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Cover photo: Members of the Club of Foreign Lithuanian Students (ULSK): President Aira Gurauskaitė; Lithuanian-Venezuelan Gabriela Avalos Liesinskas-Mockienė; and Lithuanian-Argentines Daina Juana Gariboldi and Kovas Luksas.

Photo by Gabriel Orentas

On Lithuanianness in South America – Not out of Fear, but out of Friendship

We didn't spend much time in deciding on what kind of face to give to this issue of *Jungtys*. The theme became clear once we began reviewing our many activities and recalling the many people we had worked with, created together with, and engaged with over the past few years. For the initiatives of the World Lithuanian University (WLU) at Vytautas Magnus University (VMU), the topic of Lithuanianness in South America always glimmers like a beacon of light, reminding us not to let this part of the Lithuanian diaspora's history slip into oblivion. One of the WLU's key idea promulgators, Professor Egidijus Aleksandravičius, reinforces this by saying: "If there is no space for South American Lithuanianness in WLU's activities, we might as well say we're committing a sin."

But it was certainly not the fear of hell that determined the choice of this issue's theme – it was the friendships that have formed and grown stronger over the past few years through the activities of WLU.

In late 2022, Professor Egidijus Aleksandravičius met Gabriel Orentas, a Lithuanian from Venezuela, at the Thomas Mann Festival and introduced him to the WLU team. Soon after, we began discussing the vast photographic archive Gabriel Orentas holds – an archive of photographs taken by his father, Gediminas Orentas, a Lithuanian Venezuelan photographer. This led to the idea of organizing a photo exhibition, and later, to the creation of a text for this journal.

In 2023, Dr. Martín Parselis from Argentina came for a teaching visit as part of VMU's V. Kavolis Interdisciplinary Professorship Program. The process of organizing this visit with Martín – working both through academic content and through practical arrangements – truly brought us closer. It allowed us to immerse ourselves in the history of the Parselis family and of the Lithuanian community in Argentina. Without hesitation, we invited Martín to write about the life story of his father, Ernesto Parselis.

In 2024, Felipe Desbanca Liutkus, a Lithuanian from Brazil, enrolled in undergraduate studies at VMU. Invited to a meeting, he responded wholeheartedly, expressing both the longing and joy of discovering his long-sought Lithuanian identity and the pride of becoming the first member of his family to return to Lithuania after nearly 100 years.

That same year, we also formed a friendship and began collaborating on a joint project with Dr. Eglė Ozolinčiūtė, who had lived in Colombia and personally knew Nijolė, the mother of (former Bogotá mayor) Antanas Mockus. When the VMU Lithuanian Emigration Institute organized a presentation of Rimantas Vanagas' book *Nijolė Lituana*, the dots connected naturally, and Eglė prepared for us a review of the book.

The year 2024 was also marked by active cooperation with the World Lithuanian Youth Association (PLJS) and the Club of Foreign

Lithuanian Students (ULSK). A significant number of ULSK members who actively participate in co-organized events are Lithuanian students from South America. So, it was only natural that we give them a voice and, with their help, bring the colours of South American Lithuanianness into the imaginative space of the Lithuanian diaspora.

Through similar activities focused on South American Lithuanian identity, we also met Ieva Šulskutė, a VMU Comparative Cultural Studies student, who is researching the national identity of Lithuanians in Colombia. She together with Giedrė Milerytė-Japertienė prepared overview stories about lesser-known, nearly vanished Lithuanian communities in South America. Ieva Šulskutė offers a perspective on the history and fate of Lithuanians in Colombia, while Giedrė Milerytė-Japertienė shares the story of Lithuanians in Uruguay and that community's journey to the 100th Anniversary Song Festival in Lithuania.

So, we wish you an enjoyable journey through the "jungles" of South American Lithuanian-ness. It is important that these "jungles" remain alive in our memory and in our diasporic imagination.

Ingrida Dačioliienė and Gerda Pilipaitytė

Coming Full Circle: A Journey of Brazilian, Portuguese and Lithuanian Identity

Gerda Pilipaitytė

In this heartfelt interview, Felipe Liutkus shares his remarkable journey of reconnecting with his Lithuanian roots nearly a century after his family's emigration to Brazil. Born in Santos, Brazil, with Lithuanian and Portuguese heritage, Felipe, the first in his family to return to Lithuania, shares experiences of perseverance, discovery, reclaiming a sense of belonging and embracing ancestral identity.

Felipe, thank you for agreeing to share your family history. Could you start by introducing yourself and telling us a bit about your background?

Of course! My name is Felipe Desbanca Liutkus, and I was born in Santos, Brazil. I have Lithuanian origins from my father's side and Portuguese roots from my mother's side. Currently, I'm a first-year student in the Business Administration bachelor's program at Vytautas Magnus University. Returning to Lithuania, the land of my ancestors, to live and study has been a dream of mine, and I'm thrilled to be realizing it now.

Can you tell us more about your family history and how you feel connected to Lithuania?

My Lithuanian roots come from my father's family. My great-grandfather, Jonas Liutkus, and my grandfather, Mykolas Liutkus, were Lithuanians from Vilkija. Jonas was born on March 14, 1833 into a wealthy family.



Felipe Desbanca Liutkus. Photo by Jonas Petronis

However, when he married Magdalena, who came from a poor background, his family disapproved and reportedly excluded him. Jonas and Magdalena had five children in Lithuania, and on February 25, 1927, they boarded a ship named *Formose* in Le Havre, France and emigrated to Brazil. My grandfather, Mykolas, was only 2 years old then.

The family arrived in Santos on March 19, 1927, and, after some time working on farms in Cravinhos, eventually settled in São Paulo. There my grandfather Mykolas married Estelila, and they had five children: João Carlos (my father), Ricardo, Jorge, Sandra, and Margareth. As far as I know, both my grandfather and my great-grandfather had always dreamed of returning to Lithuania, even just for a visit, but they never got the chance.

Interestingly, my grandfather Mykolas hoped for a male grandchild to carry on the Liutkus family name. However, while his sons Jorge and Ricardo had daughters and his daughters Sandra and Margareth had sons, none of them could continue the Liutkus surname. My father, João Carlos, was the only one who had a son – me. I was born on March 14, 1992, the same day as my great-grandfather Jonas. Moreover, I was told that out of all my relatives I resembled my grandfather Mykolas the most, as many of my other family members inherited features from my grandmother, who had Middle Eastern origins.

How did your Lithuanian identity develop over time?

Growing up, I was aware of my Lithuanian origins but didn't know much about them. Most of my early influences came from my Portuguese side, especially since I wasn't very close to my father's family at the time. As a child, I often felt different because of my last name, appearance, and mindset.

During my teenage years, I struggled with adapting to Brazilian society. I faced bullying and felt disconnected from the culture and even the climate. These challenges made me question where I truly belonged and sparked my curiosity about my Lithuanian heritage.

At first, my family couldn't provide much information. My grandfather Mykolas had avoided talking about Lithuania, possibly due to a fear of Soviet spies or the history of deportations during that era. Despite the gaps in my knowledge, I started piecing together our family's history. I discovered that many details, such as Mykolas' birthplace and birthdate, were unclear or incorrect. Through persistent research and help from relatives in Lithuania, I eventually confirmed that he was born in Vilkija – not Kaunas and in July – not August.

That must have been a rewarding discovery. How did you further embrace your Lithuanian roots?

It was! As I learned more, I felt a growing connection to Lithuania. I started exploring the



Jonas and Magdalena Liutkus

possibility of Lithuanian citizenship, but my family initially hesitated due to concerns about costs, documentation, and the mistaken belief that I'd have to renounce Brazilian citizenship.

Despite these challenges, I persisted. A relative in Lithuania helped me locate my grandfather's birth certificate, which was crucial for the citizenship process. Along the way, I also joined a Lithuanian language and culture course offered online by Vytautas Magnus University. Learning the language was a transformative experience – it made me feel closer to Lithuania and gave me the confidence to embrace my heritage fully.

What was it like visiting Lithuania for the first time?

It was an incredible experience. In July 2022, after nearly 100 years, I became the first member of my family to return to Lithuania. Coincidentally, I arrived on July 12, my grandfather's birthday, which made the moment even more special.

That trip changed my life. I participated in the summer course at VMU, explored the country, and felt an undeniable sense of belonging. It was during this time that I received the news that my Lithuanian citizenship had been approved. I was speechless – after years of effort, it was a dream come true.

That's amazing! How has living and studying in Lithuania impacted you?

Living in Lithuania has allowed me to reconnect with my roots in ways I never imagined. Studying at VMU has deepened my understanding of Lithuanian history, culture, and politics. It's also given me the opportunity to contribute to my family's legacy by keeping our Lithuanian identity alive.

This journey has been about more than just reclaiming my citizenship – it's about recovering a sense of self and ensuring that future generations of my family take pride in their Lithuanian heritage.

What advice would you give to others seeking to reconnect with their heritage?

Don't be afraid to start, even if the path seems uncertain. Ask questions, research your family history, and reach out to relatives or community groups who might help. Reconnecting with your heritage isn't just about learning facts; it's about finding a deeper sense of who you are and where you come from.



Felipe's grandfather Mykolas, his wife Estela and their children (from the left) Jorge, Sandra, Ricardo and Margareth

South American Lithuanian students: “Lithuania has always existed for us – it is our history”

Ingrida Dačioliene

Near the end of 2024, we met for a conversation with South American students of Lithuanian descent at the L. and F. Mockūnas Space in Vilnius. The students, who are also members of the Foreign Lithuanian Students' Club (ULSK)¹, shared their experiences studying in Lithuania, discussed their dual identity, and reflected on their image of being Lithuanian, i.e., their Lithuanianness, inherited from their parents and grandparents in South America.

The meeting was attended by Daina Juana Gariboldi and Victoria Laima Gariboldi, Audra Luksas and Kovas Luksas from Argentina, and Alejandro Avalos Liesinskas from Venezuela. Venezuelan Lithuanian Gabriel Orentas, who has been living in Lithuania since 2003, also joined the discussion.

All of the meeting participants had the following in common: they gained Lithuanian citizenship, they learned the Lithuanian language upon arriving in Lithuania, and they saw their futures connected to Lithuania. Each participant had a different level of proficiency in Lithuanian, but none of them intended or suggested speaking in English or Spanish. For them, having the conversation in Lithuanian was a given.

¹ ULSK – The Club of Foreign Lithuanian Students – is an organization operating in Lithuania that unites Lithuanian youth from around the world who have returned to Lithuania.



A conversation with students of Lithuanian origin from South America at the L. and F. Mockūnas house in Vilnius

For the reader's convenience, the interview has been edited for clarity.

How did your journey toward discovering Lithuanian culture and identity unfold?

Kovas: My sister and I were born in Mendoza, Argentina. During our childhood, we didn't have the opportunity to be part of the Lithuanian community. Later, we moved to Buenos Aires, where our parents participated in the community, but we didn't – maybe just occasionally. I used to dance traditional Lithuanian folk dances.

People often asked us where our names – Kovas, Audra, and Vytas – came from. We had to explain how they were written and that our great-grandparents were from Lithuania.

My mom says that when we were around one or two years old, she spoke to us in Lithuanian. At that time, she didn't have to work. But later, when we moved to Brazil, she had to learn a new language, and when we returned to Argentina, our parents separated. Then my mom had to work, and by the time she got home after work, she didn't have the energy to speak in a language that wasn't her every day one. Our school and homework were all in Spanish.

I learned more about Lithuania through my family – through stories, through my grandmother.

Juana: For us, Lithuania has always existed – it is our history. Back then, we didn't speak Lithuanian, but every week we watched recordings of the 1990 *Dainų Dainelė* children's singing competition. We didn't understand a single word, but we could sing along – and we did – even though we had no idea what the words meant.

When I came to Lithuania, my grandmother was so proud. She sent my photos to all her friends.

Did you always know that you wanted to study in Lithuania?

Kovas: One Father's Day, we were at a restaurant talking about the time my dad lived in Chicago when he was 18 to 23 years old. I thought to myself that I'd like to have a life like that too. I kept asking him, "Can I do the same?" And he always said, "Of course you can." Then, coincidentally, a week or two later, Juana² returned from Lithuania. That's when I decided to go study there.

Audra: I was always curious because my whole family spoke Lithuanian. My parents had friends from Lithuania and from the *Vasario 16-osios gimnazija*³. When they came over, everyone spoke Lithuanian, and I didn't understand anything. But I really wanted to be able to speak and understand. My brother was already in Lithuania, so I told myself that I wanted to go there too.

This is my first time in Lithuania. Before coming, I imagined Lithuania as my family had described it, but now I have my own opinion. And everything is good.

Gabriel: Actually, my real name is Kęstutis. My father was Gediminas, and he convinced my mother that my name had to be Kęstutis. My mother is Venezuelan from Colombia, and my father emigrated from Lithuania after the war. He was a photographer in Kaunas.

When Lithuania regained independence, he decided that he wanted to return to his homeland. But at the time, I thought Lithuania was still communist, that there was nothing there. When we both arrived in Lithuania, after 15 days, he wanted to go back to Venezuela, but I wanted to stay in Lithuania forever.

² Juana Gariboldi – friend of Kovas, participant of this discussion.

³ Lithuanian High School in Germany – known in German as the *Privates Litauisches Gymnasium* and in Lithuanian as *Vasario 16-osios gimnazija*. In Lithuanian, the name refers to the founding of the Lithuanian Republic on February 16 (*Vasario 16-oji*), 1918.



From the left: Gabriel Orentas, Alejandro Liesinskas, Aira Gurauskaitė, Victoria Laima Gariboldi, Kovas Luksas and Daina Juana Gariboldi at L. ir F. Mockūnas House in Vilnius

I fell in love with Lithuania. Everything was so bohemian, so strange – everything had to be rebuilt from scratch, but it was all very creative. I really liked that kind of environment. Later, my father started living in Lithuania, and every summer, I would come to visit him. Each year, I saw how things kept changing.

Since 2003, I decided to move here permanently. I felt like I had nothing left to do in Venezuela and that I wanted to start over in Lithuania. Since then, I've spent some time living in Spain and London.

My full name is Kęstutis Gabriel Orentas Amado, but while living in London, it was easier to go by Gabriel Orentas – I didn't have to explain over the phone to the bank, for example, how to pronounce "Kęstutis." Since then, I've been Gabriel Orentas.

What language do you speak with your family and friends?

Gabriel: My father always spoke to me only in Spanish... with his accent.

Kovas: My sister and I also speak Spanish with each other – switching the language would feel really strange.

Gabriel: That's how it is. With someone I always speak Lithuanian to, we stick to Lithuanian. And if we switch languages, it changes the relationship – it feels like I'm talking to a different person, like a stranger. There are Lithuanians I always speak English with. I think it has to do with communication, semiotics, and language codes.

Juana: We live with a roommate from Russia, and we speak English with her, but the

language switches constantly. I speak Spanish with Victoria, then we switch to English when our roommate joins in, and from then on, we continue in English, just because we're too lazy to switch back to Spanish.

We have some Lithuanian words we've learned to say well, like *vadovė* (advisor), *sesija* (exam session), *montuoti* (to edit), and we never translate those into Spanish. A lot of the words are study-related, because we study in Lithuanian.

Alejandro: Question for everyone – do you have a name for this kind of language mix? Like how people say “Spanglish”?

Maybe we could call it *Lietuviš*? I came up with *Lituaniol* – from *Lituano* and *Español*. Or from Lithuanian – *liespatuviškai*. But maybe *Lituañol* or *Lituanish* sounds better⁴.

What's happening with you all is the same as with me and my sister or mom. You start speaking in Spanish, then forget a word in Spanish but remember it in Lithuanian. For example: *Estaba en el parque, entonces sutikau amiga mía*⁵.

Sometimes I even use Lithuanian verbs with Spanish endings – like instead of *einu pirkti* (“I'm going to buy”), I say *einu pirkiar*.

What kind of perception did you have about Lithuania before coming here, and how do you feel about Lithuania and Lithuanians now? What difference do you feel within yourself?

Alejandro: What difference do I feel in myself? I've become different. I'm not as warm as I used to be. I'll give you an example. Imagine a circle [he arranges cookies in a circle on a plate – I. D.] and you are one of the cookies in that circle. If everyone else starts dancing, you – whether you want to or not – will start

dancing too. But if you're the one who's always moving and dancing, and everyone else in the circle is just standing still... That's a kind of social psychology. I think everyone tries to stay true to themselves and not change, but the environment still changes you.

Juana: In Argentina, I'm very introverted, but here – I'm an extrovert. My whole life I was an introvert. I came to Lithuania and suddenly – bam! Why am I like this here? Vicki is 120% extrovert both in Argentina and in Lithuania.

Vicki: What our grandma told us about Lithuania was all about Lithuania during the Soviet era. So we arrived expecting everything to be bad, dirty, with no sunshine, and people never smiling. But when we got here – it was all different! Now Lithuania needs to move forward, to look at what's ahead, not behind.

Kovas: Before coming here, I told my friends I'd go back to Argentina after one semester, but I told my parents – maybe I won't return. Why I made that decision, I don't really know. I've always been free, always wanted to live my own life. And living independently in Argentina is really hard – you have to study, work, and pay rent. But here, in Lithuania, that actually feels possible.

Gabriel: Lithuania gives you this feeling that you can be free, you can be yourself – and because of that, you can move forward. Especially for young people, the conditions are good. People kept asking me why I left Venezuela – after all, it's always summer there, there are coconuts, bananas – *chunga-changa*⁶. But that's nothing new. Even 500 years ago, Venezuela was *chunga-changa* to all the Europeans.

Juana: There aren't many immigrants in Lithuania yet, and people don't look at them like cockroaches. When I came to Lithuania and

⁴ The participants of the conversation unanimously agreed that the best name is *Lituañol*.

⁵ I was in the park, then I met my friend.

⁶ Popular Russian kids' song about an amazing life on a tropical island where summer and fun occur the whole year.

didn't speak the language well yet, people were still interested in me. People here are happy that you chose to live in Lithuania, chose to learn the language, to study in Lithuanian. You chose to live here – and people are happy about that. For example, if you go to the market and speak with an accent, but in Lithuanian – you'll definitely get something for free. The market ladies love it when you try to say something in Lithuanian.

You came to Lithuania, and it feels special to you, while for many Lithuanians who were born and raised here, Lithuania doesn't feel special at all.

Juana: That's because you're always looking at how people live elsewhere. People in Lithuania look to Western Europe, see that people live better there, earn higher salaries, and they want the same. Meanwhile, we in Argentina or Venezuela look at Lithuania and think – oh, stability! That's everything! That's already the dream.

Gabriel: People in Lithuania want to move to Norway or London – they want to live better. But we came here because we want to **live**.

Juana: Yes, we just want to live [smiles]. That's it.

Alejandro: We're finally living peacefully.

Gabriel: You can walk down the street, and no one will kill you. You can leave your phone on a café table, go to the bathroom, and it'll still be there when you come back!

Juana: Also, I no longer instinctively jump off the street when I hear a motorcycle. In Argentina, it's very common for two people to pull up on a motorcycle – one of them takes everything you have, hops back on, and they speed off. Here in Lithuania, everyone walks around so relaxed – it would be very easy to rob you [laughs] because people don't watch where they're going or what they're doing.

Do you say, "I am Lithuanian" or "I am a child of Lithuanians"?

Victoria: In Argentina, we don't say we're Lithuanian. We say my great-grandmother or grandmother came from Lithuania. I say I'm Argentinean with Lithuanian roots.

Kovas: When I first came here, I used to say I'm an Argentinean of Lithuanian descent. Now, after spending enough time here, speaking the language better, studying in Lithuanian, and serving in the Lithuanian army – that had an impact – I developed a Lithuanian side. I was born and raised in Argentina – I can't erase that – I was fully Argentinean. But now I've started to feel my Lithuanian side too. I'll never say I'm only Lithuanian, because that would mean erasing half of my life. Now I'd say I'm a Lithuanian-Argentinean or Argentinean-Lithuanian.

Alejandro: I was born in Venezuela and lived there until I was 13. I've lived in Lithuania for 8 years now, but sometimes I feel caught in between – not knowing exactly who I am. Am I Venezuelan or not? I was born and raised there, but I don't know all the traditions of Venezuela. I am and feel Venezuelan because that's where I was born. When it comes to Lithuania, I am Lithuanian. I live here, so I can experience what it's like to live here, how Lithuanians interact. I live here, but I was born there, and because of that, I am who I am. I have energy, I have what they call *sabor* – Latin flavour [everyone laughs]. To sum up – I'm a child of the world.

Gabriel: I've always felt like both Lithuanian and Venezuelan too. One part of me was raised Venezuelan, the other – Lithuanian. I saw it as an opportunity to look at both Lithuania and Venezuela differently, because having another perspective is a gift.

Memory and Presence: A Portrait of Ernesto José Parselis

*“He who does not know the history of his ancestors is like a tree without roots.”
(Confucius, Analects)*

Verónica Parselis and Martín Parselis¹

Ancestral roots not only connect us to the past but also shape our identity, values, and worldview. Writing about someone’s life (especially that of a parent) is a challenge that goes far beyond merely recounting facts. It involves organizing memories, selecting what is worth telling, and, most importantly, facing one’s own story or that of another with sincerity and with depth.

The philosopher Martin Heidegger explored the notion of “historicity”, which implies that human identity is intertwined with its past and lineage. For him, Dasein (the human being in its existence) is not an isolated individual but rather inherits a world and a history that shape its way of being. “Tradition is not something we simply inherit; rather, it throws us into an already interpreted world”, he states. (*Being and Time*, 1927).

One of the greatest challenges is deciding what to include and what to leave out of this world of interpretations. A person’s life is shaped by a succession of moments and events that are difficult to measure: How do we choose which ones are relevant? How do we prevent the story from becoming merely an inventory of events? Aware of these constraints, we set

¹ Verónica Parselis is a philosopher and visual artist. Martín Parselis is an engineer, educator, and artist.



Ernesto Parselis



Ernesto Parselis in Argentina (first from the right)

out to present a brief portrait of our father: Ernesto José Parselis.

He was born on October 9, 1940, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in the Avellaneda neighborhood. His parents were Lithuanian. He completed his primary education at the Mother of Mercy Lithuanian Parish School. There, he spent his childhood, from which came many anecdotal stories describing a mischievous, curious, and happy boy. He was an altar boy and a Scout leader. He also founded the School's alumni centre. Mentioning this is like tracing back a thread that remained unbroken throughout his life – a path marked by leadership and the ability to manage human groups. His entire life was closely tied to Argentina's Lithuanian Community, personally representing humanist values and honouring his cultural roots. He spoke perfect Lithuanian and,

together with his wife and lifelong companion, Irene Eva Pikutis – also the daughter of Lithuanian parents and deeply committed to the Community – passed down the fundamental traditions of the Baltic country to his children and grandchildren. Like a shadow, the intimate experience of our unique origins in Argentina emerges – we are the descendants of four Lithuanian grandparents.

Undoubtedly, our current beliefs and values are deeply rooted in historical and cultural structures that arrived in Argentina between 1928 and 1930, along with 20,000 Lithuanians who boarded ships shortly after leaving their hometowns: Šiauliai, Liaunai, Plaštaka, Liubiečius. Nietzsche once said, "There is no human being who can leap beyond their own shadow." Our identity is built from those blurred edges that embrace plurality and cultural diversity – elements that, from Lithuania,

transform and converge with South American influences.

Our father's vocational search led him, as a teenager, to enter the Metropolitan Seminary of Devoto². Later, he travelled to Rome – a journey that proved decisive and left a lasting mark on him. It is paradoxical: in the city of Rome, one can sense something akin to what we feel in our filial relationship – the splendour of the past continues to permeate the present, making it a place where history and enduring values never fade.

In the “Eternal City”, he studied Philosophy, earning *Magna cum laude* honours at the Angelicum – the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Upon returning to Argentina, he validated his degree at the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina (UCA) and began his academic career there at a time when Monsignor Octavio Derisi, the University's founder, was still rector. In 1984, he was appointed the University's Academic Secretary,

a role that marked the beginning of his long association with various administrative positions at the University (until 2016) and collaboration with successive rectors. His legacy remains not only in the University's hallways – where a lecture hall now bears his name – but also in his patient and honest dedication to the academic community and other institutions of higher education, such as the Faculty of Philosophy at UNSTA³, where he served as Dean for several decades.

His life and professional career stand as a testament to the intellectual movement that led to the founding of private universities in Argentina. His path was also deeply influenced by his connection to the work and spirit of the Dominican Fathers, particularly to the Order of Veritas, which is an example of commitment to seeking and spreading the truth through study, preaching, and teaching.

Throughout his professional life, he also dedicated time to contributing to the Lithuanian

² Metropolitan Seminary of Buenos Aires, better known as Villa Devoto Seminary.

³ Es. Universidad del Norte de Santo Tomás de Aquino (Saint Thomas Aquinas University of the North)



Parselis family: (from the left) son Martin, daughter Verute and parents Irene and Ernesto

community in Argentina, together with his wife, Irene Pikutis. He gave numerous lectures to community members and the local public on Lithuanian culture and history, covering topics such as: the importance of the newspaper *Aušra* in Lithuania's national revival, the poem *Metai* (*The Year*) by Kristijonas Donelaitis, the Grand Duke of Lithuania Gediminas, the pilots S. Darius and S. Girėnas, the Catechism of Martynas Mažvydas, Lithuania's liberation process, and its historical path to independence, among others.

In 1975, Ernesto led the South American Lithuanian Youth Congress. In 1991, he prepared the program for the Study Week of the World Lithuanian Youth Congress. He also founded and published the Spanish-language magazine *Foro Báltico*, which was distributed in Argentina. Additionally, he edited and published a book in Spanish titled *LITUANIA*, which recounts the country's most significant historical milestones.

He was an example of moderation and always encouraged dialogue in times of crisis to maintain the right balance of pragmatism with a unique ethic of care for both people and institutions. He is fondly remembered for this

trait, which became a defining characteristic of both his professional and personal life. We were witnesses to his example and dedication to this special perspective – and to its many lasting impacts.

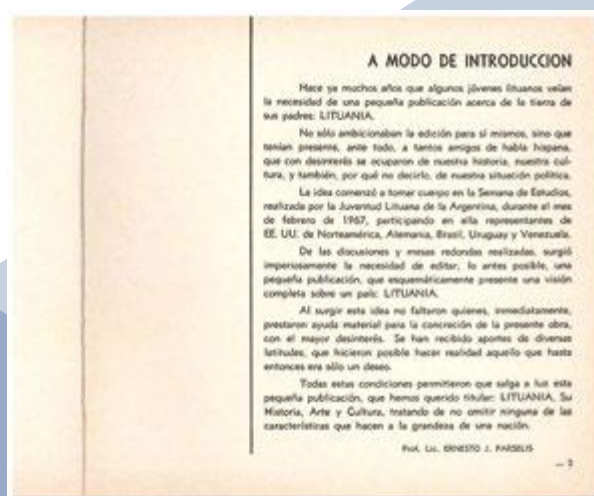
The formation of individuals – education – is an endeavour that presupposes selflessness. What a true educator imparts is a gift; it is not given with the expectation of receiving something in return, as in a commercial exchange. Throughout his life, Ernesto transformed this work into a mission, one that he carried out by guiding institutions through their growth and development.

We are deeply grateful for his example and his dedication. Now, as parents and adults ourselves, we aspire to continue his generous and selfless legacy with our own children.

These paragraphs are merely an incomplete glimpse of a life filled with depth and experience. We honour Ernesto in this brief portrait, knowing that through his example, he has left us with an immense world.



Book "Lituania" edited by Ernesto Parselis



Mission Lithuania and discovering the Lithuanian community in Uruguay

Giedrė Milerytė-Japertienė

“Hello. My name is Alberto Kaluževičius, and I am the secretary of the Lithuanian Community in Uruguay. We’re happy that you’ll be visiting us this coming October. We would like to receive information about your arrival and the hotel where you plan to stay so that we can coordinate our activities,” – this is how, in the fall of 2022, our acquaintance with the Lithuanian community in Uruguay began, which soon grew into a true friendship.



Folk dance group on Mount Cerro. Uruguay, 1990s

Preparing for the Exhibition – An Expedition to South and North America

When Dr. Rūta Kačkutė became the director of the National Museum of Lithuania, she envisioned organizing an exhibition dedicated to the history of Lithuanian emigration. She invited me to join her in preparing the exhibition, and around 2019, we began our first preparatory work.

Our goal was not only to tell the story of Lithuania's migration history, but above all, to bring closer together people living in and outside the country to whom the name of Lithuania still feels familiar and meaningful.

Preparing for the exhibition involved many activities, including, presenting migration story festivals, a series of radio programs, and articles in the press and on social media. It was very important to hear and collect as many migration stories as possible so that people would feel they had personally contributed to the creation of the exhibition and, upon visiting the museum, could find the stories of their own families or ancestors.

To collect these stories, in the fall of 2022, we set out on an expedition across South and North America. Over the course of six weeks, we visited Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and the United States. We travelled through 17 states and 17 cities, drove 9,184.5 kilometres, visited 14 museums, recorded 43 stories, and brought back 2 suitcases full of exhibition items.

But without a doubt, the most valuable treasure we brought home was the friendships formed during our journey.

Here, I would like to tell you about the friends we made in a small South American country – Uruguay.

A Brief History of Lithuanians in Uruguay

It is said that today around 10,000 Lithuanians and people of Lithuanian descent live in

Uruguay. Approximately the same number of people arrived in the country before the Second World War as part of the second wave of emigration from what is known as Smetona-era Lithuania. This time, however, they fled not to North America, but to South America¹.

The first Lithuanians may have reached Uruguay as early as the 19th century, but their numbers by the shores of the Río de la Plata² began to grow only after the First World War. When the first Lithuanian dance evening – called a “robaksas” – was held in Montevideo in 1928, it was attended by only 7 women and 30 men. This number likely represented the majority of Lithuanians living in the country at that time.

In the 1930s, Lithuanian organizations of both right- and left-leaning political orientations began to form one after another. In 1940, the then-Minister Plenipotentiary Kazys Graužinis counted twelve such organizations. However, few were large in membership size and few were particularly active.

After the War, several thousand more Lithuanian settlers joined the Lithuanian community in Uruguay.

The history of Lithuanians in Uruguay is closely tied to a hill – the Montevideo suburb known as Cerro. Today, at its highest point stands the General Artigas Fortress, home to a military museum, and at its base, you can still stumble upon a street called *Lituanía*.

It was at the foot of this hill that newly arrived Lithuanians found work in slaughterhouses. There were three so-called “frigoríficos”³ around the Cerro area, and Lithuanians – more tolerant

¹ The first wave of Lithuanian emigration, prior to the First World War, was primarily directed toward North America. The second wave occurred in the years leading up to the Second World War was largely directed toward South America.

² The Río de la Plata in Uruguay, near Montevideo, offered a convenient and accessible landing point for immigrants seeking to settle in the region.

³ Refrigerated meat processing and slaughterhouse facilities.

of the cold than immigrants from southern Europe – quickly adapted to the work environment.

Some Lithuanian immigrants even managed to establish their own businesses: they owned shops, diners, bars, a photo studio, rented out cars, and acted as intermediaries in land purchases.

In 1932, with the initiative and funding of the Lithuanian government, the Dr. J. Basanavičius Lithuanian Primary School was opened in Uruguay. However, its operation came to an end when Lithuania lost its independence.

In 1954, thanks to the efforts of the Lithuanian community in Uruguay, the Church of Our Lady of Fatima's Immaculate Heart was built in the same Cerro district of Montevideo. For many years, this church served as a Lithuanian cultural hub.

Due to the sizable Lithuanian population in the area, various cultural, artistic, political, and

community activities were actively encouraged. Publications were issued, a radio program was broadcast, and numerous cultural events – such as dance evenings, exhibitions, conventions, and international gatherings – were organized.

The Lithuanian Cultural Society of Uruguay was home to the choir *Aidas* and the folk-dance ensembles *Gintaras*, *Ažuolynas*, and *Rintukai*. These groups participated in local and international events and even appeared in television programs.

Since 1982, Lithuanian youth from Uruguay have been sent to the Vasario 16-osios (February 16) Gymnasium⁴ in Germany to study the Lithuanian language.

⁴ Lithuanian High School in Germany – known in German as the *Privates Litauisches Gymnasium* and in Lithuanian as *Vasario 16-osios gimnazija*. In Lithuanian, the name refers to the founding of the Lithuanian Republic on February 16 (*Vasario 16-oji*), 1918.



A moment of celebration at the unveiling of the monument in the Lithuanian Republic Square. Montevideo, Uruguay, 1960s



The board of the Lithuanian community of Uruguay at the club. Cerro, Uruguay, 2024

Migration Stories and Mission Lithuania

When we arrived in Montevideo in 2022, we were greeted at the airport by Alberto Kaluzevicius, wearing a scarf in the colours of the Lithuanian flag. This marked the beginning of a meticulously planned visit filled with meetings, tours, interviews, conversations, and dinners.

We listened to deeply personal migration stories shared by Berute Zukas, Mindaugas Macenskaskas, Roberto Ibarra, Veronica Kavaliauskas, Virna Vilimavicius, Alejandro Brom, Cecilia Hernandez Svobas, Alberto Kaluzevicius, Alondra Sivickis, Daniel Josponis, and Birute Yuzulenaskas. Some stories were told with tears in the storyteller's eyes.

From these accounts, we not only gathered material for the exhibition but also reflected on the current state of the Lithuanian community of Uruguay.

Today, the only active Lithuanian organization in Montevideo is the Lithuanian Cultural Society of Uruguay, with around 200 members and with its own home – a building located in the same Cerro district. The society's activities are mainly sustained by a few dedicated individuals and the friendships among them. It seems that friendship is what empowers and motivates them to act.

None of the society's active members were born in Lithuania. They only know the country through the stories of their parents and grandparents. They heard the Lithuanian language as children, but most learned to speak it later – either during time spent at the Vasario 16-osi-os (February 16) Gymnasium or through language courses in Lithuania.

The people's love for their ancestral homeland is witnessed by our interviews with them and

by their daily lives and dedication, which include devotion of time and resources, raising of children with cultural knowledge, and providing care and maintenance of the Lithuanian community centre.

But the story that truly sealed this understanding was the one they told us about how, a couple of times a week, they buy local lottery tickets, marking numbers related to community events and Lithuanian history, hoping to one day win enough money to travel to Lithuania together.

That story inspired us, upon returning from the expedition, to organize a fundraising campaign for the Lithuanian community in Uruguay – an initiative they themselves named Mission Lithuania.

On this side of the ocean, we spread the word about their activities and their story, while they created an introductory video, made plans, and dreamed of completing a symbolic circle of history – a collective return to their grandparents' homeland.

Although we couldn't raise enough money to fully cover the trip's expenses, 9 Lithuanian Uruguayans came to Lithuania in the summer of 2024 to attend the Centennial Song Festival.

That event became a kind of global Lithuanian gathering, and at times, it felt like people in traditional folk dress were constantly walking the streets of Vilnius.

I'm truly happy that their journey happened during a time when the whole country was living to the rhythm of one big celebration.

I believe that the Vasario 16-osios Gymnasium was one of the most successful projects for preserving Lithuanian identity – a strategic decision whose results are still felt today. Today, the Lithuanian state can afford to invest

more in education for its diaspora. It's wonderful that state-supported schools are operating. Even better, it is now possible to attend summer or winter language and culture courses in Lithuania itself.

However, as life often shows, the greatest and most sincere things are achieved by those who have little funding but a great deal of desire. Let's invest in them. Let's offer scholarships to those who are eager to learn the Lithuanian language today, to those who dream of learning about Lithuanian culture and making friends here.

Perhaps not all of them will engage in active cultural activities in the future, but even a few shining stars, thousands of kilometres away, can continue to share the light of Lithuanian identity for decades in places where new immigrant winds rarely blow.

The Long Way Home: A Personal Journey of Lithuanian Diaspora

Gabriel Orentas

The history of Lithuania is in many ways the history of its diaspora – a history of lives separated from homeland yet bound together by culture, memory, and identity. Across the world, the Lithuanian spirit endures being carried by generations of sons, daughters, fathers, and grandfathers – each with a story to tell. Some, driven by hope, sought new lands to cultivate. Others, escaping oppression, embarked on a journey to search for freedom. And perhaps for some, it was a quest for adventure, an exploration of the unfamiliar.

Let me share with you the story of my father Gediminas Orentas – a prolific Lithuanian Venezuelan photographer known for his contributions to photography in both Lithuania and Venezuela. He was not only an excellent photographer but also an established, successful publisher in Kaunas and Caracas. Additionally, he was a respected art dealer and avid collector, both of which enriched his professional and personal life. In his later years, he became a patron for education and a political adviser.

The Making of a Photographer

Born in St. Petersburg in 1915 to a Lithuanian family, Gediminas Orentas was the son of Petronelė Kudirkaitė and Adomas Orentas, a former officer of the Imperial Guard. In Russia, Adomas invested in various businesses, but due to the looming Bolshevik Revolution, he and his family returned to Lithuania and settled in Kybartai. In 1934, my father graduated from Kybartai's School of Commerce and



Gediminas Orentas in Venezuela

moved to Kaunas with plans to study at Vytautas Magnus University.

As a student, my father was active in several organizations, including one called *Pažanga*. During one of *Pažanga*'s regular meetings, he met writers and editors from local newspapers, including *Jaunoji Lietuva* and *Lietuvos Aidas*. They mentioned their need for pictures to illustrate an article about a recent sea festival in Klaipėda. My father, with personal photographs of the festival events, was unsure if his photographs would be acceptable as a contribution for the article. As it turned out, his photos exceeded the newspapers' expectations, and the editors even quarrelled over who would get to publish which image.

That moment marked the beginning of my father's profession in photography – a career in which he provided images for various publications. Lithuania's participation in the Paris International EXPO in 1937 provided a great opportunity for Lithuanian professionals to showcase their work. My father's photographs were among those awarded with a gold medal during that exhibition.

Back in Kaunas, he felt encouraged to establish a publishing business focusing on photography. Between 1938 and 1940, he published two books featuring his own work alongside those of colleagues like Vytautas Augustinas, Otonas Milaševičius, and A. Giedraitis. He also released ten series of postcards and envelopes printed with the landscapes and landmarks of Lithuania. His third book was in the works, but production was halted when Soviet troops invaded the country.

A New Lens in a New Land

Having witnessed the first Soviet occupation, my father felt compelled to join the June 1941 uprising. He managed to evade the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) and,



Gabriel Orentas

with his first wife and son, was ultimately forced into exile in Germany. Decades later, the memories of those days remained vivid in his mind. He once said, "Those days in June revealed the true character of Lithuanians – men with an unwavering will to stand and fight for their families, their homes, their nation, and their ideals." Though the course of the war would ultimately bring defeat, that perspective never deterred those who took up the fight.

Exile, however, was not the end of his journey. After spending several years in Germany, building a life through trading Old Master paintings and antiques, he made another life-altering decision – one that would take him even further from home. In 1950, he made the journey to Venezuela. Why Venezuela? This remains unclear to me. Was it his sense of adventure? A lack of alternatives? He had

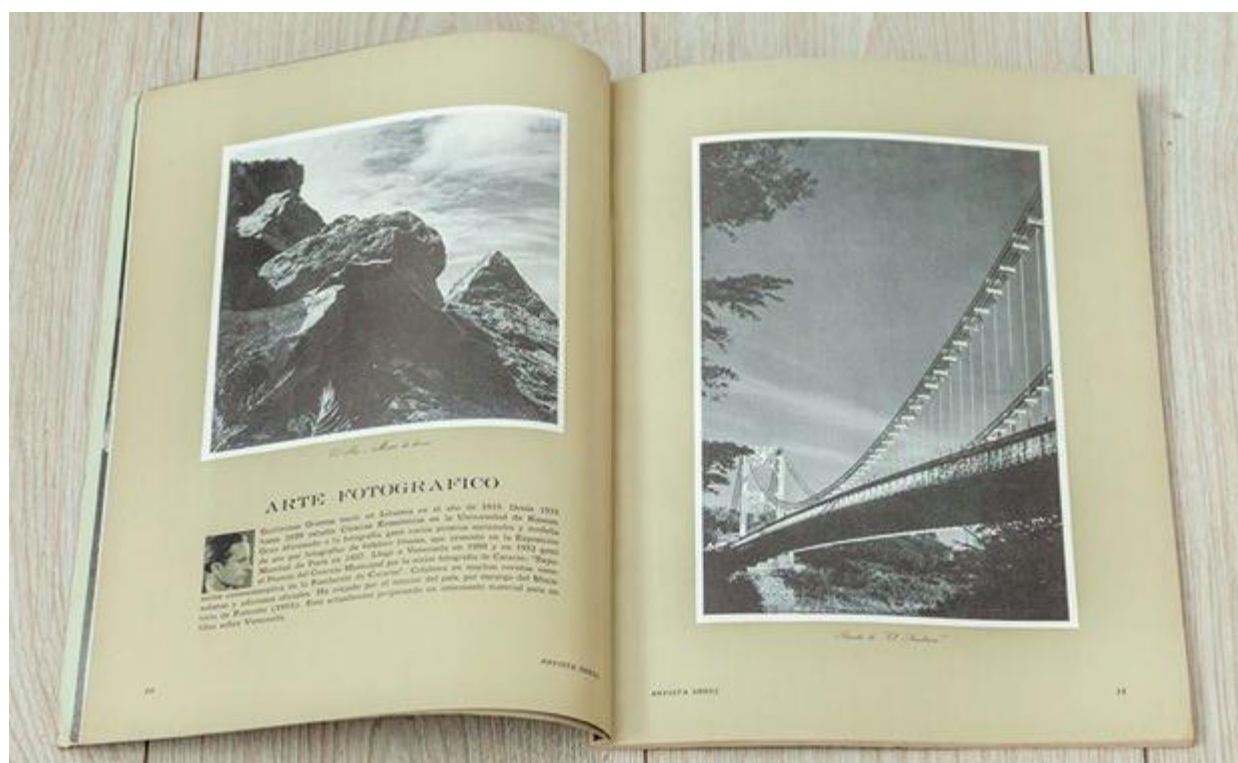
fared well in Germany, so staying there was an option. He knew about Venezuela and its emerging economy from newspapers in Kaunas, so perhaps that and the perspective of tropical weather were what ultimately influenced his decision.

After WWII, Venezuela had an open-door policy toward immigration, welcoming Europeans to introduce fresh ideas and a work ethic into the local economy. In 1950, Venezuela was like a blank canvas where one could reinvent one's life. For my father and his family, the country was completely unknown. The language barrier and uncertainty of how to begin anew weighed heavily on them. Fortunately, he arrived with some funds and paintings that he had acquired in Germany as investments. Through some inquiries, he connected with local art dealers who agreed to see his collection.

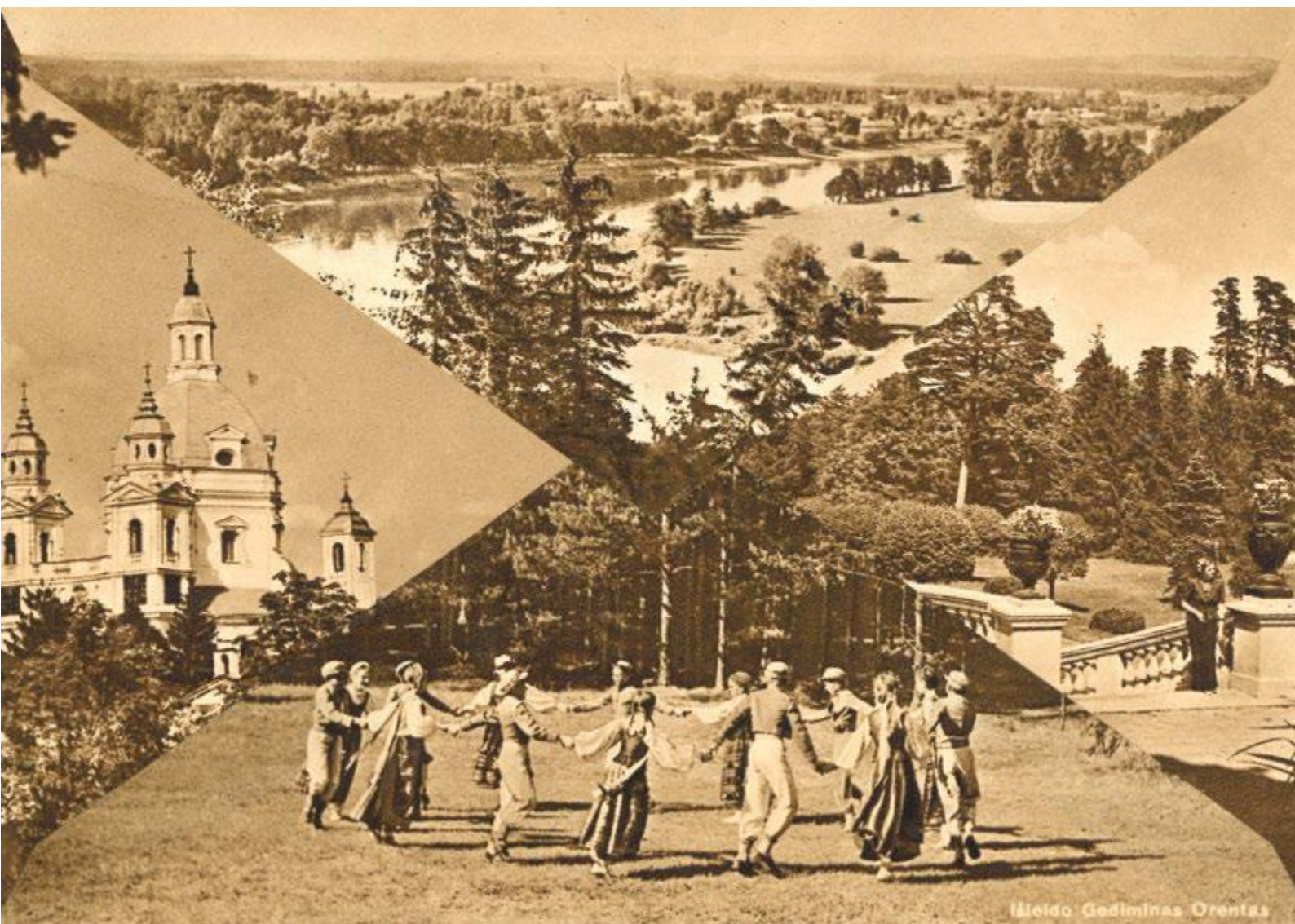
During one such meeting, my father encountered a collector facing a problem: he couldn't

find a photographer skilled enough to document his art collection. Just as he had done years before in Kaunas with the editors of *Lietuvos Aidas*, my father offered to take on the task. Soon, he was being recommended for other photography jobs, covering not only art but also events and official meetings. His growing network led him to a collaboration with *Revista Shell* – a magazine funded by the Royal Dutch Shell Company.

Within his first year in Venezuela, my father (a photographer from Kaunas who spoke fluent German but no Spanish at all!) was producing documentary work for the Ministry of Development, Shell, and Creole Oil. He also contributed to the art collections of the Venezuelan National Gallery, the Museum of Colonial Art, and the Museum of Sacred Art in Caracas. As a Lithuanian immigrant, now entrusted with numerous photographic work commissions, he travelled across Venezuela – from Paraguaipoa



Gediminas Orentas' photography in "Shell" magazine



An envelope created by Gediminas Orentas

to Tucupita, from Porlamar to San Fernando de Atabapo – capturing through his camera lens the whole country from air, land, and sea.

Collecting More Than Images

Life carried on. He divorced and then remarried. He founded the business *International Foto Service* with an aim to reach an international audience. Things seemed to go well until 1976, when a tragic accident in Colombia brought an end to his photographic journey.

A bus hit the car in which we travelled, projected the car several meters into the air, and nose-dove it into the ground. Miraculously, my sister and I were unharmed. Our parents, however, received the worst of the impact. My mother had severe cuts from impacting the windscreen. My father had numerous fractures. He was confined to a bed for six months with most of his body in a cast. Although he would eventually recover from the accident, his sight was severely affected. Further

diagnosis of a retinal disease sealed the fate of his photographic career.

Undeterred, my father returned to trading Old Master paintings and other antiques, just as he did before in Germany, and he would continue to do so regardless of his sight limitations. From the end of the 1970s to the beginning of the 1990s, our home became the headquarters of *Antigüedades Orentas* (Orentas' Antiques). From the comfort of our living room, my father dealt dozens of European paintings, sculptures, colonial art, Pre-Columbian art and even emerald gems that went to private collectors in Britain, Germany, France and the U.S.

But my father's interests extended beyond art and antiques. His work with Shell, Creole Oil, and various national museums not only built his reputation but also introduced him to influential figures in Venezuelan political life. I still have some letters that he received from ministers and presidents thanking him for his input and collaboration, especially at the time of elections.

Familiar Lands, Foreign Feelings

Despite his lengthy involvement in Venezuela, his heart remained tied to Lithuania. By 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall brought a wave of hope to my father – Lithuania might be independent again. One afternoon, I entered our home, and all he said was: "Son, we're going back to the motherland!" Being born and bred in Venezuela, the idea of leaving everything behind and just moving abroad was completely disorienting to me. But his mind was set. I never went to Europe before, and I was 19 at the time – so why not?

In the summer of 1992, we landed at Vilnius airport. Back then, Lithuania was an entirely different country. The single-terminal airport consisted of a greyish-looking Soviet building with one conveyor belt that went in and out of the

building to carry the luggage. Once outside the airport, we took a taxi and headed to find a place to exchange some money. The taxi driver recommended a place on Vilnius Street, so off we went.

The business was in a fairly dark entrance hall, not really an office at all. At the bottom of a staircase, sat a pair of funny-looking guys with their feet upon a desk. Confused, we asked, "Excuse me, where's the bank?" To which they promptly replied while jumping off their seats: "The bank? Right here! What can we do for you?" Like two characters in a British comedy, we looked at our surroundings, then looked at each other, then looked at the guys and said quietly: "Can we exchange a hundred bucks?" "Sure, no problem" said one of the guys while the other produced two purses, one full of roubles and one full of what seemed a mix of U.S. dollars and German marks. We exchanged our money, expected no receipt or paper of any kind, and went back to our taxi, happy we made it this far.

For the next 45 days of our stay, such occurrences would not be uncommon. But despite all the funny moments and quirkiness that we found during the trip, it was also clear that my father wasn't pleased. The Lithuania in his mind was the one he left in 1945. He hadn't accounted for the changes that several decades of Soviet occupation would introduce. No one he had known in Lithuania from before lived there anymore. Places felt familiar and yet totally strange at the same time. Eventually, he reckoned, he felt like a foreigner in his own land.

Even so, just like in the 1950s when he first arrived to Venezuela, he went out and met new people. We were staying at the *Draugystė* Hotel in Vilnius, and boy, that place was friendly indeed. If I have very fond memories from that first trip to Lithuania, it is because of the radiant kindness of the people we encountered along the way. That kindness reignited my father's enthusiasm, and just a few months

after our return to Caracas, he would jump on a plane and head back to Vilnius.

Starting Up at 79

In 1994, a couple of students approached my father with an idea – they wanted to start a fuel business. Perhaps because they knew he had lived in Venezuela (a country known for its oil) they assumed he had some expertise in the field. While my father was well-versed in business, he had never worked in the oil industry before. Still, he knew plenty of people and, recognising the opportunity, he decided to join them in launching a company. They named it Ornaga – short for Orento Naftos Gamykla (Orentas Oil Factory). At 79 years old, my father was once again embarking on a new life chapter in Lithuania.

Much like he had done in Venezuela in the 1950s, he steadily built a network of connections, fostering relationships that would prove invaluable over the years. One of his most meaningful contributions was establishing a scholarship program for students at VGTU (Vilnius Gediminas Technical University.) The only requirement for recipients was that they commit to teaching at the university for one or two years after graduation. To fund this initiative, my father reached out to his acquaintances in Venezuela, persuading them to sponsor Lithuanian students. Many answered his call, thus forming bonds of friendship and solidarity between the two communities.

From the mid-1990s until his passing in 2007, my father remained committed to serving his homeland in any way he could at an age when most would have just chosen to retire. Though physical limitations eventually slowed him down, his door was always open to those seeking guidance. Politicians often gathered around his kitchen table, seeking his counsel. Some disputes were settled over those

conversations, and a few of those politicians became lifelong friends.

The Long Way Back Home

I never fully understood the motivations behind my father's decision to return to Lithuania, and I suspect he wasn't entirely certain of them either. Perhaps, deep down, he felt a calling, a need to close a chapter left unfinished in 1945. Or maybe it was something simpler – once you are born a Lithuanian, you remain a Lithuanian for life. No matter how far away you go that sense of belonging never stops tugging at you.

I like that idea – the notion of a Lithuania that thrives beyond its borders, not just as a place on the map, but as a living spirit carried by its sons and daughters. There is a Lithuania in São Paulo, another in Chicago. One exists in Dublin, another in London. One lives in Australia, and another in New Zealand. And once upon a time there was a Lithuania in Venezuela in between its mountains, golden shores, and vast tropical jungle. That Lithuania still endures and is preserved in fragments of time in photographs that captured one bit of the world through the eyes of an immigrant who never truly left behind his homeland. He simply took the long way back.

Certainly, nativists might see this differently, but to me, migration is not a one-way journey but a dynamic, ongoing exchange. Lithuanian expatriates have not merely left their homeland; they extend its influence by forming a global network that enriches both the diaspora and Lithuania itself.

The story of Lithuania's migration is far from over. Whether driven by opportunity, necessity, or curiosity, Lithuanians will continue to seek new horizons. And wherever they go, they will carry with them the spirit of their homeland, proving that Lithuania is not just a place on the map – it is a living, evolving identity that transcends borders.

A Lithuanian Oasis in Colombia: The Undiscovered Diaspora

Ieva Šulskutė

“For the new Lithuanian world wanderers, with rare exceptions, it was destined to find already rooted, perhaps even faded, remnants of earlier Lithuanian diasporas. Except for Venezuela and Colombia, where small groups of new Lithuanian immigrants emerged, Lithuanians had already left their marks in all other countries...”¹

I will begin this story of one of those small groups of new Lithuanian immigrants, the often-overlooked Lithuanians in Colombia.

Colombia might have remained for a long time an entirely foreign land on the map of the Lithuanian world, if not for the paths paved by a few pioneering Lithuanians. The first Lithuanian to enter Colombia is considered to be the Salesian² priest Mykolas Tamošiūnas, who arrived in 1930. In a letter written in 1937 from Mosquera, a town near Bogotá, he expressed his joy that several more Lithuanian Salesians had joined him in Colombia: “Last October, I welcomed three more Lithuanian friends from Italy, so now there are four of us under the Colombian sky!”

In 1940, Stasys (Stany) Sirutis also arrived in this distant land. Bringing a legal background, Sirutis had worked in Lithuania's State Security Department, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and later as an economic attaché at the

Lithuanian diplomatic mission in Brussels. After settling in Colombia, Sirutis founded one of the country's first tourism agencies, Turavión, in 1943. He is regarded as a pioneer of the Colombian tourism industry and later co-established the National Association of Travel Agencies.

Lithuanian Families Move to Colombia

After World War II came to an end resulting in thousands of Lithuanians finding themselves in DP (displaced persons) refugee camps in Europe, the small group of early Lithuanian settlers in Colombia took the initiative to invite the DPs to relocate to Colombia. Aware that Colombia had not signed any international agreements for accepting war refugees, they established the Lithuanian Catholic Committee for War Victim Relief (Comité Litauano Católico Pro Víctimas de Guerra) in 1946. They secured 1,500 Colombian visas and spread news through the Lithuanian diaspora press highlighting Colombia's job market and living conditions to attract skilled professionals.

In a 2020 interview, Colombian Lithuanian Laima Didžiulis recalled how her parents

¹Egidijus Aleksandravičius, “Karklo diegas. Lietuvių pasaulio istorija”, 2013.

²The Salesians, founded in 1859 in Turin by the Italian priest Giovanni Bosco, are a Catholic religious congregation of men. The mission of this congregation is to educate underprivileged children and youth, to promote Catholic education among the poor, and to engage in missionary work. Salesian missionaries began arriving to Colombia in 1875.



Lithuanians in Medellin, around 1975. Album of the Vyšniauskas family

discovered a newspaper article by Father [Catholic priest] Nikodemas Saldukas in 1947 or 1948, inviting Lithuanians to Colombia. "He wrote that here you could work the land, just like in Lithuania. My father sent a letter introducing himself as an agronomist and asked if he could come", Didžiulis recalled.

For some, the decision to move to Colombia was driven by practical reasons. This was the case for the Mockus-Šivickas family. Due to Alfonsas Mockus's illness, the family could only move to a country that did not require a health certificate. They hoped that Bogotá's climate would be beneficial for Alfonsas who was suffering from severe tuberculosis. Later, his son, Antanas Mockus, would recall that his father quickly recovered in Colombia thanks to newly developed medications.

In another case, a Vogulys family legend recounts how Jonas Vogulys, originally from Panevėžys, dreamed of finding an emerald. After World War II displaced him to Germany, he learned that Colombia was the best place to search for these precious stones – so he set off for South America.

Regardless of each family's individual reasons, Lithuanian newspapers abroad soon began publishing lists of Lithuanians departing for Colombia.

Arrival: Challenges and Community Building

"I remember Cartagena. They housed us in a huge hangar. My great-grandmother, who was then as old as I am now, was given a chair to sit on, but the rest of us had to sit on the ground... For the first time, we encountered something

unknown to us in this land – a scorching heat that tormented us”, recalled Barbara Rimgaila (Barbora Rimgailaitė). She was just a child in 1948 when she and her family arrived at the port of Cartagena on Colombia’s Caribbean coast. Indeed, the climate and landscape were in stark contrast to the familiar Lithuanian or German weather and scenery. At the same time, newcomers had to adapt to a new language and an unfamiliar culture – one that was more collectivist and expressive. As B. Rimgaila describes it, “If a European family could be painted in pastel colours, theirs [Colombian] would be painted in bold oil hues.”

Naturally, the first arrivals sought to stick together to create a small oasis of Lithuanian culture and to help each other settle. Once again, the *Lithuanian Catholic Committee for War Victim Relief* played a leading role. B. Rimgaila recalls:

Later, all Lithuanian refugees took their first-ever flight – from Cartagena to Bogotá. Everything was carefully organized – we were warmly welcomed. We had shelter living in three large Spanish-style houses with rooms surrounding a shared courtyard. We were provided with meals at restaurants in the city centre all expenses covered and even given pocket money for medicine and basic necessities. On Sundays, we gathered for Mass. Within two months, all professionals – engineers, doctors, and teachers – had found jobs. Craftsmen found work in carpentry, and those from rural areas took up farming.

The earlier-arrived Lithuanian settlers involved in agriculture also helped newcomers to establish themselves. For example, upon arriving in Colombia, Albinas Čiuoderis began working on S. Sirutis’s farm, and the Trakimai couple received significant help from the Lukauskas family who owned a farm near the city of Cali.

The efforts of the first Lithuanian settlers in Colombia – to invite war refugees, to secure

visas, to assist them in getting on their feet, and to preserve Lithuanian identity – provided countless war-affected Lithuanians with the opportunity to start a new life and formed a small but strong community in a distant land. As the Lithuanian diaspora press of the time wrote: “When all is said and done, it must be acknowledged that the names of the people in this committee will be inscribed in gold letters in the history of Lithuanian hardships. They truly deserve deep respect and gratitude.”

A Small but Enduring Lithuanian Community

Despite its small size – estimates suggest that between 550³ and 850⁴ Lithuanian war refugees arrived in Colombia – the Lithuanian community managed to establish not only mutual aid societies and an honorary consulate but also various cultural gathering and community centres. However, starting in the 1950s, due to significant emigration to other countries and increasing assimilation to the Colombian culture, the Lithuanian community in Colombia began to decline. Community meeting centres started closing, and fluency in the Lithuanian language gradually diminished. In 1970, the Colombian government even declined to renew the credentials of S. Sirutis, the country’s only active Lithuanian honorary consul.

Yet, new personal initiatives by second-generation Lithuanian Colombians began to emerge. At the Slotkai family’s farm, *Granja Lituania*, near Villavicencio, Lithuanian camps were organized, and young Lithuanians engaged with the World Lithuanian Youth Association. To revive Lithuanian activities, the Colombian Lithuanian Cultural Fund was also

³ Michelsonas, S. 1961. *Lietuvių išsivijimas Amerikoje (1868–1961)*. Keleivis, South Boston.

⁴ Liutkutė, L., Ūsaitė, K. 2013. „Nors gimėme ir gyvename Kolumbijoje, širdyje jaučiamės lietuviai: Trakimų šeimos istorijos pėdsakais“. *Oikos: lietuvių migracijos ir diasporos studijos*, 15, p. 57–71.



Lithuanian camp in Chinauta, Colombia, February 2023. From the album of Minyela Vogulys

established. In 1978, writing in the Canadian Lithuanian newspaper *Nepriklausoma Lietuva*, Jonas Kaseliūnas from Medellín noted: "Though we are few, we want to remain vibrant Lithuanians."

For the children born and raised in Colombia of Lithuanian immigrants, this country was home, not an exotic foreign land like it had been for their parents. Yet, the desire to form a Lithuanian community and to preserve the diaspora's historical narrative remained strong. Despite the ongoing decline of the community membership, the continued assimilation, and the nearly complete loss of Lithuanian language usage, Lithuanian identity in Colombia still breathes today – through annual February 16th Independence Day celebrations, by the tradition of giving Lithuanian names to children, via the preservation and acquisition of Lithuanian national costumes,

through trips to the ancestral homeland, and, most importantly, by the continued transmission of family and diaspora history across generations.

As Kęstutis Vacys Slotkus, the president of the Colombian Lithuanian Youth Association (KLJS), wrote in 1983:

Being born into a Lithuanian family, we inherit Lithuanian blood, features, and even a mentality from our parents. <...> Through our parents and our past, we possess an innate sense of emotions and a unique vision of life, which allows us to understand not only the joys that we and humanity celebrate but also the injustices that bring suffering and pain to so many other nations.

What began as a small gathering of a few compatriots forming the *Lithuanian Catholic Committee for War Victim Relief* grew into

an active and united community of several hundred Lithuanians in mid-20th century Colombia. Over time, maintaining Lithuanian community life became increasingly difficult – many Lithuanians emigrated to other countries, and those who stayed often formed mixed families. However, the longing to create a Lithuanian cultural oasis never disappeared.

Notwithstanding being geographically and culturally distant from Lithuania, despite lacking strong institutional support or a large membership, and facing the challenge of vast distances within Colombia itself, the Lithuanian community has preserved the core of its national identity to this day. Through historical memory – the stories of the Lithuanian nation, its diaspora, and each of its families' pasts – Lithuanian heritage continues to endure in Colombia.

(Self-)Revelations with Nijolė Lituana

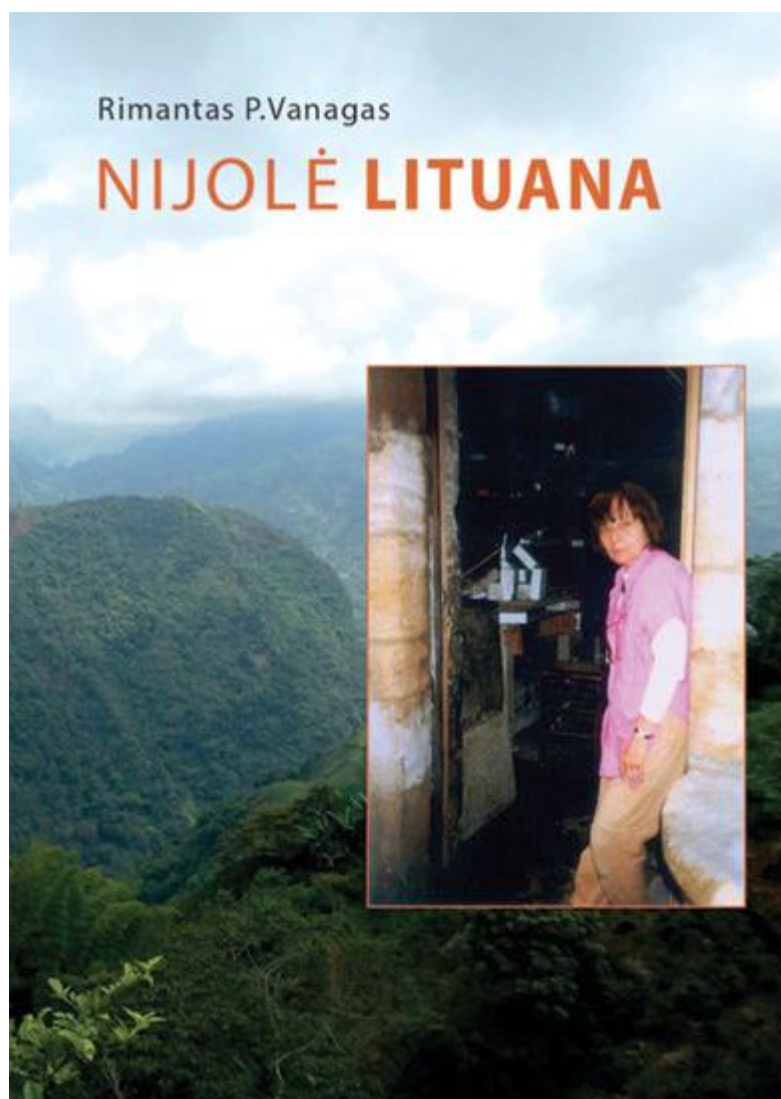
Eglė Ozolinčiūtė

The book “Nijolė Lituana” is a narrative gathered and lived across more than 20 years (2001–2024) by the journalist Rimantas P. Vanagas of Anykščiai (Lithuania). The book, which the author calls an adventure novel, is an account of his acquaintance with the late artist, ceramicist, sculptor, and creator of structures and installations – Nijolė Šivickas (1925–2018), also known as Nijolė Lituana.

Although Nijolė’s roots trace back to Anykščiai, most of her life and artistic career unfolded while living in exile in Bogotá, Colombia. She is more widely known for being the mother of the philosopher, mathematician, politician, former mayor of Bogotá, and Colombian Senate member Antanas Mockus.

While the book is easy to read and is captivating as an adventure novel – at times provoking laughter, at times inviting tears, it is notable for containing a wealth of documentary material collected through ethnographic methods. The author R. Vanagas directly interacted with Nijolė and her family during their visits to Lithuania and when he visited Colombia. His inquisitive eye as a journalist uncovers enriching secondary sources and the recollections of people who knew Nijolė’s family. The reader can find “lyrical” moments or poetic interpretations of the author’s experiences; these include poems written or read by the author during his travels and three of his previously unpublished short stories.

The book’s narrative takes the reader on a journey through different countries and across various time periods. Visual material and



stories about Nijolė's parents, about the flow of Nijolė's life and about her children are illustrated with photographs, some taken in Lithuania just a few years ago. Afterwards, a photo from the German cemetery in Bogotá of Nijolė Šivickas's grave is presented.

Following the textual narrative, framed by the lush green mountains of Colombia, the book continues with 30 pages dedicated to colourful photographs of Nijolė's artworks. It also includes images from catalogs featuring Nijolė's creations, as well as additional photographs documenting the journeys of both the artist and her works to exhibitions in various locations around the world, including Bogotá, Medellín, Quito, Vilnius, and others.

Nijolė's Unveiling

Revealing and opening Nijolė up to speak was a gift. Those who knew her (and I, while creating a film about her in Lithuania, was fortunate enough to be among them) were never certain whether Nijolė would choose to open the doors of her heart to a newly met person. For instance, as mentioned in the book, she opened up to the filmmaker Sandro only after inspecting his hands – roughened by his work pruning trees. It seems that Nijolė did not have much connection with “soft-handed” people unfamiliar with labour. Her meeting with Sandro marked the beginning of a beautiful friendship, one of whose fruits is the film *Nijolė*, which I sincerely recommend.

A similar openness was reflected by her response to the author R. Vanagas's respectful approach when promising to show Nijolė the book's manuscript before publication – and her reply: “No need. I trust you.”

Even more remarkable and welcoming was the fact that, during his stay in Colombia, journalist Vanagas was granted an exceptional

gift of trust – he was allowed to observe Nijolė's creative process. As the artist herself mentioned, she had never permitted anyone to do that before. His respectful writing, carefully preserving the secrets entrusted to him, allows the reader to hear Nijolė's reflections on the sacred nature of creation and on what mattered most to her in life.

Mother, Son, Family

“My mother is my most relentless critic, always rising above the confrontation between good and evil. From an outsider's perspective, she may sometimes seem rude, but she has never been fond of naïve and cheap illusions or vanity.” – Antanas Mockus

The book devotes considerable attention to the unique relationship between Antanas Mockus and his mother. In 1974, due to his mother's efforts, Antanas found himself in Lithuania, attending Lithuanian language courses at Vilnius University to master his parents' native tongue (a course he repeated in 2006). While recounting this story, Nijolė reveals her greatest fear: “Oh, how I feared that he [her son] might be killed.”

The book also describes Nijolė's visit to Lithuania in 1982 and her emotional reunion with her almost blind mother after a 38-year separation. Reflecting on this visit, Nijolė says: “I was in Vilnius, Kaunas, and Anykščiai. Among so many people and so much art, I can only say that I had a strange feeling – as if the trees and the birds were speaking, but I do not know what they were saying. We cried. We all cried a lot...”

Further, the book details a poetic and sacred moment during the visit – carrying a flame and lighting candles in the Old Cemetery of Anykščiai. As the family gathered in a circle after bringing the flame, they sang *Subatos vakarėly*. In that sacred space, through an

unconventional musical genre for such a setting, it is as if they proclaimed the victory of life in the face of death – or perhaps, at the same time, bore witness to the fragility of the moment in the presence of eternity.

Installations on the Edge of the Sky

Perhaps the most sacred space for Nijolė is introduced to the reader in the book's chapter "On the Ridge, Beneath the Ridge..." In it, the author recounts how Nijolė invited him to sculpt a clay piece, which she later brought to him in Lithuania as a Colombian souvenir. While he shaped the clay, Nijolė seemed to "read" his soul through the emerging piece, remarking, "Aha, you're hiding something." This ability to perceive others – where Nijolė instantly senses pretence and insincerity – reveals that clay in her life serves as a kind of mediator, allowing her to discern what is genuine and what is not.

The book's narrative then jumps to mid-August 2016 when the author R. Vanagas, at his home in Lithuania, unexpectedly receives the guests: Nijolė, Antanas, Italian director Sandro Bozzolo, and filmmaker Maria Cecilia Reyes, who were then working on a film about Nijolė. Within moments of their arrival, an installation initiated by Nijolė, titled *Nobody's Perfect*, unfolds and is immediately filmed: Nijolė, Antanas, and R. Vanagas are lying on their backs on the floor sipping cognac. This scene prompted the journalist to recall the first of Nijolė's installations that he ever saw – in the remote town of Villa de Leyva, nestled between mountains – inside an old, abandoned church, agave trunks hung from the ceiling inviting every passerby to experience [Nijolė's] art.

Spaces, Meanings, (Self-)revelations

For me, this book is about revelations and unveilings. Particularly valuable are Nijolė's

reflections on creativity, which are shared in the text after she had allowed the author into her studio:

When I touch the clay, my hands start working on their own... I don't command them. The initial piece emerges as if from nothing, the shape and expression are formed by my inner state [rather than by any conscious decision]. Then comes the hard work – weeks, even months – until the lines sharpen, the planes draw closer or pull away, and I rub in various oxides.

But it is not only Nijolė's soul that unfolds. Perhaps the author's openness encouraged Nijolė to reveal herself in a way that she never had before: "You're the first person I've ever allowed to watch me create. And why am I doing this?" Could this synergy be the key to the gradual unveiling of her art? A seemingly simple ball of clay or an agave stalk sparks the imagination inviting a transcendent experience of life itself: "This is what art is", R. Vanagas muses, "breathing life into something from nothing – shaping raw clay into a stunning, unrepeatable being".

The book's author guides the reader by opening a certain door to spaces and meanings. During his visit to Colombia, he speaks of a breathtaking sculpture-filled home, a workshop where few are granted entry, and the discovery of an adjacent room – "a paradise of books" with shelves lined with publications especially from the U.S. and South America, from the Lithuanian diaspora press, and including world literary classics – many inscribed with dedications to Nijolė or her children – offering a glimpse into yet another dimension of her life.

A Life Long Message

This book provides a deeper understanding of the context in which strong, free, critically

thinking, and nonconformist individuals take shape – where an authentic existence represents a clear invitation to live one's own life, to walk untrodden paths, and to allow the creative spirit to manifest itself in the forms and places best suited for each person to thrive and blossom.

In summarizing, I would like to pause on a particular visual page (inserted before the main narrative) of the book that is dedicated to immortalizing the joint work of the author and Nijolė, Ketera, and that includes a facsimile of Nijolė's reflection as well as a photograph of a cardboard square inscribed with the word *MUJER* (Spanish for woman).

This page's contents, in my view, encapsulate the messages Nijolė conveyed throughout her life. She would offer men a burnt-in inscription of *Mujer* on a piece of cardboard to wear around their necks – if only for a moment – to feel what it felt like to be in the place of the women that they demeaned. Ketera symbolizes her way of inviting others into the creative process by using art as a means to understand and “read” people. However, perhaps the most striking element is Nijolė's reflection in the facsimile: “God, I do not know if You will help me – I do not know; there is darkness in my life. But there is also the light of You, God, in the clay, where I seek You...”

The final chapter of the book was written after Nijolė had passed on, yet its central theme remains her enduring dream – to see her works in her homeland, Lithuania. A hopeful note appears in the author's postscript, announcing an initiative by the Lithuanian National Museum of Art and the Vytautas Kasiulis Art Museum to travel to Colombia and to delve deeper into Nijolė Sivickas's work.

Though Nijolė has departed, she continues to speak and to invite us into a transcendent and

socially conscious artistic experience through her creations – works that live on carrying their own stories, which I sincerely hope will continue in Lithuania as well.

I wholeheartedly wish for this.

A Review of Key Activities of the VMU World Lithuanian University in 2024

Vytautas Kavolis Interdisciplinary Professorship

The Vytautas Kavolis Interdisciplinary Professorship is a program launched in 2022 to support teaching visits by Lithuanian diaspora lecturers at Vytautas Magnus University. Its aim is to enhance interdisciplinary perspectives in study programs and to strengthen ties with the academic community of the Lithuanian diaspora. The visits are funded by the Lithuanian Foundation's Dana Gedvilienė Fund.

From May 7–14, 2024, Vytautas Magnus University hosted Dr. Evelina Gužauskytė from Wellesley College (USA). Dr. Gužauskytė delivered lectures to students of the Faculty of Humanities, the Faculty of Social Sciences, and the Faculty of Arts at VMU. During her visit, two public lectures were held: "Colonial Discourse and Its Forms: A Perspective from Postcolonial/Decolonial Studies" and "Science Meets Art: Interdisciplinarity and Its Discontents." The scholar also participated in the events of Kaunas Literature Week.

Nurturing the Diasporic Imagination

Fulfilling its mission, the VMU World Lithuanian University invites discussion on the existence and fate of Lithuanians both in Lithuania and around the world. This initiative seeks to raise questions and to reflect on issues relevant to Lithuania, the Lithuanian diaspora, and contemporary migration processes, while fostering the collective imagination of Lithuanians as a diasporic nation.

On January 12, a discussion was held with the public figure Skirma Kondratienė, former representative of the World Lithuanian Community in Lithuania. The meeting focused on the topic of mental health in the context of migration.

On March 22, a conversation took place with Laurynas Misevičius, former longtime head of the North American Lithuanian Physical Education and Sports Association (ŠALFASS) and chairman of the Sports Affairs Commission of the World Lithuanian Community (PLB). The discussion explored the potential of sports in connecting Lithuanians across the diaspora, how sports competitions foster relationships and solidarity among Lithuanians living in different countries, and the opportunities that sports provide for collaboration between Lithuania and its diaspora. The event featured discus thrower Virgilijus Alekna, Lithuanian-American basketball player Derek Molis with his daughter Cammie Molis, and the president of the World Lithuanian Sports Association, Valentinas Aleksa.

On May 17, a meeting was held with Ana Baronas de Zavadzkas, a Lithuanian from Venezuela. The discussion covered the migration experiences of the Baronas family to Venezuela, the history of the Lithuanian community there, and the emerging community of Venezuelan Lithuanian repatriates in Lithuania.

On September 30, an event was dedicated to the memory of Liūtas Mockūnas, a Lithuanian émigré. Friends and colleagues who had

known him closely – Egidijus Aleksandravičius, Vytautas Žalys, Vytautas Adomaitis, as well as Skirma and Ramūnas Kondratai – shared their memories.

October – Lithuanian Diaspora Month

For the fourth consecutive year, Vytautas Magnus University invited everyone to actively engage with the Lithuanian diaspora throughout October – exploring its history, the activities of diaspora communities and Lithuanian heritage schools abroad, as well as the works of diaspora creators. October – Lithuanian Diaspora Month is a series of events that brings together initiatives from VMU, from various organizations, from institutions, and from individual scholars and artists focusing on Lithuanian diaspora-related topics.

In 2024, the scope of the October event series was unusually broad, beginning in late September, with events dedicated to the Lithuanian émigré and public figure Liūtas Mockūnas, and concluding in early November with a scientific conference marking the 30th anniversary of the VMU Lithuanian Emigration Institute.

Educational Programs



The VMU World Lithuanian University invites students from schools in Lithuania and from Lithuanian heritage schools abroad to explore the Lithuanian diaspora through educational programs offered in-person and online.

Students and all interested participants may take part in the following educational sessions: *The Spirit of Nobility in the Lithuanian Diaspora: Lessons from L. and F. Mockūnas*; *Ecology and Local Heroes in the U.S.: The Story of Valdas Adamkus*; *Venezuela's Golden Age*

Through Lithuanian Eyes: The Photography of Gediminas Orentas and Lithuanian Childhood in Venezuela.

History of the Lithuanian Diaspora

The course *History of the Lithuanian Diaspora*, which has been successfully taught to VMU students for several years, is made available to a wider audience – to anyone interested in the history of Lithuanians who settled outside the borders of Lithuania – in February of each year. The course explores the circumstances of Lithuanian migration and life abroad, and it encompasses a wide range of topics that provide opportunities for unfolding personal stories of the students or of their immediate environment. The lectures cover topics such as the global spaces of Lithuania, world diasporas and Lithuanians in the perpetual movement of nations, the economic emigration from Lithuania in 1920–1940, and the challenges of mass emigration after 1990. The course is taught by Dr. Egidijus Balandis and Prof. Egidijus Aleksandravičius.

Formal and Non-formal Study Opportunities For World Lithuanians at VMU



If you are a Lithuanian living abroad and are interested in studying at Vytautas Magnus University, we invite you to visit the VMU World Lithuanian University website. There, you will find useful information not only about degree programs (bachelor's, master's, and doctoral studies), but also about non-formal courses and training, additional study opportunities, tuition discounts and scholarships, as well information concerning summer and winter Lithuanian language and culture courses. The website also provides practical information

about study programs, an interactive tour of VMU's campus, and testimonials from foreign Lithuanians who have studied at the university.

Foreign Lithuanian Scholarship Competition for VMU Students



Foreign Lithuanians studying at Vytautas Magnus University now can receive additional financial support. The Foreign Lithuanian Scholarship can be awarded to a particular recipient only once during their entire period of study. The Scholarship amount is €1,000.

Selection criteria for the Scholarship include interest in the Lithuanian diaspora (history and contemporary issues); involvement in Lithuanian community activities abroad, including Lithuanian schools, participation in community, volunteer, and/ or academic initiatives; engagement in specific VMU World Lithuanian University activities.

The Scholarship competition is announced twice a year, in October and March.

Lithuanian Language Education Abroad

Since 2021, the Lithuanian Language Education Abroad Forum (Lituanistinio ugdymo forumas) has been held every March to highlight the importance of teaching Lithuanian language abroad to both Lithuanian society and the diaspora. The forum is organized by Vytautas Magnus University, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Sport, Member of Parliament Dalia Asanavičiūtė, the Education Commission of the World Lithuanian Community, and the Association of Lithuanian Heritage Schools Abroad. Each year, a different Embassy of the Republic of Lithuania serves as the forum's

guest of honour. The event is held under the patronage of First Lady Diana Nausėdienė.

On March 15, 2024 the fourth Lithuanian Language Education Abroad Forum took place at Vytautas Magnus University's Education Academy in Vilnius and online. One of the key topics of discussion was the strengths of informal Lithuanian heritage schools abroad.

Liūtas and Françoise Mockūnas House

The L. and F. Mockūnas House (Žygimantų St. 5a, Vilnius) has been opened to the VMU community and to VMU World Lithuanian University collaborators. This space (an apartment), formerly owned by Lithuanian émigrés Liūtas and Françoise Mockūnas, was donated to Vytautas Magnus University by F. Mockūnas after her husband's passing and has been established as the first VMU representation in Vilnius in 2010.

F. Mockūnienė entrusted the property to be used for activities related to the Lithuanian diaspora. Therefore, VMU warmly invites, in collaboration with the university, small-scale events, interviews, discussions, recordings, and book presentations to take place in this space; all activities should be focused on topics of the Lithuanian diaspora and migration.

This space also serves as a small museum dedicated to L. and F. Mockūnas and welcomes students and all other interested visitors. Visitors wishing to learn about the life and work of L. and F. Mockūnas are invited to participate in the educational program *The Spirit of Nobility in the Lithuanian Diaspora: Lessons from L. and F. Mockūnas*.

Prepared by Rūta Pūraitė