



Current Events

Latvian Pioneer

Riga, Latvia — Peteris Elferts has set an unlikely goal for himself.

The 30-year-old former Seattleite wants to rebuild his family's homestead in Svarde, a small town two hours west of the Latvian capital of Riga. Elferts has never seen his family's piece of land, still in the hands of the former Soviet military which has a missile base and training center there.

A strongly build man who substitute-taught until June 1991 in Seattle's primary public schools, Elferts has been in Latvia for five months.

But he could not get the gasoline in the strapped Baltic nation to travel to the small plot of land which his family was forced to flee with the advance of the Soviet front during World War II. Latvia only won its independence with the collapse last autumn of the Soviet Union and is struggling with shortages caused by chaos in Russia, its major trading partner.

Elferts' parents, Zanis and Veronika Elferts have lived in Seattle since immigrating to the U.S. after being reunited following World War II in a displaced persons camp in Germany.

Elferts hopes there will still be a foundation left from the old family home. he has no idea what he will do to make a living there once he reclaims the land under new Latvian laws and builds the house.

"There is no logic to my decision," he said. "But, I feel my calling is to build a house there. I feel in my heart that I have to do that."

Elferts is one of about 40 young ethnic Latvians from a worldwide diaspora who have come to Latvia to help rebuild the country following more than 50 years of Soviet occupation. Their commitment and urgency stems from the fact that Latvians make up only about 53 percent of the population of 2,8 million people. The rest are largely Russian speakers brought in to work at Soviet-built factories.

Elferts is in a position to have quite an impact. He is the director of the information bureau of the World Federation of Free Latvians, which recently moved its headquarters to Riga from Germany. The umbrella group encompasses all major Latvian emigrant groups in the world.

He said his main function is to help the country "on the road to a true democracy and market economy."

His first work was aiding about 20 of the ethnic Latvians to find the places where they could help most with their skills in Latvia. They include another Seattleite, Ilga Grava, who is now teaching German and English in the Latvian town of Cesis.

Most plan eventually to return to their homes in the United States, Canada, South America and Australia.

But, Elferts is determined to stay. "I am Latvian," he says firmly when he is asked his citizenship. He hopes to be able to also retain his U.S. citizenship under a law now being processed in Latvia.

"I feel right inside when I am here," he said. "I felt comfortable in the States, but, inside, I did not feel at home. I do here."

Latvia is in the first stages of adopting a new citizenship law, which restricts citizenship to people who lived in Latvia prior to its occupation in 1940 or their descendants. Anyone who came later must meet a 16-year residency requirement and be able to speak Latvian.

"It is a matter of survival for Latvia," Elferts said, defending the law which has drawn criticism from the Russian-speakers.

He said no Latvian is against any Russian speaker who speaks Latvian and "will work for the independence of Latvia."

Elferts estimates there are 150,000 people of ethnic Latvian descent worldwide, with 92,000 of them in the United States, with about 2,000 in Washington state. He said up to 10 percent of them are expected to come back and those 15,000 people could have quite an impact on whether Latvia remains Latvian.

Elferts has been dedicated to preserving his ethnic roots for years. He spent summers learning Latvian at special summer camps in the United States. He was president of the Latvian association of Washington state and once taught for three years at the Latvian high school in Münster, Germany.

He was a member of the Baltic Action Committee and was in charge of East European delegates two and a half years ago at a conference on the right to self-determination and national equality in Riga. He said he was "escorted out of the country" at that time by the KGB, the former Soviet secret police.

Life in Latvia is not easy. Old brown clapboard houses intermingle with the cheaply made gray concrete buildings common to Communism.

Little is available in the stores and many basic necessities are sold only with ration coupons if at all.

Latvia has begun steps for privatization of its factories and businesses but little has been accomplished so far.

The economic difficulties have had a heavy touch on everyday existence. One moment there is hot water, the next none. Candies come unclad of chocolate coating. Lines form for bread, meat and beer. Trams and buses have been forced to curtail service because of a lack of gasoline, forcing people to jam in against each other so tightly that passengers can barely squeeze on and off when they get to their stops.

Still, Elferts said he did not know if he has given up a lot. "I was comfortable but I didn't see any direction before," he said. "Teaching kids was fine but I wanted more. My friends and family are in Seattle but there's just so much to do here."

By Sonya Zalubowski
Newswriter at Radio Free Europe in Germany,
who took a trip recently to Latvia.

Ninth Lithuanian Folk Dance Festival July 5, 1992—Rosemont Horizon

When more than 2,000 colorfully dressed folkdancers from Lithuania and five other countries perform at the Ninth Lithuanian Folk Dance Festival—North America's largest ethnic dance concert, it will represent an immense investment in creative abilities by the Lithuanian community. To give an idea of the magnitude of the Festival:

*54 dance groups from six countries — Lithuania, the United States, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, and German—will perform for an audience of 14,000.

*20 spirited dances will be performed. Many center around farm work, weaving and children's games. Others depict harvest celebrations. Most dances were originally danced by peasants at parties organized after harvest time. More than 2,000 dances are documented in Lithuania's archives.

The typical dance group has 30 members, and practices for more than two hours each week all year long. The typical dance requires 16 dancers.

*Dancers are divided by age. There will be 25 children's groups, 37 student groups, 17 youth groups, and 32 veteran groups. (Most dance groups have dancers in more than one age group, with six dance groups having dancers in all age groups. Festival dancers range from 7 to 70 years of age.)

*The first Lithuanian Folk Dance Festival was held in 1957 in the Chicago Amphitheater; 2,000 dancers entertained a crowd of 15,000 people. With the Ninth Festival, a cumulative total of more than 18,000 dancers from nine countries will have performed for 135,000 spectators. Dance groups also came from Australia, England and Uruguay. During this Ninth Folk Dance Festival, a group from Lithuania will participate for the first time.

*Most folk dance groups are named after the elements of nature, such as Aušra (Dawn), Audra (Storm), Liepsna (Flame), Berzelis (Birch Tree), Perkūnas (Thunder). Several dance groups are named after the schools to which they belong. Many

children of Lithuanian descent attend Saturday school for four hours during the school year to learn the Baltic country's language, history, literature, dances and songs.

*Dance groups which have participated in all of the nine festivals are Grandis (Link) of Chicago (formed in 1953); Tryptinis (Foot Stomper) of New York (formed in 1950); Grandinėlė (Chain) of Cleveland (formed in 1953); Gyvataras (Moving Fence) of Hamilton (formed in 1950); Lazdynas (Nut Tree) of Rochester, NY (formed in 1949); Sambūris (Gathering) of Boston (formed in 1937) and Spindulys (Sun Ray) of Los Angeles (formed in 1949).

*The first Lithuanian folk dance group in the United States was formed in Chicago in 1933, and was named the Lithuanian Youth Society.

*At the Ninth Lithuanian Folk Dance Festival, 13 groups from Chicago will participate; 2 from St. Petersburg, FL; 3 from Detroit; 2 from Cleveland; 2 from Baltimore; 5 from Pennsylvania, 4 from Connecticut; 2 from Buenos Aires, Argentina; 5 from Ontario; and individual groups from Omaha, NE; Lake Geneva, WI; Bridgewater, NJ; Rochester, NY; Seattle, WA; Madison, WI; Sao Paulo, Brazil; Denver, CO; Los Angeles, CA; Vienna, VA; New York, NY; Berkeley, CA; Champaign, IL; Kansas City, KA; Romuva, Germany; and Klaipėda, Lithuania.

The political flavor of the dances changes with the times. Originally developed by Lithuania's peasants as expressions of fun, the folkdances have actually served the country's political agenda to regain its freedom.

Lithuania had been occupied by its Russian, German and Polish neighbors during the past two centuries, and folk dancing was only performed in the small villagers. During its brief period of independence from 1918 to 1941, the art was painstakingly revived by the country's grammar school and high school physical education teachers as a way to integrate exercise with the country's cultural identity among the students. The teachers traveled to the small towns, searching for the original folk dance steps among the older villages. In the high schools, physical education celebrations were held each year that featured the Lithuanian folk dances, and which attracted large audiences. By 1935, folk dance contests were developed in many of Lithuania's regions with the finals being held once a year in Kaunas, then the country's capital. The winning group featured dancers in authentic Lithuanian costumes who performed Suktinis (the twirl), a traditional dance in a stylized version that eventually became one of the most enjoyed folkdances among Lithuanians. This contest had set the trend for folkdancing on a grand scale and was continued every year until Lithuania's occupation by the Soviet Union. Since then, folk dancing in Lithuania became centralized and was allowed to be performed only as an official expression of art by government-approved professional ensembles.

Between 1941 and 1991, dancing continued in the occupied country, but about 1 million Lithuanians who fled to other European countries, the United States, Canada and South America for political reasons found themselves as strangers in a new land. The folk dances helped keep alive the culture and the name of Lithuania among the exiles and their families. This was especially important for the youth born outside of the country.

Folk dance rehearsals became a social gathering for Lithuanian youth as they met at least once a week to practice the steps together. The idea was to provide a social setting for Lithuanians so that they wouldn't forget their parents' homeland while it was occupied by foreign invaders.

Going back to the 14th century, Lithuanian folkdances were passed down the generations. Historians believe folk dancing originated among the pagans as a religious ritual to worship the gods and ask for their help in warding off evil. If a group danced in a circle clockwise, this signified happiness. When they danced counterclockwise, this was to signify sadness. Work dances were very common in Lithuania. All professions — the bakers, weavers, shoemakers — had their own characteristic dance with a matching song. Soon the dances began to depict everyday life in the predominantly agricultural land, signifying reaping, harvesting, uprooting flax, planting poppy seeds, and grinding wheat. To complete the big farm jobs, families invited their neighbors to help with the promise of a party afterward. These dances were often accompanied by songs and danced with scarves or flowers.

In Malūnas, (Windmill), dancers execute geometric formations signifying the sifting of grain, transporting it to the mill and finally, the mill in action with the rotation of its sails and millstones.

In Blezdingėlė (Swallow), the all-women dancers portray the flight of the swallow in one of the oldest and most evocative folk dances. The alternating swift and lingering movements imitate birds in flight and express the awakening of nature. (This is the only dance that was performed in all eight previous folk dance festivals.)

The folkdances and accompanying music remind the listener of Lithuania's peaceful nature, her slow-flowing rivers, and gentle rustling of forests. The country's folk dances are typified by simple movements with small jumps, reflecting its geography. As people living in a fertile, flat, Northern country, they didn't have to take big leaps as if walking among the mountains and sidestepping rocks, or produce strong and pronounced foot movements more characteristic of people from countries with a clay soil. The authentic costumes are woven with heavy wool and linen.

The first Lithuanian Folk Dance Festival of the free world took place 35 years ago on June 30, 1957. The first four festivals were held every five years. Since 1972, they have been held every four years. Five festivals were in Chicago; other

festivals were in Cleveland, Toronto, and Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

This Ninth Festival is the first time that so many Lithuanians will get together after the country's newfound independence and is the first time that a group from Lithuania will participate. All of the festivals have featured about 2,000 dancers.

Now that the country is free, the dances may lose some of the political flavor that they have acquired, and revert to their original spirit as expressions of celebration.

The Ninth Lithuanian Folk Dance Festival will be held at 2 p.m. at the Rosemont Horizon, 5920 N. Mannheim Rd., Rosemont, IL. For tickets or more information, call the DanceLine at (312) 471-1424, or, Ticket Master at (312) 559-1212. Tickets are \$10 to \$20.

The Rosemont Horizon is located just off the Kennedy Expressway (1-90), one-and-one-half miles from Chicago's O'Hare Airport. Ample parking is available for \$6 per car.

(From press releases by the Lithuanian Folk Dance Festival.)

Lithuanian Children find medical treatment and hope in Chicago

Two crippled children from Lithuania — Ilona, 15, and Tomas, 12—recently came to Chicago in search of a cure for their advanced scoliosis, a curvature of the spine that has progressed to such a degree that their ribs could puncture their lungs.

Both of these children came to Chicago through Lithuanian Children's Hope, a volunteer group based in Chicago that works with Shriners Hospital for Crippled Children to help cure children in Lithuania with a crippling disease. Shriners Hospital provides all of the medical treatment at no cost to the children or their families while Lithuanian Children's Hope, through generous donations, covers the travel and living expenses before and after the hospital stay. Shriners Hospital requires that a child come with one parent.

Ilona is staying with her mother in a room at the Lithuanian Human Services Council headquarters in the southwest side of Chicago. Tomas and his mother are staying in a room, two doors down the same street, provided by the Lithuanian Daughters. (For purposes of confidentiality, the group asked that the children's last names not be published.) They are two of seven children who have arrived in Chicago during March, April and May 1992. In late April, the two were still wondering what their future would hold.

"They'll probably be here for a few months," said Teresa Drutys-Soliunas, coordinator of Lithuanian Children's Hope. "Last May (1991), Laima, a 13-year-old girl with scoliosis arrived in Chicago from Vilnius. She gave blood every two weeks to prepare for the blood transfusions during the operation, which was in October 1991. During her five-hour operation, the doctor placed metal rods in her back to help straighten the spine. Laima was discharged after 12 days, and after a six-week follow up, she went home to Lithuania in December 1991, with a brace to wear for six months. After that, she will lead a normal life."

The small Baltic country has about 1,000 children with scoliosis. Since its inception in January 1991, Lithuanian Children's Hope has been able to help eight children, and their goal is to help one child each month, said the group's president, Regina Kulys, PhD, chair of the doctoral program at Jane Adams College of Social Work at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

"This is my last hope," said Tomas' mother in Lithuania with her son at her side. "All mothers want their children to be healthy."

Tomas spent the last four years in a special institute for crippled children in Šiauliai, Lithuania. He saw his family on weekends about twice a month because they had to take a three-hour trip from their hometown, Dusėnai, to visit Tomas. The institute has about 200 children, ages eight to 18, with back problems. The institute provides massage and aqua therapy.

"He was diagnosed with scoliosis when he was four, and it had advanced from first degree to fourth degree (the most advanced stage) since then," said his mother. "He could have gotten an operation in Lithuania, but his scoliosis wouldn't have been cured there; it would have just been arrested temporarily."

While Tomas was being interviewed, he was also being filmed for a documentary of Lithuanian Children's Hope, and, as a result, he was a boy of few words. "I missed my family when I was at the institute," he said.

He has a younger brother and a sister who are home with their father tending their newly repossessed farm that originally belonged to their grandparents. (Fifty years ago, the grandparents were forced to relinquish their farmland to the

Communists during the Soviet occupation, but since Lithuania's newfound freedom, land is slowly being given back to the original owners.)

Tomas arrived in Chicago with Ilona, who also spent the last eight years at the special institute in Šiauliai. When she was younger, her mother took the two-hour trip from their hometown Vilnius about once a week, but lately, Ilona has been seeing her family about once a month.

"Lithuania's social problems are very grave," said Dr. Kulys. "The best place for a child is in the home, and Lithuania needs to do a lot of work in this area."

"All of the children at the institute have scoliosis," continued Ilona. "Mine is considered to be very advanced. Compared to healthy children, I can't jump or do strenuous exercise that would cause my spine to bend. The back always has to be kept as straight as possible. I always wore a corset, which I took off in the evening. At night I slept in a plaster cast of my upper body, which at first is very uncomfortable, but after many years, you get used to it."

The institute provided regular school classes — math, biology, geography, literature. During the school lectures, the children laid on an inclined bench because it was too painful for them to sit in a chair for lengthy periods of time, explained Ilona. Everyday, the children had therapy, which included swimming, massages, and exercises with weights. "My scoliosis kept getting worse, but if I weren't at the institute, the scoliosis would have progressed even further," said Ilona.

Medical treatment in Lithuania is still backward due to 50 years of Communist neglect, said Algis Paulius, MD, an orthopedic surgeon in Elgin, Illinois, who is on the advisory committee of Lithuanian Children's Hope, and who completed a two-week medical observation trip in Lithuania in March.

"Many of these cases can end up like the Hunchback of Notre Dame," said Dr. Paulius. "This can't be treated with just exercise, therapy and a brace. These can be helpful to a certain point, but when the disease is advanced, it's time for an operation. After a certain point, even surgery can't help.

"Unfortunately, Lithuania doesn't have the expertise to do these necessary operations for the back," said Dr. Paulius. "You need good instrumentation, rods, plates and different implants. You need a supportive team with a pulmonary and a cardiac specialist, a blood bank, a lab, follow-up care, and antibiotics—most of which is still missing in Lithuania."

Expenses for each child are at about \$5,000, said Dr. Kulys, which are met through generous donations in the community. Lithuania's first airline, which began in December 1991, donates free flights to the children and a parent from Vilnius to Frankfurt, Germany. The group has also enlisted five volunteers from Chicago to help with translations and transportation. The program has expanded to other cities in the United States that have a Shriners Hospital, including Los Angeles, Portland, and Philadelphia.

Lithuanian Children's Hope is under the umbrella of the Lithuanian Human Services Council/Lithuanian-American Community. Tax-deductible contributions can be sent to Lithuanian Children's Hope, 2711 W. 71st Street, Chicago, IL 60629; (312) 476-0664.

By Silvia Kucenas Foti

New Jersey's Deborah Hospital to send operating team to Lithuania

Deborah Hospital, the outstanding heart and lung specialty hospital of Browns Mills, New Jersey, has announced plans for a trip to Vilnius by a medical team of about 30 people from the institution to perform surgery on 15 to 20 Lithuanian children, sometime at the end of September. While there, the team will also conduct a symposium for Lithuanian physicians, and make plans to invite Lithuanian medical personnel to Deborah Hospital for further study.

An advance team of about eight people traveled to Vilnius in May to see the hospital, the operating rooms, the equipment available, and the level of nursing skills available, and to make plans for the September trip.

Because the bylaws of the Deborah Hospital Foundation prohibit the use of Deborah funds for travel, it is up to the Lithuanian community to assist with airfare for the team trip in September. An estimated \$50,000 will be needed for this cause. Surgery and consultation costs will be covered by Deborah Hospital.

Similar programs have been carried out most successfully in Georgia, Poland, Ukraine and Armenia. Help for Lithuania by Deborah Hospital began in the winter of 1991, when six-month-old infant Migle Grigutis was brought from Lithuania for major heart surgery at Deborah as part of their "Children of the World" program. Later, Migle's doctor, Dr. Vytautas Sirvydis, chief cardiac surgeon at Vilnius University Hospital was accepted for a three-month stay at Deborah, at their expense, to observe surgeries and take part in associated consultations.

A campaign to raise needed funds for the work visits of Deborah's medical personnel has been started under the leadership of Dr. Jack and Loretta Stukas of the "Memories of Lithuania" and "Music of Lithuania" radio hours. Donations of any amount may be sent to: Dr. and Mrs. Jack J. Stukas, 234 Sunlit Dr., Watchung, NJ 07060. Checks should be made out to "Deborah Hospital Foundation" with a notation of "Lithuania Project" on the face of the check. All donations are tax-exempt.