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THE IMPACT OF A CATHOLIC NEWSPAPER ON AN ETHNIC COMMUNITY: THE LITHUANIAN WEEKLY RYTAS, 1896-98, WATERBURY, CONNECTICUT

Rev. William Wolkovich-Valkavicius,
Boston College

The *Other Catholics* is the title of a book to be published in May of this year investigating the immigrant experience of less known minorities. This collection of monographs is indicative of the surfacing attention of Catholic historians to a neglected aspect of the Church in America. In this regard the study of the ethnic press or even a single newspaper can be a rewarding avenue to clues and insights into the total life of an alien community. The weekly publication *Rytas* (Lithuanian for 'morning') provides such a disclosure. It chronicles the labors of a Lithuanian minority struggling to salvage its heritage of Catholic Faith, ancient tongue, customs and other badges of identification; *Rytas* also reports steps to New World assimilation by these foreigners from the Baltic shores. A chief exponent of this dual endeavor of preservation and adaption was Rev. Joseph Žebrius, first Lithuanian priest in New England—editor and publisher of *Rytas* at Waterbury, Connecticut in the Hartford diocese.

This pastor of St. Joseph Lithuanian Parish fully exploited his new-found American liberty of the press, a blessing denied in the homeland under tsarist Russia. He invested maximum attention in his newspaper, being solely responsible for its supervision, and writing nearly all the copy. Thus Žebrius' pen gave him an arena more enduring and far-reaching than his pulpit. This exceptional priest among his Lithuanian peers in the clergy was able to offer sustained interest to the daily needs of his peasant flock. It is no surprise that a doctoral study of 1924 on cooperatives among Lithuanians characterized Žebrius as "the pioneer of the cooperative movement among Lithuanians in the United States" and as "the foremost social worker among the people of his fatherland."¹

The purpose of this paper therefore is to provide ethnic historians with a case study of an immigrant clergyman whose venture into journalism was the principal channel for his array of efforts aimed at the welfare of his fellow-nationals. An analysis of *Rytas* likewise achieves a companion goal, namely a glimpse at life typical of the scattered Lithuanian settlements in America. The migration to this land of Croatians, Hungarians, Slovaks and Ukrainians was roughly comparable in numbers to that of the Lithuanians. It would be valuable for researchers of these ethnic bodies to compare their priests with Father Žebrius. How did such journalists fare with their newspapers? What were the success and failures of these entrepreneurial innovators with their intended beneficiaries? Were such ethnic leaders accepted by their people, or did they prove to be prophets without honor in their own vineyards? For that is what Žebrius' fate turned out to be. His newspaper, along with his many visionary schemes collapsed within a few years of their inception, and finally some fifteen years later, this would-be champion of his people's needs was murdered in the rectory at New Britain, Connecticut. I tell you this now to prepare you for the finale, since I doubt if many papers presented at these meetings finish on such a dramatic note.

By way of background let me say something about Lithuanian immigration and the start of the ethnic press. Economic pressure and the desire to evade compulsory military conscription were leading causes of the exodus. Lithuanians began arriving here shortly after the Civil War.

On admission they were whisked away to the anthracite coal region of Pennsylvania by agents of mining and railroad companies recruiting unskilled laborers from among the newcomers streaming the major port of entry at New York City. It was here that a little over a decade later in 1879 a Pole of fervent Lithuanian sentiment broke ground with the first newspaper *Gazieta Lietuwiszka*. This endeavor of Michael Tvarauskas (Lithuanianized Tvarowski) died on the vine after only sixteen issues for lack of public support. In the first fifteen years from the time of *Gazieta*, a similar number of publications were attempted.

Several of these short-term ventures were creatures of John Šliūpas, the chief Lithuanian freethinker, offering a blend of intense patriotism and anti-religious, especially anticlerical sentiment. On the Catholic side of the ledger, *Vienybė Lietuvninkų* in its first decade from 1886 was under the tutelage of priests, but it veered to the left under a new editor in November, 1895. For the years 1893 and 1894 Rev. Alexander Burba, pastor of the Lithuanian parish at Plymouth, Pennsylvania edited a conventional journal of weekly Scripture readings and religious essays. The paper called *Valtis* survived only 56 issues. In January, 1896 another pastor, John Žilinskas of the Lithuanian parish of Mount Carmel, Pennsylvania started a monthly organ called *Tėvynė* for the Lithuanian Alliance of America, a chain of local affiliates organized in 1886.

Conditions in the homeland illumine attitudes toward the press among Lithuanian immigrants. Under tsarist rule from 1795, Lithuanians staged fruitless uprisings in 1831 and 1863. After second revolt the Russians for the next forty years banned Lithuanian literature by outlawing the Latin alphabet. Lithuanian phonics were permitted but only in Cyrillic script. As one might expect, this repressive measure backfired. An era of resistance ensued, sparked by printers in Tilsit, Prussia just over the border, providing prayerbooks and other devotional literature. Such contraband was disseminated about the Lithuanian countryside through the hands of a network of booksmugglers. A generation later the national renaissance began in 1883 with the appearance of a magazine **Auszra**, followed by other influential papers. These were added to the satchels of book carriers. Among their illicit wares were also Lithuanian publications from America including Žebrius' newspaper *Rytas*. Early participants in this patriotic movement, men like Šliūpas, Burba and Žebrius brought their enthusiasm for the press to this country. Here the majority of Lithuanians of the 1890's were barely literate if at all. Most of them had seldom seen material printed in Lithuanian, unless through the book smugglers. Here they were absorbed in earning their daily bread, hardly having time or strong inclination to appreciate an ethnic press, much less capable of extending financial backing.

Into this milieu came Joseph Žebrius, already a priest for nine years in his native land, but now a voluntary exile pressured by harassment of Russian officials. It was summer of 1893 when the immigrant arrived at Plymouth, Pennsylvania to visit with his colleague of high school days— Father Burba. Though at the time there was an urgent need for a priest at Waterbury, Connecticut an Episcopal interregnum delayed Žebrius' appointment for nine months. In this interval he was becoming acclimated to his new surroundings, helping out at Lithuanian parishes of Pennsylvania. Moreover he traveled extensively about the circuit of Lithuanian colonies, encouraging the formation of mutual benefit societies and their linkage with the national alliance, fostering the creation of ethnic parishes, and offering spiritual ministrations.

In his introduction to American life, Žebrius gained two powerful impressions. He saw at first hand the pathetic circumstances of the coal miners' lives trapped in company-owned shanties, relying on company-owned shops for food and clothing. Secondly he marveled at the tradition of a free press illustrated by the four Lithuanian newspapers publishing at that time, three of which originated in nearby coal towns. Žebrius promptly began reporting his visits of Lithuanian settlements through the pages of *Vienybė Lietuvninkų*, contributing essays and poems to this paper, as well as pieces to *Lietuva* of Chicago, and later to Father Burba's journal *Valtis*.

By the time Žebrius was unpacking in Waterbury, Connecticut in March, 1894 he already earned a reputation as a competent writer. Not surprisingly he was invited to edit a Lithuanian newspaper in Boston; but after seven issues the project crumbled when one of the publishers fled with the subscription list and the modest cache of funds. Žebrius right away bought the printing equipment, hauled it off to Waterbury and immediately inaugurated his weekly *Rytas*.

The purpose of his newspaper as explained in the first issue was the "spiritual and material welfare of the Lithuanian brethren" and more specifically "matters of ethnicity and Faith (to be) treated for the most part, with admonitions concerning evildoers, and an unmasking of their fatuous reasoning." ² (All quotations from *Rytas* are my translations). The priest had already been crossing swords with freethinkers and advocates of socialism in his pulpit, in lecture halls, in other newspapers. Now he would engage in polemics at frequent intervals in the columns of *Rytas*. His first task was to build up a readership.

What was the scope of Žebrius' audience? From a printing of 250 copies of the first run, *Rytas* rose to a figure of 1,000 five months later, a considerable circulation relative to the size of the Lithuanian community of 1896. Bear in mind too that the novelty of a Lithuanian newspaper doubled or tripled the actual number of readers as a single copy passed hands rapidly in the boarding house, factory or saloon. Nor did Connecticut alone benefit from this newspaper. Other states of New England were represented among the subscribers, as were more distant places such as: Kansas City; Grand Rapids; Thorpe, Wisconsin; Thomas, West Virginia; and cities and towns of the Greater Chicago area. There were even a few subscribers in England and Scotland; and probably in Prussia and Lithuania too, since Žebrius gave annual rates of four marks and two rubles respectively for these European lands.

Boosting circulation was not the only challenge. Collecting subscription payments was yet another task. Many of the people had an undeveloped sense of justice in this regard. Žebrius frequently pleaded for back dues, but continued sending *Rytas* anyway, subsidizing it from his own pocket. He was anxious to place his weekly into as many hands as possible. Remember, there was no Lithuanian newspaper in New England, nor as yet any substantial Catholic voice for these immigrants anywhere in the nation. And Žebrius was brimming with information and a litany of blueprints to enhance the lowly status of his brethren.

Precisely how was Rytas a vehicle of heritage and assimilation? Of prime importance, Žebriš set out to preserve the Faith of his dispersed people, the vast majority of whom were Roman Catholics. As the sole Lithuanian priest in Connecticut in early 1896, the editor of Rytas journeyed far and wide throughout the plains and valleys of the state for annual confessions, sermons and the celebration of Mass. Outside the diocese he was a frequent visitor to Lawrence, Massachusetts where he was instrumental in setting up a parish. Elsewhere he attended incipient Lithuanian colonies at Boston, Brockton and Athol, Massachusetts, and the more distant outposts of Portland, Maine and Lincoln, New Hampshire. To the west he traveled to Brooklyn, New York and to Elizabeth and Newark, New Jersey. Altogether he was at least partially responsible for the foundation of thirteen parishes including all six Lithuanian congregations of Connecticut. To reply to requests for a visit, furnishing information and instructions, and to list the time, date and place of his stops, Žebriš used his paper as a massive bulletin board, and with much success.

The Faith required protection from incessant attacks in the columns of Kardas, a freethinkers' magazine from Baltimore, and Nauja Gdynė, a more sophisticated journal of John Šliūpas begun at Mount Carmel, Pennsylvania. Grievances against the Catholic Church and Žebriš were endless. The despotic institution which he represented was the source of all evil and the oppressor of freedom. Printed were articles on figures such as: John Hus, Joan of Arc and Giordano Bruno. The clergy and Žebriš among them were greedy, intemperate and lustful, caring nothing about the working class. In collusion with their Irish bishops, Lithuanian priests were stripping their people of church property when it came time to register deeds. The clergy were a disruptive force against harmony among the immigrants— and so the lament went on and on. Needless to say, a handful of unworthy priests gave much fuel for these harangues.

In rebuttal, Žebriš along with other pastors (and I suspect the same of other ethnics) almost always resorted to raw authority, issuing heated denials and hurling anathemas. For Žebriš, Rytas provided a forum in which he unhappily lapsed at times into name-calling and an occasional earthy expression. Not often enough did he print point-by-point responses in a calm display of the art of apologetics. As to objectionable behavior of brother-priests, Žebriš at first defended them on the presumption of innocence, but as a matter of fact he did eventually lash out at them in his newspaper. Žebriš did nonetheless employ the standard tactics of his colleagues, condemning freethinkers' papers, threatening to withhold absolution from readers of such material, and urging landlords to oust tenants who read such publications. It goes without saying that the clergy became unwittingly the best promotion men for these newspapers. The dismal ineffectiveness of their policy is too well known to deserve elaboration here. Žebriš strength lay elsewhere in the use of Rytas as a facilitator in the process of assimilation in which his people were participants.

The depression of 1893 had left its mark. Many Lithuanians in that decade of the 90's, being at the bottom rung of the job market, were out of work. Survival in unfamiliar surroundings was their challenge. To help in this critical issue, Žebriš monitored local tobacco crops, for instance, reporting demands for unskilled workers. He relayed news of job openings on the railroads in Boston and the water works in New Rochelle, New York.³ But the Waterbury priest did not stop there. He did more. He created employment by buying a parish farm (future site of an agricultural school and orphanage he hoped, though in vain), and by opening up a parish bakery. Thus he was responsible for room and board at the farm for the needy and jobless, and furnished work there and at the bakery for Lithuanians. As a custom he distributed loaves of rye bread at half price or gratis to the poor. For Žebriš it was imperative that these projects succeed. In this regard he scolded indifferent Lithuanians who patronized the local German and Jewish bakeries. Of prime significance too was the St. Casimir Society grocery cooperative. This major Lithuanian organization in the community, under the instigation of Žebriš, successfully operated a store selling staple goods at low costs

In fact the enterprise expanded soon to a second location, and added to its shelves a line of shoes, clothing and sundries. Confidence in this venture, novel to the immigrants, was bolstered by regular financial details and advertising in **Rytas**.

Žebriš' social plans were not merely for the good of his immediate parishioners. Editorially he inspired other colonies to copy these enterprises of Waterbury Lithuanians. Very likely he was responsible for cooperatives that sprang up in immigrant settlements of New England. For instance, to timid investors among Lithuanians of Worcester, Massachusetts he offered this counsel:

With a minimum of \$300. one can embark on this project (i.e. a bakery). It won't be as profitable as a saloon, of course, but will rebound to the good health of the people. Look at the ruddy complexions and strong frames of the immigrants in contrast to the washed-out, bloodless appearance of the native-born Americans. The people should rally to such a bakery in Worcester as elsewhere. Rent a suitable location, hire a capable baker, and have a minimum of three employees for baking and sales. Don't be discouraged with a slow start because of competition, and don't hesitate to advertise in Lithuanian newspapers.⁴

Similar advice was given to inquiring brethren from Ansonia, Connecticut and Northampton, Massachusetts—to mention two other cases.⁵

Despite the fact that many immigrants had hopes of returning to their native birthplace, Žebriš was concerned realistically about their future in America. The son of a rather prosperous farmer, the priest valued real estate as the best use of money by his thrifty, spartan people. Could he forget the coal town shanties he had seen on arrival while lingering in Pennsylvania? Proudly in **Rytas** he announced the buying of homes, farms and businesses by Lithuanians as a stimulus for like investments. Essays expressive of Žebriš' firm views included titles such as: "It's Time Now to Purchase Farms" and "Lithuanians Ought to Buy Homes".⁶ These newcomers brought the memory of primitive farming knowledge. **Rytas**

improved their methods with articles in the "how-to-do-it" category, touching on a range of topics such as: milking cows, care and feeding of chickens, protection of ducks against worms,⁷

The versatile Žebrius was also mindful of health requirements in this new environment of America. He regularly wrote pieces against alcohol abuse on both physiological as well as moral grounds. To support the wisdom of temperance he often quoted and summarized American scientific journals. On matters of hygiene he furnished notices such as: "Tips on Keeping One's Home Clean", "On Cleanliness of the Body", and "Breathing Properly for Health's sake".⁸

Rytas moreover informed readers about services and merchandise of Lithuanian vendors. The editor believed in Lithuanians helping one another within the ethnic household. Accordingly, from the earliest issues of Žebrius' paper, readers learned of Joseph Andziulaitis in New Britain, for a long time the sole Lithuanian physician in the Connecticut Valley. Other advertisements included: local travel agents and providers of money orders; a Lithuanian restaurant in Brooklyn, New York; dramas and other activities in the Chicago area; and even an enterprising Italian—owner of the Gardella Market which was evidently in the Lithuanian section of Haverhill, Massachusetts. On principle, though, Žebrius refused advertisements from saloonkeepers and liquor dealers. He was a lifelong crusader of temperance. To be consistent with this stance, he rejected a lucrative source of revenue.

Beyond catering to the spiritual and material wants of his people, Žebrius sought to educate them about current events. From the domestic scene Rytas printed stories on such diverse topics as: unemployment, the presidential election, the American-Spanish dispute over Cuba. Life beyond our borders was reflected in news about: famine in India, Greek-Turk conflicts in Crete, population decline in France, Turk persecution of Armenians, and Lithuanians in distant Johannesburg. Of spiritual and theological flavor were notices on: Pope Leo XIII and the Index; life of St. Casimir; power to forgive sin; virtue of patience; devotion to God among presidents of the United States; the Holy Trinity; historical vignettes of the Church in Africa. In serial form were Lenten reflections, the Person of Jesus Christ, and even columns introducing scholastic philosophy.

Lacking access to wire services, Žebrius had to be a voracious reader. He probably haunted the local library, and perhaps received clippings in the mail from friends, since he quoted many American news organs such as: **New York Journal, Cleveland Leader, Indianapolis Journal, Detroit Free Press, Review of Reviews, The (Boston) Pilot and Connecticut Catholic**. Knowing Polish, he occasionally cited sources such as **Patryjota** from Philadelphia and **Nedziela** of Detroit. Žebrius also obtained papers from Tilsit, Prussia, compiling from them a regular feature of news from Lithuania. He encouraged subscriptions to these publications, thus further sharing in the cause of freedom for his homeland.

Lithuanians here, along with other ethnic communities, had problems. Appropriately **Rytas** supplied a primitive sort of social service by publicizing the requests and anguish of individuals and families in search of solutions. Thus a young widower unable to care for his little daughter pleads with some reader to take her as one's own; separated friends and relatives seek reunion. Or a disappointed bride-to-be craves justice as described in this appeal:

Augustas Bungorda, age 38, arranged banns of marriage at Waterbury with a widow, Anna Kulbokas, a woman with three children; he procured from her some gold rings, a gold watch and \$100. cash and fled to parts unknown. He has a dark complexion, a hand marked by a bullet wound, and a scarred chin; he is of average build, has speech slightly defective from days in Lithuania . . . Let someone catch that evil one. The defrauded woman will give a \$10. reward! ⁹

In the Old World a peasant could spend his entire life without the blessings of literacy and voting right. The American scene was so different with its range of opportunities and its demands of adjustment. In **Rytas** Žebrius commended societies and citizens clubs aiming to produce members who could read and write in both Lithuanian and English. He lauded citizenship papers and voting privileges as coveted goals. As he began discovering civic fraternities elsewhere in the state, he proposed a Connecticut alliance of such clubs to fashion a united voting bloc for candidates sympathetic to the Lithuanian immigrants.

For Žebrius, his newspaper was his right arm. Through Rytas he strove to preserve something of the Old Country heritage, while realistically aiding his people to adapt to their new environment. Yet despite his progressive social views, he became a prophet without honor in Waterbury. By his preaching of temperance and because of a suggestion to amalgamate the local taverns into a cooperative to lessen heavy drinking by eliminating competition, Žebrius aroused the four Lithuanian saloon owners. A vocal minority of parishioners, goaded by these influential figures in coalition with freethinkers, demanded Žebrius' removal from the parish. Charges that Žebrius was a businessman merely pursuing his own financial interests while neglecting his parish failed to impress Bishop Tierney. These were accusations of Žebrius' opponents either ignorantly or willfully misreading the priest's intentions and misinterpreting his actions. Nevertheless, the pastor's enemies eventually brought the bishop to his knees with the threat of schism, a weapon already being used by other ethnic dissidents around the nation.¹⁰ The upshot was a transfer of Žebrius to New Britain. In vain he struggled to continue Rytas. After a few months he was forced to relinquish the paper to his successor at Waterbury. Now without his newspaper, Žebrius was crippled. Soon he sold the farm, the bakery—both financed by him—and within a few years he painfully observed the demise of the once flourishing cooperatives of the St. Casimir Society. Without his supervision and counsel these projects caved in.

Without Rytas Žebrius' social blueprints were shredded. At New Britain he settled down to more conventional pastoral chores such as building a new rectory and later a new church. Oh yes, he still made his missionary journeys, he yet lectured previously in behalf of Lithuanian causes, and he continued to grapple with his perennial nemesis John Šliūpas and an assortment of socialists. But he no longer advocated the social enterprises for which Rytas had been the herald. Copies of back issues lining his book shelf were now merely keepsakes for a moment of nostalgia. Little did he realize that his cherished newspaper might possibly be linked to his tragic death. For Rytas which publicized his vigorous welfare activities in Waterbury, helped to generate a legend of Žebrius' personal wealth. In fact a socialist newspaper told its readers that the priest had an estate of \$50,000.—a baseless commentary, as the Probate Courts records show. What happened?

Two Lithuanian hoodlums, after being wanted for a series of robberies in Brockton, Massachusetts in 1911, were temporarily split up by a three-year prison term of one of them. By winter of 1915, they resumed their criminal careers, arriving in New Britain. But why not Boston, Worcester or Waterbury—all notably larger Lithuanian colonies? Possibly the legend of Žebrius, the rich pastor lured the two thieves. In any case February 8 of that year the pair invaded the rectory of St. Andrew Parish, flashing pistols and demanding money. Since there was no such bullion to be snatched, they killed the pastor (and housekeeper who was a witness) in their furious frustration.

Thus was snuffed out the life of one of the most significant Lithuanian priests among the immigrants—a man who, prizing freedom of the press in this adopted land, strove especially through his newspaper to retain the best elements of his Lithuanian heritage, while guiding his people along the pathways of assimilation.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

To date there has been very little published in English about the Lithuanian experience in the United States. Two titles of introductory value are: Antanas Kučas, *Lithuanians in America* (Lithuanian Encyclopedia Press, Boston, 1975) and Algirdas Budreckis, *The Lithuanians in America 1651-1975* (Oceana Publications, Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., 1976). The scholarly quarterly *Lituanus* occasionally prints articles of a historic nature. The only source of general information is the *Encyclopedia Lituanica* (Lithuanian Encyclopedia Press, Boston, 1970), five of whose six volumes are in print. Among unpublished theses and dissertations there are a few in history and sociology which bear on Lithuanian immigrants in America; for instance, the massive master's thesis of Sr. Timothy Audyaitis, S.S.C. extending through 645 pages of typescript—"Catholic Action of the Lithuanians in the United States: A History of the American Lithuanian Roman Catholic Federation" (Loyola University, Chicago, 1958). The only paper dealing with the Lithuanian press was prepared by Dana Tautvilas at Catholic University in 1961 as her master's thesis. An annotated list of unpublished material is being prepared by this writer for tentative publication in the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture newsletter (Chicago).

(Note: In the final days of January, 1978 as this paper was completing preparation, another book came to the attention of this writer. Leo J. Alilunas, *Lithuanians in the United States: Selected Studies* (R. & E. Research Associates, Inc., Palo Alto, California) scheduled for publication February 15, 1978.).

1 Fabian Kemėšis, *Cooperation Among the Lithuanians of the United States*. (Catholic University of America, 1924): 17.

2 *Rytas*, Feb. 26, 1896.

3 *ibid.*, Mar. 5, Dec. 24, 1896; Jan. 28, Apr. 29, May 6, June 3, 1897.

4 *ibid.*, Jan. 28, 1897.

5 *ibid.*, Feb. 11, 18, July 18, 1897.

6 *ibid.*, **July 2, Sept. 24**, 1896; Nov. 4, 1897; see also. May 6, Aug. 27, 1307, Apr. 7, May 12, 1898.

7 *ibid.*, Apr. 22, Sept. 9, 16, 1897; Feb. 24, June 24, Sept. 2, 9, 16, 1898; *Katalikas*, Aug. 24, 1914.

8 *Rytas*, Apr. 16, May 21, June 4, 1896; Oct. 28, Nov. 4, 1897.

9 *ibid.*, May 7, 1896.

10 Ironically, the tragedy which Tierney hoped to avoid occurred anyway in 1901 when the first Lithuanian schismatic church was founded at Waterbury, though it lasted only a few years.