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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

Milena Vico  
*University of Notre Dame Australia*

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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

A Lithuanian remains a Lithuanian everywhere and always. A Lithuanian passes on the life of the Lithuanian Nation, sustained by its ancestors, to future generations so that we will live forever. ... It is the duty of every Lithuanian to promote the national culture (Lithuanian Charter, in Eidintas, Žalys and Senn, 1998, p. 193)

This thesis is a contribution to the history of the Lithuanian diaspora in Western Australia and Siberia and of Lithuanians living in their homeland in regards to the preservation or loss of the *essence* of their pre-WWII Lithuanian culture, over a period of fifty years living in a foreign land or under a foreign occupation.

After independence was re-established in 1918, Lithuania existed as a nation until 1940. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939) re-shaped Europe. By the end of WWII approximately 60,000 Lithuanians had fled their homeland to the West, because of the advancing Soviet Army (Eidintas, 2003, pp. 212-213). Between 1940 and 1953 a total of 126,817 Lithuanians were deported to Siberia (Racėnas, 2005, p.11) and the remaining Lithuanian population endured Soviet occupation. On March 11, 1990 Lithuania with its 3.5 million inhabitants led by the *Sąjūdis* (anti-Soviet movement) proclaimed independence after fifty years of occupation (four years under the Nazi-Germany and forty-six years under the Soviets). In February, 1991 Iceland was the first country to officially recognize Lithuanian independence. In September of the same year, after seventeen months of confrontation and the death of thirteen Lithuanian civilians, the Soviet Union recognised Lithuania as an independent state and began to withdraw its troops. On September 17, 1991 Lithuania became a member of the United Nations. The last Soviet troops left the territory of Lithuania on August 31, 1993 (See in Maps Appendix 11). On March 29, 2004 Lithuania became a NATO member and on May 1, joined the European Union.

Lithuanian identity has always been closely associated with the land, farming practices and village community life. Although Lithuania during the period of independence (1919-1940) had experienced a degree of industrialization, resumed later during the

Soviet occupation, the ethnic Lithuanian population has always maintained close ties with their rural life. Despite their desire for continuity and preservation of their original pre-WWII culture, Lithuanians had to confront a new environment and a different dominant culture which required them to make adjustments. After living fifty years in a foreign land or under Soviet occupation Lithuanians found it hard to resist becoming partially or fully assimilated into the dominant culture.

This study aimed to identify the preservation or loss of those core markers which I identified to be the *essence* of the pre-WWII Lithuanian culture; to determine the extent of such cultural changes within the three present-day communities investigated; and to speculate on reasons for such changes. This study has measured to what degree pre-WWII Lithuanian culture has survived outside the homeland, among members of the Lithuanian diaspora, and Lithuanians in Lithuania itself under Soviet occupation. In determining the foci and the expected outcomes of this study four hypotheses are proposed which do not intend to exhaust the range of possibilities:

- Each present-day group has retained a substantial common core of pre-war culture.
- Each present-day group has drifted substantially away from their original culture.
- The Western Australian and Siberian present-day groups have preserved some common *essence* of their original culture which is not shared by the present day group in Lithuania.
- Only the present-day Lithuanian group in Lithuania maintained substantial part of the pre-war culture.

The three groups investigated were relevant to the study as they epitomized the three life-style models adopted by the post-war Lithuanians: those who remained in their homeland, those who were forcibly deported to Siberia and those who fled their homeland and re-settled in other countries. The sample of the three present-day groups were drawn as follows:

- The Western Australian sample was drawn from Lithuanian community and Catholic organizations in Perth;
- The Siberian sample was drawn from Lithuanian community in Krasnoyarsk;
- The Lithuanian sample was drawn from Lithuanians living in Kaunas, Klaipeda, and Vilnius.

The retention or loss of the key markers of the pre-war Lithuanian culture was examined through quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Three detailed descriptive accounts have been written one for each of the sample population investigated. So that attention could be drawn to the changes in the participants' cultural beliefs and values from immediate post-war to the existing situation.

To date, little scholarly research has been undertaken on the Lithuanian diaspora hence, there is no extensive literature in this field. Lithuanian post-war emigrants are a minority group which assimilated in a short period of time into the dominant culture of the host country. Studies have been conducted by a few scholars, mainly of Lithuanian descent. The existing comparative works focus on the post-war Lithuanian diaspora in the United States and on Lithuanians in their homeland and on their degree of adaptation to the new culture and the attempt to hand down to the new American-Lithuanian generation the Lithuanian heritage.

This study expands on the work of the Lithuanian historian Alfred, Erich Senn, "*The idea of a Lithuanian state, 1940-1990*" (1998) and the work of the historian Giedrė Van Den Dunden "*Lithuanian Identity in the United States 1950-1985*" (1996), both of whom maintained that the Lithuanian émigrés in the United States (also Lithuanians in Lithuania) strived to preserve the characteristics of their pre-WWII culture. However, by early 1960 it was evident that the struggle to preserve their original culture and language weakened both in Lithuania and abroad by the emergence of a new generation of young adults. They embraced the values of the country in which they were born or brought up. Senn claimed that the new generation of young adults living under Soviet rule should have evolved differently from those living in a capitalist society. However, even if this new generation lived in a capitalist or socialist society, they still shared "a common Lithuanian cultural heritage, dating from the period of independence between the wars that was independent of these political and economic influences" (Senn, in Edintas, et al., 1998, p. 194).

Senn attributed the above outcome to those cautious pragmatists who outwardly submitted to Soviet rule, while under the surface remaining committed to their

Lithuanian heritage. In quoting the historian, Aleksandras Štromas, Senn highlights certain characteristic traits of the Lithuanian people:

I think that I can say that the pragmatic tactical political consciousness dominant in Lithuania is of a conservationist character ... the nation as such decided to end active resistance to the occupation and to accept the condition of existence forced on the country, i.e., it accepted a partial conformism as its fundamental thought. ... Such a conformist position does not mean capitulation; it means just a change of tactics to seek the same goals. ... In order that the nation could pursue any goals, it is necessary first to protect its life (Štromas, in Edintas, et al., 1998, p. 194).

Senn claimed that the new generation of Lithuanians had been brought up mainly with pre-war heritage and suggested that the original emigrants were successful in maintaining and passing on the *essence* of their pre-WWII Lithuanian culture.

Giedrė Van Den Dungen stated that the Lithuanian refugees had always “considered themselves exiles and felt driven by the need to return to their homeland if it ever became independent” (Van Den Dungen, 1996, p. 55). Thus, they have endeavoured to preserve their national identity by educating their children according to the ideals and values of their traditional culture. However, unlike Senn, Van Den Dungen believes that, in spite of their efforts, the old generation of emigrants did not succeed (Van Den Dungen, 1996, p. 55).

Van Den Dungen attributed the outcome to two distinct factors. Firstly, the children of the first and second generation were raised in a different country. Secondly, the hope of an independent Lithuania began to fade and, as a result, it became more and more difficult to maintain a sense of ‘Lithuanian-ness’. Other factors included the influence of school and university leading the children of Lithuanians to challenge the ideals and values which had appeared self-evident to their parents. The new generation began to formulate their own ideas and opinions on the relevance of retaining those so-called crucial factors of Lithuanian history, language and culture, which their parents considered the basis of their heritage. In addition, they questioned the importance of the Catholic faith, which had played such a prominent role in most of their grandparents’ and their parents’ life (Van Den Dungen, 1996, p. 55).

The Lithuanian language which provided its people with a distinct ethnic national identity was also difficult to maintain in the context of a dominant society which placed

no value on it (Van Den Dungen, 1996, p. 56). Nevertheless, Van Den Dungen acknowledged that the old *émigrés* were able to lay the foundations of a real community. They succeeded in assembling the scattered refugees into local communities such as clubs or cultural organisations. Newcomers were welcomed only if they conformed to the original group's concept of being Lithuanian. Van Den Dungen sensed a changing perception among Lithuanian migrants of what constituted the original Lithuanian identity, since they did not take into consideration the evolution of the Lithuanian culture in Lithuania. As a consequence, the understanding of the national culture among the first generation of emigrants and the Lithuanians living in the homeland underwent a process of divergence (Van Den Dungen, 1996, pp. 55-57).

Van Den Dungen concluded that Lithuanians abroad, who consider themselves Lithuanian, are in fact no longer so, because they have been separated from their homeland for too long. Furthermore, they have assimilated many aspects of the culture in which they live in at the same time, freezing certain Lithuanian characteristics which they originally possessed. Van Den Dungen's findings are indicative of the original *émigrés'* ideological struggle to retain their national characteristics which diminish with each passing generation, reinforced by on going changes in the contemporary new Lithuanian identity. The decline of awareness of one's ethnic origins, kinship and cultural roots is made evident when Van Den Dungen says that American-Lithuanians were surprised at being "regarded as totally American in Lithuania" (Van Den Dungen, 1996, p. 58). These American -Lithuanians did not conform to the expectations of the local people in Lithuania and vice versa. There would be no reason therefore for the original *émigrés* to return permanently to an independent Lithuania.

Both Senn and Van Den Dungen maintain that in spite of either Soviet indoctrination at home or living in a different environment, Lithuanians constantly struggle in both their own country and abroad to preserve their national identity and culture.

As explained above this thesis is an historical and empirical investigation which focuses on three present-day Lithuanian groups and relies on data from a larger and more varied sample in order to achieve a deeper understanding of how time and circumstances have affected the original culture of the pre-WWII existing generation.

To assist the researcher in obtaining a comprehensive and deeper knowledge of the pre-war Lithuanian traditions, values and beliefs, the existing literature has been widely consulted, in particular the works of authoritative scholars DanuteBrazyte Bindokienė (1989), Irena Čepienė (1977, 1995, 1999), Prane Dundulienė (1991, 1994), Marija Gimbutas (1963, 1974), Birute Imbrasienė (1990), Juozas Kudirka (1991, 1996, 1997) Rasa Račiunaitė (2002) have been used as supporting sources.

While the works of Gimbutas and Bindokienė represent the insight of scholars before the Soviet occupation, both of them fled Lithuania between 1940 and 1944 Dundulienė, Čepienė, Imbrasienė, Kudirka and Račiunaitė provide evidence for the Soviet period between 1945 and 1991. However, all of them have extrapolated views from the works of Gimbutas and Bindokiene to give a post-WWII understanding of Lithuanian folklore and mythology.

For the modern history and contemporary situation this study is indebted in particular to the works of recognized historians Albertas Gerutis (1969), Alfred Senn (1946), Alfred Erich Senn (1959, 1966, 1990, 1995, 1998, 2001), Adolfas Šapoka (1962, 1990), Stanley Vardys (1965, 1978) all of whom fled Lithuania before the Soviet occupation. Recognition is also given to the works of the post-Independence historians Alfonsas Eidintas (1998, 2003), Jurate Kiaupienė, Zigmantas Kiaupa and Albinas Kuncevičius (2000, 2002) who are living in Lithuania.

It is important to acknowledge that all of these sources represent secondary material, because their purpose is only to provide a brief overview of the history of Lithuania as background context for this study. Therefore, it is considered appropriate to rely on these respected secondary sources.

This thesis comprises four parts:

Part 1: Chapter 1 is the introduction to the thesis.

Part 2: Chapters 2, 3 and 4

Chapter 2 presents the overall context of the earliest beginnings of Lithuania, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the Czarist-Russian occupation.

Chapters 3 and 4 provide a broad analysis of the origin of Lithuanian nationalism and of the first Soviet occupation, the German occupation and the second Soviet occupation.

Part 3: Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9

Chapter 5 outlines the methodology adopted to explore the preservation or loss of the key markers of the pre-war culture.

Chapter 6 provides a detailed account of the customs and traditions, values and beliefs of the pre-war Lithuanian culture.

Chapter 7, 8 and 9 present for each of the selected three present-day groups what the research has discerned from the interviews regarding the preservation or loss of the pre-war culture.

Part 4: Chapter 10 is the conclusion of the thesis.