

Lithuanian Braille: The Dots That Connect Our Children with Their Heritage

By Erikas Vasiliauskas, MD



Like many children around the world, Vėjas and Petras attend Lithuanian School on Saturday mornings; but rather than reading their textbooks in a traditional fashion, they read with their fingers. They are fluent in English and Lithuanian braille; Vėjas has even added Spanish to his repertoire. Both boys started searching for the raised dots of braille on the pages of books and on toys before their first birthdays, even before they really knew what the letters meant.

Rasa and I first met as children during summer camp at Dainava in Michigan. We eventually reconnected many years later at an International Lithuanian Song Festival Banquet and got engaged the following winter at the end of a month-long Lithuanian World Youth Congress in South America. Our wedding ceremony was held in Lithuanian and the reception that followed was complete with Lithuanian traditions. Our Lithuanian heritage has always been an integral part of our lives. Furthermore, participation in Lithuanian activities has served as a catalyst for exposure to a broad spectrum of cultures

and viewpoints beyond those of our purely English-speaking friends and neighbors. Naturally we wanted our children to share the same culturally rich and worldly experiences that we had growing up.

When we embarked on our blindness journey 15 years ago, we had no access to brailled Lithuanian children's stories. The reality is that at that time there were even few fun and engaging English braille books available for young children. Thus early on, for Lithuanian language exposure we checked out mountains of children's print books from our neighborhood library, and then Rasa and I would translate many of these stories into Lithuanian "on the fly" as we read to our boys each night.

It quickly became clear to us, that if our children were going to get exposure to the written Lithuanian language it would be up to us, the parents, to provide the braille. Rasa tracked down the Lithuanian braille alphabet through a childhood friend who happened to be traveling to Lithuania to visit relatives (the internet was still in its infancy at that time). We were quite relieved to learn that in reality, Lithuanian braille is not that hard. Most letters are the same as in English braille. There are a few additional braille cell configurations for the Lithuanian letters not found in the English alphabet and unlike American English Braille, there are no Lithuanian braille contractions. Rasa rapidly became fluent in both English and Lithuanian braille.

Rasa started braille-ing out the words of popular fun English-language books we would find during our explorations of the children's section of our local bookstores onto sheets of durable transparent self-adhesive braille label. She then affixed the braille label to the pages of children's books we bought so that the boys could follow along with their fingers as we read to them. We read many stories together every night, most in English, to begin to create the same letter word associations as sighted infants and toddlers develop as they read with their parents.

We continued to verbally translate some of our children's favorite books into Lithuanian. As an illustrative anecdote, during Vėjas's first year participating in the National Federation of the Blind's Readers are Leaders Contest, the rules clearly stated that in order for the pages to count, the participant must read the braille on their own. One night Vėjas volunteered to read a story to his younger brother. Vėjas decided he would like to read one of his favorite books from when he was little. At his request, I handed him "Spėk Kiek Aš Tave Myliu" ("Guess How Much I Love You"), a book that we had "read" together literally hundreds of times when he was a toddler. As his fingers glided across the text on the familiar worn pages, lovingly braille-labeled years earlier by his mother, Vėjas in a very astonished and somewhat shocked

A	Ą	B	C	Č	D	E
□	□	□	□	□	□	□
Ę	Ė	F	G	H	I	Į
□	□	□	□	□	□	□
Y	J	K	L	M	N	O
□	□	□	□	□	□	□
P	R	S	Š	T	U	Ū
□	□	□	□	□	□	□
Ū	V	W	Z	Ž		
□	□	□	□	□		

manner said “Hey, this book is written in English!” upon the realization that his cherished childhood book was actually in written and brailled in English, not in Lithuanian.

Lithuanian Saturday School. While both boys are successfully mainstreamed in our neighborhood’s public schools, on Saturdays Vėjas and Petras attend Švento Kazimiero Lithuanian School in Los Angeles. Vėjas is a high school freshman and Petras is in fourth grade. Amazing as it may seem, they actually have access to the Lithuanian Saturday School curriculum to nearly the same degree as their sighted classmates.



For the first few years, Rasa brailled all the Lithuanian school classroom assignments and textbook passages ahead of time on our Perkins Brailier, a mechanical old-fashioned manual braille typewriter that punches raised braille dots on special thick braille paper in a process known as embossing. She also modified drawings and worksheets to make them tactilely understandable and usable. In the younger grades, Vėjas and Petras each would complete their classroom and homework assignments using their Perkins Brailiers. In order for the teachers to understand and grade everything the boys brailled out in this “traditional” fashion, all their work had to then be ink-printed - that one of us then has to manually write-in the print letters next to the raised braille dots on the paper.

[Photos: Pictures of Petras with his Perkins Brailiers [left] and Vėjas [right] in class working on Lithuanian worksheets and using a workbook pre-modified by his mother.]

As you might imagine, this is a very time-intensive process, however the fruits of our labors are best summarized by the following anecdote: **One day when I was with Vėjas in the classroom, he in his usual form finished his first grade Lithuanian classroom assignment before anyone else. I leaned over to let him know this and he whispered back to me: “Of course, Tėveli - that’s because I have the advantage – braille is faster” (referring to reading and writing).** At the end of that school year, Vėjas was in fact formally recognized as the best student and most fluent reader and writer in his Lithuanian school first grade class. Petras received the “best student” in his class award at the end of the last school year.



Flying Fingers. As an aside, there are many individuals and even teachers who hold the belief that braille is slower medium than print. We chose not to share that perspective with our children. In second grade Vėjas read over 12,000 pages of braille in 3 months earning him first place in his age group in the National Federation of the Blind’s Readers are Leaders Contest. In fifth grade was formally assessed to be reading at 208 words per minute with 98% accuracy. In middle school Vėjas won first place in his age division in the National Braille Challenge Invitational, an academic braille decathlon in which the top 60 braille-reading students (grades 1-12) from across the US and Canada are invited compete in a series of exercises designed to demonstrate proficiency in braille. Both boys can type far faster and more accurately on their electronic braille note-takers that I can on my laptop or iPad-type device.

Lithuanian Braille in the 21st Century: “e-Braille”. Both boys now read their Lithuanian school textbook passages and Lithuanian choir songs directly off their BrailleNote electronic braille note-takers!

The BrailleNote is a portable netbook-sized screenless computer with a braille keyboard that braille readers use to enter information. It has a built-in refreshable braille display, that is a row of special "soft" braille cells made of plastic pins that move up or down in response to an electronic signals to tactilely display the letters/words of each new line of text.

[Photo: Close up of the BrailleNote with the words “Aš čia gyva” pictured on the refreshable braille display.]



The BrailleNote can set to read information aloud in English, Spanish, and a few other non-Lithuanian languages with a synthesized voice. Both boys however prefer to read text on the device with their fingers, which is actually faster and more efficient. The BrailleNote has a built-in word processor, book reader, email program, internet browser, calendar, address book, calculator, media player, and even has GPS capabilities. Portable electronic braille notetakers are handy for taking notes in class, completing homework assignments, writing stories, journaling, and reading downloaded e-books and e-magazines. We discovered that the BrailleNote can actually be “tricked” into recognizing Lithuanian braille (however to do so, the boys turn off the voice feature to avoid listening to what sounds like complete gibberish).

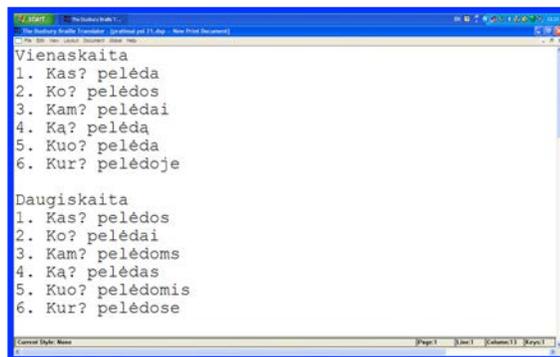
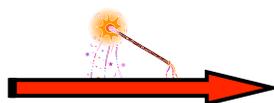
[Photo: Picture below of Petras reading to his Lithuanian school 2nd grade classmates off his electronic braille notetaker.]



Realizing that the sheer volume of braille that would need to be transcribed and ink-printed would exponentially increase each year for *each* of our boys, a number of years ago I sought out the assistance of the president of Duxbury Systems, who was kind enough to adapt their electronic Duxbury Braille Translation Program to accommodate Lithuanian braille translation, in addition to the multitude of other supported languages. The program truly is a virtual magic wand, for now with relative ease, we are able to convert electronic Lithuanian print to electronic Lithuanian braille and visa versa.

So while Rasa still modifies selected worksheets using traditional techniques, she now brailles out text passages on her laptop into the Lithuanian template in Duxbury. They are then saved as digital Lithuanian braille (.brf) files that we then transfer to their BrailleNotes via USB sticks or email.

[Picture of a Lithuanian school assignment brailled out by Vėjas on his BrailleNote and then opened up in Duxbury and then converted to print using the program’s Lithuanian language option.]



Conversely, our boys can also complete Lithuanian homework and classwork assignments electronically on their BrailleNotes. By opening their files on our laptop with the Lithuanian template in Duxbury’s braille translation program we are able to then convert the BrailleNote-generated braille to Lithuanian print and turn in!

It is much easier to make corrections within electronic braille documents, than rebrailing entire assignments on a manual brailier. Not to mention, as assignments inevitably become more lengthy at the higher grade levels, think about how much time we save by not having to ink-print everything!

The Lithuanian school teachers have overall been great about posting or emailing us class work and homework assignments ahead of time. Many such teacher-generated WORD documents can be fairly easily converted to Lithuanian e-braille files using the braille translation program. With today's technology, it is even possible to use the optical character recognition (OCR) features found within off-the-shelf versions of Adobe Acrobat Professional to recognize Lithuanian text within scanned PDF pages of reading passages, stories, and worksheets that teachers email to us in advance so that we can make them accessible. Such files often still need to be "cleaned" up and edited. Many files still just need to be brailled out from scratch. Thus, Rasa and I team up and each of us spends a few hours every week preparing materials for the boys in an effort to assure that they have what they need to be able to independently complete assignments in class and at home.

A Somewhat Accessible Lithuanian World Wide Web. Using a special screen-reading program called JAWS that reads out loud everything that a sighted person sees on the computer screen, Vėjas is now able to independently surf the English language world wide web on a regular netbook laptop well enough to research information for school reports, to learn more about topics that interest him, and to access teacher's most webpages. Unfortunately neither the BrailleNote's software, nor the latest version of our US-edition JAWS screen reading program is sophisticated enough to read Lithuanian - *yet*. I have learned of a Lithuanian adaptation of the JAWS program which is available from a vender in Lithuania, but we have not had a chance to play with that yet. This will hopefully allow both boys to complete assignments in WORD and to surf though information on the rapidly expanding number of Lithuanian language websites.

For the time-being, we copy the text from Lithuanian webpages and convert it to Lithuanian braille using the Duxbury Braille Translation Program. While not always this straight-forward a process, we can generally fairly quickly provide our boys with Lithuanian reference materials for reports so that they can independently read through the information on their electronic braille notetakers.

For example, several years ago we participated in a commemorative ceremony marking the hundredth year birthday of Bernardas Brazdžionis. Vėjas asked if I could find him some background information on this influential patriotic Lithuanian poet and author. I "Googled" "BernardasBrazdžionis" and one of the links lead me to a "Vikipediija" web page (<http://lt.wikipedia.org>). I then selected, copied, and pasted the desired text and a few clicks later "wha-la!"... I had Lithuanian braille reference material that I could pass on to Vėjas to filter through on his own.

This year our local school district is piloting iPads in selected classrooms in every school. We are now in the process of exploring how to tether their BrailleNotes to this new technology not only for classwork, but also as a means of expanding their accesses to additional informational resources of the World Wide Web, potentially including Lithuanian sources.



Lithuanian Language Weekends. The reality for all of us at this point is that it is easiest to communicate in English, especially when discussing more advanced concepts and when addressing increasingly more complex school topics. While preservation of language of origin and traditions outside one's homeland is known to be increasingly more difficult through successive generations, I recall how when I was younger, my Lithuanian fluency improved dramatically after a few weeks at summer camp at Dainava, Neringa, Rakas, and Wasaga where the programs were run in completely in Lithuanian.

Rasa and I thus decided to put forth a strong conscious effort to try to speak only Lithuanian on weekends, not only with our children, but also between ourselves. While this certainly has proved to be challenging, and was even somewhat frustrating initially, our efforts are definitely paying off, for we have all made noticeable advances in our fluency and vocabularies continue to expand. We have easily accessible Lithuanian-English and English-Lithuanian dictionaries at home to look up words on the spot and I have added free Lithuanian/English translation apps to my smart-phone, thus we now have quick and easy access to new or unfamiliar words or phrases. Once we learn a new word, it is fun to try to incorporate into conversation in the days that follow.

Bringing the Lithuanian Language into our Home via Internet Radio. An increasing number of radio stations in Lithuania are broadcasting their programs over the internet and there are now a variety of programming options to choose from. Our family can now not only listen to the traditional as well as the latest genre of Lithuanian music, but we also get exposure to the living Lithuanian language via news bites and commercials.

In Search of Fun and Interesting Lithuanian Braille Recreational Reading Materials. Unfortunately we have not had access to Lithuanian children's books in braille.

Though we have been putting forward the extra effort to speak predominantly Lithuanian on weekends, reading helps further reinforce language concepts and fluency. While both our boys love stories and books, the reality is that at the present time there is no mechanism for us to borrow embossed children's books from Lithuanian libraries or to purchase them and we currently don't have access to digital Lithuanian books nor children's magazines.

Thus, for now each of the boys has a Lithuanian "Fun Reading Folder" on their BrailleNotes. Before the start of each weekend I surf the Lithuanian language internet for fun-sounding web articles on a broad range of Lithuanian topics ranging from the grand dukes and rulers of old and national poets, passages describing Lithuanian traditions, to geographical tidbits, to modern day sports figures and popular musical artists and current events. These are articles written in Lithuanian, most by native Lithuanians. I copy them from the internet webpage, convert them to braille files in Duxbury, then load them onto their BrailleNotes. Both boys enjoy reading these during break time in Lithuanian school and on weekends. At the middle-school and high school level the teachers are starting to incorporate interesting "web-articles from Lithuania" into the Saturday school classroom curriculum.

Beyond Academics. We have found ways for both boys to partake in most nonacademic activities as well. Vėjas and Petras both participate in plays at Lithuanian Saturday school. Both boys sing alongside their classmates during school choir performances. They either memorize the songs (as is often expected of their sighted classmates) or in some cases read the words off BrailleNote files. In addition to Saturday school, both Vėjas and Petras belong to the Lithuanian youth group Ateitininkai.



[Photos: Picture of Petras dancing, Vėjas singing in the Lithuanian school choir, Petras dressed up as a shepherd in a Christmas play, and Vėjas reading a scripture passage off his BrailleNote during a Los Angeles Lietuvių Dienos Mass.]

A few years ago Vėjas was invited for the first time to read a scripture reading during a Lithuanian mass. Our then 10 year old projected an image of competence and confidence and turned quite a few heads, even the visiting Bishop's, as he gracefully read his Lithuanian passage off of his BrailleNote. He continues to be invited to read at Lithuanian masses and during Saturday School programs.

Exploring the Wild Side. When they are not doing homework, the boys enjoy reading, writing, swimming, hiking, geocaching, horseback riding, running on the track, and trying out fun activities like rock-climbing, boogie-boarding, surfing, skiing, and even paddle-boarding and snowboarding.



Through our interactions with the blind community, we have come to realize that the boundary between what is possible for a blind individual and for a sighted individual is not all that much different. We thus have high expectations for both boys. As a father I share the same dreams other parents have for their children – the desire for our children to excel and be happy, productive members of society. While it has been, is, and will continue to be, a struggle, I have no doubt that our children will ultimately have the foundation they need pursue their dreams, both professionally and in their family lives. That being said, a combination of a lot of hard work and a team effort is needed to assure that blind children acquire the full compliment of skill-sets necessary to be successful. In our case, that team extends well beyond the bounds of our home and our local system and includes input and guidance from a network of parents of other blind children, educators in the field of blindness, as well as individuals and mentors in the blind community from literally across North America. We look forward to opportunities to connect with families, educators, and leaders in Lithuania’s blindness community with whom we might then be able to share and exchange insights, experiences, and resources as well.

Santa knows Lithuanian Braille too! It may come as a surprise to some, while it is sure to be obvious to others, that Santa not only knows Lithuanian, but he is fluent in Braille - even Lithuanian Braille! Our boys have proof! :-)

Braille is very much alive and remains a vital ingredient in the success of blind adults and children, including our own. Since its inception 200 years ago, the braille code has flourished and has been adapted to languages throughout the world, including Lithuanian. I am a firm believer that braille fluency makes the difference between a blind individual just “getting by” and having a chance to reach their full potential and really succeed in life. Without access to braille, Vėjas and Petras could still participate in the Lithuanian Saturday school setting, but their roles would be passive, relying on others to read and do the work for them. The inability to read and write Lithuanian independently would have undoubtedly affected their level of mastery of the language and have limited the depth of their understanding of subject matter. As a result our children would have been “passengers,” whereas now because of their access to Lithuanian braille each has the opportunity to shine on his own merits. It is indeed amazing that Louis Braille, a young man of humble origins who lived two centuries ago in a far away land, could have such a profound impact in my family and lives and futures of so many children and adults around the world.

“Lietuva, Aš Turiu Tave – Lithuania, You are Mine.” Throughout history Lithuanians are well-known for determination, perseverance, and willingness to confront life’s many challenges head-on. Rasa and I believe that our children’s lives are much richer as a result of the bond with our Lithuanian heritage, and therefore, like so many other families around the world, we strive to keep the connection with our Lithuanian roots alive for ourselves and our children.

For anyone interested learning more about our experiences, I invite you to read:

“So Dad, When Can I Go Surfing?” (www.nfb.org/images/nfb/Publications/fr/fr26/Issue2/fr07sum02.htm)

“Tandem Surfboarding Brothers” (www.nfb.org/images/nfb/Publications/bm/bm11/bm1111/bm111108.htm)

“Equal Expectations: A Belief Paradigm or a Politically Correct, Feel-Good Phrase?” (www.nfb.org/images/nfb/Publications/fr/fr27/1/fr270107.htm)

“The Failure of the Educational System in Meeting the Needs of the Blind” (www.nfb.org/images/nfb/Publications/bm/bm10/bm1009/bm100902.htm)

“California Dreaming” (www.nfb.org/images/nfb/Publications/fr/fr27/3/fr270316.htm)

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