 1863 had decreed the closing of Lithuanian schools and suppressed all books not printed in Cyrillic, the national alphabet of Russia.

Fainhauz contends that between 1899 and 1914, the rate of illiteracy among Lithuanian immigrants in the United States was 53 percent.[7] Literacy statistics for this time period, however, are difficult to calculate with any degree of accuracy. A major problem is that the term *literacy* encompasses a wide range of behaviors: there are individuals who read and write fluently, those who can read but not write, and those who neither read or write. What constitutes "writing" is problematic as well, witness the ongoing debate as to whether signature counts represent wider reading and writing abilities.[8]

Most of the participants in this study believe that their parents read well enough to follow their prayer books, and that they had probably acquired this basic reading competency from a type of home schooling that was popular duTing the press ban, where a traveling teacher gave informal lessons to a small group of neighboring children. Writing, however, was another matter. The following sentiments were echoed again and again by the participants in this study:

> My mother couldn't write at all to her dying day. She couldn't even sign her name. She would sign X's.
>
> William Wolkovich-Valkavičius interview.

> My mother could only sign her name. She learned that in the States here. My father, he knew how to write his name, but poorly. For John, he never wrote J-O-H-N, but J-A-E-N. That was John. I would say, "Pa, that is not English. That is Jan. Jan. Jan."
>
> Sister Cyril Krasauskas interview.

An exception to these generally low rates of literacy were the Jews of Lithuania. Their traditions of learning went back centuries to the concept of the yeshiva, which Greenbaum aptly describes as "a lifetime of scholastic endeavor in which notions such as 'completion' or 'graduation' were unknown."[9] The majority spoke and wrote Yiddish, with many of the men also literate in Hebrew. Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian were spoken by most Jews; many knew how to write in these languages as well. The term ut-zony yevrey was used to describe highly literate Jews. Greenbaum believes that many of these learned Jews worked as scribes for neighboring Poles, Lithuanians, and Russians.[10]

The first generation of Lithuanian immigrants settled in the coalmining regions of Pennsylvania and in the Stockyards neighborhoods of Chicago, where finding jobs depended not on literacy skills, nor even knowledge of English, but on strength, youth, and connections. Although it may have been occasionally necessary for an individual to read a contract for the fine print or skim a newspaper for a listing of the next meeting of the Daukantas Society, a lack of reading ability posed no significant problems in everyday life. Not only were practical day-to-day transactions conducted orally, but larger, more complex needs for affiliation were met through institutions such as the church and the local tavern, where communication was overwhelmingly oral. In many ways, writing was even less essential. The one exception, however, was the writing of letters to friends and relatives in Lithuania, and here it took on paramount importance.

The Social Importance of Correspondence

Although it was important for those who remained in Lithuania to be able to write to their relatives in the United States, the impetus for writing letters remained in the hands of those who emigrated. Lithuanian immigrants were prompted to write letters for many reasons. First and foremost, they knew that their loved ones would be anxious to hear the facts about this land of milk and honey. Letters allowed for the transmission of important practical information, especially concerning possibilities for employment in the United States. Letters were thus an important stimulus for immigration to the United States. Immigrants also wrote letters to send money and announce significant life events. Tadas Kublickis penned a letter to his brother proclaiming his intention to marry. His brother wrote back stating his objections - in Kublickis's own words "forbidding" him to carry out his plans.[11] Christine ^Constant's father often dispatched money to his extended family, once sending $200, "a lot of money at that time in Lithuania." Konstant remembers her father talking about how providential his gift turned out to be because his own father had just lost two horses. Sometimes even a disturbing dream could spur one on to write a letter, as in the case of Sister Dilecta Krauchunas's mother, who dreamt of a white horse and interpreted that to mean that a loved one had died in Lithuania. Dilecta helped her mother write a letter to the "bereaved," stating that a Mass was being ordered for the soul of the "deceased."

The most important reason for writing letters, however, one under which the others were more or less subsumed, was to reaffirm family solidarity. In Lithuania, day-to-day contact and extended visits with close relatives on ceremonial occasions made such artificial means of connection unnecessary. The significance of the extended family was deeply rooted in Eastern European peasant culture, and the threat of the dissolution of family bonds was a great incentive for writing frequently. Practical considerations played a role as well. Because most immigrants planned on returning to Lithuania once they had saved enough money for a farm,[12] maintaining connection with those who might eventually assist them was especially important.

In the past, historians have underestimated the significance of such transnational ties. Narratives of "uprootedness," as Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton refer to them, which emphasized dislocation and eventual assimilation, obscured the networks of connection that existed between immigrants and their family and friends back home.[13] Such connections existed among groups other than Lithuanians. Emigration rates of more than 40 percent were common for Greeks, Italians, and Slovaks.[14]

Given the fact that most Lithuanian immigrants believed that they would eventually be reunited with their families, what one wrote often was not as important as the fact that one wrote. Sister Cyril Krasauskas recounted that, as a young girl, when she was told by her mother to write letters to relatives in Lithuania, she would ask her mother just what it was she was supposed to communicate to them:

> I would say, "What should 1 tell them? I don't know what to tell them." "'Praised be Jesus Christ,' that's the first thing you write. 'I kiss your dear hands.'" Then 1 would say, "What should I write about now?" "Write about the farm, how we live here, that we have animals."

Between the formal, ritualized greeting and the news about the farm, Krasauskas would have included a line or two about the family's health. The letters of Lithuanian immigrants followed a fairly fixed form, one that we see repeatedly in the letters of Polish peasants of the time collected by Thomas and Znaniecki. The greeting, a variation of "Praised be Jesus Christ," is followed by the information that the writer, with God's help, is in good health and is succeeding and wishes the same for the recipient and his or her family. These introductions were lengthy because family members were often mentioned by name, their health and happiness frequently inquired about individually; Thomas and Znaniecki have termed such letters "Bowing letters" because of their emphasis on deference and politeness.[15]

One of the consequences of following these requirements was a definite sameness of tone in the letters. William Wolkovich-Valkavičius remembers that they "all sounded alike," an impression echoed by Sister Anita Petroshus;

> We would always write the same way. "Aš, Tavo sesuo Elena, sveikinu Jus su žodžiais 'Tegu bus pagarbintas Jezus Kristus.'" [I, your sister Elena, greet you with the words "Let Jesus Christ Be Praised."] We used to write the same things over and over again.... "Aš, Elena, sveika esu, mano šeima gražiai auga." [I, Elena, am in good health. My family is doing well.] And, of course, when they wrote back, they would write more or less the same thing.

The ritualized greeting served the purpose of highlighting the importance of the letter-writing occasion, emphasizing it as "a social duty of a ceremonial character."[16] Ritualized addresses, of course, are a common feature in letters in general. The more ceremonial an occasion, the more likely a highly specialized address will be used; letters of condolence are a good example. Such openings thus serve as markers, in a similar way that different greetings, salutations, and words of farewell work in speech. The generic forms in which we cast our speech allow others to more easily determine their ultimate significance in any given social context, as Bakhtin has shown us.[17]

The "I, your relative, greet you..." construction, as well as the "bowing" to relatives, was not only a widespread feature of Lithuanian letters but also a persistent one. We find it in a letter written in 1961 by Jonas Juktonis to his brothers in Lithuania, an excerpt of which opens this article. Although the religious sentiment is absent, perhaps because such expressions would have aroused the suspicion of the Soviet powers that ruled Lithuania and routinely opened mail from abroad, the extended greeting would not have seemed out of place in a letter written eighty years earlier.

Although I have added punctuation marks and have capitalized the appropriate words in the English translation of Juktonis's letter, in the original handwritten Lithuanian they are practically nonexistent. There is no sense of paragraphing, and word choice and spelling are often non-conventional. In spite of what many might consider obvious flaws in the writing, Juktonis achieves his primary purpose: Family connection is maintained at a time when, because of the Soviet occupation, physical visitation was impossible. The letter is neatly handwritten (a ruler may have been used to help form lines) and, most importantly, the appropriate expressions of greeting are present.

"Let's Learn to Write": Literacy and the Technology of the Pen

The emphasis on ritualized openings that we find in Lithuanian and Polish immigrant letters was paralleled in the stress placed on their visual appearance. A letter had to look the proper way, following current conventions of format, penmanship, and style. Advertisements for a book titled *Kaip Rašyti Laiškus Lietuviškoje ir Angliškoje Kalbose* [How to Write Letters in Lithuanian and English] appeared in 1910 in successive issues of the Chicago-based newspaper Lietuva [Lithuania], aimed at individuals who needed instruction in these aspects of letter writing.

Other books purporting to teach Lithuanian immigrants writing skills, such as Paltanavičia's *Mokinkimės Rašyt* [Let's Learn to Write] concentrated on the mechanical skills of word formation, although their introductory statements suggest something more complex and dramatic. In the preface to Mokinkimės Rašyt, Paltanavičia exclaims: "My dear brothers and sisters, it is now time for all of us to carry out by hand our writers' duties; the era is past when man could live without writing; the times are gone when our parents would spin, weave, sew their own clothing."[18] The main purpose of the book was to teach prospective writers how to move their hands on the paper so the letters would emerge "clearly and beautifully." However, Paltanavicia did include "a little bit of grammar, showing by example when to use capitals and when to use lower-case letters... as well as punctuation marks."[19]

Many of the participants in this study echoed Paltanavicia's belief that proper penmanship was an integral part of writing. Sister Cordia Vaisvilas, in explaining how she tried to teach her mother to write, emphasized that it was not grammar, word recognition, or sentence structure that her mother needed to learn, but hand movement: "I would take her hand, 'Mama, write it this way.'" Cordia mimicked these handwriting motions as she spoke.

For most Lithuanian immigrants, writing was a new technology, one that many of them had been exposed to only minimally because social, personal, and economic circumstances had precluded formal learning. Like any new technology, it came with its own set of requirements. Although the children of Lithuanian immigrants would have been exposed to the rigors of handwriting instruction in American schools, their parents would have had no such training.

The difficulties involved in writing motivated some immigrants to turn to other forms of technology. The following advertisement in *Lietuva* gives us a sense of the issues involved in this discussion. It appeared July 25, 1913, and announced the opening of a public stenographer's bureau in the offices of the paper:

> Many Lithuanians come daily to our office demanding that letters be written for them, etc. In order to help those who cannot write, or those who want to write a neat letter, we have established such an office.... Each letter will be considered confidential.[20]

The Boston-based newspaper *Keleivis* [The Traveler] featured advertisements for a typewriter that would transform individuals into accomplished letter writers. The following advertisement in the April 20, 1905 issue was published in the form of a dialogue:

> Philip, why aren't you writing letters to the Homeland?
> Well, brother, it's because I don't know how to write well, and it's better not to write at all than to write any old way.
> Then why don't you buy yourself a little machine with which you can fashion a letter so beautifully, that even an unlearned person will understand what it is you're trying to say? You can get yourself such a thing for only nine dollars. And they'll even pay for delivery.[21]

The advertisement discloses the growing influence of American consumerism on Lithuanian immigrant culture. The opening line is a good example of the traditional marketing ploy of playing on personal guilt, in this case of a major kind - not fulfilling family obligations by writing letters to the homeland. The ad also reveals the continued emphasis on correctness; "it's better not to write at all" than to submit something to loved ones that falls short of current standards of what is proper. Like many other products advertised in the pages of both immigrant and Anglo newspapers of the time, such as hair-growth tonics and remedies for syphilis, the typewriter promised a "miracle cure" for gullible consumers, in this case a fairly expensive one, although we may laugh at the assumption about writing that prevailed in the early years of the personal computer, when anxious parents hoped that new technology would make writing easier for their children.

Reciprocal Exchange and Family Obligation:
The Personal Importance of Correspondence

Most Lithuanian immigrants did not rely on writing services, which cost money and entailed a trip to the newspaper bureau. A much more common solution was to ask for help from more literate neighbors. A neighbor woman used to write letters for Sister Anita's mother, who would return the favor in other ways, such as bringing over a meal. Wolkovich-Valkavičius's father, who was self-taught, wrote letters for friends and acquaintances while living in Lithuania. He continued doing so for neighbors after he had immigrated to the United States.

Having neighbors write letters was an extension of the concept of mutual aid, or *talka*, that Lithuanian immigrants had brought with them to the United States. Fainhauz defines *talks* as "a tradition of helping neighbors and of collective assistance," especially during the harvest or times of illness.[22] Christine Konstant remembers *talka* as an important part of life in her Lithuanian neighborhood in Chicago: if somebody was going to paint a house, the word got around, and everybody who had an older son would say, "You better be available for that day." You would help, and then, when you needed something, people would help you.

The fostering of good neighborly relationships played a vital part in the forging of community cohesiveness, especially important in the light of the many adjustments immigrants had to make to the dominant Anglo culture.

In Fingeret's study, reciprocal exchanges occurred not only among friends or more distant relatives but within families, where there was a more or less implicit understanding of the nature of the reciprocal relationship; the husband undertook household repairs, for example, whereas the wife helped the children with homework. In Lithuanian immigrant families, fathers worked outside the home whereas mothers ran the household, cooked, and cleaned. It was overwhelmingly the daughters who were the scribes - rarely did sons help out in this way. Perhaps this gendered division of household labor had something to do with penmanship; letters had to be scripted, not printed, and a graceful hand traditionally has been seen as the particular province of women. My sense is that boys were expected to participate in family life in other ways, such as running errands, carrying packages and, sometimes, retrieving fathers from the local tavern.

The women I have interviewed stated that they had often felt a sense of importance as girls in performing these so-called adult writing tasks. Compared to other household duties, such as cooking meals, taking care of younger siblings, and even sewing, writing letters was an activity where they had expertise that their parents lacked. Parents occasionally allowed them to take responsibility for the actual composition of letters. Sister Cyril, for example, was told she could write what she wanted to about the animals the family kept. At their most productive, these collaborative sessions allowed both participants to contribute, as we see in the following excerpt from the interview with Sister Dilecta:

> My mother knew how to write, but very slowly.... I would have to write letters for her. "Praised be Jesus Christ for ever and ever. I kiss your little white hands." Like that. After a while, I knew how she started [a letter]. I

had the beginning ready. I would say, "Ma, what else do you want me to write"? And so she'd tell me, and maybe sometimes I'd suggest something. Then she'd say, "Read me what you have." And so I would.

Many times, however, parents dictated in the literal sense of the word. Sister Angela Balchunas, who wrote letters for her father, "who wasn't much of a writer," clearly remembers her father being in charge. Their letter writing followed the same routine. She would open the recently received letter from Lithuania, read it out aloud, then ask her father, "What do you want me to tell them?" He would then dictate, stopping after every phrase so that his daughter could write down his words. At the end of the session, she would hand the pen over to her father, who would then ceremoniously sign his name to the letter.

For the young women who were scribes for family members, letter writing became important when many of them left their families in a way they would not have had they married. After completing their novitiate, all spent time at schools and hospitals outside of Chicago, sometimes for long periods of time. Sister Dilecta lived for many years in Argentina, where she became an avid letter writer, writing in Lithuanian, English, and Spanish. Her father would write once a month; she later discovered that he would spend the entire day at this: "My mother told me that it was like a valley of tears around the house on those days."

Since coming back from Argentina, Sister Dilecta has kept up with her correspondence, writing to friends on a regular basis: "I've written about a hundred letters already. All in Spanish. I write all the time." She reads Spanish books and magazines on a variety of topics, as well as missionary magazines in English, though she states that one of the drawbacks is that they make her want to go back to Argentina.

The women in this study contend that the writing and reading they did with and for their families affected positively their reading and writing experiences as adults. Sister Cyril Krasauskas, for example, believes she enjoyed writing more than her peers in grammar and high school did, partly as the result of her role as family scribe. In her future career as a teacher of English, she emphasized grammar and clarity of style. Today, at 85, Sister Cyril writes letters to several nuns in Pazaislis, Lithuania, who had lived at the mother-house on an extended stay several years ago; Cyril had taught one of them English. She writes in Lithuanian, occasionally adding a phrase or two in English.

It is difficult to determine to what extent the early writing experiences of these women influenced their future vocations as nuns and teachers (as well as their avocation as letter writers). They were probably predisposed by several factors to engage in work that played such a significant role in the education of Lithuanian-American children and the maintenance of Lithuanian identity as well as to achieve levels of education much higher than those of their compatriots. However, it is likely that their role as family scribes had at least some influence on their future decisions.

In addition to benefiting the young women, collaborative writing may have functioned to help parents feel a closer bond with their children, one based on the intimacy of a shared language. The maintenance of close family ties, difficult under ideal circumstances, can be especially problematic in immigrant families, where parents are faced with children influenced by an alien culture and beginning to speak a language foreign to their elders. Jane Addams, in her 1910 autobiography Twenty Years at Hull-House, writes of immigrant parents who relied on their often wayward children for monetary support as well as for help in interpreting the mores and customs of American life. Addams put it aptly as "the premature dependence of the older and wiser upon the young and foolish."[23] For the parents of the participants in this study, having their children forget their native tongue, having them become too Americanized too quickly, was seen as a threat to family stability.

As immigration to the United States decreased and, after World War I, eventually came to a standstill, collaborative literacy practices among Lithuanian immigrants declined. The second generation, those individuals born and educated in the United States, had no need to rely on intermediaries to fill out forms or help write letters.
The Soviet invasion of Lithuania in 1945, however, brought about a second wave of Lithuanian emigration. Although these individuals were more highly educated than those from the first wave, there were many with limited reading and writing skills. Irene Guilford's grandmother, for example, who emigrated to Canada in 1948, was raised on a farm and had never gone to school. As a young woman, Irene would read aloud to her grandmother from Lithuanian newspapers and, at a somewhat later age, would fill out her income taxes.

As with the earlier immigrants, Guilford's grandmother's lack of literacy skills did not prevent her from leading a productive life. She acquired a reputation for being a wonderful cook, whose specialty was bakery goods, and ran a small but profitable business among Lithuanians in Toronto. In order to keep track of basic recipes, she learned to read numbers and distinguish several letters, those used to begin with the words for the most common ingredients in her cakes, such as K for *kiaušinis*, or egg. Irene was ten when her grandmother asked her to rewrite an old recipe booklet that had grown worn from use: "She dictated. I wrote. She asked me to use a big, round script. This way, while she couldn't necessarily make sense of the script, she could pick out the K, P, S. M."

After the Second World War, collaboration between Lithuanian parents and their children took on a new guise. A dramatically different social context, characterized by growing bureaucracy and increased industrialization, necessitated more writing in English on the part of the new wave of Lithuanian immigrants. Job applications, work permits, requests for medical services - many of these had to be completed in writing. Parents increasingly turned to their English-speaking

children for help. Violeta Kelertas, who immigrated to Canada with her family as a young girl,-remembers being a scribe for her mother, helping her fill out forms in English and writing letters to government agencies. Kelertas, like the women of the earlier generation, felt she had no say in the matter. Unlike the nuns, however, Kelertas did not appreciate these extra duties, which kept her away from more pleasurable pursuits.

Questions For Future Study

Historical studies of literacy practices allow us to question to what extent conceptions of literacy that we conceive of as universal are, in fact, specific and bound by culture. For the Lithuanian immigrants in this study, for example, reading and writing were, to a large extent, collaborative activities, not the solitary, individual acts that we often assume them to be. Somewhat ironically, such studies can also help us see the similarities between cultures separated by place and time. Today, for example, the children of Mexican immigrants of Chicago often help their parents write letters in English to various government agencies and frequently accompany their mothers and fathers to doctors appointments.

In addition to standing on their own as specific historical and cross-cultural investigations, studies such as this one have important applications to classroom practice. The growing diversity of student populations across the United States brings with it a number of challenges that educators have yet to adequately address. Although we are growing more familiar with the technical aspects of the writing of students from ESL (English as a Second Language) backgrounds, and are increasingly knowledgeable about the debates regarding bilingual education versus immersion methods in the early school years, we know little about the roles that personal and family relationships play in the lives of these students. How many of them plan to return to their countries of origin, either permanently or as visitors? How many of their parents maintain residences in both countries, and how might this affect attitudes toward learning English? We are often unaware of the important cross-national networks of connection that exist among many immigrant groups today. Glick Schiller et al, gives as examples Caribbean, Haitian, and Philippine emigres who, while establishing themselves in the United States, retain ties with their respective homelands, often owning property there. Connection is maintained through visits, letters, and phone calls and, in the case of nonliterate Haitians from peasant backgrounds, through songs recorded on audiocassettes.[24]

An awareness of the existence of transnational ties can also help us question certain teaching practices. For example, if children of immigrants are accustomed to seeing their parents corresponding with relatives back home, how can we apply this information in the writing classroom? Instead of having students write personal narratives, still the first assignment in many ESL and basic writing classes, teachers might use letter writing as a means of introducing students to complex conceptions of audience and genre. In a multicultural classroom, simply having students from immigrant backgrounds discuss the kinds of writing they do at home can often lead to interesting discussions about the role that literacy plays in different cultures. The end result of such discussions is frequently a growing awareness, on the part of both students and teacher, of how reading and writing practices are rooted in a variety of complex economic, political, social, cultural, and individual circumstances.

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1. Heath, 32.
2 .Farr, 25.
3. Besnier, 64; Kalman, 193-194.
4. Although Lithuanian had been the first language for all of the sisters, most of them preferred talking in English. Somewhat surprisingly, all of the participants in this study agreed to having their real names used. Translations of conversations that took place in Lithuanian are mine, unless otherwise noted.
5. Daniels, 123.
6. Fainhauz, *Lithuanians in Chicago*, 42.
7. Fainhauz, USA, 21.
8. Kaestle, 11-12.
9. Greenbaum, 88; Significant Jewish populations have existed in Lithuania since their arrival in the tenth century. Important as discrete communities, they have also played prominent social, economic, and cultural roles in broader Lithuanian life. In the nineteenth century, the repressive czarist policies that affected Lithuanian Christians were even more severe for the Jews who, in addition to the closing of their schools and induction into the Russian army, experienced religious persecution in the form of pogroms. This article does not cover the complex and interesting literacy practices of Lithuanian Jews of the time, given their distinctive educational histories and their self-identification, once in the United States, with the larger Eastern European Jewish community.
10. I have uncovered such an instance in E.S. Johnson's short story (1908) about immigrant coal miners in Pennsylvania, "The Ticket for Ona." The story's hero, Paul Zelleck, writes to his sister, Ona, who is living in Lithuania, informing her about his new life and encouraging her to join him. The illiterate Ona hires a Jewish marketman to write her letters.
11. Kublicki, 44.
12. Fainhauz, USA, 19.
13. Glick Schiller et. al., 49.
14. Bodnar, 53.
15. Thomas and Znaniecki, 304.
16. Ibid., 303.
17. Bakhtin, 78-79.
18. Margeris, 66.
19. Ibid.
20. *Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey. II A.*
21. Ibid.
22. Fainhauz, USA, 32.
23. Addams, 182.
24. Glick Schiller, 32.