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## LITHUANIANS AND POLITICS IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

**ROBERT MEDONIS**

The rapid expansion of western Pennsylvania's economy in the last quarter of the nineteenth century attracted the first Lithuanian immigrants in 1871.<sup>1</sup> Large numbers of Lithuanians however did not emigrate to western Pennsylvania until after 1885, when they began arriving in ever increasing numbers. By 1913, there were an estimated 13,000 Lithuanians in the area.<sup>2</sup> Immigration from Lithuania halted with the start of the First World War and never resumed, because quotas were imposed in 1924 that severely restricted immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe.<sup>3</sup> Only after World War Two did Lithuanian emigration to western Pennsylvania resume, when restrictions were temporarily lifted to allow refugees from Europe to settle in the United States. Several hundred refugees from Displaced Persons Camps came to Pittsburgh, but most promptly moved on to Chicago and Cleveland; only fifteen refugee families settled permanently in western Pennsylvania.<sup>4</sup> Thus the political history of the western Pennsylvania Lithuanians is of the first wave of Lithuanian immigrants to the region and their backgrounds and struggles.

The majority of Lithuanians who came to western Pennsylvania came from Dzūkija; and the culture shock for these Dzūkijans was immense, for they came from a traditional, rural society with tight-knit, extended families and their own dialect and traditional culture. Furthermore Dzūkija, which today comprises parts of southern Lithuania, western Belarus and northeastern Poland, was and still is heavily forested and in some sense a wilderness.<sup>5</sup>

The Pittsburgh that the Dzūkijans came to was a world away from their homeland. The growing, industrial city's grime and congestion provided only one reminder of Dzūkija—the incessant rainy weather. Few Lithuanians brought with them skills applicable to a modern, urban society and so they worked in unskilled jobs in the mills and mines. The majority of Lithuanians in western Pennsylvania lived a paycheck-to-paycheck existence until the 1950s, and very few continued their education beyond high school until the late 50s.<sup>6</sup>

Lithuanians in western Pennsylvania stayed within their own communities until the late 1950s with the Catholics living in ghettos centered on eight national parishes: Ascension (1906), St. Anthony, St. Casimir (1893), St. Isidore (1916), St. Joseph, St. Luke, Sts. Peter and Paul (1901), and St. Vincent de Paul (1903).<sup>7</sup> Ascension, St. Casimir and St. Vincent de Paul were in Pittsburgh proper while the other parishes were located in towns outside the city. Catholics, Nationalists, Socialists, and Communists established and supported twenty-four Lithuanian halls across western Pennsylvania. The Communists had two halls in Esplan and North Side, while the Socialists had a hall in SoHo; the Catholic Nationalists had their halls on the North Side and Wilmerding, and the Catholics had a hall on the South Side.<sup>8</sup>

Lithuanian political activity between 1870 and 1922 focused not on the Republican or Democratic parties, but on restoring Lithuania's independence. Lithuanians in America were the leaders in the drive for independence and by 1900 were responsible for most of the supporting literature, diplomatic activity and funding.<sup>9</sup> Western Pennsylvania was the site of the first declaration of Lithuanian independence, adopted in Pittsburgh on January 11, 1917 by a conference of thirty-three prominent Lithuanian public figures. The resolution was given to the U.S. President and ambassadors from Europe in Washington DC.<sup>10</sup>

The focus on the restoration of Lithuania's independence was not only a matter of justice for Lithuanians, but also pragmatic: many immigrants intended to live in America only long enough to earn enough money to buy land in Lithuania upon their return. The struggle for economic survival left them little time or resources for leisure activities.<sup>11</sup> What little spare time they had was spent on their most important political goal, the campaign for Lithuania's independence.

Some Lithuanians in western Pennsylvania, however were involved in political movements outside Lithuanian nationalism. Before 1919, Lithuanians belonged to labor unions, but showed little interest in them. One reason was that Lithuanians were unfamiliar with American trade unions and another was the American Federation of Labor's campaigning to restrict immigration, which conflicted with the Lithuanian immigrants' support for open immigration. Furthermore, the social divide based on language and culture between native American and Lithuanian workers lessened the union's appeal to the uncultured immigrants.<sup>12</sup>

The Lithuanians, however, were stalwart strikers and the persecution they suffered for their tenacity on strike details was long remembered by them. During the Great Steel Strike of 1919, Allegheny County Sheriff William S. Haddock agreed to steel company demands to create a large force of deputies to control the strikers. Sheriff Haddock deputized 5,000 men, who were selected, trained and paid for by the steel companies.<sup>13</sup> These deputies would attack striking steelworkers wherever and whenever possible. One Lithuanian steelworker recalls meeting other Lithuanian strikers for picket duty at a saloon on 21st Street in Pittsburgh's South Side that they thought was safe because it was seven blocks away from the Jones and Laughlin Steel Company's gate at 27th Street and outside the jurisdiction of the deputies. Mounted deputies attacked these Lithuanian steelworkers outside the saloon anyway, beat them, and arrested them.<sup>14</sup> Many other Lithuanian workers who lived through the steel strike of 1919 harbored bitter memories of these deputies, who attacked and beat them at every opportunity.<sup>15</sup> As the Lithuanians became more established in western Pennsylvania, they began to be more attracted to union ideals. By the 1940s it was commonplace to see portraits of Franklin Roosevelt, the current President and champion of unions, and John Lewis, then president of the mine workers union, hanging in the homes of Lithuanian coal miners throughout western Pennsylvania.<sup>16</sup>

Lithuanians in western Pennsylvania also became involved in leftist politics, but their numbers were never very large. The reasons they joined were varied. Poverty and suffering were probably the most prominent, because the leftists promised a better life in the here and now. Other probable reasons were cultural alienation, limited education, and the politics of envy.<sup>17</sup> The leftists, or freethinkers as they often called themselves, supported their own halls in SoHo, North-side, and Esplen along with a Pittsburgh-based leftist newspaper, *Tiesa* (Truth).<sup>18</sup>

Lithuanian leftists also met at the Socialist Party of America's Pittsburgh headquarters at 233-235 Fifth Avenue or at downtown Pittsburgh's other socialist halls: Moorhead Hall, the Labor Temple, and the Jewish Labor Lyceum.<sup>19</sup> The Socialist Party in Pittsburgh also rented out the Lyceum Theater and Kennywood Park, a local picnic area and amusement park, for larger meetings.<sup>20</sup> With other Central and East European leftists Lithuanians also raised \$18,500 to purchase a building that became the International Socialist Lyceum at James and Foreland Streets, on the North Side of Pittsburgh.<sup>21</sup>

The Socialist Party in Pittsburgh brought in national speakers for rallies, which the Lithuanian leftists would support.<sup>22</sup> Lithuanian leftists also attended speeches given by prominent local leftists such as Jacob Margolis.<sup>23</sup> The Lithuanian Left also joined with other western Pennsylvania progressives at May

Day celebrations, such as the one in Bentleyville, a small, coal mining town located sixty miles south of Pittsburgh, where 1,400 immigrant workers marched to the tune of a Russian Socialist band.[24](#)

Prominent Lithuanian leftists in western Pennsylvania included Dr. Johanna Baltrušaitis, a Socialist, who had a medical practice in the SoHo neighborhood of Pittsburgh. Another Socialist was John Mažiukna, who ran a bowling alley on Pittsburgh's north side and later became an officer of the Lithuanian Communist Club there.[25](#) The most prominent local Socialist was Joseph Stilson, who was active in the American Lithuanian Socialist Association.[26](#) Jonas Gasiunas and John Orman were Pittsburgh's most prominent Lithuanian Communists. They headed the fraternal side of the Lithuanian Communist League, the Lithuanian Workers Alliance. Orman also wrote for the Communist daily, *Laisvė* (Freedom).[27](#)

Each of these leftists, however, appeared to have his own interpretation of leftism. In 1918, Joseph Stilson stated, on behalf of the Lithuanian Socialist Alliance, that "Russia was the freest country in the world, and Lithuania should remain under Russia's control."[28](#) He would later work as a linotypist for the Catholic newspaper *Lietuvių žinios* (Lithuanian News) published by the Rev. Magnus Kazėnas, pastor of Pittsburgh's St. Casimir's Church, from 1942 to 1951.[29](#)

Dr. Johanna Baltrušaitis would advise all the Lithuanian women who came to see her that they should practice contraception.[30](#) In 1940, she supported the Soviet invasion of Lithuania.[31](#) John Mažiukna also supported the 1940 invasion.[32](#) However, he drove his wife to St. Casimir's for Mass every Sunday and would wait for her in the car outside church.[33](#)

The social activities of the Lithuanian communists and Socialists were numerous. They attended meetings and events sponsored by the Pittsburgh Socialists and Communists, but they also held their own social events and activities. Socialists and Communists socialized together at dances, picnics, and cultural events. Each group held its own meetings, where the members would come in, pay their monthly life insurance dues, maybe hear a speaker and socialize at the bar. The Communists held meetings at their own clubs in North side and Esplan, while the Socialists met at their hall, the Lithuanian Literary Society, in SoHo.[34](#)

These groups also brought in prominent Lithuanian leftist speakers, such as Mykolas Mockus, Joseph Sakol, Anthony Bimba, and Roy (Rojus) Mizara.[35](#) Mykolas Mockus was an atheist who, from 1908 to 1919, lectured throughout the United States denouncing Christianity.[36](#) He was a solo lecturer because he was not affiliated with any party or group.[37](#) Joseph Sakol was a Communist who fought in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade during the Spanish Civil War and lectured on his wartime experiences and Marxism.[38](#) Anthony Bimba and Roy Mizara headed up the Lithuanian Communist League and were coeditors of the Communist daily, *Laisvė*. Bimba and Mizara spoke in support of Communism and engaged in fund raising for *Laisvė*.[39](#) These speakers, especially Mockus, were not only met by crowds of sympathetic leftists, but also by hostile Catholics and Nationalists, who would disrupt the talks with catcalls, foot stomping, and heckling.[40](#)

The Soviet invasion of Lithuania in 1940 devastated the Lithuanian Communist League in Pittsburgh. It is estimated that it lost 80 percent of its membership as a result. Not only did the invasion devastate the Communist movement, but it also rearranged the Lithuanian social scene in Pittsburgh. Prior to 1940, the Socialists and Communists socialized together and the Nationalists and Catholics socialized together, but the two larger groupings never mingled.[41](#)

The exception to this was the 1932-1940 campaign to raise money to construct the Lithuanian classroom at the University of Pittsburgh. The executive committee for this campaign had representatives from every political faction in western Pennsylvania, including the leftists, who were represented by Dr. Johanna Baltrušaitis.[42](#)

After the Soviet invasion of 1940, most of the Communists became Socialists and the Socialists started socializing with the Catholics and the Nationalists. All three groups then shunned the Communists. The

only Pittsburgh Socialists who supported the Soviet invasion were John Mažiukna and Dr. Johanna Baltrušaitis. The two were welcomed socially by the Communists, but ostracized by the others.[43](#)

After 1940, the Communist League in Pittsburgh became a mere shadow of its former self, but the Communist occupation of Lithuania provided a new activity—Communist-led tours of occupied Lithuania. The tours started after the independence fighters were finally put down in 1953 and were usually in groups of thirty-five led by a writer from *Laisvė*. These Communist tour groups received excellent hospitality from the Soviet government.[44](#) John Mažiukna, a Socialist, went on several of these tours, bringing back books and films in the process. He offered public viewing of the Communist films as late as the early 1960's.[45](#)

The Lithuanian Catholic response to the leftists was varied. Some reacted by forming local chapters of the Knights of Lithuania. The Knights is a national organization of Lithuanian Catholics, independent of the Church hierarchy, formed in Massachusetts in 1913 to fight leftism, defend Catholicism, and promote Lithuanianism.[46](#) Eight councils were formed in western Pennsylvania in the five years following the founding of the Knights. The towns or neighborhoods and years these councils were founded were: 1914, Homestead; 1916, Pittsburgh-West End; 1916, Pittsburgh-South Side; 1917, Donora; 1917, Bentleyville; 1918, Pittsburgh; 1918, Vandergrift; and 1918, Braddock-Duquesne. All of these councils became defunct during the Great Depression. A council for the greater Pittsburgh metropolitan area was formed in 1947, and has survived to the present day.[47](#)

A local priest, Fr. Joseph Girdis, pastor of St. Vincent de Paul in Esplen in the late 1950s, took a different approach to the challenges posed by the Left. Esplen had a Lithuanian Communist club just two blocks from the church; but, according to Fr. Girdis, the club was declining in the late 1950s, and it was not worth his time to criticize a dying organization.[48](#)

Lithuanians began to be involved in the Democratic and Republican parties by the 1930s. A prominent early Lithuanian Republican was Charles Pikel, who owned several businesses: one was an insurance business on the South Side of Pittsburgh; the other was buying and selling taverns. He was the point man for the Republicans among the Lithuanians and was active from 1939-1954. Pikel had about six or so Lithuanians in his Republican group, his uncle and father were also Republicans.[49](#) Pikel ran unsuccessfully for Prothonotary in 1948.[50](#)

A well-known Lithuanian Democrat was Paul Dargis who held a patronage job under the reign of Pittsburgh's "Tzar" Lawrence. David Lawrence was the Mayor of the city from 1945-1959 and Governor of Pennsylvania from 1959-1963.[51](#) Lawrence controlled the Democratic Party machine in Allegheny County through a patronage system that put many party workers and loyalists on the public payroll.[52](#) Dargis convinced Lawrence that he represented the Lithuanians in Pittsburgh and could turn out their vote, so he was rewarded with a tipstaff job.[53](#)

Dargis also hosted a Lithuanian radio program and was President of the Lithuanian Alliance of America from 1955-1985 when he retired. He aired advertisements for Democratic candidates on his radio program and organized Lithuanian voters for David Lawrence and other Democrats. Dargis was able to recruit twenty-four Lithuanians for these Democratic groups. His political career ran from the early 1950s until the mid 1980s.[54](#)

Another Lithuanian had a different experience with the Democratic Party. In the winter of 1960, Robert Medonis, Sr. decided to get involved in politics. He was a practicing attorney who knew little about running for office, but wanted to get involved at the local level. The only thing he knew about Pittsburgh politics at the time was that Lawrence, a Democrat, was the mayor. He decided to run for ward committeeman, which was the lowest political post one could run for. Medonis took out a nominating petition, got the fifteen signatures required, and filed it.

He did not however ask permission from Lawrence before he filed. He was rewarded for his initiative with harassment from Democratic party functionaries who warned him not to run. These party workers even went to the length of changing the two-way street Medonis lived on to one-way then towing all the illegally parked cars away, while telling the neighbors that Medonis was responsible.

The Pennsylvania Primary Election was held in May; Medonis received five votes. Several months later, Bangy Ambrose, a friend and a city employee, came up to Medonis in the far side of the City-County building in Pittsburgh. Ambrose told Medonis that he had a message for him from Lawrence; and the message was that he might as well as become a Republican, because there was no room for him in the Democratic Party.<sup>55</sup> The Republican Party gained a member and the Democratic Party lost a member that day.

In their 130-year history, Lithuanians in western Pennsylvania have come a long way from Dzūkija. They have organized twice for the restoration of Lithuania's independence and struggled to establish themselves as Pennsylvanians. Their political experiences in western Pennsylvania have been long and varied and continue to this day.

- 1 Antanas Kučas, *Lithuanians in America* (Boston: Encyclopedia Lituanaica, 1975), p. 66.
- 2 Diocese of Pittsburgh Archives, Correspondence, 10/26/94.
- 3 Kučas, *Lithuanians in America*, p. 58.
- 4 Thomas Clarke, "Lithuanian Heritage: The Bitter and the Sweet," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 12/5/79.
- 5 Author's travels in Dzūkija, 7/98 and 2/00; Joseph Brazan, Correspondence 4/14/94; Ray Sabo conversation 7/15/97; Kathleen Sechler, Conversation 5/15/94; Ruth Thon, Correspondence 8/9/00.
- 6 Joseph Girdis, Conversation, 3/25/00.
- 7 William Količius, Conversation, 11/28/94.
- 8 Nancy Binkney, Conversation, 11/15/99; John Cadzow, Conversation, 6/5/00; William Količius, Conversation, 11/28/94; Ruth Thon, Conversation and Correspondence, 5/23/00; Tom Unitas, Conversation, 11/21/94; Joseph Girdis, Correspondence 8/17/01.
- 9 Gary Hartman, "Building the Ideal Immigrant: Reconciling Lithuanianism and 100 Percent Americanism to Create a Respectable Nationalist Movement," 1870-1992 *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Fall 1998, p. 36.
- 10 Kučas, *Lithuanians in America*, p. 105-106.
- 11 David Brody, *Labor in Crisis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 41.
- 12 Ibid., p. 42-43.
- 13 Ibid., p. 148-149.
- 14 Frank Žiaukas, Conversation, 11/25/99.
- 15 Robert Medonis Sr., Conversation, 11/15/99.
- 16 Frank Žiaukas, Conversation, 10/25/99.
- 17 Robert Medonis Sr., Conversation, 11/15/99.
- 18 John Cadzow, Conversation, 12/23/99; William Količius, Conversation, 11/28/94; Tom Unitas, Conversation, 11/21/94; *Encyclopedia Lituanaica*, Vol. IV, (Boston: Encyclopedia Lituanaica, 1965), p. 288.
- 19 Charles H. McCormick, *Seeing Reds* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), p. 31.
- 20 Ibid., p. 31.
- 21 Ibid., p. 60.
- 22 Ibid., p. 70.
- 23 Ibid., p. 101.
- 24 Ibid., p. 99.
- 25 William Količius, Conversation, 11/28/94.
- 26 K. Gineitis, *Amerika ir Amerikos lietuviai* (1925).
- 27 Rudolf Baranik, Correspondence, 11/25/94.
- 28 Kučas, *Lithuanians in America*, p. 102.
- 29 Frank Žiaukas, Conversation, 10/25/99; *Encyclopedia Lituanaica*, Vol. IV, p. 288.
- 30 Viola Stanny, Conversation, 10/22/99.
- 31 William Količius, Conversation, 11/28/94.
- 32 William Količius, Conversation, 11/28/94.
- 33 John Cadzow, Conversation, 6/5/00.
- 34 William Količius, Conversation, 11/28/94.
- 35 Rudolph Baranik, Correspondence, 11/25/94; William Količius, Conversation, 11/28/94; William Wolkovich, Correspondence, 10/15/94.
- 36 William Wolkovich, "Immigrants Who Became Lithuanian By Becoming American," *Lituanus*, Summer 1994, p. 63-65.
- 37 Leonard W. Levy, *Blasphemy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p. 512-516.
- 38 William Količius, Conversation, 11/28/94.

39 Rudolph Baranik, Correspondence, 11/25/94.  
40 Wolkovich, *Immigrants Who Became Lithuanian* By *Becoming American*, p. 64.  
41 William Količius, Conversation, 11/28/94.  
42 William Količius, Conversation, 11/28/94; Ruth Mitchell, *The Lithuanian Classroom* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1942), p. 13-15.  
43 William Količius, Conversation, 11/28/94.  
44 Interview of Eva Mizara by Paul Buhle, New York University: Oral History of the American Left, 6/24/83.  
45 Tom Unitas, Conversation, 11/21/94.  
46 William Wolkovich, *Lithuanian Fraternalism: 75 Years of U.S. Knights of Lithuania* (Brooklyn: Knights of Lithuania, 1988), p. 21.  
47 Ibid., p. 239.  
48 Joseph Girdis, Conversation, 3/25/00.  
49 Darryl A. Wishbar, Conversation, 12/6/99.  
50 William Količius, Conversation, 11/28/94.  
51 Michael P. Weber, *Don't Call Me Boss* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988), p. 398.  
52 Ibid., p. 67.  
53 William Količius, Conversation, 11/28/94.  
54 William Količius, Conversation, 11/28/94.  
55 Robert Medonis Sr., Conversation, 11/15/99 and 7/1/01.

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