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A LITHUANIAN GRANDMOTHER: TRIUMPH OF SPIRIT OVER CIRCUMSTANCE

JOSEPH W. DUFFY
Wethersfield, Conn.

For those of us who spring from immigrant stock, ethnic history can read like the biography of familiar folk. Beneath the learned characterizations of say a John Higham, we see a face or hear an accent from some neighborhood encounter of long ago.

We who spent our early lives in the shadow of immigrants recall their crusty individualism and zest for life. Like the old neighborhood itself, the 'immigrant story' will always be to us an endless series of anecdotes, countless stories within a story. Every immigrant was an unfolding tale to anyone who would observe. The usual settings for these ongoing personal dramas were the family, the church, and the community.

So important was family to Josephine Koncavage (Koncevičius)¹ that she would meticulously catalogue her family's moments of joy and sorrow in a diary.² Covering half a century, it was faithfully kept from Josephine's marriage until her death. Events included births, first communions, confirmations, graduations, weddings, and deaths.

Josephine Koncavage was born on December 6, 1886, in Lithuania and came to the United States at age seven with her parents, "Martin" and "Antanette."³ They settled in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania, a mining town that had also attracted scores of Irish, Italian, Polish, Welsh, Slovak, and Greek immigrants. Though Josephine received but a sixth-grade education in the local public school, she was able to read and write with good proficiency in both English and her native Lithuanian. Her diary is a reliable witness to her strong, clear, English-language penmanship.

Not too long after her schooling ended, Josephine would begin her own family. She would marry a young Lithuanian immigrant named William Yescalis (Jeskelis), who had already served his adopted country in the Spanish-American War of 1898. Family lore even recounts that while in Cuba young William Yescalis had met Theodore Roosevelt and the Rough Riders. Josephine Koncavage chose to begin her diary at the beginning of her life with William Yescalis:

I was 16 years old in Dec., 1901 and I was married in April, Saturday morning, 1902. I was married in St. George's Roman Catholic Church by Rev. Peter Ambromaites. Mrs. Anthony Greblick and William Metalavage my best man and lady. They stood up for us. I was married in a gray dress.

Like so many others in Shenandoah, William Yescalis took a job in the mines. Josephine's first years as a young wife were clearly difficult ones as her diary entries testify. Josephine lived at a time when mines were thoroughly unsafe and when child-bearing was risky for both mother and baby. There is a stark sadness especially noticeable in the care taken by a new mother to preserve accurately the few highlights of momentary life allowed her first offspring. The entries read:

My baby girl Martha Ann was born May 3, Sunday, 1903, evening 7:50 P.M. and was baptized May 10, in St. George's R. C. Church. I was churched⁴ Godparents were Miss Morta Yoberwitz, Povilas Miklasevičius. Midwife was Mrs. Mazeika. Born at 36 S. Emerick St., Shen., Mrs. Haverty's property. Martha Ann died Sept., 1903, age 5 months, buried in St. George's Cemetery. Undertaker, William Snyder Sr. Marta Ona.⁵

1904 — my baby boy George was born April 23, 1904, Saturday morning 6 A.M. and was baptized the same day, April 23 — 10 o'clock A.M. in St. George's R. C. Church by Rev. Anthony Milukas and died the same day at 2 P.M., age 8 hours. Born and died at 36 S. Emerick St., Mrs. Haverty's property.

1905 — my baby boy John was born June 24 — 1905, Saturday morning at 4 o'clock A.M. and was baptized 4 o'clock A.M. Monday morning June 26, by Rev. Peter Ambromaites and died at 11 o'clock A.M. Born 36 S. Emerick St., Shen., and died. Mrs. Haverty's property.

1905 — I had a miscarriage in Dec., 17th. About 5 months gone.

The diarist seems to have been very conscious that she and her husband did not own their own home. As in the preceding entries, Josephine always added the landlord's name to her excerpts. In so doing, she virtually recorded that the family moved at least four times between 1902 and the birth of her last child Florian in 1922.

It is significant to observe that Josephine's first two landlords were Irish (Haverty, Tierney), the third Italian (Bronzo), and the last Polish (Liziwski). This pattern roughly parallels the sequence of ethnic arrivals to Shenandoah. In addition, Josephine Koncavage's chronicle illustrates the dominant influence of the Irish in the Pennsylvania hierarchy of the Roman

Catholic Church. The three bishops who confirmed Yescalis children over the years were Dougherty, Crane, and O'Hara. Shenandoah itself was in the vicinity of the famous nineteenth-century Irish-inspired miners' protest, the Molly Maguires.

Josephine Koncavage Yescalis throughout her life maintained a tender loyalty to her Lithuanian heritage. The names of family and friends connected with all key events were always given by Josephine in both their English and their Lithuanian spellings. For example, the June, 1905, baptismal entry for "baby boy John" indicates:

Godparents were Mrs. Kawalzik,⁶ William Miklaseurcz — Mrs. Kawalcikienė, Vincas⁷ Miklasevičius.

Another citation reads, "Adolph was confirmed by Bishop Crane, Sept. 26, 1928. Jerome, Jeronimas. Sponsor William Menkewicz."⁸

From the well-spring of family history come other touching memories of how Josephine esteemed her native culture. A great-granddaughter fondly recalls that Josephine as senior matriarch would sing to her in Lithuanian while helping her to dress for school. Older relatives remember that Josephine always acted as a tireless scribe for her Lithuanian neighbors. The Yescalis home became a kind of clearing house where letters from the old country would be translated and then appropriate responses formulated and written. Josephine was always involved in church activities as well. It is said that she worked diligently to heal a schism within St. George's Lithuanian parish that had produced a small band of break-away Lithuanian Catholics for a time.

Sorrow, however, continued its wearying presence in the life of Josephine Koncavage Yescalis. Of sixteen children born to her by 1922, only five reached adulthood. A particularly moving passage speaks of what had become unfortunately familiar:

1913 — my twin boys Francis and Joseph were born March 14, Friday, 6 P.M., 1913 — about five months gone. Doctor baptized them Francis and Joseph. Francis lived 5 minutes. Joseph lived two minutes. When born, just time for Dr. Scanlon to baptize them.

By 1913, Josephine and her husband had buried six children. The following year she nearly lost her own life in a miscarriage. It was her fifth:

1914 — Feb. 22, 1914, Sunday night I had a mis [sic] about 3 months gone. I was pretty near gone — inflammation set in — bed for 9 days — fever 104. Dr. Scanlon. 204 S. Market St., Tierney property.

In 1916, disease again ravaged the Yescalis family. A son Walter had been born in May of 1915. His mother Josephine wrote:

Walter died Oct. 19 — 1916 — 12:30 A.M. Midnight with diphtheria croup, was sick one day. Age 1 year, 5 months, 14 days. Was buried Oct. 20. Quarantined by Dr. Urictor and Dr. Scanlon.

Martin Koncavage, Josephine's father, was killed in August of 1919 in what was then a common occurrence for Pennsylvania, a mining accident. Four years later, during the same month, the following loss was recorded by a new widow:

My husband William Yescalis was hurt at the Locust Mountain Colliery [mine] July 30, 1923, Monday morning — took him down to the state hospital, Fountain Springs, died Aug. 3 — 1923 at 3 A.M., 15 minutes to 3 A.M., Friday. I buried him Tuesday morning, Aug. 7, 1923, in St. George's Church, High Mass and buried in old cemetery, St. George's. Fr. Dumczkus.

Students of modern psychology define the ultimate personal tragedies as deaths of parents, spouses, and children. Josephine Koncavage Yescalis had endured all of these by her 38th birthday. Incredible as it seems, another unspeakable tragedy lay ahead. Perhaps the worst. The strength of this Lithuanian immigrant woman humbles even those of us who know her only through her diary and her family's recollections. We read of what must have been the most heart-rending of Christmas eves for the widow Yescalis and her young family. No respecter of holidays, accidental violence once again shook Josephine's life. It was the time of the Great Depression.⁹ The enormity of the trauma is self-evident:

Raymond Anthony was 13 years, 3 months, 29 days when he was shot and killed by his pal buddy Cherneski. He was shot Sunday afternoon about 1:30 P.M. down by the abattoir [meatpacking house] with a 22 gun. The bullet went through the right ear and into his brain and he died up in Locust Mountain Hospital. Was unconscious till he died. Dr. William Breslin took him up. Fr. Joseph Karalius gave him his last rites, and he was buried Thursday morning 9 A.M. — Dec. 28, 1933. High Mass was said by Fr. Alauskas. Priest came to the house and up to the cemetery. Pall bearers for my sonny Raymond Anthony — Benedict Ogovek, Anthony Layilski, Michael Zakazewski, Clement McClosky, Edward Zagorsky, Albert Jakimonis.

Under a separate heading in the diary entitled "Mass Cards," a sorrowful Lithuanian mother captures for us with striking simplicity the poignancy of a grief-stricken inter-ethnic community. Josephine gratefully enumerates spiritual remembrances from Fr. Karalius of St. George's Lithuanian Church [this priest had anointed Raymond], "German Father Bruckman,"⁹ "Italian Church, Rev. Joseph Myna," and "Slavish Church,"¹⁰ Rev. J. W. Floracek."

The list of those who contributed flowers pierces the reader's heart: "THE GANG;" "TEACHER AND CLASS-MATES;" "MR. AND MRS. ANTHONY CHERNETSKI." The latter are the parents of the boy "Buddy" who caused the accidental death of Josephine's son. "Buddy" is also mentioned separately for his floral remembrance.

If we did not already know from family tradition that Josephine Koncavage Yescalis forgave Buddy Chernetzki absolutely, her carefully written private acknowledgement of Buddy's floral offering unquestionably confirms the absolution as genuine.

For as long as she lived, Josephine was wholly without malice toward her son's "pal." The last floral tribute appearing in the diary came from Josephine herself and lovingly read, "MINE, HEARTS AND SPRAYS."

From the surviving children of Josephine Konkavage Yescalis, there were fifteen grandchildren and numerous great-grandchildren. Josephine remained at the center of this widening family circle until her sudden death. A relative, Mr. Joseph Dombrosky of East Hartford, Connecticut, aptly described Josephine: "She was a real Lithuanian grandma! What a marvelous sense of humor she had. Her Lithuanian cooking was unforgettable!"

Yet, Josephine Konkavage Yescalis dearly loved her new country of the United States and had a passion for its history. There were several pages of her diary reserved for significant people and events from America's heroic past. The following selections amply represent Josephine's historical tastes: "George Washington, Feb. 22, 1738; Abraham Lincoln, Feb. 12, 1809; Robert E. Lee, Jan. 19, 1807; Daniel Webster, Jan. 18, 1788; Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jan. 30, 1982; Battle of Princeton, Jan. 3, 1777; Battle of New Orleans, Jan. 8, 1815; U.S. Flag on Guam, Feb. 1, 1899; Battleship Maine destroyed, Feb. 15, 1898; Panama Canal Treaty, Jan. 22, 1903; First telephone exchange, New Haven, Connecticut, Jan. 28, 1878; Peace with Spain, Feb. 10, 1899." It will be recalled that William Yescalis was a Spanish-American veteran. His wife the diarist had lived some of the historical events she had chosen to make a part of her personal narrative.

An undeniably heroic character emerges from the life of Josephine Konkavage Yescalis as it has been reconstructed from diary and living memory. As her interest in history has shown, Josephine liked heroes, but she would never have accepted the characterization that she herself was one. Yet, this persevering but gentle immigrant woman had borne the almost unimaginable anguish of numerous family disasters. As a young widow during the Great Depression,¹¹ Josephine had assumed responsibility for the support of her family by taking in boarders. Neither personal nor national catastrophe could bend her spirit. Nursing no bitterness whatsoever for her family's multiple misfortunes down through the years, Josephine Konkavage Yescalis remained vivacious, cheerful, and unmistakably American in her perennial optimism.

One evening in late August of 1956, she defied a chilling rain to attend a favorite function at St. George's Church. Shortly after, Josephine contracted pneumonia and died within days on August 29th. The month of August had always been an unhappy one for Josephine, having been the time of both her father's and her husband's death in the mines years before. However, just a few days prior to her brief illness Josephine had spoken rather spontaneously to the family about how "lucky" she was to be so very much loved by all her children and her grandchildren.

Such was the fiber of this ordinary Lithuanian woman who, as a stranger in the land, had enriched it by bringing to it an extraordinary capacity to celebrate her heritage and enjoy her family throughout all life's joys and sorrows. That family she had willingly shared when her adopted nation became engulfed in World War II. As was long her habit by that time, Josephine confided to her diary both occasions of pride and of mourning:

Florian enlisted in the Marines January 20, 1942 and went to Philadelphia and Jan. 29, from Philadelphia he went to Paris Island and after 1942, he was in the Pacific [Guadalcanal].

Adolph went to the Army . . . went to Japan Dec. 16, and got there Dec. 27, 1949.¹²

Peter Melusky [son-in-law] was killed in Germany Nov. 29 — 1944. Pete went to the Army . . . Inducted Dec. 23, 1943 ... In Allentown and left for Cumberland Jan. 13, 1944. Then to Blanding Field, Florida for basic training; then got a 10 day furlough June 25 to July 7 ... Back to Fort Meade . . . Then was sent across to England; in July and August in France, then in Luxembourg Nov. and was at the fighting front; resting in Luxembourg, then Nov. 20 went to fight again and was killed in Germany, Nov. 29, 1944.

Received a telegram Dec. 12, 1944, that Pete was killed in Germany ... A letter came Dec. 14 that he was killed. Then General Marshall sent a card, a sympathetic [sic] card. We had a Mass for Pete in our church Dec. 29 — 1944, a military Mass. And in the Russian Orthodox Church.

Throughout the many trying moments of her busy life, faith, family, and the promises of America had together sustained and nourished Josephine Konkavage Yescalis. No other explanation suffices. She was eulogized in the local newspaper, *The Evening Herald* of Shenandoah, as a "Prominent Local Woman . . . active in both the Catholic War Veterans and the VFW Auxiliaries... a member of St. George's Church . . . active in St. Casimir's Auxiliary." Josephine was laid to final rest in the parish cemetery that had already received so many of the Yescalis family.

All who read this story will surely recognize some of the common elements of the larger immigrant saga. Clearly, Josephine Konkavage Yescalis had never allowed herself to be victimized into demoralized passivity by the uprooting experience so ably described by Oscar Handlin. Rather, she is a portrait in personal courage, a great lady who actively confronted desperate episodes and ultimately prevailed over them. Thorough Josephine's inspiring story, we are again reminded of the signal truth arising out of the immigrant drama: namely, that if we their descendants have seen farther, it bears remembering that we stand on the shoulders of giants.

1 Priest-scholar of Lithuanian immigrants Rev. William Wolkovich-Valkavičius has observed that the familiar form "avicius" frequently became "avage" because the English-speaking public could handle that rather easily. Wolkovich is pastor of St. James Roman Catholic Church, West Groton, Mass. His most recent book was *Immigrants and Yankees*, 1981.

2 It is very unusual for Lithuanians to keep diaries according to ethnic historian Wolkovich-Valkavičius, who began his own article "Lithuanian Immigrant's Diary — A Rarity" (*Lituanus*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 1981) with the following citation from *Lithuanian Encyclopedia*, Vol. IV, p. 535: "Among ourselves, no one has ever published a diary; the Lithuanian sense of intimacy is not favorable to bringing one's personal life into the open."

3 From the Lithuanian name "Antosė," feminine for Anthony. This was a very popular name for Lithuanians during the era.

4 This Roman Catholic ritual prior to the Second Vatican Council of twenty years ago was a prayer of thanksgiving for a safe delivery. It has since the Council been replaced by a prayer at the child's baptism for both mother and father.

5 "Marta Ona" is Lithuanian for Martha Ann.

6 Mrs. Kawalzik was mid-wife at the birth of "baby John." In all, she was mid-wife for nine Yescalis births.

7 It was common for Lithuanians to mistake the translation of "Vincas" (Vincent) for William.

8 William Menkewicz was the local undertaker. It was customary to choose sponsors from among those in the immigrant community who were regarded as prominent.

9 It is thought that this may have been a Protestant clergyman paying his respects.

10 This was a common reference for the Church of St. Stephen, a Slovak community.

11 Mr. John Croslis, a retired miner of over 40 years in the Shenandoah area mines, recently reminisced for me about the Depression in Shenandoah: "In those days, we went out onto the mountain sides picking whatever we could to eat. We accepted the situation, just as we did our lot as miners."

12 Edward, another of Josephine's sons, served with the Army Air Corps in Italy.