

# Baltic activist realizes dream

By Paulius Klimas  
Guest contributor

I was only 6 or 7 when I attended my first demonstration in the mid-1960s.

That demonstration outside the Eastman Theatre was not to protest the Vietnam War. Rather, it was scheduled to protest the Siberian dancers scheduled to perform at the theater. To many of the people who gathered for the protest, the word "Siberian" had vicious connotations.

Just imagine the reaction people would have had if the "Nazi dancers" were scheduled to perform there.

I remember little about this event, but I do recall the need to personally express my distress over this distortion of art and reality.

Although I was born in Rochester in 1960, my parents were born in an independent Lithuania. They might have lived their lives contentedly if not for the Soviet invasion of 1940. Their world ceased to exist because of that invasion. They were forced to leave behind their relatives and homeland in order to escape persecution.

Torn away from their roots, they became "displaced persons" who were eager — yet a little reluctant — to reach the shores of the United States.

I still find it perplexing to consider how they must have longed for their true homes and precious loved ones. While they spent several years in Europe before reaching the U.S. in the late 1940s, their countrymen fought a guerrilla war against the Red Army until the early 1950s.

The Lithuanian partisans then had false hopes for help from the West, but found themselves faced with the task of defeating the mighty Red Army on their own. As a child I learned from Lithuanian Saturday school instruction how partisans had to use code names for fear that the KGB would learn their real names and terrorize their families. One folk song plaintively asks a partisan: "Will you return to your home?" The partisan replies, "If I don't return, the birds will come back this spring."

My own grandparents, Vincas and Marija Klimas, spent nearly 10 years in Siberia from 1948-57. They were successful farmers, and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin tried to eliminate them and millions more. Their suffering — including a 16-day journey to Siberia in a cattle car — remains immeasurable. I have never been able to wrestle their images from my mind, and this has motivated me to act.

In 1977, I accompanied a bus load of Baltic-Americans from Rochester on an overnight ride to Washington, D.C. for a Baltic "Freedom Demonstration" at the Lincoln Memorial. I was 17 years old, and my Lithuanian friends helped me sing folk songs during my first trip to Washington. Optimism filled the air as our arrival was greeted by the light

of a new day.

Although Republican Sen. Robert Dole of Kansas was one of the distinguished speakers, the approximately 3,000 Baltic demonstrators who gathered with such determination that day failed to receive one speck of media coverage. Even a small group of people that ran to the Soviet embassy earned little attention. A picture of the group's protest appeared only on the cover of a Lithuanian-American magazine.

During the 1970s, some Lithuanian-Americans seemed to be living in their own little world — completely oblivious to the harsh reality of Soviet occupation. At Lithuanian independence commemorations, which saluted the memory of those who helped liberate Lithuania in 1918, they stated their desire for an independent Lithuania without suggesting a single course of action to achieve it. I applauded along with everyone, but felt compelled to do more.

Attending Lithuanian youth camps in the United States during summer and winter vacations enabled me to immerse myself in the Lithuanian-American world. I met other Lithuanian-Americans and Lithuanian-Canadians whose parents also were born in Lithuania.

Those youth camps were structured to include lectures in Lithuanian about the culture, language and customs of Lithuania. In study groups we would often discuss the possibility of returning to Lithuania if it ever became independent again.

I usually explained that I would definitely visit an independent Lithuania, but I couldn't commit myself to living there immediately.

One of the things I realized during those discussions was that we were discussing possible independence at a time when it seemed unlikely it would happen.

At that time, few people actually knew that the Soviets illegally occupied Lithuania, that Lithuanians spoke Lithuanian (which is one of the oldest living languages), and that Lithuania had a consulate in Washington. Often, it was a battle to simply explain where Lithuania was located. Instead of discussing possibilities, it seemed imperative to educate the public.

Writing letters to the editor of local publications and organizing Baltic freedom rallies appeared essential to me. Often someone would ask why would this hopeless cause seem so important to an "American."

At times this question left me exasperated because my parents had taught me their native language and ingrained in me a very strong sense of identity and pride toward my heritage. When I see the yellow, green and red stripes of the Lithuanian flag or hear the Lithuanian anthem, I feel a tear in my eye.

Another misconception that irritated me was the argument alleging that both capitalism and communism were completely similar. It insinuated that if the U.S. incorrectly persecuted another nation — which has happened — then the Soviet Union can do the same.

Regardless of past mistakes by the U.S. government, the Soviets had no right to annex the Baltic States. They had attempted to "Russificate" the Balts forcibly by persecuting their religious practices, establishing Russian language instruction as mandatory, and using the KGB — the Soviet secret police and intelligence agency — to punish dissidents.

In 1988, I attended a Lithuanian Youth Association political seminar in Washington, D.C. During the seminar, I learned about imprisoned Lithuanian dissident Petras Grazulis. The dissident had fulfilled two years of duty in the Soviet army, but he refused to attend a military refresher course designed to serve as punishment for his participation in a demonstration in Riga, Latvia, in 1987. The more I learned about Petras — who is only two years older than I — the more I felt compelled to help him.

According to the Lithuanian Information Center (LIC) in Washington, D.C., Soviet court officials beat and sprayed Grazulis with tear gas after he said he would begin a hunger strike soon after his trial in Kapsukas, Lithuania, on Feb. 2, 1988. He said he would start the hunger strike to promote the spiritual and national revival of Lithuania on Feb. 16, the 70th anniversary of the restoration of Lithuanian independence.

The fast was scheduled to last until Feb. 25. Rochester's Lithuanian Youth Association chapter and other Lithuanians throughout the United States fasted on Feb. 16 to support Grazulis. One of the youth association members phoned me and persuaded me to write a last minute press release regarding our fast. That release was published in a small local newspaper.

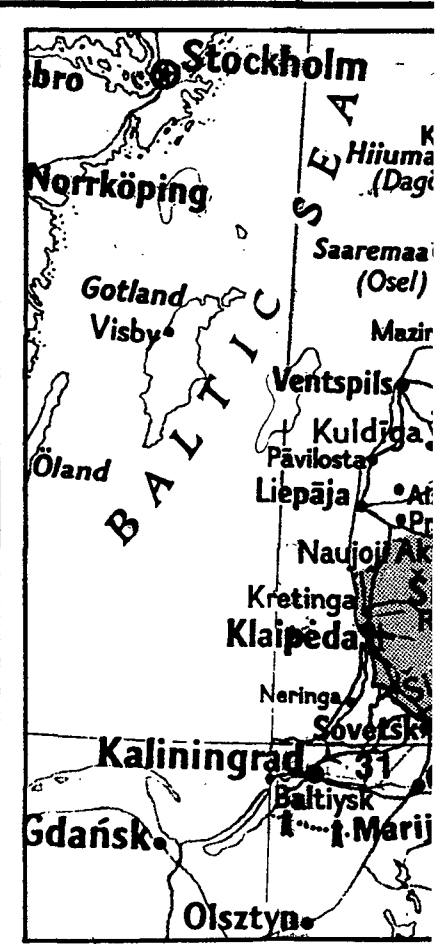
Even before the phone call, I had been thinking about Grazulis and how to help him. My first impulse was to organize a huge convoy of automobiles on a trek to Washington, D.C. But without thousands of participants, which could create a serious traffic problem, this idea was worthless.

Then I recalled in 1971 how I walked 30 miles in the "Hike for Hope" when I was 11. (The "Hope" is a hospital ship that sailed around South America administering to the ill.) I thought my walking before raised money to help the ill, so why couldn't I publicize the plight of Petras Grazulis by walking now?

My friends and family doubted that I could finish the walk. But I had an added reason to start it soon: President Ronald Reagan was leaving for a summit in Moscow at the end of May. The timing of that



Paulius Klimas addresses a Baltic freedom demonstration at a border Pasvalys, Lithuania during the 400th Baltic Freedom Walk June 3, 1991.



## 'Lietuva' has

Lithuania is no stranger to independent resisting occupying nations.

The Lithuanian Empire — also known as the Jagiellon Empire — formed in the 14th century after a loose confederation of tribes joined to oppose the Teutonic Knights. The religious order was attempting to expand its territory along the Baltic Sea.

After the confederation defeated the order, it began its own conquest of territories.

The Lithuanian Empire eventually expanded from the Baltic to the Black seas, including parts of Byelorussia, European Russia and Ukraine.

Lithuania gradually merged with Poland. Two nations tried to stave off Russia. By the 16th century, the two countries had a common legislature and an elected king.

Over the next two centuries, Poland was repeatedly invaded by neighboring nations, mainly Russia — and was gradually



A young child flashes the "V" sign during a rally for independence in Vilnius, Lithuania on May 4, 1991.