

THE LITHUANIANS IN RHODE ISLAND

From the Baltic Shore to Narragansett Bay

By

WILLIAM WOLKOVICH-VALKAVICIUS



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Rhode Island Ethnic Heritage Pamphlet Series
Dr. Patrick T. Conley, *General Editor*

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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

In 1975 and 1976, on the eve of the bicentennial observance, in my capacity as chairman of Rhode Island's celebration (ri76), I established eighteen ethnic heritage committees, consisting of recognized leaders of this state's major ethnocultural groups. One purpose of this move was to involve in bicentennial activities those ethnic communities whose contact with this country did not extend as far back as the Revolutionary era. I urged such groups to observe and commemorate the contributions they had made to the American and Rhode Island experience from the time of their arrival down to the bicentennial year. A much more important reason for establishing the ethnic heritage program, however, was to allow each group to present its unique contributions, customs, and folkways to its neighbors from other cultural backgrounds. Formulated under the premise that knowledge promotes understanding and understanding begets brotherhood, the program was designed to break down the ethnocentric barriers and antagonisms that hindered us from achieving that lofty motto and goal—*E pluribus unum*, one out of many.

The one task assigned to each group upon its formation was to write a brief interpretive account of its Rhode Island experience—its motives for migration, areas of settlement, cultural survivals, and economic, political, and social activities—together with an assessment of its contribution to the development of our state. Though some efforts are more sociological, subjective, anecdotal, or selective than the neat, precise historical narrative that I envisioned, each of these pamphlets in its own way makes a valuable statement to all Rhode Islanders and provides a useful self-evaluation for the group that is the subject of analysis.

After the bicentennial's expiration, the concept of an ethnic heritage pamphlet series was kept alive by the Rhode Island Heritage Commission and its tireless chairman, Robert J. McKenna. Albert T. Klyberg of the Rhode Island Historical Society, Dr. Hilliard Beller of the Rhode Island Publications Society, and, especially, the authors of the various essays have also labored to bring this project to fruition as their contribution to the 350th anniversary of the founding of the state. No historical enterprise could be more appropriate for this 1986 celebration than a recounting of the toil and the triumph of our diverse peoples: From American Indians to Southeast Asians, we are Rhode Islanders all!

Patrick T. Conley

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Prologue

On November 23, 1970, a Soviet fishing vessel, *Sovietskaya Litva*, floated alongside the U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Vigilant* off Cape Cod near Martha's Vineyard. While Russian and American officials discussed fishing rights, a radio operator dramatically leaped from the foreign ship onto the American boat to beg for political asylum. The request was refused; the Soviets were allowed to board the U.S. vessel, beat the man into unconsciousness, and drag him off.

The sailor was Simas Kudirka, a Lithuanian. Thanks to a Latvian sea captain, Robert Brieze of New Bedford, Massachusetts, news of the bizarre incident quickly sped around the country and the world. (For his role, Brieze was later honored by the Knights of Lithuania with their special "Father John Jutt—Friend of Lithuania" award.) In Providence, officials of the Lithuanian Citizens Club publicly condemned the "irresponsible decision" the Americans had made.

Perhaps as never before, this embarrassing episode made the general public aware of Lithuanians as a separate ethnic group and the Lithuanian homeland as a Soviet-occupied nation. In 1978 Paramount Pictures produced a made-for-television movie called *The Defection of Simas Kudirka*, subtitled *The Story of One Man's Leap for Freedom*, with Alan Arkin in the starring role. This true-to-life drama was seen by audiences in the United States, Canada, England, France, and West Germany. Some public schools of the United States used the film in civics classes. A journalist, Algis Ruksenas, penned a study called *Day of Shame*; eventually Kudirka himself collaborated with professional writers to tell his story in *For Those Still at Sea*. Kudirka's birth in Brooklyn, New York, had given him a claim to U.S. citizenship, and thanks to Lithuanian activists in this country, Kudirka was released from prison and allowed to leave the Soviet Union in January 1974.

Long before Kudirka's leap to freedom, the reading public was exposed to Lithuanians in a famous literary work, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. This 1906 novel told the tragic story of Jurgis Rudkus and other Lithuanian immigrants working in the Chicago stockyards. A generation later Lithuanians everywhere welcomed word that boxer Jack Sharkey (real name, Juozas Zukauskas) had become heavyweight champion of the world with his victory over European champion Max Schmeling on June 21, 1932.

People of Lithuanian roots may be excused for taking pride in well-known Lithuanian American personalities in the world of sports, entertainment, and the arts. Despite some changes of surnames or spellings, Lithuanians lay claim to such athletes as football quarterback Johnny Unitas (Jonaitis), linebacker Dick Butkus, tennis player Vitas Gerulaitis, baseball pitcher Johnny Podres (Poderis), and the one-armed major league outfielder Pete Gray (Wyshner-Vaisnoras). Gray was the subject of a made-for-television movie in 1986, *A Winner Never Quits*. The Lithuanian roster also includes movie and television celebrities such as Ruta Lee (Kilmonyte), Ann Jillian (Jurate Nausedaite), and Charles Bronson. Among vocal artists, Anna Kaskas, Polyna Stoska, Lillian Sukis, and Algerd Brazis reached the stage of the Metropolitan Opera. This is just a sampling of celebrities of Lithuanian heritage.

As this study will show, the Lithuanian immigrants and their children who settled in Rhode Island represent people of more modest circumstances and achievements. By temperament, Lithuanians and their offspring have been inclined toward service careers and professions. A representative number have become nurses, pharmacists, dentists, teachers, architects, engineers, tailors, secretaries, and clerks. Many others, like their immigrant parents, have found their place in the ranks of blue-collar workers.

Lithuanians are a tiny ethnic minority in Rhode Island, though not quite so small a body in the United States. Regrettably, they and their offspring have published little about themselves in English. Non-Lithuanian readers curious about the Lithuanian presence in Rhode Island may well wonder about the background of these people, and thus a brief description is in order.

With its 23,000 square miles, Lithuania is roughly two-thirds the size of Maine. A small northern east-central European land, it is bounded by Latvia on the north, Russia to the east, Poland on the south, and the Baltic Sea to the west. From World War II until 1991, Lithuania had been one of the Soviet republics, although

nearly every nation of the globe recognized the Baltic country as a sovereign state, albeit one under Russian occupation (annually the president of the United States issued a proclamation of nonrecognition of this Soviet takeover). The historic capital of Lithuania, dating from 1323, is Vilnius (Wilno or Vilna).

Except for some small hills, the land is mostly level and quite fertile. In the past, farming and dairying were the mainstay of the economy, yielding, among other products, flax, butter, and cheese, especially for export. In recent decades, sad to say, the hitherto unpolluted landscape has been posing a challenge to environmental ecologists.

The Lithuanian language belongs to the Indo-European group and is closest in idiom to Sanskrit. Lithuanian is more ancient than Greek, Latin, German, Celtic, and the Slavic tongues. Most philologists view Lithuanian as the most ancient of living languages. Its flexibility and rich variety provide a fertile medium for Lithuanian writers of every style and genre.

In religion, the great majority of Lithuanians are Roman Catholics of the Latin Rite. A small number of Protestants, Jews, Orthodox, Karaim, and Moslems round out the tally of inhabitants.



On September 26, 1987, a banquet was held at St. Casimir's Church to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the Christianization of Lithuania. Bishop Daniel P. Reilly of the Diocese of Norwich, Connecticut, was the principal speaker at this event.

Photo © 1987 by Ernest A. Myette.

Because religious life was important to Lithuanian immigrants in Rhode Island, it is necessarily interwoven throughout this narrative. In 1987 Lithuanian believers the world over observed the six hundredth jubilee of permanent Christianity in Lithuania. The beginnings date from 1251, when the leading prince Mindaugas was baptized and received the crown from the pope, but after Mindaugas's murder in 1263 Christianity for the most part lay dormant. In 1387, however, a large number of Lithuanians became Catholics following the baptism of Lithuanian grand prince Jogaila (Jagiello), who then married the Polish princess Jadwiga (Hedwig). The third phase of Christianization dates from the Council of Constance (1414-1418) and its aftermath, when missionaries were sent to complete the conversion of Lithuania.

For the next four centuries non-Slavic Lithuania and Slavic Poland were united in a partnership of nations. In some aspects of civil life each country maintained autonomy, while in other areas there was joint government. By the close of the eighteenth century, Russia had become a major power, able to partition Lithuania and Poland, and most of Lithuania fell under the rule of the tsar. Not until 1918 did Lithuania regain its independence. Thus the first waves



Governor Dennis Roberts signs a proclamation for Lithuanian Independence Day in February 1954. Behind him are John Bienoris, organist of St. Casimir's Church; St. Casimir trustee Edward Ciocys; Father Vaclovas Martinkus; Helen Belconis, president of Council 103 of the Knights of Lithuania; and Beatrice Mathieu.

of immigrants who came to the United States and to Rhode Island were mostly the children of serfs, a few town folks, and a handful of intellectuals, reared under the tsars who ruled Lithuania from 1795 to 1918.

A trickle of Lithuanians began arriving at these shores after the Civil War. The first immigrants landed in New York City, where they were recruited to work in the coal mines and on the railroads in Pennsylvania. From there these newcomers spread to Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Baltimore in the 1880s. By the 1890s some Lithuanians were migrating from Pennsylvania to New England. Meanwhile, other countrymen were beginning to come directly to this corner of the country from Europe. The three largest settlements appeared in Boston and Worcester, Massachusetts, and Waterbury, Connecticut. Other sizable colonies sprang up in Brockton and Lawrence, Massachusetts, and New Britain, Connecticut. One of the smaller enclaves developed in Rhode Island, especially in Providence. This is where our story begins.

The Lithuanian Community: Origins and Development

By 1899 Lithuanian leaders in the United States had persuaded immigration officials to include the category "Lithuanian" as a separate ethnic group in their records, even though Lithuania had not yet recovered its independence. Accordingly, there are statistics indicating the numbers of arrivals who gave Rhode Island as their destination from 1899 through 1914, when the First World War began.

1899 - 7	1903 - 63	1907 - 85	1911 - 46
1900 - 33	1904 - 29	1908 - 41	1912 - 63
1901 - 40	1905 - 51	1909 - 67	1913 - 97
1902 - 44	1906 - 64	1910 - 51	1914 - 80

This total of 861 represents less than one-half of 1 percent of the reported 252,594 Lithuanians in the national immigration figure during those years. Before the rise of ethnic awareness among Lithuanians, most of the early immigrants listed themselves as Russian, reflecting the political rule of the tsar under whom they lived, or as Polish, because of that strong Slavic cultural and historic influence. Allowing for an undercount, as most Lithuanian scholars do, it is safe to say that some 1,200 to 1,500 Lithuanians immigrated directly to Rhode Island by 1914. If we add to this figure those who migrated from Pennsylvania or other states, it would not be far from the mark to assume that there were some 2,000 Lithuanians in the state prior to the First World War, most of whom resided in the Smith Hill or Valley neighborhoods of Providence. In fact, as early as 1907 the *Providence Journal* reported that there were 1,700 Lithuanians in the area. About the same time, a Lithuanian newspaper in New York City offered a Providence correspondent's

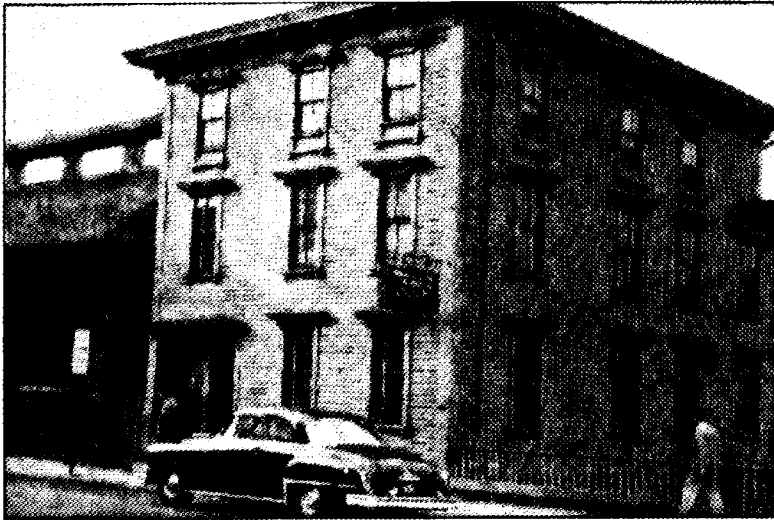
far more modest estimate of some 400 Lithuanian residents in Greater Providence, mostly from the region of Vilnius.

Like other unskilled newcomers, Lithuanians gravitated toward low-paying jobs. In 1908 they were earning between seven and thirteen dollars weekly in the textile mills. By modest immigrant standards such wages were viewed as "moderate" and therefore acceptable. Many of the men worked at places like the Brown and Sharpe Manufacturing Company, the American Screw Company, and the Nicholson File Company. Lithuanian women were on the payroll of such firms as Atlantic Mills and A. D. Juilliard Mills, both located in the Olneyville section of Providence. Those closer to the locale of St. Casimir Church on Smith Street toiled at the American Silk Spinning Company.

Organizations

Though labor consumed most of their hours, the Lithuanians, like other immigrants, needed the mutual support of organized social life. In 1902, as soon as there were a few dozen Lithuanians on the scene, the Providence settlers formed a mutual-benefit society under the patronage of St. John the Baptist. This is the first organization reported in local Lithuanian sources, but state records of incorporation reveal further associations. One of these was the Gediminas Society, an organization taking its name from a famous medieval prince. The thrust of this liberal group was emphatically ethnic rather than religious. It sponsored lectures by such well-known socialists as Fortunatus J. Bagocius of South Boston, who spoke in April 1915. In January 1908 this association had forty-seven members, while the above-mentioned St. John Society had fifty-seven members.

Like those in other immigrant communities, the Providence newcomers formed organizations to promote civic awareness. Among these groups were the Lithuanian Political Club, incorporated on February 10, 1910; the Lithuanian Citizens Club, formed in the spring of 1914 (later the word "Beneficial" was added); and the multiadjectival Lithuanian Roman Catholic American Citizens Club, established on August 7, 1925. The Lithuanian Citizens Club (which later merged with the Lithuanian Roman Catholic American Citizens Club) has survived to this day, having celebrated its diamond jubilee. Its present building on Smith Street replaced a three-story structure in 1955, when the earlier one was moved to Danforth Street. Lithuanian native Juozas ("Joe") Kiela has been wielding the gavel as president of this chiefly blue-collar organization, which provides



The Lithuanian Citizens Club met in this building on Smith Street, Providence, until a new club building was erected on the same site in 1955.

its membership with sickness- and death-benefits. The society still numbers several hundred members, either full-fledged or of "social" status. The Smith Street location, not far from the state capitol, remains the symbol of the original Lithuanian immigrant settlement.

Reflecting a nonreligious outlook, a group of mostly freethinking women incorporated on August 18, 1914, as the Lithuanian Ladies Beneficial Society—Biruta (in standard Lithuanian, Birute). The choice of a nonsaint for their name reflected the women's secular orientation. At the same time, the selection expressed ethnic sentiment, since Birute was the mother of the most famous Lithuanian grand prince, Vytautas. The initial plight of the Birute Society was described by the nationalist newspaper *Vienybe Lietuwninku* in March 1915 in an article that also reveals the early Lithuanian American practice of mingling for religious purposes with the Poles:

In recent times, the Birute society has become a concern to the Polish pastor. He would like to take it under his wing. Lithuanians here have neither their own priest nor parish, so they fulfill their spiritual needs with the Poles. There are still a few churchgoers who belong to the society [Birute]; but the fact that the society is liberal does not, it appears, please the priest. That's why he is concerned about it. He forbids Lithuanian women to join without his permission.

There was also a women's religious society that functioned for

a short time in Providence, though the name seems to have eluded standard written sources (some months prior to its demise, seventeen charter members had formed the nucleus); and there was an organization called the Lithuanian, Polish, and Russian Social Club, dating from September 7, 1934. In one of the few detectable Lithuanian neighborhoods outside Providence, the immigrants of the nearby mill city of Central Falls formed the St. Casimir Society, which acquired legal status on June 13, 1913.

The groups mentioned so far were of local origin. In addition to these, several nationwide networks of Lithuanian immigrants had local affiliate chapters. Thus by 1913 Lodge No. 197 of Lithuanian Socialists was active in Rhode Island. The Boston-based socialist newspaper *Keleivis* also referred to local chapters No. 63, No. 118, and No. 165 of the Lithuanian Alliance of America, representing a liberal, nationalistic viewpoint. Oddly enough, while the newspaper placed these chapters in Providence, Alliance sources are silent on Providence chapters, and indeed list other Rhode Island communities under the above numbers. Though there were small clusters of Lithuanian immigrants in the suburbs, the story of these immigrants and their offspring coincides for the most part with the story of the Providence enclave.

Religious Life and Strife

Most Lithuanians spoke, or at least understood, some Polish, and they tended to worship with Polish immigrants in colonies where the latter already had started a church. Shared liturgical customs, intermarriage, and other ties of European origin made such cooperation possible. In Providence, therefore, Lithuanians at first affiliated with St. Adalbert Polish Parish, whose church opened in January 1902. As much as one fourth of its congregation was of Lithuanian ancestry.

Lithuanians were one of the last European people swept up into the nationalist movement, both here and in their homeland. The pastors of the neighboring Lithuanian parishes at Brockton and South Boston, Massachusetts, were among the fiery zealots who aroused ethnic awareness. When the St. John Society of Providence invited such speakers, they preached religious and social separation from the Poles. In their intolerant extremism they even declared that Lithuanians who spoke Polish were guilty of sin! A minority of Lithuanians accepted this gospel of segregation, and they began

petitioning the local bishop for a separate parish. To some extent the next two decades in Providence were marked by ethnic and religious strife between Lithuanians and Poles, as well as by strained relations between complainants and Bishop Matthew Harkins. The turmoil became complex.

There were charges and countercharges in correspondence between both Lithuanian and Polish dissidents and the bishop, complaints to the apostolic delegate in Washington, D.C., and grumblings against the local Polish pastor. In 1908 Lithuanians even attempted to establish a church independent of the bishop. The result was the separatist All Saints Parish, composed of a small minority of Lithuanians and some Poles. The church struggled for a few years and then faded from the scene. (For details, see this writer's paper "Intradiocesan Ethnic Conflict," listed in the Bibliography.)

Failing to set up an enduring place of worship for themselves, Lithuanians returned to St. Adalbert or attended neighboring territorial ("Irish") parishes such as St. Patrick's on Smith Hill, Blessed Sacrament in Mount Pleasant, or Immaculate Conception in the old North End. A few years later a fresh opportunity arose for them to gain some measure of separate ethnic recognition when St. Adalbert petitioners again complained to the bishop about their pastor, as well as about the geographical inconvenience of traveling from the North End of the city to attend a distant parish church. Since the size of St. Adalbert's congregation appeared to justify establishing a new parish, the diocese created a second Polish parish, under the patronage of St. Hedwig, in August 1916. But this church (located on North Main Street in the old North End) was also intended to accommodate Lithuanians through a joint ethnic venture, and the Lithuanian members of the congregation disappointedly discovered that the new pastor could not minister to them in their own language. Sooner or later, as in all such Lithuanian-Polish enclaves, there would come the inevitable separation.

A few more years passed, nevertheless, before a Lithuanian parish was erected. The first steps came about in 1919, when Bishop William Hickey arrived to assist the aging Bishop Harkins. Hickey invited the Lithuanians to worship temporarily in the lower church of the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul on Weybosset Hill in the western end of Providence's downtown. Then, within weeks, Hickey bought a vacated Greek Orthodox shrine on Smith Street for the use of Lithuanians. But problems yet remained: the first two out-of-state, itinerant Lithuanian priests who served as pastors

were ill-suited for their pastoral duties, and they stayed in their post but a short time. Stability finally came to the long-troubled enclave with the arrival of Father Julius Chaplikas, a priest borrowed from the Diocese of Springfield. Father Chaplikas and his successors brought calm and prosperity to the Lithuanian worshipers of St. Casimir's Parish.

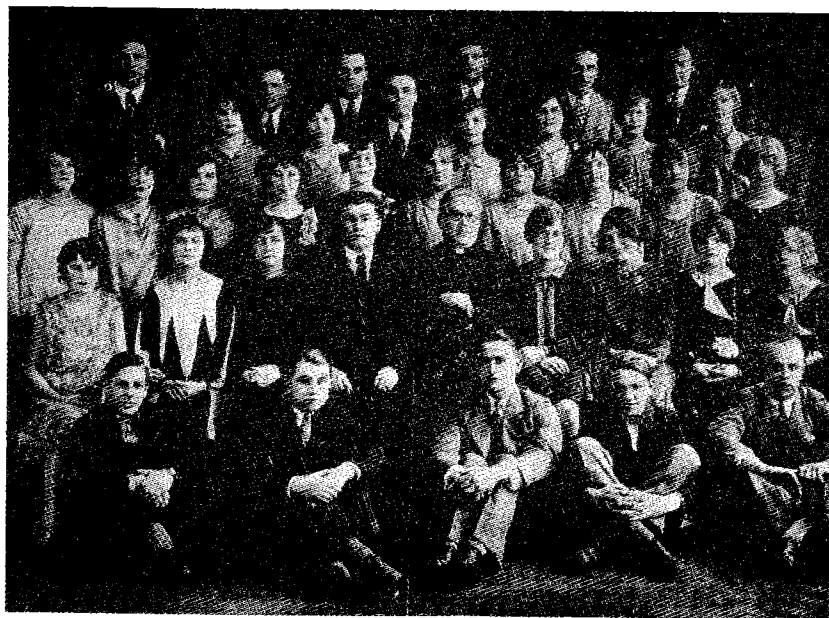
To this day a dark tradition has survived among those of Lithuanian roots, who tend to blame Bishop Harkins for not supplying a Lithuanian priest and to criticize Poles for blocking the attempt to set up a separate ethnic parish. Such views, however, are not completely warranted. Although Harkins was very slow to recognize the Lithuanians as a separate ethnic group, it is true also that the bishop simply had no Lithuanian priest in the diocese to recruit and assign; even a decade and a half later, the first two Lithuanian pastors badly disappointed Harkins's successor, Bishop Hickey. As for friction with the Poles, the fact is that many Polish-oriented Lithuanians were content to worship with Poles in a Polish parish, both at St. Adalbert and later at St. Hedwig.

In any case, Bishop Hickey blessed the remodeled former Orthodox building on Smith Street on May 15, 1921. The Lithuanians had finally emerged as a recognized ethnic body in the diocese. A Lithuanian almanac for 1923 lists Father Chaplikas, the pastor, as living at 12 1/2 Candace Street and shepherding a flock of two hundred families with seven hundred children. Chaplikas infused both spiritual and financial stability into the parish for four years, until he was recalled by his bishop to return to Worcester to found a second Lithuanian church (Our Lady of Vilnius) in that city. The people were again blessed with an admirable shepherd with the advent of Father Longinas Kavaliauskas, whose pastorate continued the commendable work of his predecessor for seven years. Cut down by death on August 8, 1932, Father Kavaliauskas was universally mourned by his people. His successor, Father Jonas Vaitekunas, would prove to be a pastor who would stamp a whole generation with his personality.

Much of the immigrant life revolved around the church, as a look at the 1930s indicates. Within a decade the people had outgrown their small shrine. By January 1933, despite the Great Depression, parishioners celebrated the news that the debt on land for a new church was liquidated, and that the parish had a balance of \$305.21 in its treasury. On the very day that news was announced, generous donors pooled \$1,000 for their future place of worship. By May

of the same year the total surpassed \$5,000. On November 13, 1934, when ground was broken to lay the church foundation, the fund topped \$14,000. The brochure commemorating the blessing ceremonies of the beautiful structure in October 1935 showed that the building fund had reached a remarkable \$25,000. The thrifty nature of the industrious Lithuanian immigrants is seen in the number of donors and the size of their gifts and additional loans. The more generous benefactors included contributors with family names such as Avizinis, Babavicius, Ciapas, Ciocys, Cirokas, Dongveckas, Dzekevicius, Rakutis, Rukstelis, Svedas, Tamasauskas, Tamulevicius, and Taraskas. Gifts ranged up to \$775, an impressive amount for those dark economic days. The St. John Society and Council No. 103, Knights of Lithuania, contributed \$225 and \$200 respectively.

One of the soloists at the dedication concert was the well-known Lithuanian American musician Rapolas Juska (1905-1982), who was the organist of St. Peter Lithuanian Parish in South Boston from 1934 to 1944. Earlier, from 1918 to 1921, Juska had been organist for the Lithuanians in their temporary places of worship. In the course of his career this versatile Brockton, Massachusetts, native was an organist, a choir director, a senior editor for a Boston music



The choir of St. Casimir's Church, 1935

publisher, and, above all, an accomplished basso. The parish choir also took part in the dedication ceremonies, offering a patriotic folk song. The photo in the dedication booklet shows a choir of ten men and twenty-six women. The musical aspects of the day were expressive of the characteristic Lithuanian love for singing.

An even dozen men served as the parish committee at the time of the completion of the new church: these were Vladas Ablacinskas, Antanas Avizinis, Matas Bagdonas, Vilius Belkonis, Eduardas Ciocys, Kazimieras Cironka, Aleksandras Dzekevicius, Kazimieras Kuprevicius, Vincas Menciunas, and Bernardas Straznickas (later Strazdas), all born in Lithuania, and the Providence-born Daniel Cironka and Joseph Turonis.

World War I and After

During World War I ambitious hopes for a restored independent homeland spread throughout Lithuanian communities in this country. Rhode Island was no exception. Rallies and fundraisers were the order of the day. Lithuanian Catholic leaders summoned delegates to a national political convention in Chicago for September 21-22, 1914, though a minority with nationalist and socialist leanings chose to stage their own assembly in Brooklyn on October 3-4 of the same year. From Providence, J. Brazauskas represented a trio of associations at the Chicago gathering: the Lithuanian Citizens Club, the Gediminas Society, and Lodge No. 197 of the Lithuanian Socialists. There were bond drives to support the United States military effort, as well as to back the fledgling Lithuanian government once freedom was proclaimed by a zealous group of elected representatives of the Lithuanian people in Vilnius on February 16, 1918.

On March 13, within a month of that proclamation, a nationwide congress assembled at Madison Square Garden in New York City, drawing 1,101 registered delegates. Three Rhode Islanders—V. Bankauskas, J. Kasparavicius, and V. Velzis—were among these delegates, taking part as joint representatives of the Lithuanian Citizens Club, the Gediminas Society, and the St. John Society. A resolution of gratitude to President Woodrow Wilson for his outspoken defense of the rights of small nations was among the declarations on the agenda. News of the rally, unusual in its size and demands for such a relatively small ethnic group, was provided to the country and the world by wire services and the New York press.

A report in the January 26, 1926, issue of the Boston-based newspaper *Darbininkas* gives us a glimpse of events in the Rhode Island Lithuanian colony during the postwar era. According to this report, Father Luke Kavaliauskas promptly started a Catholic social club after his arrival in Providence in May 1925. The first major project of the club was the purchase of thirteen acres of undeveloped woodland, together with a three-acre lake, in nearby Smithfield. Located on Douglas Pike, near Twin Rivers, four miles northwest of Providence, the property was named Lithuanian Klaipeda Park after the harbor city in the homeland. The choice of this name had political and military overtones, for in 1923 Lithuanian armed forces had seized the port, which had been earlier assigned to Lithuania by the Treaty of Versailles, from a small French military unit occupying the region in the name of the Allies. Prominent in the purchase of the park were Mr. Kaciavicius, A. Avizinis, and P. Bazinksas. Many a picnic was held here, with ethnic foods, polka dancing, and spontaneous folk singing in small groups scattered around the grounds. (In the heyday of activities in the early 1940s, such festivities were often used to benefit the Lithuanian National Fund, which was working for the recovery of the homeland's independence.)

This look at 1926 further reveals that the St. Anne Society of the parish donated a statue of their patroness to St. Casimir Church. In that era statues played a significant role in the devotional life of the people. Sometimes the many societies vied with one another for the honor of presenting such a liturgical appurtenance. On another church-related matter, the 1926 account reported a flourishing parish choir of forty voices. Under the direction of B. Valaitis, the choir presented a concert at Nickerson Hall in Providence on January 10. Proceeds from the capacity audience amounted to \$99.36. Several choir members who sang solos were recalled for encores. Among the soloists were Misses Bartusevicius, Cickevicius, Dzekevicius, Kliorikas, Palionius, and Sinkevicius.

In the period from 1915 through 1932, Lithuanian immigration directly to Rhode Island numbered only thirty-three persons. The impact of World War I, the restrictive and discriminatory immigration quotas of 1921 and 1924, and then the Great Depression combined to reduce the influx of all European migrants to a trickle when compared to the great wave of newcomers that crested just prior to the Great War.

Most natives of Lithuania were ethnically Lithuanian, but there

was a large Jewish minority. In 1926 a former Jewish resident of Lithuania, Max Senderowski (Sender), settled in Providence after living in Argentina with his brother, Solomon. After three and a half decades of separation, the two men enjoyed a reunion in Providence in 1960, together with relatives from Canada, Boston, and the Providence area. In sharing their experiences, they found a number of curious similarities: both Max, a baker, and Solomon, a shoemaker, had married immigrants, sired three children, and lived in five-room apartments in their respective cities.

Business and Education

Temperamentally, Lithuanians are not especially inclined to business ventures. In any case, the many Italian, Jewish, Armenian, and other ethnic enterprises in the North End during the earlier years of the century provided little incentive for separate initiative by the Lithuanians, as a glimpse into the *Providence City Directory* of 1925 reveals. Among a preponderance of Italian surnames, there is listed the name of only one apparently Lithuanian baker, John (given as Jan) Skaskacskos (probably Skaskauskas); only two grocers with Lithuanian names—Alex Dzekevicius, at 52 Pekin Street, and Dora Strasnick (Straznickas), at 92 Lippitt Street—are included. There are no listings for the usual Lithuanian barber, saloonkeeper, or poolroom operator.

In the next decade, however, the business profile of the enclave began to take shape. By the 1930s a number of Lithuanians had launched into business enterprises in response to the needs of their fellow countrymen. Among the entrepreneurs listed in the city directories of the 1930s are Vincas Tamulevicius, at 181 Chalkstone Avenue, John Skackauskas, on Shawmut Avenue, and B. Bartusevicius, bakers; Antanas Avizinis, at 437 Chalkstone Avenue, Dvareckas, Kachanis, and I. Stonis, grocers; B. Valaitis, on Westminster Street, photographer; B. Simonavicius and Al. Deltuva, at 25 Chafee Street, soft-drink sellers; Bernardas Straznickas, a.k.a. Strazdas, at 29 Danforth Street, and Anthony Savickas, ice and coal vendors; Aleksandras Vaitkunas, 302-304 Orms Street, proprietor of the Busy Bee Diner; Albinas Sharkus, tavern owner and real estate dealer; Michael Rudis, furniture dealer and upholsterer; Eduardas Ciocys, of 188 Clifford Street, life insurance agent and apartment house owner; and W. Belconis and L. Michalskis, at 54 Central Avenue in Pawtucket, hard- and soft-drink dealers.

Such businessmen were mostly self-taught, using their native wits to earn their living. Sometimes they and other Lithuanians managed to attend night school to improve their English and to gain citizenship (such instruction was also provided by some of the immigrant associations). Most of these immigrants respected learning and were especially desirous of providing a solid education for their children. Large numbers turned to the parochial school to meet this need.

Late in 1937 the local pastor, Father John Vaitekunas, consulted with Bishop Francis Keough about opening a grammar school in St. Casimir Parish. The bishop agreed and recommended that the pastor recruit a teaching order of nuns. A sister of St. Casimir was already teaching at the Sunday School, commuting from the congregation's convent at St. Casimir in Worcester, Massachusetts. The outstanding reputation of the Chicago-based St. Casimir Sisters prompted Vaitekunas to turn to them, as he noted in a letter of February 24, 1938, to the order's superior general, Mother Maria Kaupas. As a start, Vaitekunas foresaw four grades, with some forty to fifty children, so he asked for two teachers to handle double classes, with a third nun as cook and housekeeper. The Lithuanianism of the women was very important to the pastor; in his request he specified that the "prospective sisters should be capable in written Lithuanian, and should be fond of speaking Lithuanian to the children as much as possible." Anticipating the approval of her bishop, Cardinal George Mundelein, Mother Kaupas promptly accepted the invitation and agreed to send sisters to Providence. (In step with their leader, all of the sisters of this order adopted Mary as their first name; when they wrote their names, they inscribed the initial M before the name by which they were called.)

That summer Father Vaitekunas moved into a new rectory, relinquishing the old quarters to the incoming sisters. Now he requested four sisters, specifying Sister Nataline in particular, "because the children have become very fond of her." He then proceeded wittily to lay down weight limits for the sisters, specifying a maximum weight of 300 pounds and a minimum weight of 120 pounds: the maximum was imperative because otherwise "the floors would not hold up"; the minimum was necessary because those who were too frail "might contract tuberculosis" in the New England climate. In a closing jest, he asserted that he would readily get along with the sisters "provided they don't attempt to expel the pastor from the parish."

The school received its first contingent of twenty-three youngsters in September 1938. The count rose to fifty-six by the end of the school year in 1940. Not only were the children being grounded in their faith and the three Rs, but they were also learning to speak Lithuanian and to sing folk songs in that ancient tongue. The sisters "have completely changed the behavior and aspirations" of their charges, wrote a delighted Providence correspondent in *Darbininkas* in August 1940. He went on to laud Sister Hilda for her unusually successful kindergarten labors. The Lithuanian spirit was secure in the hands of the principal, Sister M. Ignatia, a graduate of the Grand Duke Vytautas University in Kaunas, Lithuania, who, in addition to her Providence chores, supervised the eastern seaboard schools staffed by members of her community of St. Casimir. The third of the trio of teachers was Sister Nataline, whose assignment Father Vaitekunas had requested. In the fall of 1940 the expanded staff included Sister M. Gregory, superior, and Sisters M. Hilda, M. Teresina, and M. Katryna. With modest satisfaction the staff graduated the first two eighth graders—Helen Avizinis and Vyto Kapickas—in June 1941.

Father Vaitekunas's first Christmas with the sisters was a great success. A priest-colleague, Father Juozas Koncius of Mount Carmel, Pennsylvania, had told the pastor that the Providence parish was receiving the cream of the St. Casimir Sisters. After four months Vaitekunas understood Koncius's observation by seeing for himself how "very zealous, industrious, holy (not always the case) [parenthetical comment in original], and so wise in practical affairs" the sisters proved to be. The pastor expressed his contentment through a very generous \$100 donation to the sisters' academy building fund in Chicago. The parish school children became the delight of the Lithuanian community. The youngsters regularly entertained at various ethnic functions; at a parish supper in the winter of 1954, for example, the school's primary-grade tots provoked nostalgic stirrings by the two-part renditions of Lithuanian folk songs that they performed for some 230 diners.

None of the optimistic religious could have prophesied that their venture would last just three decades. By June 1968 the school would be no more. Insurmountable factors such as assimilation, the physical decay of the inner-city neighborhood, and suburban flight would have taken their toll.

The Vaitekunas Generation

In some ethnic groups religion tends to be largely a private matter. When an ethnic community includes substantial numbers of adherents of two or three faith-traditions, that community is unlikely to be dominated by members of its clergy. On the other hand, when an ethnic body is religiously homogeneous, as the Lithuanians are, it will often look to one or another of its prominent clergymen for leadership. The Lithuanians of the Providence area did just that, and they found a priest who was eminently worthy of their trust.

With the 1932 coming of Father John Vaitekunas, the longest era of pastoral rule for Providence's Lithuanian Americans began. Father John, a native of Lithuania, was born on July 3, 1896, in the village of Papiliai in the county of Subacius. As a child he displayed patriotic precocity, and Russian officials expelled him from the third grade because he urged classmates to refuse to pray in Russian. He emigrated to America at the age of sixteen. Later he returned to Europe, where he prepared for the priesthood at Innsbruck, Austria. He was ordained in Rome on April 6, 1930. His love of his homeland drew him back to Lithuania for a brief period, during which he served at the church of Saints Peter and Paul in the city of Panevezys. A man of somewhat fiery temperament, he did not hesitate in his sermons to criticize the nationalist government for its suppression of Catholic societies. His outspoken views irritated the local authorities, and since Vaitekunas had become a naturalized citizen of the United States during his first visit, the government "invited" him to leave the country. Accepting the invitation, he arrived in Providence in 1932 to take charge of St. Casimir's Parish.

During more than three decades of his pastorate, Father Vaitekunas's achievements included the erection of a new church, a rectory, a school, and a convent. His fervent Lithuanian sentiment



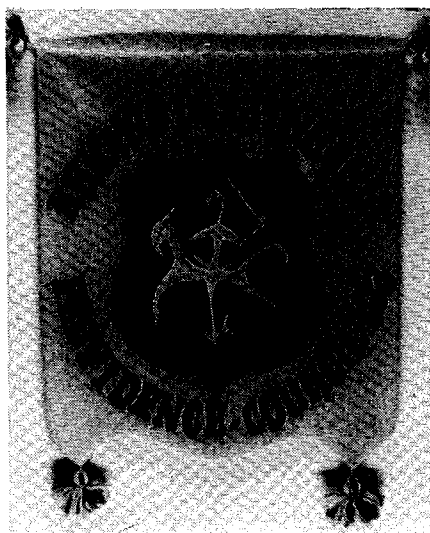
The Reverend John Vaitekunas

made him a friend and supporter of Marianapolis Junior College in not-too-distant Thompson, Connecticut. This preparatory institution was designed to produce Catholic leaders among

Lithuanians in this country and abroad. The priest's reputation as a Lithuanian zealot became well known even in his birthplace. Just prior to World War II, Vaitekunas journeyed back to Lithuania, but he was again promptly asked to leave.

In America, Father Vaitekunas made an impact on the Lithuanian community both locally and at the national level. He was, for instance, instrumental in establishing the refugee Franciscan friars in Maine during the early 1940s. He was a man who was not easily forgotten. Even twenty years after his death, his nephews, John and Peter Jokubka, arranged a solemn memorial Mass on September 16, 1983, at the chapel of the Marian Fathers in Thompson, Connecticut. This remarkable priest is deservedly the subject of an entry in the *Lietuviu Enciklopedija*.

To a great extent the pastor's right hand was the local council of a nationwide religious-ethnic group, the Knights of Lithuania, which was inaugurated at Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1913. The Providence chapter originated early in 1920. This association has kept alive the spark of Lithuanian ethnic pride to this day. Though data on its first decade is unavailable, we know that the society staged a pair of comedies on February 26, 1933, entitled *The Deaf Son-in-Law* and *Don't Resist*. The cast included such surnames as Cickevicius, Kairys, Kuprevicius, Ratkevicius, and Turnonis. That



The banner of Council 103, Knights of Lithuania

same year the local K of L recruited athletes for a baseball team that proved a match for the organization's other New England councils due to the skill of a tandem of pitchers named Oklavicius and Verbickis. By the end of 1933 the Providence council was sufficiently organized to host the New England District convention, with a local member, Teresa Donn, selected for a post on the district board. Father Vaitekunas, a firm supporter of the Knights, dedicated much time to the K of L's youth, coaching many of them in the Lithuanian language.

To its immense credit, the relatively small Providence chapter, with only forty-eight members, staged the national convention for the parent organization from August 4 to 6, 1936. The array of speakers included the governor of Rhode Island, the Providence mayor, and Bishop Francis P. Keough of Providence. The congress began with a Solemn Mass, celebrated by the Marian priest Father Mykolas Urbanavicius, M.I.C., with a sermon by Father Edward Gradek (Gradeckas) of Waterbury, Connecticut. Bishop Keough presided. Then the convention's opening session got under way with remarks by Governor Theodore Francis Green and Mayor James E. Dunne. National president Anthony Mazeika wielded the gavel to begin the proceedings.

In the audience at the convention were two guests from Lithuania, Juozas Laucka and Juozas Leimonas. They were emissaries of the youth group called Pavasarininkai, an organization similar to the Knights of Lithuania here. These two associations had forged strong ties of friendship from the time the homeland had recovered its independence in 1918. Transporting a display of Lithuanian handcrafts, the men were concluding a good-will tour of fifty-two Lithuanian settlements in the United States, with Providence one of their final appearances. In their travels they had received expense donations of \$1,086.20; their actual expenditures had been \$923.31, and they handed over the difference to the Knights as a token gift in behalf of their Pavasaris organization.

In its deliberations the 1936 convention honored the Providence pastor, Father Vaitekunas, by selecting him as national spiritual advisor, a post he held for four successive terms through the summer of 1940. A generation later, when the small Providence council of Knights again took on the giant task of hosting the national convention—this time from August 17 to 21, 1977—the post was occupied by another notable local priest, Father Anthony Jurgelaitis, a Dominican from Providence College.

The Postwar Years: 1945-1969

After World War II the Lithuanian colony was still clearly visible, though showing signs of decline. In an insightful description in the *Lithuanian World Directory* in 1958, Bronius Simonavicius indicated that in 1950 the local Lithuanian enclave included 426 natives of Lithuania and 705 second-generation Lithuanians, i.e., American-born sons and daughters of immigrant parents. Adding several hundred to this number to account for the suburbs and outlying towns, it is reasonable to judge that there were some 1,500 Rhode Islanders of Lithuanian heritage at the half-century mark. Curiously, Simonavicius estimated that there were as many as 1,700 parishioners belonging to St. Casimir Parish. Perhaps he included non-Lithuanians who had entered mixed-ethnic marriages or who lived in the neighborhood and attended the Lithuanian church.

Among the Lithuanian organizations active at this time were the Citizens Club (American Lithuanian Citizens' Beneficial Club), housed at 475 Smith Street, Providence, in a brick building with a bar and function room (Bronius Simonavicius, president; J. A. Waitonis, vice president; V. Bankauskas, recording secretary; John T. Balkus, treasurer; B. Straznickas, financial secretary); the Catholic Club (Lithuanian American Citizens' Roman Catholic Beneficial Club), owners of Klaipeda Park in Smithfield (Edward Ciocys, president); the Lithuanian Roman Catholic Alliance of America, Chapter 273 (Anthony O. Avizinis, secretary); the Lithuanian National Alliance of America, Chapter 347 (V. Bankauskas, secretary); and the combined St. John and Gediminas societies (Anthony O. Avizinis, president). A history of the Lithuanian Catholic Alliance published in 1956 gives a breakdown of Providence membership showing eighteen insurance members and twenty-one insurance and benefit members.

Many participants in the above organizations were graduates of the local ethnic parochial school. Shifting populations, however, provided the school with few new candidates, nor was there an influx of new immigrants whose children could take advantage of that small but efficient facility. In 1967, a generation after the sisters' arrival in Providence, the number of children in St. Casimir's School had dwindled to thirty-five. The religious community in charge had gone beyond the limits of prudence by disproportionately maintaining three teachers for these youngsters. Accordingly, the superior general informed the pastor and parents that only a minimum of ninety

pupils could possibly justify further assignment of sisters in Providence. In response, the pastor, Father Vaclovas (Wenceslaus) Martinkus, made a vain last-ditch effort to recruit students, but he attracted only sixty-nine for the 1968-69 school year. "The school has no library or science facilities, and adding them would be too great an investment for the size of the parish," said Monsignor Arthur Geoghegan, school superintendent of the Catholic Diocese of Providence. Doubtless, neighborhood non-Lithuanian parents would gladly have sent their children to St. Casimir School; but without public aid, such as tuition credits to parents, the parochial institution toppled, as did four other Providence parochial schools that same year.

Cherished memories of their dedicated teachers linger in the minds of St. Casimir graduates. From 1938 to 1968 the school's principal-superiors were Sisters Ignatia, Gregory, Theresine, Aquinata, Edwardine, Thomasine, and Barbara, most of whom served six-year terms. Staff members included Sisters Amanda, Catherine, Augusta, Vita, Richard, Emilia, Mildred, Antanina, Magdelita, Julia, Tarsilla, Terrence, Leonette, Cornelia, Georgine, Amelia, Ignatia, Eulalia, Sabina, Gregory, Domicella, Emma, Corona, Ludgarda, Edmundine, Priscilla, and Delphine. Most of these nuns have died or retired. Still, the salubrious life-style of the convent tends to foster longevity. For example, Sister Hilda was still teaching first grade at St. Bede School in Holland, Pennsylvania, at the start of the 1988-89 school year. (A note on names: Since religious women in Roman Catholic communities often numbered in the hundreds, inventive superiors concocted innumerable variants of both male and female names to distinguish the members. When sisters began to obtain drivers' licenses and various federal and state benefits, however, it became necessary for them to begin using their original family names.)

A high percentage of St. Casimir School youngsters, well-grounded in the three Rs—as well as the fourth and chief R, religion—went to high school at LaSalle Academy, a Catholic facility run by the Christian Brothers, located in Providence at the junction of Smith Street and Academy Avenue. A significant number also ventured into college life. Members of the Kachanis family, for example, moved on to the University of Rhode Island, while the Cyronak family was represented at Rhode Island College; some of the Savickas clan matriculated at Yale, as did J. Adamonis and P. Stoskus; V. Savickas studied at Brown University; and A. Gumauskas went to Boston College. Some Lithuanians went with other first- and second-

generation local ethnics to Providence College, which was chartered in 1917 to serve that segment of Rhode Island's population.

There have been scores of Lithuanian professionals. These have included Tufts University-trained orthodontist John Kacevicius; engineer John Scott (Skackauskas), a graduate of Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and chemical engineer John Simkevicius, a Brown University graduate. Other Lithuanians took their place in the ranks of teachers, musicians, nurses, and financial consultants.

In sports, the Osmanski (Asmanskis) brothers of Providence—



Bill (kneeling) and Joe Osmanski. Photo by Acme Photos/UPI, courtesy of the Providence Journal Company.

William and Joseph—enriched the world of football with their exploits. Bill Osmanski became a star fullback at Holy Cross College in Worcester and then went on to achieve all-pro status in his heyday with the Chicago Bears, with whom he played in five National Football League championship games. In his very first season he led the league in rushing with 699 yards, an excellent figure when one remembers the shorter season of that era. His career with the Bears, interrupted by military service (1943 to 1945), spanned the years from 1939 to 1946. For a time he coached the team at his college alma mater; then, leaving the world of football, he practiced dentistry in Chicago until his retirement in 1987. He was inducted into the Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame in the spring of 1978.

Bill's brother Joe also carved himself a niche in sports history when he played professional football from 1946 to 1949. During his time with the Chicago Bears, he briefly provided that team with a brother backfield tandem. In his last season, 1949, he played for the New York Bulldogs. After retiring from football, Joe became a Chicago attorney and is still practicing on a limited basis at the time of this writing.

One other Lithuanian American from Providence also reached the ranks of professional football. Albert Russas (Rusas), a graduate of the University of Tennessee, played tackle for the Detroit Lions in 1949.

Religious Vocations

One measure of the vitality of an immigrant community is its ability to generate vocations to the religious life. On this count, Providence fared well. Despite St. Casimir's small size and relatively brief lifetime (dating only from the early 1920s), the parish nurtured a disproportionate number of vocations, namely, three priests and three nuns. Parish native Father Anthony Casey (Kacevicius) briefly assisted Father Vaitekunas in 1941. In addition, two men from the parish entered the Marian Fathers: the Reverend Anthony Svedas and the Reverend Joseph Kuprevicius. The religious women included two Casimirite sisters, M. Maura (Marijona Virbickas) and Marianne Kacevicius, and Sister M. Apolinara (Emilija Urnikas) of the Immaculate Conception Sisters. The last-named managed and operated the Immaculate Press at her Putnam, Connecticut, headquarters for over thirty years.



The Reverend Anthony Svedas

Space limitations allow just a sketch of one of the most colorful of these people, Anthony Svedas. Svedas (meaning "Swede") was born in Providence on August 13, 1909. He was one of seven children in the family of Dominic and Eva (Narkauskas) Svedas. Dominic, a native of the Dzukija section of Lithuania, had served four "miserable" years in the tsarist army. To avoid further service, he fled to England and then on to the United States when the Russo-Japanese war broke out in 1904. While in the North End of Providence, he managed to send to Lithuania for his wife and three small children. Infant Anthony was baptized at the Polish church of St. Adalbert in Providence, where the family name was entered as "Szwed." Though he knew no Polish, he attended catechism classes in that language! Not atypical of Polish and Lithuanian immigrants in Providence (as in immigrant settlements elsewhere), the Svedas family lacked a clear sense of ethnic identity. Growing up, young Anthony thought he was Polish, though Lithuanian was the tongue spoken in the Svedas home. When the Lithuanian parish of St. Casimir was inaugurated after World War I, the Svedas clan, along with many other immigrants, clarified their Lithuanian ethnicity, and the family officially restored Svedas as the family surname.

After attending George J. West Grammar School and Providence Technical High School, Anthony entered the Marian Fathers Novitiate in Clarendon Hills, Illinois, on July 15, 1925, to complete his secondary school studies. He pursued his philosophy program at the Sulpician seminary in Montreal from September 1929 to 1931 and then transferred to the Angelicum University in Rome for four years. He was ordained there on July 15, 1934, and he spent the rest of that summer in Lithuania.

His colorful and varied career included teaching assignments at Marianapolis Preparatory College in Thompson, Connecticut, and at his congregation's novitiate in Clarendon Hills, Illinois (September 1935 to May 1942). From 1942 to 1946 he served two terms as a military chaplain in the Pacific at places with such exotic names as Aitutaki, Cook Islands; Noumea, New Caledonia; and Bougainville, Solomon Islands. Perhaps his most poignant chaplain's mission was with the Regimental Twenty-first Infantry on Mindanao Island. During his eighty-nine days of combat there, 178 soldiers were killed and some 700 were wounded.

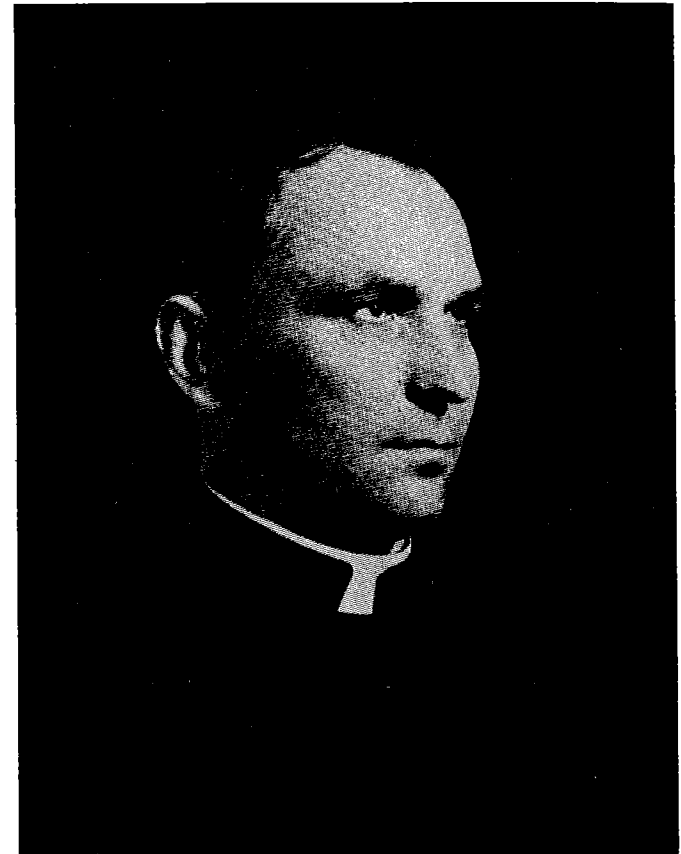
After being recalled to the military in 1950 during the Korean War, Father Svedas served two and a half years at the air force base in Sampson, New York, and two more years in Alaska. In 1960 he volunteered for the Marian Fathers mission at the parish of St. Casimir in Rosario, Argentina. There he dedicated more than two and a half decades of his priesthood to the foreign missions. As of this writing (summer 1989), Father Svedas resides at the headquarters of the Marian Fathers in Chicago. What a trail of self-sacrifice this intrepid Providence native, now an octogenarian, has blazed around the globe!

Twilight Years

The days after World War II saw a major change in the ethnic enclave. As the energetic Father Vaitekunas entered his twilight years, he was in need of an assistant. In 1941 he had received a newly ordained native of the parish, Father Anthony Casey (Kacevicius), to help out for a brief spell. By the early 1950s Vaitekunas needed aid more earnestly. The postwar émigrés provided such a priest. Among the twenty thousand Lithuanian DPs (displaced persons) who reached the United States were several hundred clergy. One of them was a physical giant of a man, the exuberant, curly-haired Father Vaclovas (Wenceslaus) Martinkus.

Father Martinkus, a Lithuanian native with a resonant, mellow voice, was born on March 15, 1909, in the village of Vaiteliai. He studied at the seminary in Telsiai and was ordained on March 21, 1935. After five years as assistant at the Mazeikiai parish, he assumed the role of pastor at Zidikai. In the face of the 1944 Russian invasion of the German-occupied homeland, Martinkus left for Bavaria, where he continued theological duties. From June 28, 1946, to September 15, 1950, the priest acted as pastor to his fellow countrymen in the DP camp at Lubeck, Germany. When he arrived in the United States, he briefly took a chaplain's assignment at a nursing home, where he began learning English. On May 29, 1952, he assumed assistant's duties at St. Casimir in Providence.

With the death of Father Vaitekunas on July 24, 1963, Martinkus became pastor. For about a year he was helped by a fellow displaced person, Father John Maknys, Ph.D. Meanwhile Martinkus's intense Lithuanian spirit bubbled over beyond parish chores. Martinkus lent a willing hand to summertime camps of the transplanted Lithuanian organization Ateitis (Future) at their college-student level. In 1964 he took up the reins as national president of the United Lithuanian Relief Fund, a post he held until 1972. He generously supported



The Reverend Vaslovas Martinkus

every Lithuanian cause, especially the press, and was instrumental in the resettlement of dozens of compatriots in Rhode Island. As many as seventy such émigrés came to the Providence area.

At the parish level, Martinkus witnessed the flight of parishioners to the suburbs and the inevitable aging of his congregation. As numbers dwindled in the parish school, the pastor was forced to close grades 7 and 8 for the 1966-67 school year. By the next year the enrollment had fallen to sixty-one students, only half of whom came from Lithuanian roots. Consequently, when St. Casimir School closed its doors, an attempt was made to revive the earlier "Saturday School" to preserve ethnic appreciation. Classes conducted by the Lithuanian Sisters of the Immaculate Conception

from Putnam, Connecticut, were held at nearby St. Patrick's School on Smith Street. For the 1968-69 school year the parish managed to recruit eighteen children for this instruction. Father Martinkus also endured other adjustments and terminations. He saw the St. John Society combine with the Gediminas Society for a time and eventually disappear. In 1969 the two citizens clubs also merged, and at this writing (1989) the combined organization still survives at its hall on Smith Street.

When the parish observed its golden jubilee in 1969, its commemorative booklet raised the question of St. Casimir's future. True, the ethnically fervent faithful backed St. Casimir Church out of proportion to their numbers, even as their ranks thinned. "The sole hope of the parish," realistically admitted the anonymous writer (most likely Martinkus himself), "hinges on all who experience their Lithuanian roots," renewing themselves with a love for God and their forebears' homeland, and reviving affection for the church built by the sweat of their parents and grandparents.

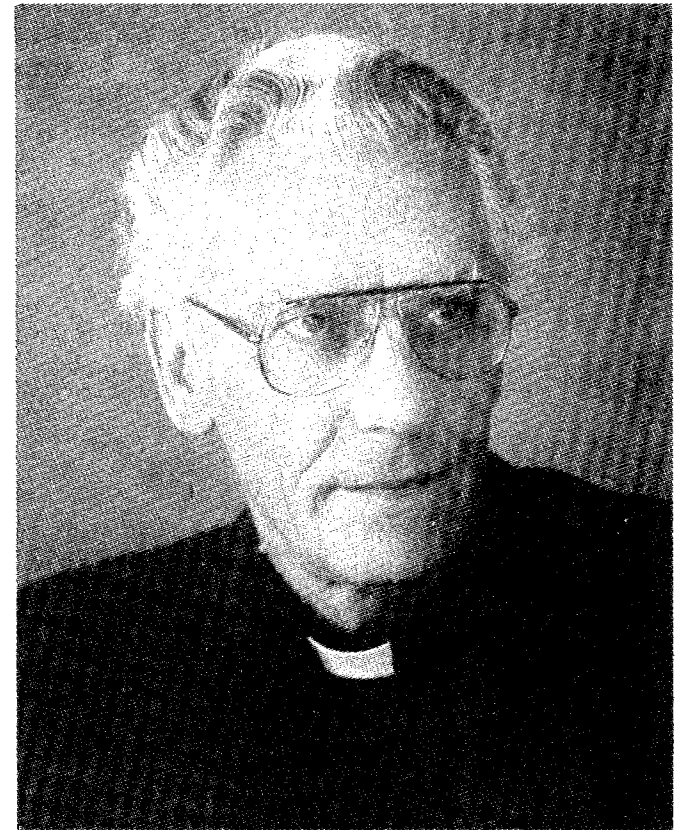
The nationwide bicentennial of American independence in 1976 gave Rhode Islanders of Lithuanian roots a powerful incentive to mobilize. Bertha Stoskus and Jean (Krasinkas) Coughlin, chairpersons of the Lithuanian Heritage Subcommittee of the state bicentennial commission, aided greatly by Saule Satas, spearheaded a number of events as part of the general celebration. In June 1976 there was a major expression of renewed ethnic spirit at Warwick Mall, where viewers were treated to elaborate displays of Lithuanian amber, wood carvings, woven sashes, postage stamps, and straw Christmas tree ornaments. A forty-voice children's choir from St. Casimir Parochial School of Brockton, Massachusetts, and a folk dance troupe from that city provided live entertainment. Also featured was the Sodauto ethnographic ensemble of the Greater Boston area. Elsewhere, a large throng of worshipers gathered on June 13 at the State House plaza for an outdoor Mass.

Institutional Crisis

On the morning of November 18, 1980, Father Vaclovas Martinkus, the burly pastor of St. Casimir Parish, was fatally stricken with a heart attack while shoveling snow. His sudden death left a major gap in the Providence community and in Lithuanian circles at large, and it precipitated a church crisis as well.

The future of the declining ethnic parish of St. Casimir posed

a dilemma for the Diocese of Providence. In December 1980, church officials suggested a merger with the neighboring parish of St. Patrick, an old territorial parish dating from 1841, which was temporarily worshipping in the basement hall of its parochial school. St. Patrick's was in need of a church, which St. Casimir Parish might provide. This seemingly wise proposal resulted in an explosive meeting on December 11, at which emotions prevented a proper assessment of the plight of each parish. In the face of this heated response, the head of the diocese, Bishop Louis E. Gelineau, graciously abandoned the merger suggestion. Instead, he assigned Father Valdemaras Cukuras, Ph.D., borrowed from the neighboring diocese



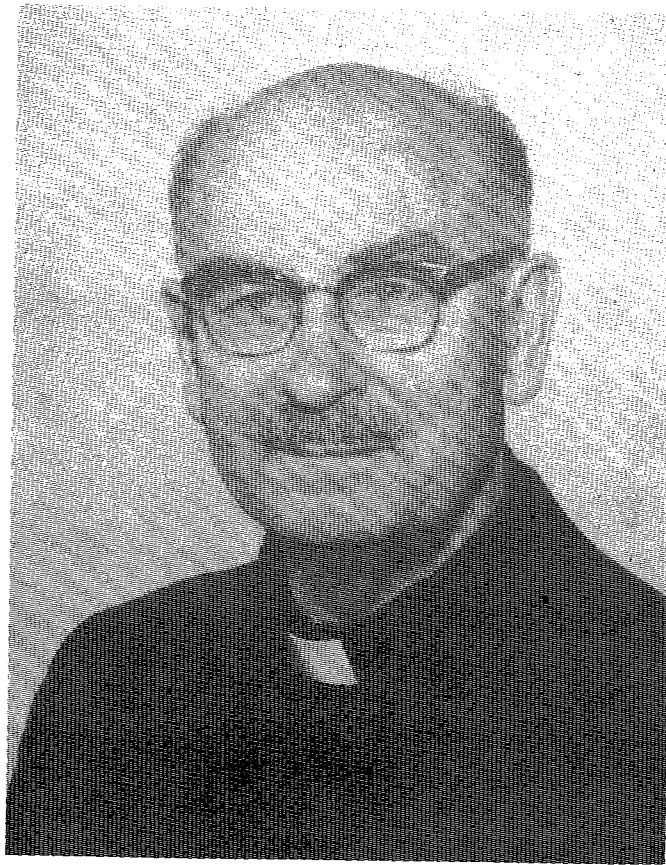
The Reverend Valdemaras Cukuras

of Norwich, Connecticut, as administrator of St. Casimir. This erudite priest was recruited by the parishioners with the sympathetic help

of Bishop Daniel P. Reilly of the Norwich diocese. With an academic background in philosophy, Cukuras had served on the faculty at Wesleyan College in Middletown, Connecticut, from 1958 to 1965 and was chairman of his department. He had also taught philosophy and theology at the now defunct Annhurst College in Woodstock, Connecticut.

(Ironically, the Providence parishioners' insistence on remaining an uncombined ethnic parish may prove to have been a tactical misjudgment. According to a loyal, committed Lithuanian close to St. Casimir's, who confided his view to this writer, the parishioners' victory may well bring on the demise of the parish sooner than it otherwise might have occurred.)

After a brief stint of only a few years, Cukuras, unaccustomed

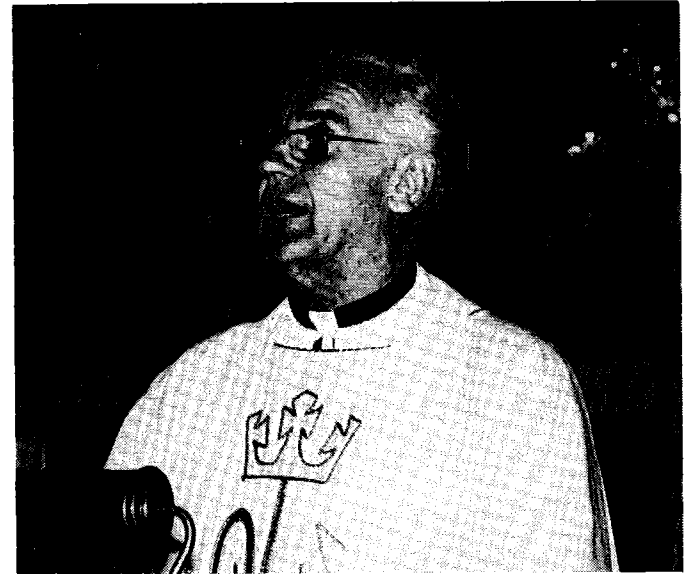


The Reverend Izidorius Gedvila

to full-time pastoral chores, retreated to Putnam, Connecticut, where he has since served as chaplain at the Immaculate Conception Sisters convent. From there he continues a diversified apostolate in the Lithuanian community at large. During his stay at Providence he endeared himself sufficiently to be recalled to St. Casimir Church on July 2, 1988, to observe his golden jubilee in the priesthood.

At the time of Cukuras's departure, efforts were made behind the scenes to locate a suitable replacement. One was found in Montana in the person of Father Izidorius (Isadore) Gedvila. Accustomed to the wide-open spaces of cattle and prairie country, the motorcycle-riding Gedvila was now faced with the challenge of a congested metropolis like Providence. Though a priest of the diocese of Helena, Gedvila spent his remaining active days at St. Casimir until his retirement to Florida in the fall of 1988.

Now another personnel crisis arose. Where could another available Lithuanian-speaking priest be found? The curious odyssey of Father Adolph Klimanskis, from Lithuania via Argentina, New

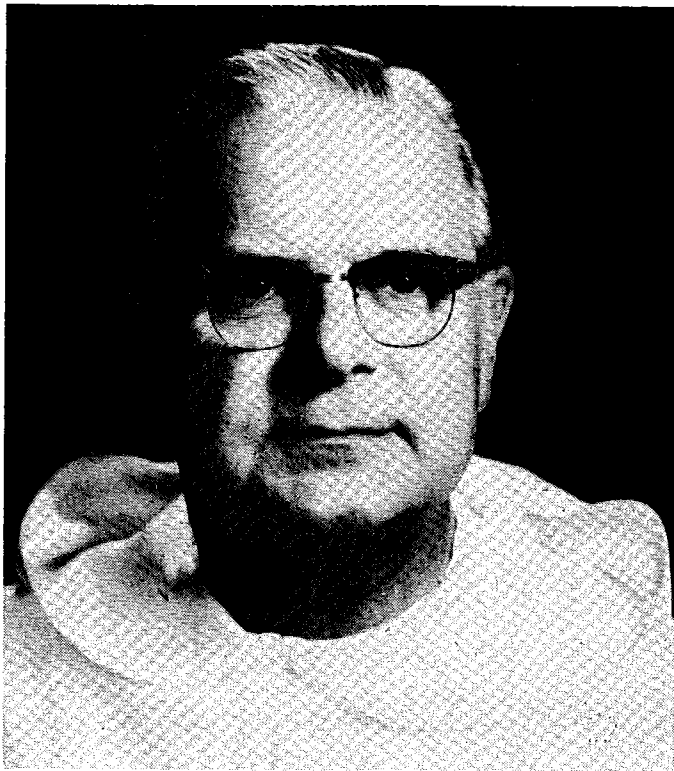


The Reverend Adolph Klimanskis

York, and Connecticut to Providence, provided the answer. This roving priest was born in the homestead of Luoke in the county of Telsiai. In the early 1930s his father ventured to Argentina, seeking financial betterment. After returning briefly to his native land, in

February 1937 he went back to Argentina, this time with his eleven-year-old son Adolph (the boy's mother joined them later). Consequently the lad received his primary schooling in his homeland and in Argentina and his subsequent high school and seminary training in that South American country. He celebrated his first Solemn Mass at the Lithuanian Marian Fathers' parish of Gate of Dawn (Ausros Vartai) in Avellaneda, Argentina, on December 10, 1953.

In 1970 Father Adolph came to the United States, where he did pastoral work in several Spanish-speaking parishes of the Brooklyn diocese. Later he earned a master's degree in Spanish literature at Hunter College. He then joined the diocese of Norwich, Connecticut, where he served at Moosup until 1979. He also became director of the Spanish Apostolate for the New London region. It was from Connecticut that he was recruited for the vacancy at St. Casimir in Providence.



The Reverend Anthony Jurgelaitis

Possibly the precarious status of the parish would have arisen sooner, had it not been for the longtime aid of another clergyman, Dominican Father Anthony Jurgelaitis. Intimately linked to the area's Lithuanians, Father Jurgelaitis is by now a bit of a legend on the local scene. He was born in Boston on June 9, 1917, and was graduated from the prestigious Boston Latin School. After two years' attendance at Providence College, he obtained his undergraduate degree from St. Thomas College in River Forest, Illinois, in 1940. Ordination followed on June 7, 1944, into the Dominican family of priests. In 1945 the Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., awarded Jurgelaitis a lectorate in sacred theology for his dissertation "On the Time of Increase of Charity." He won a second doctorate in Spanish literature at the Pontifical University of Lima, Peru, in 1948. The next year he returned to Providence College to teach Spanish language and literature. In 1959 he became chairman of PC's Department of Foreign Languages. Meantime he was active in Lithuanian activities as a preacher, retreat-master, and weekend helper at area Lithuanian parishes, including St. Casimir in Brockton, Massachusetts, as well as St. Casimir's in Providence. His lengthy career in Rhode Island has earned him recognition as an outstanding ethnic and educational leader. At the national level he was spiritual advisor for the Knights of Lithuania from 1975 to 1988 and merited honorary membership in that association.

The Lithuanian Heritage in the 1990s

Not all prominent Lithuanian Americans are in the ranks of the clergy. Indeed, one of the Rhode Islanders most active in behalf of Lithuanian goals is not even of Lithuanian heritage. A Central Falls resident for many years and a resident of Bristol since 1976, Victor G. Mathieu, of French Canadian roots, has vigorously promoted the Lithuanian cause for more than two decades. Mathieu benefited early from instruction by the Sacred Heart Brothers when he boarded at Mount Saint Charles in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. His intellectual curiosity about the plight of the Acadians in the eighteenth century aroused a parallel sensitivity to the agony of another minority, the Lithuanians. In 1944 he married Beatrice Savickis, a daughter of Lithuanian immigrants who had settled in Rhode Island, and in the following years he gained access to Lithuanian circles, especially through the Knights of Lithuania, of whose Council 103 he became a "social" (associate) member. Mathieu attributes much of his



Elizabeth Tribushis, Beatrice Mathieu, and Victor Mathieu at the State House on Lithuanian Independence Day, February 16, 1991.

inspiration to his pastor, Father Ronald Gadoury, who urged him to align himself with the Lithuanian cause. On the occasion of the priest's golden anniversary, Mathieu and his wife presented the jubilarian with a traditional Lithuanian hand-carved wayside cross as a token of esteem.

Since 1976 Mathieu has annually arranged for services in his territorial parish of St. Mary to memorialize the "Tragic Days of June" of the early 1940s, a kind of Lithuanian holocaust, when Soviet soldiers herded thousands of Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians into boxcars destined for Siberia, while injuring and slaughtering untold numbers on the spot. The yearly Saturday afternoon Mass has drawn more and more worshipers, with guests attending from near and far. Mathieu has invited area priests, bishops, and other dignitaries to participate in these devotions. A South Providence native, Bishop Daniel P. Reilly of the Norwich, Connecticut, diocese, has been a popular visitor. The second Saturday of June is now a day filled with Lithuanian hymns, sung by participants of Lithuanian descent—all owing to the efforts of just one man!

There seems no limit to what Mathieu has been willing to do for the Lithuanian cause; witness his trip with his Lithuanian American wife to the International Human Rights Conference on November 6, 1986, in Vienna. There, bearing a banner of the Providence Knights of Lithuania, the two Rhode Islanders marched in a Lithuanian freedom demonstration at famed St. Stephen Square and prayed at an ecumenical service in St. Stephen's Cathedral. Two days later the Mathieus were in London to attend the convention of the Supreme Lithuanian Liberation Committee. Victor's memoirs of Vienna and London are recorded in the January 1987 issue of *Vytis*, the Knights' Journal.

Mathieu's efforts inspired Representative Rene M. Lafayette of Woonsocket to sponsor a General Assembly resolution declaring



Raymond Gallison (Gelezimis), executive director of the Rhode Island Heritage Commission, reads Governor DiPrete's proclamation of Lithuanian Independence Day on February 16, 1989. Looking on are Father Anthony Jurgelaitis, V. Kiela, E. Ruth Krecioch, Dr. Danute Katelyte-DeCesare, Representative Rene Lafayette, Representative Helen McDermott, C. Valiuskis, and Father Izidorius Gedvila.

February 16 an annual day of observance for Lithuanian independence. Cosponsors included Representatives Gaetano D. Parella, Joseph Casinelli, and Helen McDermott. The entire proceedings were captured on videotape, with copies sent to Lithuanian centers around the world. There is talk that a copy was smuggled into Lithuania.

When Lithuanians have partaken of their centuries-old Christmas Eve supper ("Kucios") at St. Casimir Church hall, Mathieu, his wife, and her two sisters Ruth Krecioch and Bertha Stoskus have usually been in the midst of the swirl of activities, as was Bertha's late husband John. The chief feature of this meal (a tradition also observed by Poles, Ukrainians, Slovaks, and others of East



Sister M. Palmira of Putnam, Connecticut, explains the meanings of the traditional Lithuanian Christmas Eve supper in December 1976. The presentation was part of Rhode Island's observance of the American bicentennial. Photo courtesy of the Providence Journal Company.

European origin) is the sharing of large wheat wafers (*plotkeles*, or *kaledaiciai*). Each participant passes around his own wafer so others may break off a small portion. After this mutual sharing, everyone consumes the collected pieces as a sign of unity. Prayers for the dead are offered, especially for those who have died since the last Christmas Eve observance; and then the meal itself—a variety of meatless dishes—is served.

The tradition of the Kucios was observed at St. Casimir Church hall as late as December 1986. It was sponsored at that time by the local chapter of the Lithuanian Community (Bendruomene), an

international umbrella network seeking to preserve Lithuanian culture. Treasurer Aldona Kairys explained the Christmas Eve practice, especially for the benefit of guests of other ethnic backgrounds, and Father Anthony Jurgelaitis's Lithuanian-language class offered a musical presentation.

Although Rhode Islanders of Lithuanian heritage are scattered about the state, the church of St. Casimir in Providence has remained their institutional symbol. Beyond proportion to their numbers, many of these sturdy citizens have proudly maintained their ethnic background in a variety of celebrations and commemorations. Come what may, they and their immigrant forebears have left an indelible mark upon the history of the polyglot and multiethnic state of Rhode Island.

Epilogue

By the time this brochure was ready for the press, Lithuania had repeatedly captured international attention. Few, if any, people of Lithuanian heritage had dared to dream that they would witness such extraordinary changes and upheaval in their lifetime. Political analysts and historians will be busy for some time to come attempting to assess all that has been happening. One senses the unfolding drama in this selective calendar of events:

- May 1988: The pope appoints Vincentas Sladkevicius as the first Lithuanian cardinal in modern times.
- February 5, 1989: Bishop Julijonas Steponavicius reenters the Vilnius cathedral, which has been surrendered by the Soviets (they had used it as an exhibition hall).
- March 4, 1989: The sarcophagus of St. Casimir is returned to the renovated St. Casimir chapel in the Vilnius cathedral.
- October 1989: The first issue of *Caritas*, a Catholic monthly, appears in Lithuania.
- 1989: Father Alfonsas Svarinskas, a survivor of twenty-one years of Soviet prisons and labor camps, tours the United States.
- January 11, 1990: Mikhail Gorbachev pays an unprecedented three-day visit to Lithuania.
- February 24, 1990: The pro-independence movement Sajudis sweeps the elections to the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet, capturing 80 percent of the 141 seats in the parliament.
- March 11, 1990: After a vote of 124 to 0 (with 9 abstentions) in the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet, Vytautas Landsbergis, newly elected president, declares Lithuanian independence restored.
- April 1990: In retaliation, Gorbachev imposes a blockade on Lithuania, including a ban on visitor visas. The Lithuanian Republic offers a freeze on its independence decree for 100 days to allow for negotiations. By summer the Soviet blockade is eased.

- 1990: Sister Nijole Sadunaite, a survivor of Siberian camps as a prisoner-exile, tours the United States.
- January 13, 1991: Fourteen unarmed civilians are massacred outside the radio and television building in Vilnius.
- August 1991: A Soviet coup to oust Gorbachev fails, and the Soviet Union subsequently collapses.
- September 2, 1991: The United States follows other countries in recognizing Baltic independence.
- September 17, 1991: President Vytautas Landsbergis signs documents in New York as the Baltic states are admitted to the United Nations.