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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 10

CONCLUSION

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Culture is not like rock, which ostensibly can pass through many hands and remains unchanged, but it is rather like a story that is tailored and embellished in the process of transmission ... false cultures – static and passively transmitted – are produced by tourist industries and by scholars ... the [true] process of cultural transmission ... is dynamic, creative and real (Linnekin, 1990, p.161).

This study has discovered, described, explored, compared and analysed the cultural changes which have taken place within three distinct present-day Lithuanian communities in Western Australia, Siberia and Lithuania.

Using empirical data collected from people still living in the present-day Lithuanian, Siberian and Australian population sample groups, I was able to identify within their subjective experiences the differences and the similarities in the preservation and loss of the key markers of pre-WWII Lithuanian culture among these three distinctive groups as well as the degree to which they have distanced themselves from their original culture.

Analysis of the data has established clearly that the reality for the two distinctive groups in Western Australia and Siberia is that a degree of adaptation has occurred to a new culture which has been dominant for the last fifty years. This is not revealed by the analysis of the data of the Lithuanian group in Lithuania. Furthermore, it was found that the ways in which individuals moved through this process of preservation and loss were governed by intervening conditions specific to individuals and their particular circumstances. These conditions shaped and influenced what the individual or the community was able to retain from the original pre-war Lithuanian culture.

It was clear from the stories relayed by the group in Western Australia that the participants in the study viewed the adaptation to the dominant culture as a natural occurrence. The process of adaptation was dynamic and extended to all aspects of life.

Lithuanian Emigrés in Perth, Western Australia

The Lithuanians in Western Australia were a small group and their composition was not socially homogeneous. They differed in their original social status, education, professions, military training and region of origin. They shared only a common political view. These differences, over time, contributed to the extent of the maintenance and/or loss of the core markers of the pre-WWII Lithuanian culture. The usual difficulties in the sharing of Lithuanian ethnicity occurred on personal, psychological and social levels and nurtured the *émigrés* need for social and emotional support but only in the first years of their re-settlement. The small size of the Lithuanian group limited their ability to maintain cultural institutions and, therefore, the group on their arrival, became dependent on the Catholic Church. However, when the Lithuanians started to merge into the Australian society their dependence on the Church diminished as they became more influenced by the values of the Australian society where the Roman Catholic religion did not play a prominent role.

Perhaps because of this drift, decreased participation in community gatherings occurred. Activities which largely related to traditions became diluted and are at risk of being lost. Although the Lithuanian language is still maintained among the old *émigrés* on an individual basis, the use of the English language is dominant. Most of them failed to pass on their language to the next generation. After fifty years, Lithuanian religious and linguistic ethos and family traditions, continued to be preserved among most of the original *émigrés*, on an individual basis.

Lithuanian Emigrés in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia

The Lithuanians settled in the region of Krasnoyarsk formed a small community. Although living in an atheistic society, where any form of religious practice was forbidden (until 1992), the Lithuanian *émigrés* continued to maintain their faith on an individual level. Lithuanian family traditions could be maintained with a certain degree of adaptation in the family where the female participant was of Lithuanian origin. In the families where the male participants in the study entered into mixed marriages, traditions had to be negotiated. Lithuanian *émigrés* in Krasnoyarsk, although they speak Russian as a national language, maintain the use of their native language with contacts in their

community, as a sign of rebellion against their forced displacement and as a symbol of ethnicity and identity. The use of the Russian language threatened their national ethnic identity and the sense of belonging to their homeland which the group associated with freedom and a normal life. After fifty years, Lithuanian religion and the language, more than family traditions, continued to be maintained by the group.

Pre-War Lithuanian Generation in Lithuania

After the period of Soviet occupation the characteristics of pre-war culture were retained in spite of the Sovietisation of the country. As a form of resistance and protest against atheistic doctrines, religious values and beliefs were celebrated. Pre-war traditions and customs were maintained by the participants in the study because they were in their original environment. The older generation was also proud to continue the tradition passed down to them in the family and currently have no reason or desire to change. The language, the most important key marker of the Lithuanian identity, has been preserved as a national language although it was under threat from the occupying force. In particular, the language has survived intact in rural areas where the population was distinctively ethnic Lithuanian. According to my findings, forty-six years of Soviet occupation failed to re-mould the values, beliefs and traditions of the pre-war generation who were participants to the study.

I believe that this comparative study is unique because of the three sample groups. Information is accordingly gained from a larger and more varied total sample and hence enables a deeper understanding of how time and circumstances have affected the 'original' culture. Results obtained may be significant in assisting other scholars to explore the same phenomena in other communities that have experienced foreign oppression in their own country, deportation, or emigration as refugees from their home country to escape oppression. The findings of the present work may offer researchers an opportunity to investigate and compare three streams of other present-day populations which have not yet been surveyed.

Comparisons and Contrasts across the Three Lithuanian Groups Investigated

The value of the comparative tables set out in the appendices is that they enable an objective return to the four hypotheses with which this thesis began. The four hypotheses were designed to ascertain to what extent each of the three distinct communities investigated might have distanced itself from its original heritage and to what degree the chief features of that culture have been maintained or lost over a period of fifty years of living in Western Australia, in Siberia or in Lithuania.

The tables make it possible to draw an immediate comparison of the differences and/or similarities in the retention or loss of the key markers of the pre-war Lithuanian culture, between the three distinctive groups. The tables also allow one to validate or to offer different possibilities since the initial four hypotheses were not exhaustive. The findings show that the retention of cultural identity is far more complex than can be demonstrated with absolute specificity to these four hypotheses alone

Hypothesis 1

This hypothesis suggested that each of the three population groups' samples could have retained a substantial common core of pre-war Lithuanian traditions values and beliefs.

It is not verified. According to the findings two of these three groups (Australian and Siberian) have slowly adapted to their new environment; even if each still holds on to certain core aspects of their original culture. However the data show that adaptation has occurred more rapidly in Australia in relation to the use of the Lithuanian language and family and religious traditions.

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis posited that each of the present-day communities could have drifted substantially away from its original pre-war Lithuanian culture. In this hypothesised outcome the groups have changed to such an extent that they no longer share their pre-war Lithuanian culture; and have completely distanced themselves from their original identity.

The findings indicate this is not the case for all three population groups. It is true only for the diaspora groups. Lithuania is a predominantly agricultural country and its rural

population is firmly attached to its traditions and strongly conservative and resistant to change, especially sudden change. Therefore, the three groups have adopted different strategies to assist in the preservation of its customs, traditions, values and beliefs.

Hypothesis 3

This hypothesis suggested that two population groups both part of the post-war Lithuanian diaspora, share some common cultural aspects while the Lithuanian group in Lithuania no longer shares those aspects, even though it still retains some (other) traditional Lithuanian characteristics.

The findings, however, indicate that the two groups of the Lithuanian diaspora, in Western Australia and Siberia, although sharing some common cultural aspects, differ in the extent and intensity of that sharing. This is due to the level of integration into the mainstream population, which was more pronounced in Western Australia than in Siberia, due to the latter's political circumstances. The Lithuanian group in Lithuania did not drift. It has retained intact the characteristics of the pre-war culture, largely due to the obvious fact that it continued to live in the original environment.

Hypothesis 4

This hypothesis put forward that the two groups of the Lithuanian diaspora have drifted away completely from their original culture, while the group in Lithuania still retains its pre-war culture.

Findings show that the Lithuanian group in Lithuania has maintained its culture intact and that the two diaspora groups have not abandoned their original culture outright but still retain some core of its key markers.

In conclusion, none of the four hypotheses has been entirely verified. However, findings show that the group which retains most strongly the core markers and therefore a strong sense of 'Lithuanian-ness' is the Lithuanian group still living in their homeland. In this group age played a decisive role. Due to their age and upbringing, and to the environment in which they have been living for the last fifty years, they may have adapted to the system imposed upon them, but they preserved their language, traditions and faith. All the participants in the study acknowledge their strong religious faith and

the maintenance of religious practices and traditions, even though during the period of occupation this was possible only on a personal basis.

The two groups of the Lithuanian diaspora in Western Australia and Siberia, although retaining some common core of the original culture, are very distinctive.

The Siberian group has retained a strong sense of national identity, which could only be disclosed after 1992. The old émigrés preserved religious beliefs and values, the use of the Lithuanian language, and to some extent Lithuanian family traditions –considering that the majority of the members of the Lithuanian diaspora in Siberia are married to members of other ethnic groups. The strong ties maintained with their homeland keep alive their children's and grand-children's interest and thereby preserve certain continuity with the Lithuanian culture.

The study showed that the Lithuanian group in Western Australia, although was able to retain a sense of 'Lithuanian-ness', integrated rapidly into the mainstream population. The old émigrés have adapted to such an extent to the dominant culture that their traditions, values and beliefs now reflect their new environment. They were not able to preserve their culture in such a way that it could be handed down on their children and grand-children. They failed also to maintain continued ties with their homeland. As a consequence the future Lithuanian way of life in Australia is close to extinction.

This research has demonstrated that while none of the four original hypotheses could be completely validated, each of the groups investigated has retained at least some (and, in the case of the Lithuanians in their homeland, almost all) of their pre-war heritage. Importantly, the study has revealed that the complexities of, and marked differences between, the situations faced by the three groups have been such that the broad and somewhat sweeping comparisons implied by the original hypotheses represent a gross oversimplification of what is actually a highly variable and nuanced reality. Indeed, the only comparisons one can meaningfully make on the basis of the data obtained in the study are comparisons that reveal and delineate the different degrees and patterns of cultural movement or retention as they have been experienced by the three groups examined.