

Lithuanian American Support for Lithuania 1918-2018

Summary

Lithuanians living in the United States are the largest group of Lithuanian émigrés in the world. They have always been strong supporters of their homeland and its voice to the world: informing the American government and public as well as other countries in the world about events taking place in their homeland.

During the period of the first World War, Lithuanian Americans of diverse persuasions and beliefs, including Catholics, nationalists, and socialists, formed organizations, raised funds, and effected political actions. On January 10-11, 1917, Lithuanian Americans issued a declaration calling for the independence of Lithuanian territories and their unification into a sovereign state. This declaration was presented to the press and to President Woodrow Wilson.

On March 13, 1918, a plenary session was held, composed of 1200 representatives from various Lithuanian Catholic and nationalist organizations. At the time, the attendees were not yet aware of the declaration of independence that had been issued in Lithuania one month earlier. However, the Lithuanian-American gathering also proclaimed a goal of Lithuanian independence and began a public relations campaign to help assure recognition by the world community of Lithuanian statehood. Information bureaus were set up in Washington DC and New York City. Lithuanian Americans who had served in the U.S. Army began organizing themselves into units for action in Lithuania.

In 1918 and 1919, the U.S. Senate considered the “Lithuanian resolution” to recognize the statehood of the re-emerged country. In May of 1921, Lithuanian-American organizations presented President Warren G. Harding with a petition comprised of a million signatures bound in 138 volumes, demanding official *de jure* recognition of Lithuania as an independent country. The goal was achieved on 27 July 1922, when President Harding signed a bill acknowledging Lithuanian statehood both *de facto* and *de jure*. Once the United States had taken this step, Great Britain, France, Italy, Japan, and other countries followed soon thereafter.

Various Lithuanian-American organizations collected more than one million dollars to fund a public relations campaign to support recognition of Lithuanian statehood. In addition, about 1.9 million dollars in freedom bonds was raised as a loan to the new country. There were also funds sent to Lithuania to support the development of the country's farming, cultural activities, educational system, and economy, and to develop other infrastructure, including the introduction of the *litas* as the new Lithuanian currency. Money earned overseas and sent to relatives and friends in Lithuania contributed to the new country's economy. It has been es-

timated, that over a 20-year period, 400 million *litai* was sent over from America to Lithuania in this manner. Each year, American Lithuanians visiting the homeland as tourists would leave million dollar sums to help the economy. Returning émigrés would usually buy land in Lithuania, most often in rural areas.

There were many actions taken by Lithuanian Americans that kept the name of the new country in the news and the public eye. In 1919-20, a "Liberty Bell" was donated. Specific dates having to do with Lithuanian statehood, such as February 16, and the anniversary year of the reign of Vytautas Magnus (1930) were celebrated. Lithuanian Americans actively participated in World Fairs: in 1926 in Philadelphia, in 1933 in Chicago, and in 1939-40 in New York City. The loss of the capital city Vilnius and its environs served to energize and unify Lithuanian Americans. Committees were formed to help restore Vilnius to the homeland, funds were raised for this purpose. In 1933, the transatlantic flight of U.S. citizens Steponas Darius and Stasys Girėnas served to mobilize and energize Lithuanian Americans, who raised money to fund the flight. In 1935, this transatlantic flight feat was replicated by Felikas Vaitkus, in a plane named "Lituanica II." Lithuanian Americans helped the homeland win European basketball championships in 1937 and 1939. Sport heroes who helped bring attention to Lithuania included swimmer Albina Osipavičiūtė (Osipowich, later known as Van Aken), boxer Juozas Žukauskas (Jack Sharkey), baseball player Vytautas K. (Vito) Tamulis, wrestler Karolis Požela (Karl Pojello), and many others. A large number of Lithuanians took part in the economic and cultural life of the homeland: dr. Jonas Šliūpas, Bronius K. Balutis, Fr. Fabijonas Kemėsis, Julius Kaupas, Leonardas Šimutis, prof. Kazys Pakštas, Julius J. Bielskis, Petras Daužvardis, Magdalena Avietėnaitė and many others.

There were also setbacks, however. As a consequence of an incompletely organized legal system in Lithuania, and because of some unscrupulous government functionaries, in 1920-23, a group of Lithuanian Americans lost sizeable investments made in the homeland. In 1926, a military coup took place in Lithuania, and this disappointed many émigrés in America, especially those with military roots. Nevertheless, during the presidency of Antanas Smetona, a number of accommodations were made regarding the Lithuanian émigré community, and conditions were created for émigrés to participate more easily in Lithuania's economy. Relations between Lithuanian Americans and the government of Lithuania became more cordial and friendly.

Lithuanian Americans were dismayed by the aggression of Lithuania's neighbors in 1938 and 1939, and with the occupation of Lithuania by the Soviet army in 1940. There was strong concern regarding Lithuania's future. By 1941, the three main patriotic groups supporting Lithuania's freedom formed a joint organization, the American Lithuanian Council (ALT – *Amerikos lietuvių taryba*), the purpose of which was to reestablish Lithuania's independence. On 15 October 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt hosted a delegation from this council, and issued a declaration that the

United States did not recognize the forced annexation and occupation of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia by the Soviet Union. This organization (ALT) is still active today. Another major patriotic effort was made during the years 1941-48 by another organization formed to free Lithuania – the American Lithuanian Mission (*Amerikos lietuvių misija*), which was formed by remnants of the Lithuanian Nationalist party.

In 1944, an organization called BALFas (*Bendras Amerikos lietuvių fondas*; the United Lithuanian Relief Fund of America), was created by leaders from various Lithuanian American organizations with the purpose of helping financially Lithuanian refugees in Western Europe, those in occupied Lithuania who suffered from the war and/or from the Communist regime, those deported to Siberia and also Lithuanians left behind in Poland. The BALFas organization fought to prevent deportation of Lithuanian refugees dispersed throughout Europe back to the Soviet-occupied homeland. Once Lithuania regained its independence in 1990, BALFas took it upon itself to help Lithuanians living in Lithuania who were economically deprived or ill, those who had suffered from deportation and political imprisonment, as well as orphans and the elderly. In 2008, BALFas as an organization stopped all of its programs. Leaders of BALFas over the years included prelate J. Končius, Fr. V. Martinkus, and M. Rudienė.

While WWII was still ongoing, an organization was created in Lithuania with the goal of freeing the homeland from the occupying powers. It was called VLIK (*Vyriausias Lietuvos išlaisvinimo komitetas*) or the Supreme Committee for the Liberation of Lithuania. VLIK was active for some time in Germany, and in 1955 moved its base of operations to the United States, the country with the largest number of WWII Lithuanian refugees. VLIK was active in issuing proclamations, demanding that occupied Lithuania be allowed to become a democratic republic, and that the Soviet Union withdraw its armed forces from the homeland, so that Lithuania could once again re-emerge as an independent country. A fundraising organization called *Tautos fondas* (Lithuanian National Foundation) was created to financially support VLIK. After Lithuanian independence was reestablished in 1990, VLIK ceased its operations in 1992. But the *Tautos fondas* continues to operate, funding projects mostly in Lithuania, especially in the eastern part of that country.

The Lithuanian American Community, called *JAV Lietuvių bendruomenė* in Lithuanian, was founded on 18 November 1951. In its articles of incorporation, the stated purpose was to help Lithuanians in their goal to restore and defend an independent Lithuanian nation. Other purposes included helping to ensure the survival of the Lithuanian language, and to foster cultural and national traditions and customs. The emphasis was on helping Lithuanians to engage in the struggle against Soviet-imposed Communism and to help them in their fight to free their homeland.

For many years the task of freeing Lithuania in the United States was carried on by the major Lithuanian émigré organizations. As the elder statesmen of these

organizations became less active, the efforts on freeing Lithuania became somewhat weaker. However, the Lithuanian American Community (LAC) took over many of these functions, and with the support of the younger generation of Lithuanian Americans, public relations campaigns and political activity in this area became broadly-based and more professional. The generation comprised of the children of WWII refugees began to take on important roles. Political actions supported by LAC began in 1967, in anticipation of the 50th anniversary of Lithuania's 1918 declaration of independence. Visits were organized to the editorial boards of U.S. newspapers, requesting them to print articles focusing on the need for freedom for Lithuania. Appointments were made with politicians and spiritual leaders. Working together, Lithuanian Americans were able to achieve personal meetings with U.S. presidents in the years 1946, 1948, 1952, 1953, 1962, 1975, 1976 and 1986. This helped guarantee that the U.S. would never recognize nor acknowledge the status of Lithuania as part of the Soviet Union.

The Lithuanian American Community was one of the founders of the Lithuanian Foundation, Inc. – a not-for-profit foundation dedicated to preserving and fostering Lithuanian culture and traditions in the United States, Lithuania and Lithuanian communities worldwide. Since its inception in 1962, the Lithuanian Foundation has advanced its goals by awarding 20 million dollars in grants and scholarships. Another active funder of Lithuanian projects is the Lithuanian Catholic Religious Aid, a New York-based non-profit organization that supports Catholic educational, religious, and social outreach projects in Lithuania and its diaspora.

Another avenue of activity was the organization and dissemination of radio programs to Lithuania through Voice of America and Radio Free Europe. Local radio programs were also supported. Their goal was to inform about events in the local Lithuanian communities, about political events such as commemorations, meetings with government officials, conferences and demonstrations related to Lithuania's struggle for freedom and independence, and to mobilize support and participation in them by the community. They also played Lithuanian music.

Lithuanian Americans continued to maintain contact with Lithuanians in the occupied homeland. Letters were exchanged with relatives. They were supported with parcels of goods and sometimes were the beneficiaries of wills. Lithuanian Americans who supported Communism and were centered around the "progressive" newspapers *Vilnis* and *Laisvė* would organize excursions to the occupied homeland. Some liberal members of the younger generation banded together in the *Santara-Šviesa* (Coexistence-Light) organization, that sought closer contacts with Lithuanians in the homeland. Such contacts caused a degree of opposition in the Lithuanian American Community. For Lithuanians in the homeland, relations with the diaspora were of great importance, not only from a material welfare standpoint, but also in terms of nurturing moral and national values.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet government began to allow some writers, artists, and academics to visit emigré communities. They would try to establish contacts not only with Lithuanian Americans supporting leftist causes, but with the broader group of patriotic émigrés as well. When these emissaries would return to the homeland, they would share their impressions and information about life in the United States and the fate of Lithuanian émigrés living there.

In 1980, remnants of the diplomatic corps of independent Lithuania were of advanced age and at risk of dying out. The Lithuanian American Community endeavored to maintain and support this important link to a previously independent country. The old Lithuanian diplomatic mission and embassy building in Washington D.C. was maintained. The diplomatic corps of independent Lithuania was revitalized with new leaders, including Stasys Lozoraitis, Jr., Vytautas Čekanauskas, and Vaclovas Kleiza taking on responsibilities of their predecessors.

In 1988, with the appearance of the Lithuanian reform movement *Sąjūdis*, the Lithuanian American Community helped ensure that the goals of *Sąjūdis* would be known to members of the U.S. government and to the public at large. Political support was sought for the *Sąjūdis* leaders, and they were put into contact with high officials of the U.S. government while visiting in the United States.

The diaspora always believed in the determination of the Lithuanian people to be free and was ready to support the efforts of Lithuanians in the homeland working towards that goal. Once the Act of Restoration of the Lithuanian Nation of March 11, 1990 was proclaimed, Lithuanian Americans brought this declaration to the attention of Washington, urging the U.S. government to recognize Lithuania's independence. They organized petitions in support of this effort. Various support groups were organized, including the Lithuanian Hotline and SOS – Americans for Lithuania's Freedom in Chicago, and other similar groups in various cities in the U.S. with substantial populations of Lithuanian émigrés. These organizations would present information about the political and economic situation in Lithuania to the U.S. press, to U.S. politicians, and to the broader public at large. Similar efforts were organized by Lithuanian émigrés living in other countries.

The Lithuanian American Community invited Vytautas Landsbergis, the Chairman of the Supreme Council of Lithuania (*de jure* Head of State) for a visit to the United States and organized meetings, conferences, and panel discussions around his travels with the purpose of presenting this new leader of Lithuania to the press, especially to radio and television audiences. In the years 1990-1992, the Lithuanian American Community, working together with ALT (the American Lithuanian Council), organized conferences in Washington DC, with the goal of informing the U.S. press and Congress as well as governmental organizations about the budding independence movement in the homeland. One conference which took place in 1990 was titled, "Gift to Lithuania". Ultimately these efforts helped to at-

tain the desired goal: on 2 September 1991, the U.S. government formally recognized Lithuania's independence.

The Lithuanian American Community leaders were able to meet with U.S. presidents during this critical time period, and established support links with the Polish and Jewish communities in the United States. In this manner, Lithuanian-American organizations sought to increase the effectiveness and breadth of support for Lithuania's independence. U.S. senators and representatives who were sympathetic formed a "Baltic Caucus", which included, on the Senate side, Senator Dick Durbin as chairperson, and on the House of Representatives side, Congressman John Shimkus. In 1998, the Lithuanian American Community helped to write a "Baltic Charter" which set out a framework for joint action of the Baltic countries with the United States in areas of security and political and economic relations.

One key factor in helping to ensure the security and national identities of Lithuania and the other Baltic Nations was the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Lithuanian American Community worked together with a coalition of Central and Eastern European groups (which would represent a group of ethnic Americans 21 million strong) with the goal of including Lithuania as a member of NATO. Both political parties were lobbied in this regard, and efforts were made to ensure that leaders of both parties in the U.S. would support Lithuania's membership in NATO. On 29 May 2004, NATO leaders meeting in Washington DC drafted protocols and guidelines for acceptance of additional members, and the Lithuanian American Community, including its chairperson Regina Narusienė, participated in this key activity.

The Lithuanian diaspora responded vigorously to help the homeland when the Soviet Union instituted an economic blockade of Lithuania in 1990. The Knights of Lithuania organized an "Aid to Lithuania" (*Pagalba Lietuvai*) group. The Lithuanian American Community organized "Lithuania Children's Hope" and a committee to support orphans. Other groups were formed, among them "Lithuanian Mercy Lift" and in Boston a committee to protect Lithuanian children. The funds raised by "Aid to Lithuania" were in the tens of millions dollars each year. In the first years of Lithuania's newly achieved independence, especially under the economic blockade, the importance of this aid was immense, and in many cases, this help was the only source of support available. Notable Lithuanian Americans who went to Lithuania at this time to offer help to its people and its government included Valdas Adamkus, who would become the second president of newly independent Lithuania; Kazys Bobelis, Vytautas Dudėnas, Feliksas Palubinskas, and Romanas Algimantas Sedlickas, who would become members of Parliament; and general Jonas Kronkaitis, who would ultimately lead the Lithuanian army. In addition, a sizeable group of Lithuanian Americans came to assist the diplomatic corps and to help develop the country's economy.

In 1992 and 1996, Lithuanian American legal experts took the initiative to help organize international congresses to reorganize the civil and criminal legal system in Lithuania, and to promote the creation of an independent judiciary, as well as to prepare a new constitution. Émigré physicians would visit the homeland to help acquaint their colleagues with the latest in medical techniques and technology. Lithuanian Americans serving in the U.S. Army helped to rebuild the Lithuanian army according to NATO standards.

A number of professors from the U.S. visited the newly independent country and helped familiarize their colleagues and students in Lithuania with learning methods and information in Western countries; study abroad opportunities in Western universities were arranged. This effort was especially noteworthy in the reestablishment of the Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas. In fact, the first two rectors of this university were professors Algirdas Avižienis and Bronius Vaškelis. Lithuanian Symposia on Arts and Sciences bringing together Lithuanian academics and artists from across the globe had been organized in the United States since 1969. These symposia helped Lithuanian academics visit centers of learning in the United States, to interact with their émigré colleagues, and to actively participate in the scientific programs of these symposia.

Lithuanian researchers who visited the U.S. were provided with access to several important archives of Lithuanian history housed in the United States, including those in Chicago, Putnam, and at various universities. The Lithuanian Research and Studies Center in Chicago organized the transfer of large amounts of educational material created by émigrés during the 20th century to Lithuania, including hundreds of thousands of books and journals that were then distributed to Lithuanian libraries and schools. Some notable individuals who participated in this transfer of cultural material were Bronius Kvilklys and Dr. Kazys Pemkus, among others.

One of the more impressive projects in the educational field was A.P.P.L.E. (American Professional Partnership for Lithuanian Education), which was organized by Vaiva Vėbraitė-Gust and Jūratė Krokys-Stirbienė. This was an example of an extremely successful volunteer effort. A.P.P.L.E. would organize summer seminars in Lithuania, which included a number of faculty from the United States, and which helped acquaint teachers in Lithuania with Western pedagogical methods and principles of educating children. As part of this effort, books detailing Western teaching techniques were distributed, and sabbatical opportunities abroad were arranged for Lithuanian teachers.

A number of Lithuanian foundations altered their donation strategy, and from 1990 onwards, began to distribute a portion of their grants to fund cultural, educational, and art projects in Lithuania. After independence, cultural exchanges between the homeland and the diaspora were restarted. Artists from Lithuania were

invited to the United States and other countries, where they would be supported by local Lithuanian emigré communities, and where they would share their artistic achievements through various art exhibitions and concerts.

In 2000, the Lithuanian American Community organized the transfer of more than 1,000 works of art that had been collected in the Čiurlionis Art Gallery in Chicago to museums in Lithuania. This process of transferring works of art, books as well as some archival materials from the United States to Lithuania is ongoing. A number of artists and collectors are donating their art collections to Lithuania, and are financially supporting efforts to maintain cultural objects, churches, and institutes of higher learning in the homeland. In 2003, the Lithuanian American Community formed a committee to raise funds for the reconstruction of the Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania in Vilnius. In 1995, the Lithuanian American Community and the Lithuanian Parliament created a joint commission, later reorganized to include the World Lithuanian Community and Parliament, with a principal goal of supporting joint efforts between Lithuanians living in Lithuania and those living abroad.

With the marked increase in the number of Lithuanians emigrating since 1990, the amount of funds being sent back to Lithuania by these new émigrés has become very substantial, reaching billions of euros per year. This strong material support helps not only the recipients of those funds in Lithuania, but serves to maintain a strong base of foreign currency reserves in the homeland.

Various charitable organizations in the diaspora as well as individuals continue to donate substantial sums of money to help fund projects and scholarships in Lithuania in the areas of education, health care, child welfare and poverty reduction. These organizations include: *Lietuvių fondas* (Lithuanian Foundation), *Tautos fondas* (Lithuanian National Foundation), *Lietuvos dukterų draugija* (Daughters of Lithuania), *Lietuvių katalikų religinė šalpa* (Lithuanian Catholic Religious Aid), „*Vaiko vartai į mokslą*“ (Child’s Gate to Learning), „*Saulutė*“ (Sunlight Orphan Aid for Lithuania), *Lietuvių pagalbos fondas Kalifornijoje* (Lithuanian Aid Fund of California), *Kazickų šeimos fondas* (Kazickas Family Foundation), *Vydūno jaunimo fondas* (Vydūnas Youth Fund), *Mažosios Lietuvos fondas* (Foundation of Lithuania Minor), *Čikagos lietuvių „Rotary“ klubas* (Rotary Club of Chicagoland Lithuanians), „*Alatėja*“, *Čikagos mamų fondas* (Chicago Mothers Foundation), and a number of others.

Over a hundred years, Lithuanian Americans have given to Lithuania and its inhabitants enormous support in terms of material goods, money, political and public relations, and culture. At times, this support was crucial and the only help available. Fortunately, this long tradition of political support, charitable giving and volunteerism continues to be strong.

I anglų kalba vertė dr. Jonas Daugirdas