

"LITHUANIAN IMMIGRANT'S DIARY — A RARITY"

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In his one paragraph entry under "Dienoraštis", LIETUVIŲ ENCIKLOPEDIJA, Vol. IV, p. 535, Juozas Girnius quite correctly asserts: "Among ourselves no one has ever publicized a diary; the Lithuanian sense of intimacy is not favorable to bringing one's personal life into the open." Therefore when Peter Couble (Kubilius) of Brockton, Massachusetts, some five years ago, came upon his deceased father's diary, it was a startling historical discovery. Now an octogenarian, Mr. Couble kindly shared this document with this writer, and has permitted publication of these memoirs.

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"A Wheelright's Son"

Born and reared in Lithuania

A child was born to parents of modest means May 29, 1870.¹ The parents were offspring of capable farmers, but they themselves had but a small farm, so that they were scarcely able to eke out a livelihood.

As the family grew in numbers, they (i.e. the parents) sent out the children into the employ of more prosperous farmers to earn their bread. And so I too, Tadas Maksiminas Kubilckis, on reaching the age of seven, went to my uncle, my mother's brother Tunaitis² to herd animals.

During the summer, mother used to come to see me, but barely once in a while. My recompense was a bushel³ of potatoes for planting. When my parents did come, they were quite pensive. With the coming of fall, they used to dig up the potatoes, harvesting from one planted bushel as much as four to six bushels, which provided winter sustenance.

It was already fall when mother came to see me. She found me weighed down with fatigue. On return home, she told father. The following Sunday they came to take me home, but uncle promised to do so the next Sunday, which he did.

The following year I was among strangers, but here too I received little pay. Meanwhile the insects of worry were my constant companions. The bigger I grew, the more wages I received; and I was in the employ of a wealthier farmer. When I planted a bushel of potatoes, he gave me a bushel of rye and a ruble in cash.

Later when I was ten and eleven years of age, I then received a better income, and things went quite well. During the winters, my parents taught us children to read the catechism⁴ and to write, and the neighbors' children used to come also to learn.

Reaching the age of twelve and thirteen, I stayed at home. Mother was sickly, and so I had to be the housekeeper and home laborer. On Sundays, I even used to walk to church. Father used to go build flour mills at his nephew's or at the place of his birth. Sundays, he used to return home to instruct us where to plow, what to sow, and how to do these things. It seems all went well; but when you romp about in the daytime, at evening mealtime, sleep begins to overcome you. A spoon slips out of your hands.

Reaching the age of fourteen and fifteen, I again went out to herd for a good farmer. There, things went well, and in the winter we used to ride to the forests to transport firewood. This term of service used to range from spring to Christmas. Prosperous farmers used to employ shepherd lads even in the winter, not waiting for spring. Continuing in such service, I reached the age of sixteen.

My parents knew well that when I reached the age of twenty one, I would have to go into the army.⁵ To prepare me for more favorable conditions in the military service, my parents sent me to learn the trade of cobbler. While serving in the army, I shall repair⁶ my own boots, and even do repair work for others. Things will be better.

Now I am a cobbler, but without experience. My work isn't turning out the way it should. But even so, I did work here and there. Now the work went more smoothly.

One winter I had no work, so I helped my brother in tailoring, and I learned how. Now I know how to sew a pair of pants. But soon enough 1891 came, and it was time to enter the army. In the fall, I'll be sewing a pair of boots for myself. While I was doing some sewing, a neighbor came along — Antanas Sakalauskas by name — one who had served in the army. In conversation with me, he says that when you go into the army, your health will suffer considerably, and so you will gain nothing, and on return home you will have nothing. But if you would migrate to England, you would acquire some earnings for yourself; and when amnesty would be declared here, you could return; or if not, then you could buy your way out, and have something to start life with.

And so I began preparations. My brother and my mother agreed; and my father showed no opposition. I am preparing to go to England. I have a little money. Father gives me a little. Brother lends me some money. This takes place just prior to All Saints Day.

I arranged to meet my brother at church on Sunday near the German border. Monday morning before dawn, my brother approached the border guard, asking for how much money will he let his brother cross the border.⁷ A ruble? My brother gave him a ruble, and I forded the stream on horseback. In a little while I sat down awaiting daylight. Now the noises of the city could be heard. I walk to the city along the road.

I meet a man going toward the border area. He asks where I'm going. I reply: To England."⁸ So he leads me to a certain inn, a tavern. And I wait. Soon an elderly Jew came on the scene. Promptly we became acquainted. Both of us from Lithuania, and both heading for England. It turned out he was a good guide for me. We found someone to give us a ride to the railroad station. By evening, we are on our way to Stalupėnai,⁹ from Stalupėnai to Berlin, from Berlin to Hamburg. Here we have to await the morning. We have everything going for us.

After the overnight stay, we are on our way to England, travelling three nights and two days. On arrival in England, again the Jew inspects the address I had, and leads me to my cousin Juozas Miliauskas, who owned a tailorshop. There I gave him a hand as much as I could at sewing. With the coming of Sunday, we travel to London where there are more Lithuanians. We discovered some of them working in shoe factories. There he left me. In the morning I'm led to a Jew who takes in work and subcontracts it to the shops, from which he retrieves it. There I'm allowed to learn. After sufficient training, I get a job in a shop, and after a while, in another shop with better pay. Now life is somewhat more comfortable, and I have some money.

I lived with some people where there were four of us male boarders. A young woman used to visit the boarding-house owners. On return from work one evening the landlord says: "Let's go to the saloon." You see, he had been very helpful to me. It's not possible to refuse him. We go, Juozas Didvalis and I. "You know, Tadas, marry Victoria." I tell him that I'm a greenhorn and have no money. I can't support two people. But he explains to me that scarcely little more is needed (than for one). From that time on, I began paying attention to the maiden.

There were four of us men at that boardinghouse. The others were older than I, and had rather good jobs. But think of it, I was the one being persuaded.

One Saturday, Victoria came to visit. You see, she owned an inn nearby. The landlady told her that Thaddeus, the thin one, had his eye on her. Hearing that, Victoria gave the landlady a kiss.¹⁰

Another Saturday, Victoria came to visit me in my room. In conversation, she asks if my girl-friend makes any visits at the boardinghouse, such as occurred last Saturday.¹¹ And that was the beginning of everything, one thing after another.

Now I receive a letter from Lithuania telling that my father died. Now sorrow lies heavy on my heart. I mourn my father. I write a letter to Lithuania to my brother, telling of my intention to marry. He forbids me.¹² But that's nothing. I still have my girl friend; and what was more important, she knew how to speak Polish. Whereas I was brought up in southwestern Lithuania where no one understood Polish, except the noblemen of some rank. I admired the ability to speak Polish.

I wait to earn some money for the wedding. Six months went by. I say to her: "Wait another year." She answered: "I can wait a year or even two, but not for you." But I don't have enough money. She gave me some money and told me to order a nice suit for myself. And so I did, and we began to prepare for the wedding. In about three months, Victoria has

everything prepared. August 30 we go to church for the marriage ceremony.[13](#) At the reception we ate dinner; some men bring beer, did some drinking, and dance so that the hems of their clothes whirl about. In the evening, we retired to new quarters where Victoria rented a room, and provided furniture: a table, bed, chairs, chinaware, blinds; a stove we didn't need. In England there's a fireplace in every room.

On Monday I go to work.[14](#) My wife pays a visit to the woman who arranged the wedding.[15](#) In the evening, I'm returning home, as if drawn by a magnet to a table where supper awaits me. After such living for a few months, things got boring. After a long search, we found an apartment of several rooms. There we could even board several men. Now it is more comfortable.

Having lived at this apartment about a year at 111 Virginia Road, N.E. London, we welcomed our first son, born January 5, 1895, whom we name Maksiminas Telesforas.

Life there moved along favorably. There was organized a Lithuanian-Polish parish. It was there our son was baptized.[16](#) In time, we negotiated to buy the whole building. Taking possession, we rented out rooms to others. We now felt like genuine residents. We have friends, even from Lithuania.

One day eight men arrived at our place. All went well. And one tailor or clothesmaker came from America. He told of life in America, that one could become a citizen and purchase a farm. We are aware we have a little money saved up, and are willing to spend it to travel to America.

In six months, by May 1, 1896 we leave from London. We reached New York the 9th day, and Boston the 10th day. We had in mind to go to Worcester to "kūmas"[17](#) Motiejus Jeseliūnas, but unfortunately our baggage was delayed in New York. We had to take up lodging temporarily in South Boston until our baggage arrived. With its arrival, we have to find a place to live, and after that to look for work. Here that year there was much unemployment. For six weeks, I walked all over Boston to every place, but nowhere did I find a job.

One day my wife went out to the city streets to get something, when she again meets the same Jew at whose place we had our first breakfast. He asks: "Is your husband working?" "No." "Then let him come to see me."[18](#) In the morning I go. He brought me to a Jew who repairs shoes. You see, a cobbler works for the repairman. For a week or two, I'm hammering away. The pay is low; the hours long. The second Saturday, a (my) woman[19](#) came about 8 p.m. and said: "Go, eat your supper, and then you can work all night." My boss got angry; at the end of work he said: "Don't bother to come to work; I'll do it myself."

Monday I'm out again looking for work. I can't find any. I stop in at another shoe repairman's place. I work a while. My wife says: "Go on your own to do repairing; you'll still earn as much as you do by working for another."

We began looking for a suitable location. We found a basement at 164 W. 6th Str., South Boston. There were three rooms near the street suitable for my work, and in the rear there were accommodations for an apartment. I went out and bought some needed tools. Most of the tools we had brought from England. I hung out a sign, and I'm at work. I repair and I nail soles, and so I live for about three months. And we began to get acquainted with the Lithuanians.[20](#)

And we welcomed a second son who was born September 7. For him we picked out the name Petras Vincas, born Labor Day, September 7, 1896.

After a year, it happened that we took over three rooms above for living quarters, while the shoe repair shop remained below. The working conditions were satisfactory.

In the second year we welcomed a third son for whom we chose the name Aleksandras Jonas, born May 13, 1898 at 164 W. 6th Str., South Boston.

As life passed on, the craft becomes monotonous. You see, it means working nights and on Saturdays even to midnight. So I felt I had to go to a factory. First I found a job sewing raincoats. But it turned out to be unprofitable for me. Quitting that job, I traveled to Brockton [21](#) where there are many shoe factories. But here too it's hard to find a job. There are many unemployed. One day we decided to go look for a place to stay, and then make a move. Most people get a job, and I will get one.

The first day of June, 1899 I'm already in Brockton. I found an apartment at 129 Bellevue Ave. I write to my wife to come along with all our belongings. And we live in Brockton, but still I don't get work.

One afternoon both of us go out to plead for work, and it was promised. Then I earned a dollar a day. It was hard to get by. After three months, I searched for a better job. I earned \$1.25 a day. After staying at this work for about a year, I went to learn to work on shoe lasts. That job went well. Within a year, I was earning the same as other men.

We welcomed a fourth son. For him we chose the name Pranciškus Jokūbas, born January 12, 1900 at 24 Arthur Str., Brockton, Mass.

As life here went on for a year and then another, we welcomed a fifth son, but his was a difficult delivery, and he lived only six hours. His name was Vincas, born August 12, 1901. He was badly injured by the doctors; his mother barely survived.

As life went on, about six months later some of the neighbors grew to show a strong dislike for us, so that civil court action became necessary.²² From then on, obviously we began to look for another place. It was hard to find a place because we had four children. But it seems a decent man came along, who advised us how to go about buying a home of our own; and it wouldn't be any more costly than paying rent.

We found a suitable place and looked it over. The home pleased us — not too old, not too expensive — \$1,500. We bought the place at 66 Porter Ave., Brockton, Mass. We moved to our new home March 20, 1902. On purchase of a home, one must renovate to suit oneself. The cost of improvements for the other family was \$10.00. The cost of installing a kitchen in the cellar for ourselves was \$61.41.

After living there for a while, it became evident that it was inconvenient to be occupying two floors. We decided to add two rooms to the rear of the house, and include a bath. With the coming of summer, we began the work in June 1905. We hired help and we ourselves did the work. The total cost was \$498.63. Adjacent to the cellar kitchen, we added still another room for rental purposes. That cost was \$48.

In due time we welcomed a daughter. We picked out the name Agnes Agota, born December 3, 1907 at 66 Porter Ave., Brockton. Continuing there to June 19, we furnished an interior bathroom. That cost was \$125.50. The total cost of all improvements, with the purchase price of the house included, was \$2,282.79.

(Here the diary rather abruptly ends.)

1The diarist does not use the personal pronoun until the second paragraph.

2 The text is not clear in meaning since the diarist uses the lower case "t". Perhaps Tunaitis was his mother's family name, or some endearing nickname, which may account for the lower case letter.

3 "Kartis" in the text is translated as "bushel", although the Lithuanian measure is slightly larger than a bushel.

4 Since the tsarist ban on Lithuanian literature (1864-1904) was in effect, the catechism from which the diarist learned was almost certainly obtained from a booksmuggler.

5 Mandatory military duty was in effect from 1874.

6 Throughout the text, the diarist makes use of both past, present and future tense with no particular consistency. At times it appears he looks back in a matter-of-fact manner, and at other times his reminiscences are so vivid, that he uses the present tense. To keep the original flavor of the various moods, the translation follows exactly.

7 Bribery was not uncommon. A cautious guard could earn generous amounts during the era of heavy emigration.

8 Lithuanians of the United Kingdom, though fewer in numbers compared to the U.S. migration, were nevertheless sufficiently visible to arouse attention of a present day researcher, Murdoch M. Rodgers, who is preparing his doctorate at the University of Edinburgh on the Lithuanians who settled in England, Scotland and Wales.

9 Stalupėnai — a city in Lithuania Minor (i.e. Prussia), 10 kilometers from the Lithuanian border.

10 Observe the circumlocutious way in which Victoria seeks to ascertain if Thaddeus accepts her.

11 Note the apparent matchmaking process. It seems Victoria took an interest in Tadas from afar, and then arranged for the matchmaker to bring up the subject of marriage. It was a common practice in Lithuania to make use of a third party, though it was far less common for the female to take the initiative.

12 Even though Tadas is far from home and is an adult, his evidently older brother seeks to exercise the authority of the now deceased father.

13 The diarist's memory lapsed here. The correct wedding date was July 30, 1893 at the Church of the English Martyrs, with officiant Rev. T. O'Regan, and witnesses: George Conger and Maryanne Visbell. This data taken from the original marriage certificate in possession of Peter Couble.

14 The concept of a honeymoon was not part of the wedding customs of Lithuanian immigrants.

15 The "svočia", feminine counterpart of the matchmaker ("piršlys"), followed through on wedding arrangements after the match was settled.

16 Father T. Banaitis formed a separate parish for Lithuanians in 1894 at London.

17 "Kūmas" has no English equivalent. The word refers to the link between a set of parents and their child's godparents. Perhaps Tadas had been a godparent for a child of Jeseliūnas, or maybe the reverse was true.

18 There is a hint here of an informal "padrone" system by which Lithuanian-speaking Jews arranged work for new arrivals.

19 Here the diarist uses the word "moteris" alone for wife. Elsewhere he includes the personal pronoun as in "mano motere".

20 Boston and Worcester, Massachusetts and Waterbury, Connecticut were the three major Lithuanian settlements in New England.

21 Twenty miles south of Boston, this urban center became the world's largest manufacturer of men's shoes.

22 Brockton Lithuanians were especially contentious. Civil suits were numerous — the immigrants' popular method of settling personal grievances.