

KAUNAS

by Vytautas F. Beliajus

Kaunas was but 30 kilometers from our home, yet it might as well have been in China as far as we could see. To me it was as fascinating as the remote land of the "Kitays", described in fascinating words by veterans of the Russo-Japanese War like my father.

I had no idea what Kaunas would be like. It was too much for my imagination, but I knew that it would be different from anything I dared dream. I based my anticipations on fairy-tale drawings — grotesque buildings crammed inside huge walls.

Finally the opportunity arrived. Father's return from his captivity as a prisoner of war allowed mother a sudden relaxation from the anxiety and burden of being the sole provider for five mouths; and she began to feel weak and "run down", ailing and in frequent pain. Aunt Skrupskas and Grandmother Grybas were kept busy brewing healing herbs, while, frightened, we heard our maternal grandmother invoking the intercession of the departed.

Aunt Skrupskas and Grandmother Grybas were "žynės" (wise women) when it came to herb-mixing. In the home which they shared was a constant supply of various grasses, roots, herbs, bark blossoms, and like fetishes. But their knowledge failed them this time, and after another attack that seemed nearly fatal — with we little ones standing around mother's bed and crying at the tops of our lungs, mother was finally taken to Prienai to see the doctor. Her condition was diagnosed as one of appendix which necessitated an immediate operation, for another attack would be the last.

"Appendix" and "operation" were two new words, inventions like the Zeppelin and the automobile, and equally frightening. Among the peasantry, who had ever heard of an appendix, the

"blind intestine" (akloji žarna)? What kind of ailment would they discover next? And "operation"! A new manner of being slaughtered by a butcher with a medical title who exacted an enormous fee for his devilish activity. The peasants lived for many years; such was God's will. Operations and suicides were prohibitive terms. Small-pox and typhus were recognized ailments; any other cause of fatality was a divine means of extricating the soul from the body.

Mother wanted to cheat death if she could. At the same time she dreaded the operation. She felt that she had to wait until the spring after the planting of the potatoes, the vegetables and the flax, so that we children would be provided for in the event of her death. Thus she postponed and evaded until after Pentecost, the last holiday she could spend with her children on earth. After taking tearful leave of relatives and friends in Prienai and praying at the grave of her father, she left for Kaunas, with father driving the cart and I acting as private nurse. I was probably glad in my childish innocence that mother was sick as it offered the opportunity to behold the dream city — Kaunas.

The horse and buggy descended the steep and winding main street of the suburb of Aleksotas, and after we crossed the wide Nemunas River, Kaunas unfolded itself, with its many spires and belfrys and the 500-year-old Church of Vytautas the Great prominent on the water-front.

Kaunas intrigued me. It was a big city of beautiful brick buildings and streets crowded with people who looked different and dressed in fashion. The din of the city was like a siren's song as we rolled over the cobble-stoned streets to the home of my cousins on Laisvės Alėja.

My cousin and her family were very wealthy. They owned the cigarette and stocking knitting factories and many buildings in Kaunas and its suburbs, and we were to stay with them during my mother's convalescence.

All the homes on Laisvės Alėja (Freedom's Boulevard) had balconies overhanging the street, and it was on the balcony that I spent most of my time, wide-eyed, watching the world go by. This Park Avenue of Kaunas was a wide street, in the center of which was a tree-lined, broad, clay promenade with benches and kiosks; and on either side were one-way drives.

Every evening from the garage of the Aranauskis (my cousin's) home, advertisement films were projected to the sidewalk of another structure. This outdoor spectacle fascinated me.

I soon began to explore the city and to attend the movies,

which were the most miraculous phenomena of the city. There were many cinema houses with comfortable lounges. The theatres themselves were divided into First, Second and Third Class sections, and the very expensive loge (something like box seats). The poor and children occupied the Third Class which was right next to the screen. Most youngsters went to the Oaza (Oasis), where American Wild-West and similar rough-and-kumble pictures were shown. The captions were in Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, German and Yiddish.

There was no particular warmth between me and the many second-cousins. We belonged to different worlds, civilizations and classes. I was a peasant; they were capitalists. We did not even possess a common universe of discourse. They spoke Russian, a language completely unfamiliar to me. Salia and Liolia were big boys; Abrasha was my age, and it was he who introduced me to stamp collecting, a hobby which gave me much happiness in Lithuania. Fima was a temperamental and quarrelsome lad, and the twins, Yui and Sonia, were wee tots still under the care of a nonna. Thus I was very much alone and spent my time exploring the city and the suburbs of Slabada, Panemune, Sanciai, Aleksotas, and the hills and fortifications which had never been used, since the Russians had beaten a hasty retreat.

The places I loved most were the juncture of the Vilija (Neris) and the Nemunas, where stood the ruins of an old fortified castle of pagan Lithuania; the expanse of water and the sunsets were enchantments in themselves; the war museum (Karo Muzejus) and the monument to the unknown soldier. It was a simple monument, a small pyramid of stones gathered from all the Lith battle fields, and topped by an ornate cross and a plaque displaying a kneeling woman in mourning. A stone bore the Latin legend, "Rede qui Debet" (Render what you owe — to the fallen). Every twilight, soldiers sounded taps, invariably chilling my bones.

Finally my mother was operated on, successfully. The ether and the operation provided conversation for months. While convalescing, mother conceived a desire for grapes. It was a rare but not unobtainable delicacy. I did not know what grapes looked like, so it was hunting for an unknown relative in a crowded depot. My primary difficulty, however, was the fact that I could not speak Russian in the marts and thus could not make myself understood. Although Kaunas was the heart of Lithuania and the temporary capitol, the city folk spoke mainly Russian, Polish and Yiddish. Kindly store-keepers would indicate their show-windows that I might point out what I wanted, but I did not know what grapes looked like, so I was stymied. Finally I went to Mrs. Aranauskis, my cousin, and she bought some grapes in no time. I ate most of them.

After our return home, I once again had the opportunity of returning to Kaunas, but I found the city marred by something which stirred me deeply. Kaunas on the Sunday morning on which I returned made me feel very much ashamed. Every shingle and sign bearing Yiddish or Hebrew legends was tarred in ugly black. Vilnius Street, the main business thoroughfare of Kaunas and predominantly Jewish, appeared to be in mourning at the injustice.

It was obvious that this had been done by organized groups and with official knowledge, for certainly so large a territory where gendarmes always were present could not have been covered that night without the latter being aware.

After the initial shock had worn off, I set out to discover the justification for this incident, for to me Lithuanians were a people who could never do wrong.

The Jews were an integral part of Lithuanian life. The Lithuanians were the farmers and the land-dwellers while the Jews lived in the cities and were the merchants (a universal division, having its origin in the century-old restrictions preventing Jews from owning land). On Sundays, when the Lithuanians came to church, he also did his marketing. (Stores were closed on Saturday and other Jewish holidays). Since the time of Vytautas the Great (who reigned from 1392 to 1430), who had invited Jews, Karaimians (Karaites), Tartars, Catholics and other minorities to reside in Lithuania, Jews had found peace, Catholic and Orthodox churches were built alongside the "Zinyčias" and "Aukuras", pagan temples and sacrificial altars. This tolerance disappeared with the Christianization of the land. It is told that when Lithuania accepted Christianity, at the point of the sword, the Polish missionaries had incited the Lith to hate the Jews as killers of Christ, the new God; but the Lithuanians retorted, "Why did you not tell us? We would have saved him!"

Vilna, Lithuania's ancient capitol, was affectionately called by the Jews the world over, "Yerushalaim d'Lita", the Jerusalem of Lithuania. Yiddish, Rabbinitic and Hebrew literature and great Jewish minds were developed in the country, and it is the Lithuanian Yiddish dialect that is considered the Literary Yiddish, in which books and periodicals were printed.

I could understand the frustration of the Lithuanian, subjugated, denied the use of his own literature, a subject of en-

ENGLISH COLUMN

MINDORO, CLOSE TO MANILA, ONE OF WILDEST OF PHILIPPINES

Mindoro, newest way station on General MacArthur's road back to Manila, has remained one of the least developed of the larger islands of the Philippines throughout Uncle Sam's 44-year stewardship of the group, says the National Geographic Society.

Ranking seventh in size among the 7,000 islands, Mindoro is half as large as New Jersey. From Mount Calavite, rising 5,000 feet on the peninsula at the island's northwestern tip, a heavily wooded ridge runs east to majestic Mount

slavement, confiscation of property, expulsion to the bitter wastes of Siberia, massacres and mass public hangings. I recalled the incident of the grapes. I knew of the ire of American Lithuanians who sent millions of dollars to rebuild a war-wrecked Lithuania and their great disappointment when they could not be understood in Kaunas, their own capitol city. Chicago, they complained, is the real Lithuanian city. Although Lithuanians had fought for the long-cherished independence of language and people, one would hardly think so in Kaunas prior to 1921.

Soon after the above-related incident, the government issued a decree that all shingles be Lithuanized or bi-lingualized, with Lithuanian heading the inscription.

Halcon, 8,488 feet, at the center of Mindoro's northern coast. From this crown, ranges run toward the island coasts in all directions.

Forests reach to the shore of the island at most points. Only along part of the east coast and in the southwest portion are there grassy, coastal plains where cultivation of sugar cane, manila hemp (abaca) and sisal fiber, tobacco, rice and other crops has been undertaken. Part of the eastern lowlands are swampy, hot and unhealthy. The Yank landings along the southwestern shore are on the sugar-cane plains where the climate is healthful and temperatures are moderate.

Center of this southwest plain is San Jose town, six miles inland. It is 150 air miles almost due south of Manila. Escarceo Point on Mindoro's northern coast is only 75 miles south of Manila and virtually within eyeshot of railroad and highway at Batangas on Luzon, leading directly north to Manila. Verde Island Passage between the two islands narrows to only nine miles between Escarceo and Malacot Points.

Because of its wild, highland interior, Mindoro is like New Guinea. Deep penetration by opposing armies is difficult. The island's only good road connects Calapan, on the northeast, with Bongabong, well south on the east coast. Elsewhere, coast towns and inland villages connect by water route except for crude mountain trails. A short railway connects San Jose's sugar industries with warehouses and wharves on the coast at Caminawit Point. The first airplane landed at San Jose nearly two decades ago. Today it is reported there are eight or more air-

fields on the island. Tagalogs live along the north coast of Mindoro; Visayans on the south. In the interior are a dozen tribes, with the Mangyans predominant. Friendly and unspoiled, they are good musicians, playing ukuleles strung with human hair, and bamboo flutes. They telegraph from village to village on the resonant roots of a tree whose spider-like roots may meet in the main trunk as high as 20 feet above the ground.

Mindoro is another of the many Pacific islands which Spanish explorers gave names suggesting the presence of gold. Its name means Mine of Gold, but after four centuries it has yet to live up to its name.

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