Lithuanian diaspora: An interview study on the preservation or loss of Pre-World War Two traditional culture among Lithuanian Catholic Émigrés in Western Australia and Siberia, in comparison with Lithuanians in their homeland

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Submitted by Milena Vico
Declaration of Authorship

This thesis is the candidate’s own work and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other institution.

To the best of the candidate’s knowledge, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

________________________  __________________
Candidate’s Name       Date
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**TITLE PAGE** i

**DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP** ii

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** iii

**TABLE OF CONTENTS** iv

**ABSTRACT** viii

**CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION** 1

**CHAPTER 2 - LITHUANIA THE EARLIEST BEGINNINGS** 9

- The First Inhabitants of Lithuania: The Reindeer Hunters 12
- The Indo Europeans: The Balts, the Amber Collectors 13
- The Evolution of Lithuanian Culture and Language 18
- The Origin of the Lithuanian Nation: The Period of the Grand Dukes 19
- The Lublin Treaty: The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569) 23
- Revival of National Identity: Theorising the Process 26
- Conclusion 28

**CHAPTER 3 - ORIGIN OF LITHUANIAN NATIONALISM: POWERFUL NEIGHBOURS** 29

- The Language Contest: Lithuanian or Russian 32
- Weakening Russian Control (1905-1914) 36
- The German Occupation (1915-1918) 38
- Declaration of Modern Lithuania’s Independence (1920-1939) 42
  - Land Reform 43
  - Currency Reform 47
  - Education Reform 48
  - The Church during the Period of Independence 50
- The Lithuanian Jewish Community 53
- Conclusion 56

**CHAPTER 4 - LITHUANIA DURING THE PERIOD OF OCCUPATIONS** 58

- The First Soviet Occupation (1940-1941): The Elimination of Intelligentsia 61
- The German Occupation: The Lithuanian Jewish Holocaust (1941-1944) 63
- The Second Soviet Occupation (1944): The Mass Deportation of the Kulaks 66
- The Church during the Second Soviet Occupation 70
- Education in Occupied Lithuania 74
- Conclusion 77

**CHAPTER 5 - METHODOLOGY** 78

- Introduction 79
- Research Questions and Hypotheses 80
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Strategy</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing a Working Definition of Culture</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Characteristics of Pre-WWII Lithuanian Culture</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying, Selecting and Negotiating Access to Present-Day Interview Samples</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality and Ethical Clearance</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designing and Implementing the Interview Strategy</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language: Quotations and Translations</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Setting, Timing and Locations</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER 6 - PRE-WWII LITHUANIAN CULTURE**

- The Rural Lithuanian Family                                             103
- The Built Environment: Characteristic pre-WWII Rural Settlement          103
- Patterns across Lithuania                                               103
- Lithuanian Rural Daily Life                                              111
  - Rural Access to Modern Day Facilities: Electricity, Plumbing and Sewerage 116
  - Food and Beverage Staples                                               119
  - National Costume                                                        123
  - Dainos and Folk Dance                                                    128
  - Religious Beliefs and Practices                                          130
  - Hospitality and Charity: The Rhetoric of Idealisation                   132
- Lithuanian Family: Customs, Rituals and Celebrations                     134
  - Childbirth and Christening                                              134
  - Marriage and Weddings                                                   136
  - Death and Funerals                                                      138
- Calendar Religious Celebrations                                          140
  - Kūčios (Christmas Eve Meal)                                             140
  - Kalėdos (Christmas Day)                                                 143
  - Užgavėnės (Shrove Tuesday)                                               143
  - Didzioji Savaite (Holy Week)                                            145
  - Vėlykos (Easter Sunday)                                                  147
  - Sekminės (Pentecost)                                                    148
  - Joninės (Feast of Saint John the Baptist)                               149
  - Žolinė (Feast of the Assumption)                                        150
  - Vėlinės (All Souls’ Day)                                                150
- Superstitions                                                            151
- Leisure Time                                                             152
- Conclusion                                                               155

**CHAPTER 7 - LITHUANIANS IN PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA: THE DISSOLUTION OF A COMMUNITY**

- Earlier Lithuanian Migration to Australia                                159
- Voluntary Emigration and Refugee Status: Definitions                     163
- The Australian IRO Mass Scheme (Displaced Person Scheme)                164
- The Built Environment: Communities and Changes                           167
- The New Australian-Lithuanian Family: The Role of the Grandparents       174
Social Life and Hospitality 179
Clubs and Organizations 182
The Lithuanian Language: The Fight for its Survival 188
The Influence of the Catholic Church in the Life of the Emigrés 193
Survival of Family Customs and Traditions 201
Religious Celebrations 207
Concluding Summary 214

CHAPTER 8 - LITHUANIANS IN KRASNOYARSK, SIBERIA: THE SURVIVAL OF A COMMUNITY 217
Deportation Period (1940-1953): The Built Environment, Communities and Changes 221
Lithuanian Language: An Identification of National Identity 226
Lithuanian Families: The New Role of the Women and the Children 228
The Role of Religion in the Life of the Deportees 233
Post Deportation Period (1953): The Exodus of the Former Deportees to their Homeland 241
The Effects of Glasnost (Openness) and Perestroika (Restructuring) 245
The Built Environment: Freedom in the Former Exile Settlement 247
The New Lithuanian Family in Siberia 250
The Struggle to Maintain the Lithuanian Language 254
The Role of Education 256
The Soviet control of Religious Practices 258
The Beginning of a New Community 260
Concluding Summary 261

CHAPTER 9 – PRE-WWII LITHUANIANS IN LITHUANIA: THE PRESERVATION OF THEIR IDENTITY 265
The Built Environment in the Soviet Era 269
The Lithuanian Family: During Occupation 274
Religious Practices and Traditions under Soviet Rule 280
A Controlled System of Education 290
Lithuanian Language: Its Re-emergence 291
Concluding Summary 293

CHAPTER 10 - CONCLUSION 294
Lithuanian Emigrés in Perth, Western Australia 297
Lithuanian Emigrés in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia 297
Pre-War Lithuanian Generation in Lithuania 298
Comparison and Contrast across the Three Lithuanian Groups Investigated 299
Hypothesis 1 299
Hypothesis 2 299
Hypothesis 3 300
Hypothesis 4 300

REFERENCE LIST 302

APPENDICES 319
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Deportation Instructions</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Declaration of the Supreme Committee of Liberation</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pre-War Lithuanian Traditions, Values and Beliefs</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lithuanian Cultural Customs and Practices</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lithuanian Cultural Values</td>
<td>352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lithuanian Cultural Beliefs</td>
<td>354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Interview Design Logic</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Information Sheet and Consent Form for Research Project Participation</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Phases of Memory Recollections</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus 1 Childhood Recollections</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus 2 Transition Stage</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus 3 Present Day Perceptions</td>
<td>364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Questioning Sequence</td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>People Interviewed</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Stages of an Interview</td>
<td>370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Composite Narratives</td>
<td>374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lidia’s Story</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elena’s Story</td>
<td>379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pranas’s Story</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marija’s Story</td>
<td>386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stasy’s Story</td>
<td>391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Janina’s Story</td>
<td>394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rimas’s Story</td>
<td>396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Erika’s Story</td>
<td>399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bianka’s Story</td>
<td>402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rūta’s Story</td>
<td>405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Maps</td>
<td>407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Newspapers and Newsletters</td>
<td>412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Photographs</td>
<td>418</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

This study is designed to ascertain the cultural changes which have taken place over a period of fifty years within three distinct Lithuanian communities. Of these three, two communities—one in Western Australia and the other in Siberia—were part of the post-World War Two (WWII) diaspora. The third is still living in Lithuania.

I set out to determine the extent to which, during the period of fifty years covered by this study, cultural practices, values and beliefs have been maintained and lost by those who participated in the interviews carried out as part of the methodology of this thesis. This study is an historical empirical investigation which employs qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. In this way, it determines the extent of the retention or loss of those core markers which I have identified as constituting the essence of the pre-war Lithuanian culture.

Presentation of the study’s research and findings has been divided into four parts:
- an overview of the history of Lithuania from its origins to the end of WWII in 1945;
- a description of the core markers of the pre-war Lithuanian culture in order to set the context;
- three detailed descriptive accounts, one for each group investigated, to examine the difficulties and challenges faced by the participants in each group in preserving their native culture; and
- a conclusion which draws comparisons between the three groups in terms of the study’s hypotheses regarding retention or loss of the chief features of the pre-war Lithuanian culture over the set time period.

The findings show that each of the groups investigated has retained at least some of their pre-war cultural heritage. The group which maintains the strongest sense of ‘Lithuanian-ness’ was the group still living in Lithuania. The two groups of the Lithuanian diaspora in Western Australia and Siberia, although retaining some common core of the pre-war culture, are very distinctive.

The Lithuanian group in Western Australia, has retained a sense of ‘Lithuanian-ness’, but has also adapted to such an extent to the dominant culture that the traditions, values and beliefs now reflect the new environment. Therefore, although the old émigrés were born in Lithuania, they have not been able to preserve their culture in such a way that it could be passed on to their children. It seems likely that the future of the pre-war Lithuanian culture in Australia is close to extinction.

The Siberian group, due to the strong connections formed with the homeland, has continued to maintain a high level of the original culture. The old émigrés have been able to keep alive the interest among their children and grandchildren, and thereby preserve a continuity of the Lithuanian culture.

This research reveals marked complexity in the situation faced by the three groups investigated and shows that the broad comparisons implied by the hypotheses formulated at the beginning of the study represent an oversimplification of what is actually a highly variable and nuanced reality.
If the language, the customs and traditions disappear and religion is ignored completely … then you have no hope of continuing to be a Lithuanian …

(Alfonsas, Interview Transcript 4, Perth, Western Australia, 2003)

We could not fight the Russians … they had the tanks, but we had our language, our religion, our traditions … we maintained our national identity …

(Jadviga, Interview Transcript 2, Vilnius, Lithuania, 2004)

We lost everything … our native language was about the only thing of value we were able to preserve …

(Jonas, Interview Transcript 3, Krasnoyarsk, Siberia. 2004)