

# bridges



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\*Cover: The photo of Kaunas, Lithuania taken by Christian Akerley. Christian is the 12 year old, son of Dr. Gintarė Gecys and George Akerley. He attends 7th grade at Vincas Krėvė Lithuanian School in Philadelphia, PA at which he continues to learn Lithuanian language and culture. The family took a two week tour on Lithuania in summer of 2008.

# THE TEN MOST IMPORTANT EVENTS IN LITHUANIAN HISTORY?

1009-2009

**Historian's Note:** When choosing the ten most important events of the last thousand years in Lithuanian history, the obvious problem concerns the criteria. Any list will necessarily be subjective and will certainly evoke criticism, perhaps, even consternation from some people, whether they be the most erudite scholars or non-specialist readers. This might be interesting, however, and even a little fun: what has been missed and who has "better" choices? My own criteria: what events have most impacted the Lithuanian people during the last millennium? I can only hope that more than three decades of a professional career in history will lend some weight to these choices, although as a historian of the modern period I probably have less appreciation for the medieval past.

Several caveats are in order. First, this is not simply a "feel good" list of great achievements, but rather events of significance, some of which were painful tragedies of enormous scope. Second, not all historical happenings are singular, that is, battles, uprisings, proclamations; a number occur as a more or less lengthy process, but are, nonetheless, easily identifiable as unique events over time. I have not chosen the 1009 mention of Lithuania in the Quedlinburg Chronicle: most Lithuanian-speaking tribes of the time probably had no clue that their region had a published name or were aware that they constituted a single people. Neither do I think that the coronation of Mindaugas ranks among the top ten – the Christianization of the state was abandoned and the July date taken today as the Celebration of the State is, at best, highly speculative. The



*Saulius Sužiedėlis Professor Emeritus of History, Millersville University of PA; Director, Millersville University Annual Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide*

celebrated battle of 1410 did not expel Germandom from the Baltic nor did it affect the Grand Duchy's historic decision to choose Catholicism over Orthodoxy for ethnic Lithuanians, that is, Western over Eastern Christianity. (Had the decision been reversed would we not be writing our language in Cyrillic?) A list:

**1. 1386-1387-1569:** Jogaila's dynastic alliance with Cracow and the decision to accept the Latin (Western) form of Christianity; the failure of Vytautas to obtain a royal crown (all this culminating in the Union of Lublin and the historic cultural relationship with Poland).

**2. The First Lithuanian Book** by Pastor Martynas Mažvydas in 1547 which also signified the acceptance of Lutheranism by the people of East Prussia.

**3. The Muscovite sack of Vilnius** during the 1654-1667 war, the

Swedish invasions, and the failed attempt to solidify a dynastic union with Sweden (Union of Kėdainiai, 1655).

**4. The Great Northern War** (1700-1721) and the accompanying plague of 1708-1711 (a decisive demographic disaster for the Lithuanian-speaking people, particularly in East Prussia). These events spelled the eventual end of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1772-1795) and the incorporation of most Lithuanian-speakers into the Tsarist Russian empire.

**5. The birth of Bishop Motiejus Valančius** (1801) without whose ground-breaking work none of the following would be imaginable: secular Lithuanian literature, a Lithuanian national movement, the growth of national consciousness among the peasantry.

**6. The Great Emigration** before 1914 as nearly a third of Lithuanians left for the New World and other destinations, creating a diaspora which would later play a critical supporting role in Lithuania's struggle for independence.

**7. February 16, 1918, Vilnius:** no comment needed.

**8. 1938-1940:** The period of the three ultimatums and the loss of independence by the First Republic which initiated the most disastrous demographic consequences for the Lithuanian people since the Great Northern War, including the death and deportation of hundreds of thousands of innocents.

**9. Holocaust (1941-1944):** The destruction of Lithuania's Jews, the most important minority community which had been an important economic cultural presence for 700 years and

the memory of which still reverberates around the world.

**10. 1989-1991:** Little comment needed: the liberation of the Lithuanian nation from a half-century of foreign occupation which created the conditions for the country's reintegration into the European (EU) world as well as its new-found place within the trans-Atlantic security structure (NATO), assuring the framework for the people to decide their own future.

*Saulius Sužiedėlis*

*Saulius Sužiedėlis is Professor Emeritus of History, Millersville University of PA; Director, Millersville University Annual Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide.*

His most notable publications:

**The Sword and the Cross:** A History of the Church in Lithuania (1988)

**Historical Dictionary of Lithuania.** (1997) Selected as an Outstanding Academic Book of 1998 by Choice magazine.

With Christoph Dieckmann. The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews during Summer and Fall of 1941 (2006).

Author of numerous articles and studies in both Lithuanian and English.

*Activist with Ateitis; president of the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies (2002-2004); editor of the Journal of Baltic Studies, 1994-1998*

Member of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania; Member, Editorial Boards: *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, *Lietuvos istorijos metraštis* (Lithuanian History Annual) since December 2000; *Genocidas ir rezistencija*; delivered numerous public lectures on history in Lithuania since 1991.

*In his leisure Professor Sužiedėlis enjoys aviation as a private pilot.*



Dear Mrs. Dorr,

Some off-the-cuff thoughts on gen. Anders' Lithuanian heritage. First, it should be of no surprise to anyone,

since most (and I do mean it literally) prominent Poles have a connection to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. My father remembered Anders very well, since when he was a teenager in St. Petersburg, Russia, Anders was a frequent visitor in their home. He would come to see my grandfather's first cousin, Julia Grudzinskaitė, who was very beautiful and attracted a lot of male attention. It was always my understanding that his family had Lithuanian or Latvian roots; the latter probably because he was Lutheran. However, he was not known in those days as Andriejauskas (Andrzejewski), but Anders. (Swedish: Anders - Polish: Andrzej). Checking quickly the directory of "Poles" in St. Petersburg in 1916, there is a Janina Anders and the listing of members of St. Catherine's (Catholic) Church in St. Petersburg shows a Elizabeth Anders, who was his mother (she had a German maiden name). So the claim that he later changed his name from Andriejauskas to Anders is most likely false. However, it is possible that members of his family were called Andrzejewski (belonging to Andrzej or Anders). In college I read Anders' memoirs (in English), which I remember as a very worthwhile book.

By the way, Julia's brother, Antanas Grudzinskas, was in the Polish 1st Division which liberated Holland and was the commander, who took Wilhelmshaven, NW Germany. He was decorated by the Dutch government, but was later killed in London. The suspicion was that it was the deed of the Polish KGB.

Regards,  
Tadas Stomma

*Editor's Note: As always, thank you Mr. Stomma for sharing your knowledge with us. I appreciate the time and effort involved to share these personal memories with the readers.*

## TRIVIA QUESTION

(No.27)

If you vacationed in Palanga, you probably swam in the Baltic Sea. What kind of water is in the Baltic Sea?

(a) FRESH      (b) BRACKISH      (c) SALT

Answer to Trivia

on page 6



Photos by:  
\*CA-Christian Akerley \*GA-George Akerley  
\*JL-Joyce Lukas \*KL-Kestutis Lukas



## An Interview with Marijona Venlauskaitė Boyle

Can you tell us about your background?

I was born in the anthracite region of Pennsylvania in Minersville at the height of the depression. My father had emigrated from Lithuania in 1914, as many others at that time, to escape the Czar's army. In short order my father became a miner, married a young lady from the fast growing Lithuanian community and started a family.

I attended St. Francis of Assisi School built in 1928 and staffed by the Sisters of St. Casimir, who were wonderful teachers. Social life revolved around the activities of the Lithuanian community, school and the parish. Lithuanian was my first language, many sermons in church as well many school activities were conducted in Lithuanian. Looking back, it seemed that my school was a castle on the hill, next to a beautiful convent and church. The parish was established in 1895, but the dedication of the church building was not until 1909. The building of the church succeeded literally by the sweat and tears of my grandfather's generation as well as the sacrifice of a number of their golden wedding rings as a donation to complete the church.

After finishing Pottsville Catholic High School, I completed undergraduate and graduate work at the Penn State University in the area of history and international studies. Later, I studied German at the University of Pennsylvania. I spent many years as a teacher and finished my career teaching German and as coordinator of foreign languages at Swarthmore, PA high school.

In 2005 your book "Search for Freedom" was published. It was about the life of Captain Jonas Pleškys, Why did you choose this topic and where did your research take you?

At the end of 1990, a letter from a first cousin in Lithuania reached me by a circuitous route. The cousin who wrote me was the daughter of one of my father's sisters. I was appalled to know that her family had spent a number of years in Siberia, as had many other Lithuanians. I



*Marijona Venlauskaitė Boyle, author of Search for Freedom.*

was able to translate the letter myself but my Lithuanian was too rusty to answer in that language. It happened that my son David suggested that I might get some help from a Lithuanian colleague with whom he worked at American President Lines in Oakland, California. My son explained that Jonas Pleškys was "some" sailor who had jumped ship in Sweden. He seemed to have no friends and lived alone. Jonas helped me write a number of letters to cousins in Lithuania.

I was very grateful to have uncovered my Lithuanian roots, so invited Jonas to have Sunday dinner with our family in June of 1991. His sister Eugenija Pleškytė, a renowned actress from Lithuania, was visiting him at that time. I was fortunate to meet her as well and become her friend before Eugenija had to leave for Lithuania. She was very upset before she left because she had just learned that her brother had an inoperable brain tumor. My husband and I lived in Lafayette, CA, not too far from Jonas' apartment in Oakland. We promised his sister that we would keep our eye on him, invite him out, and especially have him visit us on all the holidays. Jonas was a special family friend for three years before his death, and I wrote his sister about the progress of his health.

I would like to share with you an incident about about New Year's Day, 1991

which Jonas spent with us and our Estonian friends from Tallin. This was after the March 11, 1990 declaration of independence, so to speak -- yet before "Bloody Sunday" which I wrote about in the book. He was always still afraid that the Russian tanks would move in and take Lithuania over, and all his family with it. Of course, the tanks did move in as you know, and his medical records indicate that his doctor had to give him tranquilizers because of how upset he became at that time.

Another really quirky thing is that the defection was on the night of April 6-7, 1961 and the best estimate of his actual death is April 6-7, 1993, 32 years later.

I had no idea that Jonas was a Captain in the Soviet Navy when he defected to the west at the height of the Cold War in 1961. When I read his obituaries in the Oakland and San Francisco papers, in April, 1993, I was also surprised to learn that he was the prototype for Tom Clancy's hero in his best seller, "The Hunt for Red October." By this time, his sister Eugenija was a good friend of mine, and I invited her to come to the United States. She was depressed not only about her brother's death, but also about the demise of the state theaters and the Lithuanian film studio.

Eugenija shared a lot of family stories



*Professor Jonas Kubilius, rector emeritus of Vilnius University, spoke about Search for Freedom*



*The author at the lighthouse in Klaipėda, Lithuania. It is the one from which Capt. Pleškys sailed, and the locals call the coast area Melnragė.*

with me about her brother and I wrote an article for Lithuanian Heritage magazine based on this anecdotal material. Eventually, after many trips to Lithuania in the 1990's, I got hold of the KGB criminal case file from the Lithuanian Special Archives (some 800 pages in Russian). This file would lead me to many people, whom I would eventually interview. I found his first love, Paula and met their daughter Sondra in Latvia. I traveled to Guatemala to meet another daughter Jennifer. Jennifer's mother married Jonas in San Francisco. In Lithuania, I met most of the members of Jonas' family members, and friends who helped me with photographs and letters. In Kaunas, I found a Lithuanian eyewitness to the defection, who had been a young sailor when Jonas fooled his crew and took his ship to the Swedish island of Gotland. Eventually I traveled to Gotland to see the lighthouse where Jonas Pleškys first stood on free soil, and from which he was whisked away by our CIA to share information with us about the Soviet Navy and its new nuclear submarines. I worked about nine years until I completed the book, which was first published by Eglės publishing house in Klaipėda at the end of 2005. It was a great honor for me to be able to present

the Lithuanian translation, "Laisvės beieškant" at the impressive Martyno Mažvydo National Library in Vilnius in July, 2006.

*I know that you are working on another book. Can you share some details with us about this book?*

My new book will be a memoir entitled "Whistles and Bells: Growing up in Coal Country." This book will include information about the early Lithuanian immigrants to the anthracite region of Pennsylvania, as well as my family members who were part of that story. A good bit of the book will be devoted to the mining industry and the difficulties of the immigrant miners, including my male family members, all of whom died of Black lung or mine accident. It retrieves another time and place, which many may remember from their youth. It also concentrates on our Lithuanian community and St. Francis of Assisi church with its wonderful church bell which regulated our lives. The shrill breaker whistle from the mines was a sharp counterpoint to the melodious church bells in our town. I have included a number of family stories, some of which have been published as short pieces in Bridges and Lituanius.

*Please tell us about your research for this book. When will your book be released?*

The research for this book took me to the anthracite mining communities of Pennsylvania this summer. I am searching for documents and records of my own family history as well as the statistics of the department of mines at that time. The book will include a number of archival family photographs, as well as recent photographs from the coal region, including one existing breaker from the old days, Lithuanian cemeteries, and historic sites like the old train station in my old home town of Minersville. I expect that the writing of the book will be finished by the coming spring. I am going to publish this book in the United States, so will be checking for publishers in Pennsylvania. The earliest I can imagine



*Marijona and Emilija (Jonas Pleškys' sister) taken July 2006 at the book presentation in Klaipėda.*

a completed published version would be late in 2009.

*I know you are very active in promoting Lithuania, but what do you enjoy doing in your spare time?*

I enjoy attending the Oregon Symphony in Portland, as well as other cultural events like the theater and museums in our area. Looks like writing is almost my only hobby at this time of my life, because I also enjoy writing poetry.

*Jeanne Dorr*

*Jeanne Dorr is the Editor of Bridges and is a member of the Board of Directors of Lithuanian Orphan Care, a branch of the Human Services Council of the Lithuanian American Community, Inc*

**Editor's Note:**

*Search for Freedom may be purchased in Lithuanian or in English by contacting the author at [bmarijona@comcast.net](mailto:bmarijona@comcast.net).*

*My deepest gratitude to Marijona for the many hours she spent on this interview and for sharing her many experiences with the Bridges readers. We wish her the very best with her new book.*

*\*Photo of Jonas Pleškys was from a family album*



*Search for Freedom book jacket. Cover designed by Matt Warner.*