

The Boston Lithuanian Saturday School At 75

by Birutė Vaičjurgis Šležas

“Stand up and tell the class: Who was Vincas Kudirka?”

[Kudirka was a 19th century writer and composer of the Lithuanian National Anthem]

“He was a *mužikas* [uncouth boor].”

“What did you say?!”

“He was a *mužikas*.”

“Whaaat? Where did you get that?”

“Here, look, it says so in the book.”

“It says *muzikas* [musician], you blockhead!”

A true story, as witnesses will attest. One small little “birdie” [*paukščiukas*: a diacritical mark] over the letter “z” made a world of difference in a word’s meaning. We learned that and other amazing things about the Lithuanian language during our years attending *Bostono liuanistinė mokykla* [Boston Lithuanian School or BLM hereafter]. It initially had twelve grades with classes, all in the Lithuanian language, that took place on Saturday mornings from 9 to 1, when our American friends were home watching Bugs Bunny and Tweety Bird. It was already bad enough that at regular school

we ate liverwurst and sliced radish sandwiches on Kilkus Lithuanian rye while they had fluffernutters on Wonder Bread. We were different.

We were the children of a generation that came of age in a newly independent Lithuania. Over barely two decades, from 1918–40, our parents and grandparents experienced a heady, exhilarating time, when Lithuania joined the free nations of Europe and made astounding strides in education, sports, culture, land reform, and more. The Lithuanian language, suppressed and even threatened with eradication under the oppressive rule of neighboring empires, became the crown jewel of a distinctive national identity. It was a unique and precious treasure.

Then came World War II. As the Soviet armies approached in 1944, many Lithuanians grappled with the question: Should we leave or should we stay? Those who chose the former did so with every intention of returning to a restored and independent Lith-

uania after the war ended. And so, Lithuanians who found themselves in United Nations refugee camps recreated the lives they had just left, as much as circumstances would allow. In the camps, drama and choral groups sprung up. Of course, there also had to be schools to teach the Lithuanian language to the children, who needed to maintain the same level of competence – it was expected that they would be reinstated into the classroom at their appropriate grade level when they returned to a free Lithuania after the war. The top educators of Lithuania set up schools, printed books, and graduated hundreds of students who received the equivalent of a Lithuanian high school education.

This was the mindset with which the displaced persons (DPs) started arriving in the U.S. in the late 1940s. And almost immediately they began establishing schools, with the one in Boston being among the first. This year we mark the 75th



The school’s students and teachers in 1950. The first director, Vladas Kulbokas (front row center in the dark hat), is seated next to his successor Kazys Mockus (to his left).

anniversary of the school founded in 1949 and officially named *Bostono aukštesnioji liuanistinė mokykla* [Boston School of Higher Lithuanian Education].

I attended classes there from 1956–1968. Saturday mornings we learned the Lithuanian language: its grammar and syntax, noun genders (three), declensions (five) and cases (seven), singular and plural; verb tenses (four) and conjugations (three groups); and much more. In addition, there was geography (*Žemaitija*, *Nemunas*, the rock *Puntukas*); history (*Mindaugas*, the Press Ban, Independence); ethnoculture (*Joninės*, *Eglė žalčių karalienė*), and literature (*Donelaitis*, *Maironis*). We wrote dictations, memorized and recited poetry, and composed essays. Friday evenings we completed our assignments and studied for tests. During the week, our teachers, who sacrificed their personal lives, prepared lessons and corrected papers, after days spent at work earning a living, often doing manual labor.

When I began, the list of pedagogues and administrators in my school read like a Who's Who of the educated class of independent Lithuania and included teachers by profession, leading scholars, and notable literary and artistic figures. Among them was the eminent poet *Bernardas Brazdžionis*, known as the "bard of Lithuania," the acclaimed satiric poet *Antanas Gustaitis*, the world-renowned

anthropologist *Marija Gimbutas*, leading man of the theater *Henrikas Kačinskis*, and others. To this day many of their former students fondly remember them as kind and dedicated teachers. Among the teachers there, often mentioned are *Vladas Kulbokas*, *Dzidorius Giedraitis*, *Stasė Lizdenienė*, *Lidija Herbšaitė*, *Juzė Lapšienė*, and *Vida Karosaitė-Kleinienė*. By the mid-fifties the ranks of the original set of teachers were supplemented by a group of younger recent graduates of the school, including *Dalia Vakauzaitė-Lizdenienė*, *Vilija Čepaitė*, and *Dalia Škudzinskaitė-Ivaškienė*. The last of these three was my teacher through the sixth grade. She was an intelligent and gracious woman, who hammered the rules of the Lithuanian language into our heads.

When I entered the upper classes (BLM then had eleven grades), I graduated into a more demanding program of study, in which the bar was raised where our knowledge of history, literature, and language was concerned. Around that time we also graduated into puberty, where we often had a completely different program on our minds. Pity the teacher who was not prepared to deal with our brand of "hooliganism." One of our upper class teachers, who will remain unnamed, was a respected scholar but someone not well-prepared to deal with the ways of the world or the ways of unruly adolescents. I am ashamed now to recall the pranks we mercilessly played on him, tormenting the poor man to the point where he would grab his leather valise and storm out the classroom door, calling us "animals" and swearing he would never return. A few moments later *Antanas Gustaitis*, the school director, would walk in wearing a monstrous scowl, his bushy eyebrows sticking straight out, and lash out at us in an

explosive voice, not sparing some choice words, his wrathful glance piercing each of us in turn one by one. We would be genuinely paralyzed with fear. Finally, in a calmer tone, he would ask us to be kinder to our teacher, let out his signature chuckle and, with a twinkle in his eye, turn to the door where our hapless victim was waiting, ready to return.

Gustaitis was the director (principal) of the school from 1961–1982, except for two years when *Antanas Mažiulis* headed the school. He was preceded by other outstanding men and women. *Vladas Kulbokas*, the first director, served from 1949–1951. Following him were *Kazys Mockus* (for two separate terms), *Justinas Vaičaitis*, and *Ona Girniuvienė*. During their tenures, the school, its teachers, and its program harkened back to inter-war Lithuania. We, the students, were there as sort of time travelers.

By the seventies, all of that was starting to change. After two decades, joining the ranks of the "Old School" pedagogues was a influx of teachers who had completed secondary schools in Lithuania but had their educations interrupted by the war. Many in that group, like *Janina Ambraziejienė* (who turned 100 this year!), had children enrolled in the school. *Andrius*, both her son and student, recalls, with some chagrin, that he received no special treatment. *Lidija Jašinskienė* was a well-loved teacher. *Liuda Senutienė* and *Aldona Dabrilienė* taught several generations of children during careers that spanned 30–40 years. The hundreds of students that sat in their classrooms remember them with genuine warmth. Two scholarships established in their names are awarded annually.

At the same time, younger men and women in their twenties, who grew up and were educated in



Dalia Vakauzaitė (*Lizdenienė*) and her first-grade students in 1959.



The school's teachers circa 1970. Director Antanas Gustaitis (second from the right, second row) with the school's longest tenured teachers: Aldona Dabrilienė (to his right, third row) and Liuda Senutienė (to his left, first row).

this country, some even graduates of the school, became teachers. Among them were Skirma Kondratienė, Algis Makaitis, and Mykolas Drunga.

Other things were changing, too. The school building of St. Peter Lithuanian Parish in South Boston that had served the school since its inception was slated to be razed. New facilities were found at the P. F. Gavin Middle School, a public school in the same neighborhood.

But the biggest change came about when Antanas Gustaitis retired and a new director took his place. This generated some excitement, because Zita Krukoniene's credentials were unlike those of any of her predecessors. She was born and grew up in Soviet Lithuania, had a degree in Lithuanian language and literature from Vilnius University, and had begun to teach before she married a Lithuanian-American and emigrated to the U.S. Krukoniene brought new blood to the directorship and a fresh perspective. However, she stepped aside after two years because of family demands.

At that time, Daiva Matulionytė-Navickienė took over the director's duties, which represented another first. No previous director had been born and raised in the diaspora and had also graduated from a Lithuanian Saturday school. From 1984–2000, under Navickienė, the school was relocated twice. St. Mary of the Hills Elementary School in Milton, MA, is still the current location of BLM. A preschool class was added. The program of study was reduced from eleven years to ten. And the demographics of the student body and the teachers had begun to change in a very significant way.

The so-called third wave of immigrants started arriving after Lithuania's independence was restored in 1990. Initially the families showed little interest in enrolling their children in BLM. But gradually the number of students there whose first language was Lithuanian grew larger. At the same time, the school was experiencing a shortage of teachers. Navickienė began to recruit teachers from among this latest wave of immigrants.

Navickienė was succeeded by a trio who shared the director's position for one year: Rima Bernotienė, Rima Girniuvienė, and Rita Štuopienė, the last of whom continued on as sole director for ten years. With technology and the internet playing an ever increasing role in everyone's lives, Štuopienė engaged Erikas Narkevičius to create a website for the school, BLSM.org, where information, announcements, events, photos, and student work could be shared.

BLM, in its early years, relied on a program of study and reprinted textbooks that dated back to inter-war Lithuania and postwar DP camps. In 1959, it, together with all the Saturday schools in the U.S., came under the mandate of the *JAV Švietimo taryba* (Lithuanian Educational Council of the USA), which going forward provided such schools with educational guidelines, materials, and funding.

Over time, it became clear that students were no longer equally proficient in their Lithuanian language skills. Some of this was due to normal acculturation. Also, in those families where parents spoke little or no Lithuanian, children had little opportunity to speak the language at home. The prevalent practice in Saturday schools to place all children at one grade level into the same class, regardless of their language ability, challenged teachers and frustrated students.

Navickienė, as director, saw the need to find textbooks suitable for students with varying levels of language proficiency. Štuopienė, her successor, urged her teachers to create their own classroom materials while following the guidelines of the Education Council. She herself wrote a textbook and learning exercises for the 4th–5th grades that she used subsequently to teach students whose Lithuanian was weak.



Boston Lithuanian School in September 2024 at the start of the new year. (G. Sekmokas)

In 2011, Štuopienė was succeeded by Gailutė Narkevičienė, who served as the BLM director until 2024. Narkevičienė became a teacher at BLM in 2000. She had graduated from the University of Vilnius and was an instructor there in the Lithuanian studies department. Her love of the Lithuanian language and her vision for the future of teaching in the Lithuanian Saturday schools are attested by her many achievements and awards. In 2013 Hippocrene Books published her *Lithuanian-English/English-Lithuanian Dictionary*. In 2021 she received an honorary medal from the Foreign Ministry of The Republic of Lithuania for her contributions to Lithuania and that same year was presented with Lithuania's "Teacher of the Year" award.

Narkevičienė took the lead in the diaspora's Lithuanian schools to promote new education methods and assessment tools. She sought to raise the level of learning through consistent and effective teaching, sharing her ideas at teachers' conferences throughout the U.S. and in Lithuania. Together with Rita Mikeliūnaitė, she created a series of Lithuanian language development books for grades 1–10 together with six teaching modules.

From 2014–2018, due to her efforts, BLM became the first

school to institute a process to test students' level of Lithuanian language proficiency. It became widely used by other schools in the U.S. Now it has been developed, in collaboration with Lithuania's Ministry of Education and the Education Councils of Lithuanians in the Diaspora, into the Lithuanian Language Level Test for Youth, which is internationally recognized as a proficiency test for Lithuanian as a foreign/heritage/second language. Narkevičienė has been involved in training teachers at conferences and seminars to familiarize them with this testing process.

When the Covid pandemic hit, BLM, like many schools, had to respond to school closures and other challenges. Narkevičienė substantially expanded the school's utilization of technology and the internet by instituting remote learning. Saturday morning classes continued, but from a distance. Even after in-person learning resumed, Narkevičienė saw the advantages of offering remote teaching to school-age students who would have to travel more than seventy miles to attend BLM. A few years earlier, she had started a Lithuanian language program for adults who now can choose between attending in person or remotely. Narkevičienė resigned from her position as the

director of BLM in Spring 2024, but remains the school's remote learning coordinator. Ramunė Keegan has assumed the BLM's directorship for the time being.

The Boston Lithuanian Saturday School has been around for 75 years. It has grown, developed, matured, as it has responded successfully to changing circumstances. The children and grandchildren of several immigrant waves, Lithuanian language speakers of varying proficiency, learners both inside and outside the classroom, toddlers to adults – all are counted among the 160 that currently make up the school's student body. All of these willing students, their committed parents, dedicated teachers, and capable directors are part of BLM's continuing history. Their efforts have been supported by the community, financial benefactors, and institutions such as the Lithuanian American Community, Inc. and Lithuania's Ministry of Education. Together they have helped to preserve Lithuania's crown jewel, its language, keeping it a vital force in the diaspora.

The author thanks Daiva Navickienė and Gailutė Narkevičienė, as well as students and teachers of BLM, for providing information used in writing this article.