

bridges

Often referred to as the
"Iron Lady"



Dalia Grybauskaitė
President-elect of
Lithuania



june 2009

L I T H U A N I A N A M E R I C A N N E W S J O U R N A L

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Photo by Gema M. Kreivėnas, Media, PA

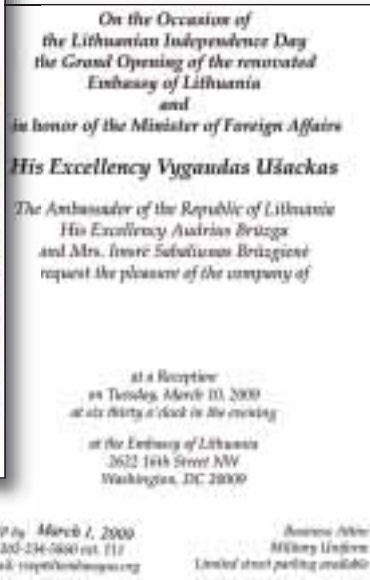
Jurta

(a type of a dwelling that was used by Lithuanians deported to Siberia. From Soviet GULAGS in Siberia) it is located in Rumšiškės ethnographic museum, Lithuania.

Cover: The photo is by Rimas Gedeika of the reopening of the Lithuanian Embassy in Washington, D.C. Lithuania's Foreign Minister Vygaudas Ušackas had cut the opening ceremony ribbon. The article is on page 11.



Formal Invitation to the grand opening of the newly renovated Embassy, the art work by Gintaras Jocius



A DREAM FULFILLED

After more than two years of hammering, chiseling, nailing, the newly renovated Lithuanian Embassy in Washington, D.C. was reopened on March 10, 2009. And what a grand reopening it was !!!

More than 250 invited guests attended the ceremony. There were foreign diplomats, State Department employees, high ranking military officers from various countries, businessmen, twelve of Lithuania's Honorary Consuls, and members of the Lithuanian American Community. Among those attending were Lithuania's Foreign Minister Vygaudas Ušackas, Lithuania's Ambassador to America and Mexico, Audrius Brūzga, U.S Air Forces Chief of Staff, General Norton A. Schwartz, Congressman John

Shimkus (a proud Lithuanian and a Co-Chairman of the Baltic Caucus) and the former Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert.

Ambassador A. Brūzga opened the ceremonies with a short introductory speech and then invited the evening's guest of honor, Lithuania's Foreign Minister Vygaudas Ušackas to say a few words. Minister Ušackas preceded Ambassador A. Brūzga as Ambassador to the United States. It was under his leadership that the expansion plans were designed and work begun. Now, several years later, he was back see his dream become a reality.

In his opening remarks Minister Ušackas stated, "This

Continued on page 14



Lithuania's Foreign Minister Vygaudas Ušackas cutting the opening ceremony ribbon.



Lithuania's Honorary Consuls



Ambassador A. Bružga, Foreign Minister V. Ušackas, Former Speaker of the House, D. Hastert, Congressman J. Shimkus, U.S.A.F. Chief of Staff N. A. Schwartz.



Foreign Minister Vygaudas Ušackas presents a token of appreciation to one of the projects architects



Congressman John Shimkus addressing the guests



Atty. Paul Domalakes, Knights of Lithuania and treasurer of C-144 and Major J. Ferrara, PA National Guard.

year our country is marking many important dates, that is, the millennium of Lithuania's name, Vilnius-European Capital of Culture 2009, also this building in Washington, which has been the premises of the Lithuanian legation and subsequently Embassy for 85 years is marking its one hundredth anniversary. This year we will also celebrate the fifth anniversary of Lithuania's membership in NATO and the European Union. For all this time Lithuania has been a responsible strategic U.S. partner. This renovated, one hundred year old, Embassy building symbolizes the continuity of Lithuania as a country, which has stood up to the Soviet tanks and continues its history towards future posterity."

After the greetings and speeches were finished the ceremony was concluded with Foreign Minister Vygaudas Ušackas cutting the official ceremonial ribbon.

Then it was time for old friends to talk about old times, time to make new friends, time to enjoy the warm Lithuanian hospitality and its variety of culinary delights. It was time to explore the new, greatly expanded premises.

So, the next time you're in Washington, D.C. make sure you visit the new Embassy. You'll be pleasantly surprised!!!

Rimas Gedeika

Photos by Rimas Gedeika

Rimas Gedeika lives in New Jersey. He is a member of the National Executive Committee of the Lithuanian American Community serving as Vice- President for Special Projects. He is also active in the Lithuanian Sports Community and is the administrator of Bridges.

JURGIS AND IRENE PETKAITIS Honored

Jurgis and Irene Petkaitis of Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church, Hartford, CT received the St. Joseph's Medal of Appreciation from the Archdiocese of Hartford, CT

Jurgis (George) Petkaitis has played an important part in the lives of the parishioners of Holy Trinity Church and the Lithuanian community in Hartford, CT.

The following is a brief account of the life of Jurgis Petkaitis. He was born January 8, 1926, in the village of Pajevonys in Suvalkija in the region of Vilkaviškis in Lithuania. He was the third child in the family of seven children. His love of music had an early start. His father enjoyed playing the concertina with Jurgis, an avid listener. The boy was noticed by Father Pijus Brazauskas, a priest of the local church. He invited him to serve at mass as an altar boy. This is when the priest noticed him looking back towards the organ loft watching and enjoying the choir singing. It was then that Fr. Brazauskas made arrangements with the organist of the church to give him music lessons. This opened the door for Jurgis to the world of music.

In October of 1944, the family left their homeland making their way through Prussia, Poland, Czechoslovakia and finally reaching Austria. After the war ended, Jurgis found shelter in the displaced persons camp in Glasenbach, not far from Salzburg. While living in the camp, Jurgis organized a men's octet and later a mixed chorus. They performed locally and sang for Lithuanian church services. He was also the organist for the American Catholic services in the military chapel at Camp Truscott near Salzburg. Jurgis continued his music studies; piano, organ, music theory and harmony at the Mazarteum Conservatory in Salzburg.

Jurgis immigrated to the United States in 1948 and initially lived with his uncle in Rockville, CT, moving to Hartford in 1949 when he became the organist at Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church where he directed St. Cecelia's choir. In 1952, He became organist at St. Patrick's Church in Hartford

The Spirit of Neringa

Just west of Brattleboro, Vermont, in the modest hamlet of Marlboro, lays Camp Neringa. Neringa is a Lithuanian heritage camp, based on religion and Lithuanian culture. The camp is naturally secluded, up a winding dirt road from Route 9, a route bustling with motorists racing by to their destinations, likely too preoccupied to notice the turnoff. While the location seems distant, it is ideal for campers who are excited to spend their summers away from all distractions.

Cabins and several larger buildings ring an open field that serves as the center of the camp. To the south, six cabins stretch across the top of the field, and, to the west, a row of six cabins runs the length of the clearing. This configuration separates the boys and girls during the summer youth camps. While a majority of cabins have been updated to include a front veranda and more spacious sleeping quarters, three cabins predate Neringa's founding in 1969. Among those older cabins sits a shower house, also built prior to the camp's beginning. The "dušo namelis" has been showing its age as long as I've ever known the camp, which amounts to almost thirty years. It was recently decided that this shower house needed replacement, and the board that governs the camp considered a series of designs of varying shapes and sizes. These designs were on display last summer in the camp cafeteria. I found myself there, one hot afternoon, considering what the camp would look like with a new and different element amongst the old buildings.

My dreaming was interrupted by the musings of the grounds keeper of the camp. The staffer, who hails from generations of Vermonters, is steeped in the history of the place. He explained to me that a decision had been made on the new shower house, and he was very pleased with the choice. Of the various designs,

the decision was made to build a shower house that is practically identical to the original structure, but with a few improvements to aid in snow removal, and other necessary updates. I learned from him that countless Neringa alumni drive up the road in the off-season, seeking the camp they knew many years ago; and every one of them is pleased to find the camp just as they remember it. Throughout its years on that slope in Marlboro, the camp has modernized slowly and only as necessary: the main lodge was updated in 1982, cabins are upgraded as needed, and a new chapel was built in 1989; but the overall appearance of the camp and its spirit has remained purposely consistent. The new shower house will help preserve that continuity.

The Beginning

In 1943 seven girls spent the summer at the residence of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Villa Maria, in Thompson, Connecticut. The next year the Sisters organized a summer camp, which they called Immaculata, for girls of Lithuanian descent at the convent in Putnam, CT. The camp moved to Vermont in 1969, and Camp Neringa was born. 2009 marks the 40th anniversary of Neringa.

In those first years, Sister Paulė Savickaitė of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception was the head of the camp, leading it through its transition from Connecticut to Vermont. The Sisters purchased land that had been used as a riding camp. Sister Paulė likes to recall how early Neringa campers found themselves jumping over construction-related ditches in the midst of Neringa's transformation into a cultural, religious, and educational facility.

In the early 1970s, the role of camp leader was passed on to Sister Ignė Marijosiūtė. Sister Ignė acted as Director of Neringa for 25 years, and many would agree that her spirit, creativity and passion for Neringa made the camp what it is today.



Two years ago I saw Sister Ignè in Lithuania, where she now lives and works. While there, she introduced me to someone she knew, and affectionately referred to me as one of “her children”; it seemed a fitting description. Sister Ignè put her soul into Camp Neringa, and every one of the children who grew up attending the camp truly felt like Sister Ignè was there for them. Those who had the opportunity to work with Sister Ignè have spoken of being in awe of her dedication to the place.

Last summer, while working as a Neringa program director, I spoke from time to time with Dainora Kupčinskaitė, the current Assistant Director of the camp. Dainora spends summers in the same house Sister Ignè used to occupy, and there is a photo of Sister Ignè hanging on the wall. When problems arose we would gaze up at the photo, as if to seek inspiration from Sister Ignè. Her dedication still drives and inspires Camp Neringa, and her motivating slogan can still be heard throughout the camp: Einam, darom! Or, “Let’s go, let’s do!”

Today

In 1996, Sister Ignè moved to Lithuania (eventually assuming the position of Superior General of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary for a considerable amount of time), and Camp Neringa was incorporated as a non-profit organization. A Board of Directors and a full time Executive Director were appointed to oversee the camp. Dana Grajauskaitė was appointed Director after Sister Ignè’s departure, and she thereby assumed responsibility to turn Neringa into a non-profit organization that could sustain itself. This was no easy task, as it has always remained one of the primary goals of Neringa to keep the camp affordable for all children who would like to attend. In 2003, Dana was succeeded by Vida Strazdienė, and Dainora Kupčinskaitė was appointed Assistant Director. Together, Vida and Dainora have embraced new possibilities for Neringa. Not only are there more camps held at Neringa during the summer, but there are more retreats, alumni events, and opportunities to reconnect with friends; today Neringa has become a place that is home to people of all ages, all year-round.

Neringa is certainly made special by the people that surround it, but there is something more, something almost inexplicable, about the camp. The setting is one of serene and natural beauty. Its location, so far away from the distractions of everyday life, allows anyone who spends time there to reconsider the simpler things in life, and to fall under the spell of the place. The camp, to me, has a life force of its own. Free from cell phones and Internet and television, a person is forced to simply be a part of the surrounding natural world. After several days at Neringa, it is perfectly natural for all negative energy to seep away, and for one to be filled with peace. It is inspiring to think of what it must have been like 40 years ago; to visit this place for the first time and sense the possibility of the landscape. It is understandable why Neringa has touched the lives of so many people for so many years.

Neringa was created for children of Lithuanian heritage. Neringa





campers are surrounded by enthusiastic counselors and administrators who are eager to impart their knowledge of Lithuanian language, history, culture and religion. The camp remains a universe unto itself for generations of children: helping to build cultural identity, develop personal wellness, and create life-long friendships. It is reassuring to believe that Neringa will be there for at least 40 more.

Rytas Stankunas

The photos were selected and compiled for Bridges by Antanina Žmuidzinas from the Neringa archives in honor of Neringa's 40th anniversary.

Editor's Note: Congratulations to Neringa. May they continue their successes and celebrate many more anniversaries.



Camp leaders in 1973

ANSWER TO TRIVIA QUESTION

Trivia Quiz on page 15

Answer: Source: Marija Gimbutas book, THE BALTS

"A peculiar cosmogonical tree of the Baltic peoples was the wooden, roofed pole topped with symbols of sky deities-suns, moons, stars-and guarded by stallions and snakes. Right up to the present century, roofed poles as well as crosses with a sun symbol around the cross/arms could be encountered in Lithuania in front of homesteads, in fields, beside sacred springs, or in the forests. They were erected on the occasion of someone's marriage or illness, during epidemics, or for the purpose of ensuring good crops. Though none of these perishable monuments are more than two hundred years old, their presence in pre/Christian times is attested by historic documents describing them as relics of the old religion. Christian bishops instructed the clergy to destroy the poles and crosses before which the peasants made offerings and observed other pagan rites. The Lithuanian roofed poles and crosses managed to escape destruction because the people fixed some Christian symbols to them, and gradually they came under protection of the Catholic Church. They are, nevertheless, monuments stemming from pre/Christian faith, as well as illustrious examples of Lithuanian folk art, their symbolic and decorative elements manifesting direct ties with the art of the Iron Age."

Edward Shakalis

Edward Shakalis is a retired Electrical Engineer and a ham radio operator. He and his son Rick run "The Lithuanian Open" golf tournament.

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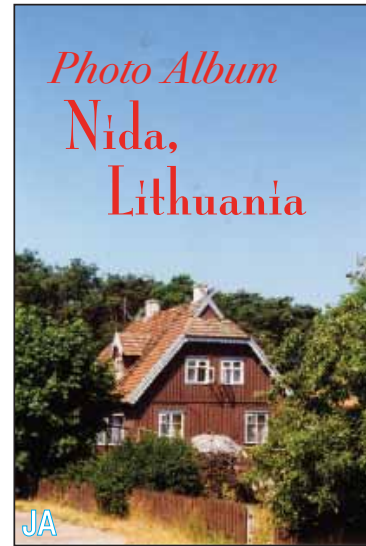
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