



Culture Days participants at Camp Neringa.

Photo Dana Vainauskienė

# VERMONT BECKONS: CAMPING ADULTS

## From Kosovo to Kaunas – Multifaceted Lithuanian culture highlighted

**BIRUTĖ VAIČJURGIS ŠLEŽAS**

One recalls that summer camp was great fun at 10. But did you ever think that it would still be fun when you're 20, or 50, or even 70? This year, in late August, we, some 30 adults of varying seniority, arrived at Camp Neringa in Brattleboro, Vermont, to attend a truncated week's worth of Lithuanian Culture Days. We came from as far away as Chicago to immerse ourselves in Lithuanian culture and enjoy Vermont's verdant countryside. For five days, we attended workshops, presentations, and performances that featured a broad range of offerings in theater, film, music, literature, crafts, and the fine arts. We were free to attend whatever interested us.

We started drifting in around midday on Aug. 25 and headed toward the dining hall message board to find out which cabin would be our home for the next several days. The accommodations, though not luxurious, were neat and clean—a comfortable home for grown-ups. That first afternoon we acclimated by exploring the campgrounds, visiting neighboring farms to pick berries, or taking a bracing plunge into the spring-fed pond.

Over the next several days, we campers were invited on figurative guided tours of fascinating times and far-flung places: we encountered a whimsical tale of love in the old town of Kaunas, learned about a little-known type of musical performance popular in the early 20th century, recounted the extraordinary life of a spiritual leader on the road to sainthood, heard about the work of a peacekeeper in Bosnia and Kosovo, and traveled to an imaginary world populated by tiny figures. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

### On the subject of food

We were a well-fed bunch of campers. Starting with a lunch of kugelis, we enjoyed delicious meals whipped up by chief cook Estera Sunelaitė and Dana Vainauskas. Meals differed each day and were served buffet style. One evening meal included an entire freshly smoked salmon. This was the exclusive specialty of Norbertas Lingertat, who dutifully tended the smoker. Other times we sampled culinary delights of our own creation: sauce made from the first Macintosh apples of the season or cepelinai, those famous potato and meat dumplings which the campers prepared themselves with the aid of a potato-grating machine. During one lunch, a cookout, we ate outside at picnic tables and were entertained by the local residents – four hens, ever alert for any scrap of food that might come their way.

### Feeding mind and soul

A schedule of the day's events was posted daily in the dining hall. After making announcements, Dr.

Aldona Lingertat, the camp's tireless program coordinator, would pose a thought-provoking challenge to the campers, such as, "which historic persona would you invite, living or dead, to lunch?" The responses were amusing, poignant, revealing – we gained insights into one another and, perhaps, ourselves.

The rest of the morning was set aside for workshops: Writing/discussion with Marytė Stankus-Saulaitis; Improvisation with Rasa Allan Kazlas; and Choral singing with Dalia Sakas. In each case, we set our creative spirit free and gave it wings. With Marytė's gentle guidance, we expressed ourselves with words in poetry and prose. With Rasa's energetic coaching, we undertook theater exercises and worked on skits, developing our acting skills. With Dalia leading us, accompanied by the accordion, we sang "Ant kalno gluosnys" (On the Hill a Willow Stood) in a three-part arrangement by M. K. Čiurlionis. Singing folk songs and popular tunes from our youth brought back memories of sitting around the campfire with friends and first crushes.

### Crafty arts

After lunch, we would roll up our sleeves for hands-on art and craft projects. Gema Phillips introduced us to the monotype, a printmaking technique masterfully used by artists such as Degas. Under Gema's tutelage, each of us came away with a work of art that we could be proud of. Bruce Nickerson, a watercolor artist, instructed us in painting still life, in this case, flowers. Danutė Mileika, an opera singer by training who enjoys working with natural fibers, conducted a session on flax. She even brought several antique spinning wheels for a hands-on demonstration.



Learning to make Zappelins (Cepelinai). From left: Jack McGowan, Estera Sunelaitė and Joseph Žirlis.

Photo Dana Vainauskienė

Film and television professional Algis Kaupas spoke about his father, Julius, a psychiatrist and writer, whose centenary is observed this year. The city of Kaunas has undertaken novel ways to commemorate its native author. His best-known work, *Daktaras Kripštukas Pragare (Doctor Kripštukas in Hell)*, is set in this city's old town. It is being republished this year since it has long been out of print. When I was a young reader, I discovered this book in the original edition published by wartime refugees in Germany and brought here by my parents. I have loved it ever since. Estera Sunelaitė and Janė Venckus Žirlis gave an endearing dramatic rendition of one of Kaupas's tales.

### Little known musical genre

Dr. Dalia Sakas, a pianist and music teacher (recently seen on the CBS television program *Sixty Minutes*), presented a little-known music genre that was the topic of her doctoral dissertation. The music melodrama, not to be confused with the theatrical term, is a composition that consists of lines spoken to musical accompaniment. The text of these works often includes poems such as Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven." Notable composers, including Richard Strauss, wrote the music for them. Melodramas were popular throughout Europe and the U.S. in the 19th to early 20th centuries, when they were performed at home as the evening's entertainment. Dalia Sakas, at the piano, and Arūnas Čiuberkis reading the text, presented two melodramas that captivated the audience.

Sister Ignė Marijošiūtė, of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, a beloved mainstay of Camp Neringa, made a presentation about Blessed Archbishop Jurgis Matulaitis, the founder of her congregation. She detailed Matulaitis's arduous earthly journey, physical infirmity, intelligence, social consciousness, and spirituality.

Dr. Juozas Kazlas, a political scientist, spoke on "Peacekeeping: Experiences and Insights." He was a senior official with the UN and the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), founded in 1975, whose 57 member nations seek to promote human rights, ensure free elections, and reduce ethnic tensions. Juozas saw upfront the frictions that continued to exist after actual warfare ended in the troubled areas of Bosnia and Kosovo. He worked to mitigate them. In the Q&A session, Juozas also touched on his service in Ukraine, a possible topic for a future presentation.

### World's Tiniest Theater

Informally, Arūnas Čiuberkis treated us to some light-hearted entertainment. His *Pasaulio Mažiausias Teatras (The World's Tiniest Theater)* staged two performances in the camp's library. We were drawn into a world where Arūnas's wind-up toys (used to engage children in speech therapy) were put through their paces as they auditioned for spots in a fictitious group heading to Philadelphia for the Folk Dance Festival. The crazy, zany, hilarious antics of characters named after campers (a rabbit in a carrot car was "Birutė Morkutė") had us rolling in the aisles.

After dinner, there was time for spiritual reflection and prayer in the camp's chapel. The remainder



Theater performances capped off the week. Birutė Vaičjurgis-Šležas and Norbertas Lingertat (left) read the works of Vytautas Mačernis, while Rasa Allan Kazlas (r.) brought Maironis' "Čičinskas" to life.

of the evening was dedicated to the arts.

Wednesday evening, we watched a brilliant video production, marking the centenary of Lithuania's declaration of independence in 1918. *Įrėžta gintare* (*Etched in Amber*) is the brainchild of Rasa Allan Kazlas, an accomplished actress and drama teacher. Rasa undertook to celebrate the poetry of her native land, choosing works from different eras and by poets from within Lithuania and from the diaspora. The video, produced by Rasa's husband Juozas, featured six actresses performing a fast-paced, tightly choreographed "ballet" on a bare stage weaving words and movement into a unique dramatic experience that left the audience breathless.

Thursday, after guiding the camp's budding artists in monotype making, Gema Phillips related her experiences as a woman artist. She brought some smaller-format paintings and showed slides of her current work – Cape Cod landscapes done in an unusual color palette.

#### Spirited discussion

Film night at Culture Days is a tradition. We watched *Pilis* (*The Castle*) on Friday evening, a Lithuanian film released in 2020 and directed by Lina Lužytė. It follows the lives of three generations of women who recently emigrated from Lithuania to Ireland. After the screening, Gintarė Bukauskas led a spirited discussion on the film: the message it conveyed, its characters and how they were portrayed. All in all, differing opinions and insightful analysis made for a stimulating evening.

Traditionally theater performances wrap up the week on Saturday evening. This year the focus was on three creative giants of Lithuanian culture: the poets Maironis and Mačernis and the composer Čiurlionis. The

evening began with Rasa Allan Kazlas's rendition of Maironis's "Čičinskas," the well-known poem about a corrupt and murderous member of the landed gentry who meets a terrifying end. Rasa brought the story and characters to life in a tour de force performance as she whirled and twirled before us.

#### Music and poetry

Next, the mood shifted, as pianist Dalia Sakas performed a prelude by M. K. Čiurlionis, setting the stage for the poetry of Vytautas Mačernis, whose centenary is marked this year. A poet of great promise, he was a casualty of World War II who died at 23 after being hit by shrapnel. Norbertas Lingertat and your reporter presented several poems from his cycle "Vizijos" (Visions), imbued with images of the poet's past and of his emotional essence. Dalia played passages from Čiurlionis's piano miniatures between each segment of poetry. At the program's conclusion, a feeling of magic hung in the air that carried over into the rest of the evening.

Culture Days came into being in 2018 and continue to thrive under Aldona Lingertat, assisted by Dana Vainauskas. Even Covid couldn't stop it. In 2020, its adult campers came together for three fascinating presentations via Zoom. Tremendous vision, effort, and energy go into organizing a camp such as this. Before Culture Days, Meno 8 Dienes (Eight Days of Art) offered adults hands-on arts and crafts workshops. It ended its thirteen-year run in 2017. Aldona thought that a new camp of shorter duration and encompassing a broader cultural program would attract adults of Lithuanian descent. She was right.

For more information about Camp Neringa and next year's Culture Days, visit [neringa.org](http://neringa.org) □



Marytė Stankus-Saulaitis leads a class in creative writing.

Photo: Algis Kaupas

## Scholarship Fund Marks Decade of Service



Lithuanian high school directors and Juozas Giedraitis Fund representatives gathered in Vilnius to mark 10 years of supporting value-based education.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the Juozas Giedraitis Fund, which provides scholarships and financial aid to high school students attending Lithuania's Marian, Franciscan and Jesuit High Schools. The fund promotes patriotic and faith-based education by supporting outstanding students, especially from Lithuania's rural areas. Operating under the New York-based Lithuanian National Foundation (LNF), this student scholarship fund was named to honor long-time LNF director Juozas Giedraitis (1910-2008).

#### Remembering Juozas Giedraitis

Giedraitis graduated from Kaunas Vytautas Magnus University with a law degree, but he had little opportunity to work in his chosen profession after World War II broke out. After the war, he settled in Hartford, Connecticut. Until 1961, he worked at the Royal Typewriter corporation. One of his assignments was to outfit typewriters with the Lithuanian alphabet. Later he founded the Sparta Trading Company. Giedraitis served as a representative of the Lithuanian Farmers' Union in the Supreme Committee for the Liberation of Lithuania and several terms as president of the Lithuanian National Foundation. On his initiative, in 1992, the Foundation began supporting Lithuanian schools in southeastern Lithuania and Belarus. For his selfless service, the Lithuanian government awarded him the Order of Gediminas in 2001.

#### Celebrating ten years of service

The anniversary commemoration took place in Vilnius on September 6th at the Holy Cross Center operated by the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception. The program was opened by the Bishop of Panevežys H. E. Linas Vodopjanovas OFM. The fund's administrator Jonas Vainius reported that some 105 scholarships had been granted to date, and this term alone, 15 scholarships were awarded. The Fund's work is enabled by donors in Lithuania and as well as those in the diaspora. The fund operates on an en-

dowment principle, scholarships for students are funded from the accrued interest on capital.

#### Essays promoted

Scholarship applicants are required to write an essay on a topic proposed by the Fund. This year's subjects included the 110th anniversary of the Ateitis Catholic Federation, noting its contributions to Lithuania's Christian formation and cultural development and the 100th anniversary of the most prominent freedom fighter for Lithuania, Juozas Lukša-Daumantas. All students are urged to participate in the essay contest. *Draugas News* has published translations of the winning essays in the past and plans to do so in the future as well.

#### Founders honored

The founders of the Fund were also honored at the commemoration: Bishop Paulius Baltakis OFM (1925-2019), Pranas Povilaitis (1924-2017), Algis Vedeckas (1927-2021), Col.



A member of the Lithuanian Political Prisoners and Deportees Association extends his greetings to Giedraitis Fund director Jonas Vainius and Bishop of Panevežys Linas Vodopjanovas OFM.

Jonas Čeponis (1925-2019), Major Vytautas Balsys (1923-2018) and the current director Jonas Vainius. The Deputy Speaker of the Seimas Paulius Saudargas, who is the head of the Fund's Grants Committee in Lithuania, thanked the fund volunteers for their service and long-term work.

The heads of the high schools benefiting from the fund were in attendance and addressed the gathering: Director of Kaunas Jesuit Gymnasium, Fr. Aldonas Gudaitis SJ, the Director of Kretinga Franciscan Gymnasium, Fr. Alvydas Virbalis OFM, and the Director of Marijampolė Marian Gymnasium deacon Saulius Andruška.

Officers and members of the Lithuanian Association of Political Prisoners and Deportees were present and extended their greetings and approval for the work being promoted by the fund. □