

PARISH PROFILE

Lithuanian parish keeps its old country loyalty

Parish Profile
St. George,
Rochester



By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Many parishioners of St. George Lithuanian Church may have left their homeland of Lithuania. But they've never forgotten it.

"There is only one place you can call home," says Jadvyga Regina, born in Lithuania many years ago, a reader for the church. "And if you were born there and especially if you spent your youth there ... you will never forget. It is always going to stay in your mind and your heart especially."

Like many of her fellow Lithuanians, she has even smuggled dirt out of her country.

"When you bury somebody they have to rest in native soil or they won't enter paradise," Birute Litvinas, another parishioner, explained. Lithuanians in exile would throw a fine mix of Lithuanian dirt and amber chips on family members' graves.

During years of repression under Soviet rule parishioners lobbied to support a free Lithuania. Several celebrated the Baltic country's strong musical heritage, traveling throughout the United States to share that heritage at festivals. In years since Lithuania declared its freedom in 1990 and the Russians eventually withdrew, St. George's Lithuanians have remained united in providing support to their homeland.

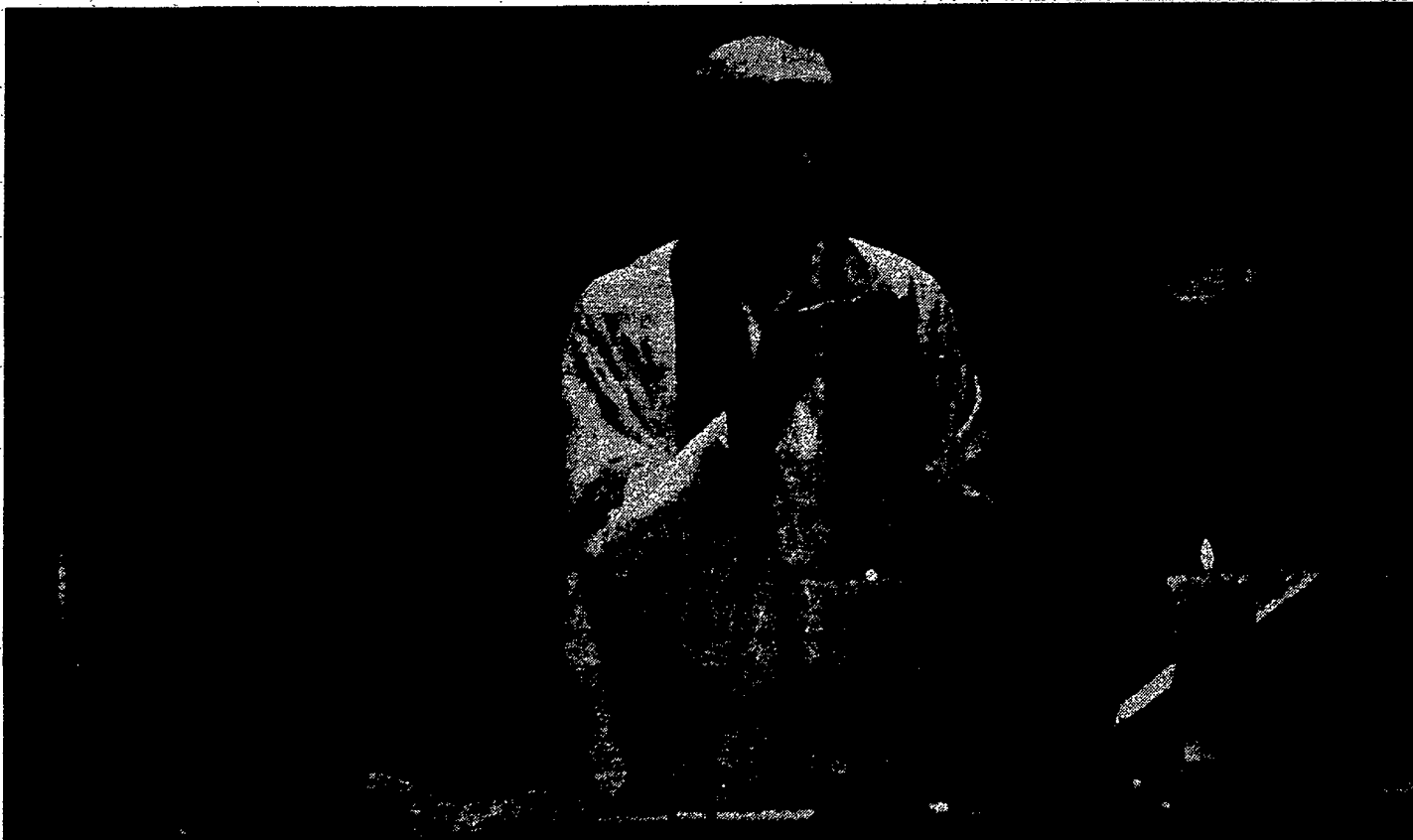
A parish mission statement approved in 1996 reads, "We will extend a helping hand to our Catholic brethren in Lithuania who are rebuilding their faith after half a century of persecution under communism."

Several times a year parishioners ship hundreds of pounds of items back to help their native land — especially medicines and clothes to families, orphanages and seminaries. Litvinas travels back regularly to teach; Parish Council President Jan Naujokas, a non-Lithuanian married to a Lithuanian, visits the orphanages.

Naujokas' husband Andy, who came to the United States from Lithuania when he was 10, joked that he "converted her to the Lithuanian faith, so to speak."

On Oct. 25 area people of Lithuanian heritage are being invited to "Come back to where the heart is" for St. George's 90th anniversary celebration. The celebration will begin with a 10:30 a.m. Mass at the church with Father Paulius Baltakis, bishop of Lithuanian clergy outside Lithuania. An afternoon program will begin with dinner at 1 p.m. at the Holiday. Ray Tamoshunas, 716/671-4074, is handling tickets for the event.

The anniversary will celebrate St. George's years of maintaining a connection with their homeland, and with helping Lithuanian refugees and exiles start anew, parishioners noted. Emigrants left Lithuania for political, religious and economic reasons, mostly in the last two decades of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th.



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Father Dominic Mockevicius, left, concelebrates Mass with his brother Father Charles Mockevicius Aug. 14, at St. George Church. At left is a tapestry depicting Lithuania's Hill of Crosses.

Frank Mockevicius, brother of the church's co-administrators, Fathers Dominic and Charles Mockevicius, noted of the latest wave in the 1950s, "If they had not come over we would have been dead today. That was new blood that came in."

"They used to be called displaced persons," he continued. "We call them 'Dievo Paukstičiai,' 'God's birds.' They flew over from Europe."

In the early 1900s, Rochester Catholic Lithuanians were served by the pastor of Holy Redeemer Church; later visiting Lithuanian pastors held services at Holy Redeemer for them, according to a church history. In 1906, 134 Lithuanians pledged to support organizing a Lithuanian church.

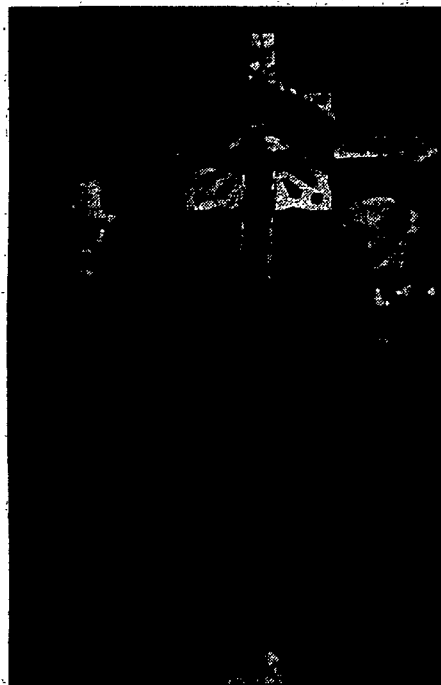
After its incorporation in 1908, St. George's was served primarily by professors from St. Bernard's Seminary and a seminarian. By 1909, the number of Lithuanians had grown to 700. The seminarian, Father Joseph Kasakaitis, became the first pastor of St. George's in 1910.

Two major influxes of Lithuanians filled the church. One came just before World War I; the other after World War II. People needed a sponsor, a job and a place to live, Father Dominic Mockevicius said, and that's where the parish helped.

Today, with a membership of about 100 families, George's attracts 35 people to its English Mass at 9:30 a.m. Sunday, and 75 to its Lithuanian Mass at 11 a.m. Sunday. Though many have moved from the city, some members continue to attend from Albion, Hilton and Fairport, for example. Several supporters who have joined other churches return to celebrate St. George's feast day.

The church, still at its original site on Hudson Avenue, is marked by a wooden wayside shrine with a roof-covered crucifix, modeled after those throughout Lithuania.

This summer, church organist Ray Obalis and the community Lithuanian choir Putinas ("snowball tree") he directs traveled to Lithuania for the second Free Lithuania Song and Dance Festival —



Fathers Dominic and Charles Mockevicius, near a wayside shrine on the church property. Similar wayside shrines are found across Lithuania at crossroads, churches, parks and front yards.

where 19,000 singers join in song together on one stage, Obalis said.

They planted a cross donated by the church similar to its shrine, at the crowded Hill of Crosses. "We set the cross in concrete, said prayers and sang 'Marija, Marija,'" Obalis said.

More than once when the Soviets came and burned and bulldozed the crosses people had placed on the hill, people replaced them at night. Today the hill is covered with crosses as a public sign of the people's faith.

During her teen years in Lithuania, Regina recalled, the economy was good, people were educated and free to travel. She lived in the countryside of Orija in southern Lithuania.

"In 1940 when it was Soviet occupied, all hardship started," she said. "It is very hard to imagine how it is to live in a place where the war was going on. There was a shortage of everything. You had to watch your step, there were rules and regulations."

Eventually anyone with relatives in the United States tried to come here, she said. She and her husband Vincent moved to Rochester in 1951 where he found work at Eastman Kodak Co.

Regina, who had studied dance since

SNAPSHOT

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Lithuanian
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Ministerial staff:

Co-administrators:

Father Dominic Mockevicius
Father Charles Mockevicius

Musical director:

Raymond Obalis

Parish council president:

Jan Naujokas

Business manager:

Regina Urban

Maintenance:

Joseph Stanley Gudonis

she was small, became administrator and choreographer for Lazdynas, the parish's youth dance ensemble, and remained active with it for 31 years. The group traveled extensively and took part in the 600th Anniversary of Christianity in Lithuania, celebrated in Rome in 1987. Because so many of the members have moved away from the area, the group disbanded after participating in the first Free Lithuania Song and Dance Festival in 1994.

Although Lazdynas has disbanded and the former St. George's School has closed, the Lithuanian Scouts continue to teach youngsters the language and culture.

Such loyalty to tradition is important, Frank Mockevicius said, adding that only when he began attending Aquinas Institute did he learn confession in English.

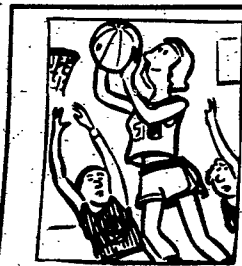
"It's a loyalty that comes from years of going to school here and our parents," he said. "This is history."

"It's a way of life, it's family," Obalis said.

The church, Regina said, reminds her of her upbringing. With its Lithuanian art and amber, paintings of tulips and nature, reminders of the Hill of Crosses, it is simple yet powerful, she said.

"It is just a beautiful place, small but beautiful," she said. "When I walk in I really feel it's my own place."

She added, "This is our own place."



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