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Lithuanian Diaspora in Western Australia: The dissolution of a community

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Lithuanian Diaspora in Western Australia: The dissolution of a community.**Abstract:**

This paper describes the significance of the cultural identity to Lithuanians resettled in Perth, Western Australia as part of the post World War Two diaspora. At the end of WWII, approximately 10,000 Lithuanian displaced persons were admitted to Australia. Of this number, 583 established themselves permanently in Perth, WA. Despite the desire for continuity and preservation of their original pre-war culture Lithuanians in Western Australia had to confront a new environment and a different dominant culture which required them to make adjustments. In what ways and to what extent has this process of modification affected the life of this group of people? What difficulties and challenges have they encountered in the effort to maintain or adapt (rather than lose) the core markers of their original culture? To answer these questions, in depth-interviews were conducted with Lithuanians in Perth selected according to specific criteria. The findings show that Lithuanians have retained a sense of 'Lithuanian-ness' but, have also adapted, to such an extent to the dominant culture, that their traditions, values and beliefs now reflect the new environment, rendering them unable to sustain their culture to hand down to the next generation. The findings reveal that the pre-war Lithuanian culture in Western Australia is close to extinction. Appreciating that it is difficult to deal adequately within the limit of a brief paper with all the core markers of the pre-war Lithuanian culture, I have restricted the discussion to looking at two characteristic elements of the Lithuanian culture: The Catholic Religion which I considered to have influenced the upbringing and the character of the pre-war generation of Lithuanians in Western Australia and their language. This paper thus offers one account to derive insights into ways the preservation of ethnic identification of an émigré population has been impacted by adaptation to their adopted cultural environment.

El éxodo lituano en Australia Occidental: La disolución de una comunidad.**Resúmen:**

Este artículo describe la importancia de la identidad cultural para los lituanos reasentados en Perth, Australia Occidental, como parte del éxodo posterior a la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Al final de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, aproximadamente 10.000 expatriados lituanos fueron admitidos en Australia. De estos, 583 se establecieron permanentemente en Perth, Australia Occidental.

A pesar del deseo de continuidad y conservación de su cultura original antes de la guerra, los lituanos en Australia Occidental tuvieron que afrontar un nuevo ambiente y una cultura dominante diferente que requería que hicieran cambios. De qué manera y en qué medida la modificación de este proceso ha afectado la vida de este grupo de personas? Que dificultades y desafíos han encontrado en su esfuerzo por mantener o adoptar (en vez de perder) la raíz de su cultura original?

Para contestar estas preguntas, se llevaron a cabo entrevistas a fondo con lituanos en Perth seleccionados de acuerdo a un criterio específico. Los hallazgos muestran que los lituanos han mantenido un sentido de lituanidad pero también se han adaptado de tal manera a la cultura dominante, que sus tradiciones, valores y creencias ahora reflejan el nuevo entorno, que no logran mantener su cultura para transmitírsela a la nueva generación. Las conclusiones revelan que la cultura lituana anterior a la guerra está en peligro de extinción en Perth.

Se comprende que es difícil tratar adecuadamente, dentro de los límites de un trabajo breve, todas las raíces de la cultura lituana de antes de la guerra. He limitado este argumento al

estudio de dos características de la cultura lituana: la práctica de la religión católica que considero que han influenciado la crianza, el carácter y el idioma de de la generación de lituanos anterior a la guerra y ahora establecidos en Australia Occidental.

Este artículo ofrece así un informe como para derivar conocimiento de las formas en que la preservación de la identificación étnica de una población de expatriados han impactado la adaptación a su ambiente cultural adoptado.

Paper: Lithuanian Diaspora in Western Australia: The dissolution of a community.

This paper attempts to describe the significance of the cultural identity to Lithuanians resettled in Perth, Western Australia as part of the post World War Two diaspora.

Following the end of WWII an uprooted population of millions of Europeans living amongst the ruins of devastated German cities became the responsibility of the Allied Forces. The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was established in December 1946 to be responsible for their care and resettlement. After one year the International Refugee Organization (IRO) replaced the UNRRA and hence inherited the responsibility for these refugees or displaced persons (DPs), most of whom were Eastern Europeans with nowhere to return as their countries had fallen under Russian Stalinist rule. Among those DPs there were approximately 60,000¹ Lithuanians eligible to migrate to countries that were signatories of the IRO program. Australia's participation in this program enabled some 10,000² Lithuanian DPs to migrate to that country between 1948 and 1953.

In what ways and to what extent did the relocating in WA affect the lives of this group of Lithuanians? What are the core characteristics of the pre-war Lithuanian culture which have been affected and to what extent? To attempt to answer these questions, the period concerned is the fifty years of resettlement of Lithuanian *émigrés* in WA who chose to remain in the country. They have evolved into local residents, tied however by intersecting influences of circumstances, history, economy and family. As it is not practical, within the limitations of this brief paper to deal adequately with the totality of culture change, discussion is restricted to the maintenance of the Lithuanian language and of selected Catholic religious practices, which I consider to be the most significant characteristic of the pre-war Lithuanian culture and which seems to have exerted the most influence on the subsequent upbringing and character of most of second generation WA Lithuanians. This study³ is based mainly on interviews. To preserve the anonymity of the interviewees pseudonyms are used and contextual information that could reveal their identities is modified or deleted.

¹Eidintas, Alfonsas, Eidintas, Alfonsas. *Lithuanian Emigration to the United States 1868-1950*. Vilnius:Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidybos institutas, 2003, p. 212.

² Kunz, Egon F. *Displaced persons: Calwell's New Australians*. NSW: Pergamon Press, 1988, p. 43.

³ Vico, Milena, http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/arts_conference/9/

1. Community and Changes

The first IRO vessel carrying DPs to Australia under the IRO Scheme was the *General Heintzelman* which arrived in Fremantle, WA on November 28, 1947 with 840⁴ passengers, of which 440⁵ were of Lithuanian origin. Their initial destination was the Commonwealth-operated Bonegilla Camp in Victoria. Of the 10,000⁶ Lithuanians who migrated to Australia some 583⁷ established themselves permanently in WA.

The sense of cultural estrangement and alienation in a new country, of and for which the Lithuanians had had no real knowledge or preparation, is described in the words of Adolfas a 24-year-old young man at this time who remembered his transfer to the reception centre after his arrival in 1948: “We travelled through Fremantle ... I was so surprised to see very funny houses, the chimneys were very high they looked like pots, so poor houses, so poor streets”.⁸ The Graylands army barracks camp was fitted out as a reception facility and temporary accommodation for DPs. For most of the *émigrés*, it was far from a suitable place to live. Families were housed in individual barracks which had to be shared with other families. While single people lived in separate primitive quarters as Adolfas remembered: “We were living in barracks, with no doors or windows ... with flies, they were very dirty... I did not expect a place like this”.⁹ These comments are a sampling of the initial negative impression of Australia on the Lithuanians who had expected to migrate to a modern and prosperous country. As new arrivals in an English speaking country, they had to negotiate the difficulty of operating on a daily basis in a foreign language. The situation was eased for most of them by their prior experience of living in refugees’ camps in Germany where other languages, in particular German, were in use. Although most of the Lithuanians knew some English, the Australian camp administrators chose to facilitate the initial communication in German – “to avoid misunderstandings”.¹⁰ The Commonwealth expected the Lithuanians in the work age limit to accept and remain in assigned employment positions two years. At the end of this period they were granted indefinite residence in the country. Most of the work was in rural areas and, was allocated to males. Wives and children were kept in holding camps often

⁴ Kunz, Egon F. *Displaced persons: Calwell’s New Australians*. NSW: Pergamon Press, 1988, pp. 39-43.

⁵ *Ibid.*,

⁶ *Ibid.*,

⁷ *Ibid.*,

⁸ Adolfas, *Interview Transcript 1*, Perth, 2003, p. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*,

¹⁰ Adolfas, *Interview Transcript 2*, Perth, 2003, p. 3.

several hundred kilometres away from their menfolk. Single and married women without children worked as domestics and most of them remained in the city area.

Private accommodation in metropolitan areas, especially for families at this time was scarce. There were no rental houses mainly only rooms. Adolfas had vivid memories of his search for lodging.

My wife and I we found a room in West Perth in a house of Macedonians ... we had to put my wife's two children in St. Joseph's Convent ... after that my daughter was born ... they [the Macedonians] told me to go, they didn't want children. I had to look for a new accommodation and it was hard ... there were no houses, Perth was very small.¹¹

The difficulty of adapting to a completely new physical, economic and social environment, to the hard working conditions and to the shortage of accommodation undermined the stability of the Lithuanian families. This led to tension, depression, feelings of alienation and in some cases to divorce and separation. Eglė, recalled those days with feelings of anxiety. “My husband went to work far away I did not see him very much, my little girl did not recognize him ... then he left us”.¹² Experiences such as this marked the first years in WA for most of the Lithuanians *émigrés* as they struggled to adapt to the demands of their new homeland. When their two-year work contracts expired they started to search for affordable housing. Before they were able to purchase or build a house they rented a room, lived in a tent or in a garage, or shared accommodation with relatives or friends. This was Aldona's case. “I was happy when we bought the land. We lived in a garage at the friend's house until we had the money to build our own house”.¹³

In the early years the Lithuanians required accommodation that was easy to maintain as, in most cases, both husband and wife were in the workforce. Their houses were sparsely furnished, as the *émigrés* typically had in those days only limited money at their disposal. Aldona maintained: “We bought only the essential and a sort of cooler ... we bought it straight away, it was too hot you could not possibly keep any food”.¹⁴ In WA the Lithuanians' houses were mainly of brick with a tiled roof and were designed in harmony with the Australian landscape and weather with each house having sufficient space for a garden. The household garden in the early 1950s was considered an important addition to the house serving an aesthetic and social purpose rather than a productive one. Of significance are the *rūta* (rue) shrubs, the national Lithuanian flower whose presence still symbolizes an unbroken bond with the former homeland and the *inkilai* (birds' nesting boxes) which are still

¹¹ Ibid., p. 12.

¹² Eglė, *Interview Transcript 2*, Perth, 2003, p. 6.

¹³ Aldona, *Interview Transcript 3*, Perth, 2003, p. 2.

¹⁴ Aldona, *Interview Transcript 3*, Perth, 2003, p. 3.

found in most of their gardens today. They are placed on trees mainly at the back of their gardens to encourage birds to nest in proximity of the house as has been the custom in the rural areas of their former homeland. This significant relationship with nature maintained for the most part by the aging *émigrés* attests to the continuing strong influence of their rural background in their life.

2. The “New” Australian-Lithuanian Family

The immediate and extended families of most of the interviewees were small, with most families limited to two or three children. The lifestyle, work commitments and financial hardship in the first years of their re-settlement in the new country, according to Aldona, precluded the larger sized families that had been the familiar pattern during the pre-war period. “We could not afford more than two children as it was too expensive if you want them to go to a proper school”.¹⁵ At the same time the comparatively small size of the extended family arriving in WA was the result of the difficulties faced by most of the Lithuanians when the time came to flee their homeland. These difficulties included the lack of suitable means of transport for the elderly, the very young and the frail. Families also had to contend with elderly members’ disinclination to leave their country and home, their relatives and friends, and their life’s memories. Algirdas was a 22-year-old single man when he left his small village near a river: “I left by boat with a friend, this was the only way. My parents did not want to leave. My sister was too young and my mother did not let her go”.¹⁶ The early experiences of these *émigrés* clearly determined the way in which families evolved in the new country. In the “new” Australian-Lithuanian family, working-age members were in employment. Their roles within the family were no longer as well defined as they had been in the traditional pre-war culture. Of necessity, their roles had adapted to the new circumstances and lifestyle. The man was still considered to be the head of the family and the provider, but now the position of the women had changed. Due to financial constraints, in addition to fulfilling their traditional roles of wife and mother, women were expected to work outside the household. The grandparents’ role in the preservation of their native language, and family and religious traditions within the family as well as in the community was now even more vital. Although limited in number the grandparents granted DP status and passage to WA in the early 1950s, were still able to maintain their roles caring for the grandchildren, whilst preserving their traditional lives.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁶ Algirdas, *Interview Transcript 4*, Perth, 2003, p. 14.

During their first years in the new country, most of the interviewees felt homesick, the intensity of which depended often on their marital status and whether they arrived alone or with their family. Many suggested that one of their most difficult experiences was the loss of the friends and the close relationships they had enjoyed in their homeland.

In attempting to establish their old culture in the new environment and driven by feelings of comradeship which had been nurtured by the shared adversity of war time, the DP camps, the journey to Australia and the time served under the labour contract, Lithuanians who were able to purchase houses in the early 1950s opened them as a meeting place. By doing so they were now able to endorse their culture and language while simultaneously encouraging the sharing and maintenance of values. The home then came to represent a safe shelter, a place where they could, without fear or restraint, express their feelings of anxiety and doubt about their future in a country, which most of them considered at best indifferent and at worst hostile. Algirdas conveyed his feelings in these words: “I didn’t like to live in Australia, but I could say this only to other Lithuanians ... all of us were complained about the weather, the jobs”.¹⁷ Their social gatherings were organized regularly, either formally to celebrate family and religious events, or simply spontaneously. It must be remembered that after their arrival Lithuanians had insufficient time to make friends outside their own ethnic group, with the language an obstacle for some and the different culture for most. One preoccupation for the gradually increasing number of Lithuanians settling in Perth was the need for the establishment of a formal community organization. The composition of those initial gatherings at meetings and in individual houses began to change over time with social divisions and a growing sense of unease based on social, educational and economic differences becoming apparent. Here needs to be mentioned that the original composition of Lithuanian DPs was not homogeneous. Most had come from urban centres and differed in levels of social status, education and professional training. It was politics, a world war and social circumstances that brought them together.

During the interviews remarks were increasingly heard about the so-labelled ‘snobbish’ behaviour of some *émigrés* who had become very wealthy and of some of the better educated who, it was claimed, formed a clique. In the memories of Adolfas: “ They started to split in groups, and they didn’t want you”.¹⁸ Most of the early organized functions were limited to the immediate friends of the host family. This resulted in a social stratification that many saw as threat to the survival of the unified community. This concern was sufficiently widespread so

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁸ Adolfas, *Interview Transcript 3*, Perth, 2003, p. 6.

as to establish a *Lietuvių Bendruomenė* (Lithuanian Community) in accordance to the Lithuanian Charter in 1943 and the Constitution of the Lithuanian World Community.¹⁹ In time, as the community became more united heritage language programs social and sport events were organized to bring together everyone, including the young and the elderly in an attempt to preserve their culture and unity.

In the early 1960s a sport club was organized, focusing on basketball. The team of young Lithuanians competed in State and local competitions. These games gave the community a venue in which to publically demonstrate pride in their national identity. However, as the players started to have their own families, taking on heavier work commitments and becoming more integrated into the wider community, they found interest and involvement in different cultural and social organization and many drift away. A formal dancing group of twelve and thirteen year olds that performed in national costume, clearly helping to rekindle and nurture feelings of pride and national identity, was created. However, as the children merged into the mainstream of the dominant culture, their participation waned. Ona, observed: “My children did not want to do anything that was Lithuanian anymore. They wanted to be Australians”.²⁰ The dancing group, disbanded in the early 1980s. During one interview, I learned that a Lithuanian women’s choir was organized in 1979. Due again largely to the lack of interest by the younger members of the community who among other reasons not having enough knowledge of, and feel for the language, it eventually went the way of the dancing group.

In 1983 the Lithuanian community purchased a building to house the *Bendruomenės Namai* (Lithuanian Club) that soon became the centre for community activities and functions. The attendance and participation at these events was high at least until the middle to late 1990s, by which time the elder members of the community, became less able to attend and the Australian-born Lithuanians started to grow distant from their original kinship.

3. The Lithuanian Language: the Fight for its Survival

Speaking of the desire among the Lithuanians to keep alive their native language in the new homeland, Alfonsas declared:

I am realistic about [the] Lithuanian language. My children are living in this country in which they are going to stay. They have their jobs here. Their children and they will be living here for the rest of their life ... so there is no need for me to worry about the language of my ancestors.²¹

¹⁹ Eidintas, Alfonsas, Eidintas, Alfonsas. *Lithuanian Emigration to the United States 1868-1950*. Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidybos institutas, 2003, pp. 195-196.

²⁰ Ona, *Interview Transcript 3*, Perth, 2003, p. 4.

²¹ Alfonsas, *Interview Transcript 3*, Perth, 2003, p. 15.

Most of the children in the early years of settlement, and in the early stages of their lives, were exposed at home to the Lithuanian language on a daily basis. Especially lucky were the children that lived with their grandparents who spoke little or no English. Once in the local schools they naturally started to speak English. For many of the adult *émigrés*, this marked the point at which they first perceived the language of their country to be under threat. Younger parents among the group were criticised by older members of the community for their inability, or unwillingness, to preserve the mother tongue as a valued priority in the family. Ona, an 82-year-old mother of two, recalled:

The old members of the Lithuanian community didn't have any clue of what was going on in my family. My children didn't want to speak with me anymore in Lithuanian ... if I didn't speak English I was left out.²²

Comments such as this found in most of the interview records expressed the common view that use of the language was diminishing. Thus, when the parents started to speak English to their children at home, they did so for the most part out of the belief that their children would be disadvantaged in a monolingual society. This inevitably contributed to the progressive undermining of the future of the language. However some interviewees observed that the erosion of the language had started even earlier, when they were in Germany during 1944, and indeed earlier for those who had left their homeland in 1940. For this latter group, who had settled in Germany for eight or nine years before being able to emigrate to Australia, both their own language and the language of their children had already been corrupted by the German language. Algirdas, who was nine years old when his family left Lithuania for Germany in 1940, admitted: "I could [still] speak Lithuania but I [soon became] more fluent in German as I attended school there, my youngest brothers didn't speak Lithuanian at all".²³

In 1969, a Sunday school in which the Lithuanian language was taught was established in Perth by the *émigrés*. The school closed in 1972, when enrolments fell below the required WA government funding support level. In the attempt to maintain the language among the younger generation, in 1975 the first edition of the Lithuanian-language monthly newsletter *Žinutė* (The News) was published in Perth. It soon became the voice of the Lithuanian Community in WA, which believed it would provide an important extra focus for community life and for the survival of the language. *Žinutė* maintained an unbroken link between the past and the present

²² Ona, *Interview Transcript 3*, Perth, 2003, p. 6.

²³ Algirdas, *Interview Transcript 3*, Perth, 2003, p. 8.

for the Lithuanians and clearly gave them a sense of pride and national identity. The newsletter continued to be published until 1999, when the ageing Lithuanian Community was unable to continue to support this significant initiative that lasted for twenty three years. Lithuanian-language radio broadcast began in 1976. As with the newsletter, this initiative was aimed at maintaining the language, the culture and folk music, as an enduring bond with the homeland. Originally broadcast only in Lithuanian programming in both Lithuanian and English began in 1995, as increasing numbers of young listeners with insufficient knowledge of the language wanted to listen to the programme. Unlike *Žinutė*, the programme was adapted to the changing preferences of the community. It was still in operation in 2009 and continued to be supported financially by its listeners. In spite of these various attempts to keep the language alive and the fact that there are more grandparents in the Lithuanian community today than there were in the early 1950s, the Australian-born grandchildren, though aware that their grandparents sometimes spoke a non-English language, seldom showed an interest in the language or a desire to learn it. Today the language is only spoken among the most senior citizens in the community, and for most of their children it is, at best, just a memory of their early childhood.

4. The Influence of the Catholic Church in the Life of the *Émigrés*

The Catholic Church according to Ona a 87-year-old grandmother, was a major influence in the early 1950s in bringing and holding together the Lithuanians in WA. “It was the church that keep us together we were living everywhere but most of us found the way at least twice a month to go to the church on Sunday”.²⁴ For isolated and minority immigrant groups, the church was a unifying point of security and identity, a link between their past and their present. This was especially so for the intensely Catholic Lithuanians. On February 16, 1950 the first Sunday Mass held in Perth, specifically for the Lithuanians was presided by an Irish priest in Latin. Services led by Irish priests, although not held every Sunday because of the limited number of priests available were attended by the great majority of the Lithuanians and their families living in the central and outer suburban areas of Perth. For most of them, the Church was the focus of cultural and social activity as well as the centre of their religious life. It was a valuable link to their pre-war Catholic religious upbringing. In those early years it was also the only available organised opportunity to socialize and to keep in contact with other members of the community. The number of people attending Church increased when the period of the initial work contract expired and most of the families returned to Perth. Ramunė described a Sunday Mass from her memories: “The church was full of people, the children,

²⁴ Ona, *Interview Transcript 4*, Perth, 2003, p. 4.

the grandparents, the parents, all well dress and happy to be there, everybody was there”.²⁵Over time, the English-speaking priests were replaced by Lithuanian priests. Moreover in 1959 the Catholic Archdiocese of Perth officially assigned a Church to the community. It remains to this day. From 1962 to 1999, regular services and important Church and family liturgical celebrations such as christenings, weddings and funerals were conducted in Lithuanian, a concession that had been approved officially by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) when the mother tongues in most countries replaced the traditional Latin of the Catholic Mass.

The clergy became an important reference point and locus of engagement for the *émigrés*. They provided spiritual leadership as well as participating in the social life of the community. Indeed priests in the pre-war culture were accepted and looked up to as highly educated and especially knowledgeable members of the community and spiritual and social leaders of the congregation. Alfonsas explained the priest’s position in the pre-war time in these words:

Priests for us were like saints. Everyone respected them, nobody contradicted them [the priests] ... what did they say was correct all the time ... nobody dare to say something against them ... they lived in the village and they helped the people. There was a *klebonas* (parish priest) who organised excursions during summer holidays for us children. We used to go from the parish to big farms and then back to the presbytery ... there we were fed properly. That was a memorable time for me. We used to sing and play and we spent happy time.²⁶

Such views illustrate the high expectation and needs placed on their priests by the early *émigrés*. Expectations which the prevailing cultural circumstances in pre-war Lithuania enabled them to satisfy, but that could not be reproduced in the vastly different conditions of life in predominantly Protestant, secular and Anglo-Celtic Australia.

The Catholic Church’s unifying influence lessened after it became apparent that the hoped for return to a free, Western-aligned Lithuania would not be achievable. Accordingly, the Lithuanians began to act in ways which would ensure a successful assimilation into the mainstream Australian culture. Rarely, however without some emotional pain. The feelings of regret felt by many are expressed in the words of Eglè: “For the next five years we all hoped that we would go back to our country ... we all hoped. Then five years passed and nothing happened”.²⁷ At this point, it had become clear that out of necessity their long-term future would be in Australia. Most Lithuanians consciously and deliberately began the process of merging themselves, their families and achievements into the mainstream of Australian life

²⁵ Ramunè, *Interview Transcript 4*, Perth, 2003, p. 5.

²⁶ Alfonsas, *Interview Transcript 4*, Perth, 2003, p. 12.

²⁷ Eglè, *Interview Transcript 4*, Perth, 2003, p. 11.

values. Eglė, discovered that: “After five years everybody started to look [at] things in a different way”.²⁸ By the mid 1950s most of the families enjoyed sufficient income to afford home, car ownership and a quality education for their children. An indicator of the family units’ success is the high percentage of second and third generation Lithuanians holding professional positions. In order to meet their expanding financial commitments most working Lithuanians held several jobs or worked overtime. As a consequence regular religious attendance became of secondary importance. In the recollection of Aldona: “My husband and I we were both working. We had very little time to go to the church, we still tried to go once a month and bring the children”.²⁹

The drift away from the church, and consequently from the community, was even more evident for those families and extended families in which the original *émigrés* had entered into mixed marriages. Once children began school and especially during secondary schooling, they became involved in sport, started to socialize with other children outside their own community, thereby diminishing the time spent with family at home. Alfonsas, father of two, reported:

My children were encouraged from us to go to the church, but they became involved in sports, and we had to drive them everywhere. In Lithuania all extra activities for children were on Saturday or Sunday after mass. Here, sport is mainly on Sunday.³⁰

This recount conveys the emerging image of the traditional Lithuanian family, in which the roles of both parents and their children had adapted to the new circumstances and lifestyle. On the other hand, according to most of the interviewees, Australian-born Lithuanian children drifted away from the church largely because the clergy unsuccessful providing activities or initiatives that enticed them to attend church and thereby reinforce their religious beliefs and identity. This lack of commitment by the priests remains a source of resentment among the most senior members of the community. Birutė expressed her feelings typical also of others of her generation:

We didn’t have Lithuanian priests who were caring for our children ... they were not interested ... we saw him [the priest] on Sunday only and then after the mass [he simply] went home. They were useless good only for themselves.³¹

²⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

²⁹ Aldona, *Interview Transcript 4*, Perth, 2003, p. 11.

³⁰ Alfonsas, *Interview Transcript 4*, Perth, 2003, p. 13.

³¹ Birute, *Interview Transcript 4*, Perth, 2003, p. 6.

While most of the family traditions adjusted to the new lifestyle and environment, the religious calendar traditions have been better preserved. Almost all of them were mentioned in the interviews, the most commonly being *Kūčios* (Christmas Eve Meal) and *Velikos* (Easter Day). Importantly, even the children who married out of the community still enjoy these occasions, especially since these holiday seasons are also observed nationally. Most of the interviewees acknowledged that *Kūčios*, needed, to be adapted somewhat to the new lifestyle. Ona confirmed: “Every year we have *Kūčios* with my family at my place ... I prepare only fish dishes to share with the family. I tried to prepare the meal as my mother did back home, but my grandchildren do not like it”.³² A variety of reasons was provided by the interviewees to the questions examining the failure to maintain as a community event the celebrations of *Kaledos* (Christmas Day), *Didzioji Savaite* (Holy Week), *Sekmines* (Pentecost), *Zolines* (Feast of the Assumption), and *Jonines* (Feast of St John). Some attributed it to apathy and others to the loss of religious values. Ona, who had lived and was raised on a farm stated: “In Australia we did not do anything right from the start. We only used to go to the church, listen to the mass and return home”.³³ *Didzioji Savaite* (Holy Week) considered by the pre-war Lithuanian population the most important and significant time of celebration of the year was discarded since the early years of the Lithuanians arrival in Australia. For the most part only Palm Sunday and Easter Day were celebrated formally by Lithuanian church services. During the week, most people were working and attending to the needs of their families. Alfonsas remembered: “We never went to church on Good Friday, because both of us were doing something at home ... we take advantage of being at home with our children”.³⁴ The *pasnikas* (fasting) the core of the *Dydysis Penktadienis* (Good Friday) preparation for Easter, according to Alfonsas, is still observed among the old members of the community, as a sign of devotion and respect. “I have never eaten or drink anything on Good Friday ... in all my life”.³⁵ And so is for most of the *émigrés* that consider abstinence a form of penance. The traditional preparation of *Margučiu* (decorated Easter eggs), a key feature of *Velykos* (Easter Day) celebrations, and the ritual of the egg cracking is still enjoyed by the young children. Aldona, grandmother of five, recalled: “All my grandchildren have always enjoyed playing with *margučiu*. My grandson always wants to help me in the preparation”.³⁶ Easter in WA typically is a time of beautiful weather and offers one of the last opportunities before winter

³² Ona, *Interview Transcript 4*, Perth, 2003, p. 8.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³⁴ Alfonsas, *Interview Transcript 4*, Perth, 2003, p. 12.

³⁵ *Ibid.*,

³⁶ Aldona, *Interview Transcript 4*, Perth, 2003, p. 14.

for the children to go on family holidays. Therefore, not all of them spent Easter Day with their parents as it was customary back at home. Aldona explained: “Last year my daughter went on holiday with her family. I was not upset. She is a working mother and she needed a holidays with her family”.³⁷ This statement shows once again the adaptation of the old *émigrés* to the new environment and to the new life style.

A general consensus of the interviewees is that *Velines* (All Soul’s Day) is still observed by the old Lithuanians. After Sunday Mass they gather at Karrakatta Cemetery to visit the graves of the most recently deceased member of their community. Aldona recollected: “Since we arrived in Perth we went to Karakatta [Cemetery] to pray. Many of us died without anybody here in Perth especially men”.³⁸ They recite the rosary and the litanies at the graveside and then they disperse to visit the graves of their own deceased family members and other friends as they used to do in the villages back home. Aldona further added that the custom of decorating the graves of deceased family members with flowers is still widely practised, as is the decoration of graves of deceased who have no living relatives in Perth.

Even though the *émigrés* today are ageing and unable to attend church for health and other reasons, they consider themselves practising Catholic. Audronė illustrated this as follows: “Religion is a personal choice and they [the Lithuanians] can make it, regardless to the environment and the possibilities to attend the church, and have contacts with the priests”.³⁹ Thus, for the remaining group of the *émigrés* who began their lives in pre-war Lithuania, religion clearly seems to have remained, a strong element of identification with their national identity.

Conclusion

This study was designed to ascertain the cultural changes which have taken place over a period of fifty years within the Lithuanian DP who came to Perth after WWII.

The discussion was restricted to two distinct key characteristics of the pre-war Lithuanian culture, the retention of the Lithuanian language and the preservation of some Catholic religious practices. Clearly, it was not possible to fully recreate their previous linguistic experience, or to persist unchanged with their religious practices. Many however, were able to reproduce some aspect of their homeland lives particularly at the more local and personal level. The interviewees appear to have retained a sense of ‘Lithuanian-ness’, but have adapted to the local culture to such an extent that their traditions, values and beliefs now

³⁷ Ibid.,

³⁸ Aldona, *Interview Transcript 4*, Perth, 2003, p. 20.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

predominantly reflect their new environment, rendering them unable to effectively hand down their culture to the next generation to the point where the pre-war Lithuanian culture is in danger of extinction in WA.

The Lithuanian language is on the verge of being lost. Today the language is only spoken by the few remaining original *émigrés* who have failed to pass the language on to the next generation of Australian-Lithuanian children and grandchildren. They show little or no interest in learning the language of their parents or grandparents.

The Roman Catholic religion with its practices some fifty years later remained a strong element of Lithuanian identification among the original *émigrés* who still hold on to their religious values while most of their descendants attend church at Easter and Christmas time only. Like language and traditions, the religious connection may indeed die with the last of the original *émigrés*.

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