Lithuanian Folksongs in America Recorded by Jonas Balys (1949–1951)



Edited by AUSTĖ NAKIENĖ and RŪTA ŽARSKIENĖ

Lithuanian Folklore in the USA: Songs Reminiscent of the Homeland

This publication and accompanying CD present the folklore of Lithuanian immigrants as recorded by Dr. Jonas Balys in 1949–1951. It includes 40 recordings from the collection made by this noted Lithuanian folklorist and ethnologist. The collection is deposited in the American Folklife Centre at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Jonas Balys (1909–2011) spent his childhood in the village of Krasnava, not far from Kupiškis. He started collecting folklore while studying at the Teachers' College in Panevėžys. From 1928 to 1933 J. Balys studied at the universities of Kaunas, Graz and Vienna (from the latter he received his PhD degree) and completed an internship in Helsinki. In 1933 he returned to Kaunas, became a lecturer at Vytautas Magnus University, and in 1935 he started to direct the newly established Lithuanian Folklore Archives. The young, energetic scholar initiated the extensive gathering of folklore manuscripts and sound recordings and started publishing the periodical *Tautosakos darbai (Folklore Studies)*. In 1939 the Archives became a part of the Institute of Lithuanian Studies and was moved to Vilnius. During the years of World War II, J. Balys resided and continued his scholarly work in Vilnius. In 1944, as the Soviet army was approaching Lithuania, Balys and his family left for Germany. He remembers

that being a war refugee he was careful to safeguard a suitcase with copies of archival materials that he planned to use for his studies.

With bombs dropping from airplanes, I would drag my sleepy children and that suitcase with folklore manuscripts into the bomb shelter. During the awful Nov. 27 bombing, British airplanes destroyed the entire city center of beautiful, old Freiburg. A flammable phosphorus bomb came through the roof and fell into the attic we were renting from a German lady, in exchange for a big slab of smoked bacon we brought from Lithuania. <...> And so we were lucky to survive in the basement of that little house and those constantly toted manuscripts were not destroyed by bombs and fire. I consider that to be my biggest success. All those theoretical musings in articles and books, written later, are only secondary in importance. There would not have been any of them had I not brought those selected materials with me. Theories come and go, but authentic materials remain.

During 1944–1945 J. Balys worked as an assistant at the German Folksongs Archive in Freiburg. In 1946–1947 he taught at the Baltic University in Hamburg. In 1948, together with his family he came to the USA, having been invited by Professor Stith Thompson to work at Indiana University in Bloomington. Lacking original sources and collections left behind in Vilnius, he decided to visit Lithuanian immigrants in America and record folklore they still remembered.

From a recorded speech given by J. Balys at the award ceremony of the National Jonas Basanavičius Prize on February 15, 1995. The Lithuanian Folklore Archives of the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, LTRF k 2212.

These expeditions proved successful: on magnetic tape he recorded about 1200 items, mostly songs, also folktales, instrumental music and other folklore genres.

Having borrowed from the university a magnetic tape recorder (one of the early ones, made by Brush Developing Company, and quite heavy) and with some financial support, I purchased the necessary tapes and set out during the summer months of 1949 and 1950. I traveled by train and bus because I did not have my own car.²

My biggest discovery was the older generation of the earlier wave of Lithuanian immigrants. <...> All those older men and women, whom I discovered as representatives of those earlier times, are now gone. They were the last Lithuanian Mohicans, who crossed the ocean but never forgot the spirit of their native culture.³

He interviewed 118 people, the majority of whom were born in the 19^{th} century (the oldest women – in 1866), and who had emigrated at the end of 19^{th} and beginning of the 20^{th} century. The collection was smaller than the one left in Vilnius, but equally varied, reflecting all regions of Lithuania and different styles

- Lietuvių dainos Amerikoje: lyrinės meilės, papročių, darbo, švenčių ir pramogų dainos / Lithuanian Folksongs in America: Lyric Songs of Love, Customs, Work, Feasts and Entertainments, surinko ir suredagavo / collected and edited by Jonas Balys, (Lietuvių tautosakos lobynas, VI / A Treasury of Lithuanian Folklore, VI), Silver Spring, Md.: Lietuvių tautosakos leidykla / Lithuanian Folklore Publishers, 1977, p. VI.
- From a recorded speech given by J. Balys at the award ceremony of the National Jonas Basanavičius Prize on February 15, 1995.



Jonas Balys Indianos universiteto bibliotekoje, Blumingtonas, Indiana. Jonas Balys at the Indiana University library in Bloomington, Indiana. Fotografuota | Photographed in 1948. *JBl ft 69*.

of singing. It is important to note that this was the first Lithuanian collection of sound recordings made on the newly invented magnetic tape recorder.⁴

In 1955, a good representation of Lithuanian folklore – recordings of 20 songs – appeared on a vinyl record *Lithuanian Folk Songs in the United States* prepared by Jonas Balys. In the booklet the author wrote that the music of Lithuanian folksongs shows a considerable difference in melodic structure from neighboring peoples, the Slavs and Germans. The oldest and most primitive kind of singing, then almost extinct, was performed in choral rounds (*sutartinės*); however, revival of *sutartinės* was received by the audience without enthusiasm; the taste of people had changed. Lithuanian immigrants preserved the traditional songs of their Old Country surprisingly well. Among the Dzūkai, the people from the southern part of the country, the old songs were sung in one voice. Among the representatives of other regions the singing in thirds for two voices (in a manner of more recent origin) was also popular. The old-fashioned singing was still practiced at banquets and picnics.⁵

In 1956 J. Balys started working at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. and at the same time concerned himself with the publication of Lithuanian folksongs. "From his collections J. Balys prepared a two-volume publication *Lietuvių dainos Amerikoje | Lithuanian Folksongs in America <...>*. The first

⁴ This innovation reached Lithuania later. Magnetic tape recorders were first produced around 1955 by the electronic company "Elfa" in Vilnius.

⁵ Lithuanian Folk Songs in the United States. Monograph Series of the Ethnic Folkways Library [LP and booklet]. Recorded by Jonas Balys, N.Y.C, USA, 1955, p.2.

volume with the subtitle – *Pasakojamosios dainos ir baladės / Narrative Songs and Ballads* appeared in 1958 and opened a window into a still living tradition in America. That volume contained 472 song texts, the majority of which he transcribed in 1952–1954. At the end of the book were 222 melodies, transcribed by composer Vladas Jakubėnas. <...>. The second volume of *Lietuvių dainos Amerikoje / Lithuanian Folksongs in America* – subtitled *Lyrinės meilės, papročių, darbo, švenčių ir pramogų dainos / Lyric Songs of Love, Customs, Work, Feasts and Entertainments* appeared in 1977. It included 702 texts, most of them recorded by J. Balys, but 257 songs were recorded by another collector, J. Būga. <...> These two volumes are considered a great scholarly accomplishment."6

These publications as well as the multivolume series *Lietuvių tautosakos lobynas / A Treasury of Lithuanian Folklore* helped Lithuanians living in America not to forget their folklore and provided necessary data for researchers. In Lithuania, however, J. Balys' name was never mentioned, and his works never cited. The reason was because Balys, with his patriotic sentiments, was an active member of VLIK (*Vyriausiasis Lietuvos išlaisvinimo komitetas / The Supreme Committee for the Liberation of Lithuania*) and tried to make sure that the US government would not recognize the supposedly "voluntary" incorporation of Lithuania into the USSR. His efforts were recognized after 1990, once Lithuania regained its independence. In 1994 he was awarded the

⁶ Leonardas Sauka. Lietuvių tautosakos mokslas XX amžiuje: tyrėjai ir jų darbai [Lithuanian Folklore Studies in the XX century: Scholars and Their Studies], Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2016, p. 234.

National Jonas Basanavičius Prize for his scholarly work in Lithuania and in the USA, and for encouraging the maintenance of Lithuanian ethnic traditions. The laureate designated the prize money to be used for the publication of his works. In 1998–2004 the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore published five volumes of Balys' works, edited by Rita Repšienė. In 1999 J. Balys was honored with the Presidential award of the 4th Order of the Lithuanian Grand Duke Gediminas.

In 2009 the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore commemorated Balys' 100th birthday. Interest in his published works as well as archival materials increased. In 2010, in cooperation with the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, the Institute received digitized copies of Balvs' sound recordings made in 1949–1951. And in 2013, with the help of Mirga and Ramūnas Girnius who live in Boston, a truckload arrived in Vilnius loaded with J. Balys' personal items and archival materials. The materials had been deposited in ALKA (Amerikos lietuvių kultūros archyvas / Archive of Lithuanian Culture in America) located in Putnam, Connecticut, and included cassette copies of the recordings made in 1949-1951 as well as much information about this folklorist, ethnologist, and politically and culturally active member of the Lithuanian refugee community. In the same year, the Institute of Lithuanian Folklore and Literature organized a presentation of "Dr. Jonas Balys' Folklore Room" (as the exposition was called in Putnam's ALKA). At that event Rūta Žarskienė, who oversaw the transfer of the materials, stated: "even though Jonas Balys never return to Lithuania after it regained its independence, his works returned, and they always were, are, and will be of great importance to the development of Lithuanian folklore and ethnology studies".

This publication presents J. Balys' sound recordings (1949–1951) that are of special interest to folklorists. They are immigrant songs relating the pain of parting from loved ones, the journey's hardships, the first impressions of the strange new land, and reminiscences of the homeland. There are also songs representing other genres: songs of youth, ballads, love songs, family songs, wedding songs, work songs, calendar songs and others that tell of the traditional rural way of life. According to Rima Visackienė who worked with the recordings, "while listening, one cannot cease to be amazed that, after so many years of living far away from the homeland and being surrounded by the American world, a person could retain in his memory such treasures without much change or damage to them. After all, these recordings were made almost a half a century after the immigrants had left Lithuania. Most likely the songs were a great source of support, comfort and constant renewal of ties with brothers, sisters, and relatives left behind in Lithuania, a breath of fresh air from the homeland."

Individual Lithuanians had travelled to America since the 17th century, but massive emigration started in the 1860s and lasted up to World War I. The primary reasons were: the abolishment of serfdom, the reprisals for the failed uprising

Rūta Žarskienė. "Jono Balio archyvas jau Lietuvoje" [Jonas Balys' Archive has arrived in Lithuania], Tautosakos darbai / Folklore Studies, vol. XLVI, p. 315–320.

⁸ Rima Visackienė. "Jono Balio Amerikoje įrašytos lietuvių dainos ir instrumentinė muzika" [Lithuanian Songs and Instrumental Music Recorded in America by Jonas Balys], *Tautosakos darbai / Folklore Studies*, vol. XLII, p. 230–238.

against the Tsar's government in 1863–1864, the famine of 1867–1868, as well as a desire to avoid the forced recruitment into the Tsar's army. It is estimated that in the 19th century 50,000 to 100,000 Lithuanians came to the New World.9 At that time in America there was a great demand for labor in coal mines, stockvards, factories, sewing mills, and on the railroads. A more exact count of Lithuanian immigrants was made after 1899 when they were registered as Lithuanians, and not as Russians or Poles. From 1899 until 1915 more than 252,000 Lithuanians came to the USA.¹⁰ Most of the Lithuanian immigrants were peasants, without education who left "in search of a better life" in Pennsylvania's coal mines or Chicago's stockyards. (Some Lithuanians emigrated after Lithuania gained its independence in 1918, but they were few in numbers compared to the earlier emigration.) At first, Lithuanian immigrants tried to stay close to Polish immigrants, establishing joint Catholic parishes and fraternities. When more Lithuanian priests arrived, they brought with them patriotic ideas that were published in Lithuania's underground newspapers "Aušra" (Dawn) and "Varpas" (The Bell). These ideas fostered ethnic pride among the immigrants and they soon established their own Lithuanian parishes. According to ethnologist Elena Bradūnaitė-Aglinskienė, religious affiliation was a strong component of identity for the immigrants, and,

⁹ Dr. Antanas Kučas. *Lithuanians in America*. Boston, Massachusetts: Encyclopedia Lituanica, pp.22–27; Ramūnas Kondratas. Lithuanians in America: A Historical Overview, *Lietuvių kultūrinis paveldas Amerikoje / Lithuanian Cultural Legacy in America*, Managing Editor Algis Lukas, Silver Spring, Maryland: Lithuanian American Community, Inc., Cultural Affairs Council, p. 29, 31.

¹⁰ Dr. Antanas Kučas. Ibid., p. 56.

therefore, the parish priests were very influential in educating and encouraging national consciousness among the parishioners. Lithuanian colonies were formed wherever they built their own churches and schools.¹¹

One of the first and the largest colony was the town of Shenandoah in Pennsylvania where the first Lithuanian coal miners settled in 1869. According to Antanas Kučas, Shenandoah was the only American town where Lithuanian immigrants played an important role in the town's history, forming about a third of the population and even taking part in its government. "Therefore, it is not surprising that Shenandoah was called the capital of Lithuanians in America." Here Lithuanians built two churches, published newspapers and books, established Lithuanian schools, had a brass band, a choir, clubs and even four cemeteries. A large number of Lithuanians also settled in other mining towns in Pennsylvania. Not speaking English, they socialized and married mostly among their own, grew flowers in their gardens, and tried to create an environment that was dear to the heart. Even the names of the towns were given Lithuanian forms in their pronunciation. In this way Shenandoah became Šenedorius, Shamokin – Šimukai, Mahanoy City – Makanojus 13. Work in the mines was dif-

[&]quot; From a paper read by Elena Bradūnaitė-Aglinskienė "Etnografinis žvilgsnis į pirmąją lietuvių emigrantų bangą JAV" ["An Ethnographic Glance at the First Wave of Lithuanian Immigrants in the USA"] at the conference "Šimtmečio etnografija" ["A Hundred Years of Ethnography"], held at the Lithuanian National Museum, Nov. 20, 2018.

¹² Vladas Butėnas & Algimantas Kezys (photographs). *Pennsylvanijos angliakasių Lietuva [Pennsylvania's Coalminers' Lithuania*], Chicago: Lithuanian Library Press, 1977, p. 8.

¹³ E. Bradūnaitė-Aglinskas' information.

ficult and dangerous. Many young men and even teenagers died from accidents or disease. Gravestones stand witness to the early deaths where the inscription states that death was a result of an accident in the mines together with the usual request that the passer-by would say a "Hail Mary" and the traditional prayer for the dead – "Eternal Rest". Often the names of the village, parish and district where the deceased was born were engraved on the tombstone – "so that the soul would know where to return!" This explanation was given by an elderly informant to E. Bradūnaitė-Aglinskienė during her 1972–1973 fieldwork when she visited a number of mining towns, talked to the remaining elderly immigrants and recorded their folklore. 15

Those first immigrants where sons and daughters of farmers and, having grown up in rural villages, they had a hard time adjusting to their new surroundings. They returned to their homeland in their thoughts, and, of course, through their songs. "Even today I see everything in my imagination and I don't forget anything, because <...> I never let go of those images of my dear Lithuania. Lithuania stands like a mirror, like an altar before my eyes." Those words belong to Uršulė Žemaitienė, J. Balys' most prolific singer, who came from Suvalkija, the

¹⁴ Vladas Butėnas & Algimantas Kezys (photographs). Ibid., p. 58, 87.

From a paper read by Elena Bradūnaitė-Aglinskienė "Etnografinis žvilgsnis į pirmąją lietuvių emigrantų bangą JAV" ["An Ethnographic Glance at the First Wave of Lithuanian Immigrants in the USA"].

Suvalkiečių liaudies kūryba Amerikoje: antologija / Anthology of Sudovian Folklore in America, surinko ir suredagavo / collected and edited by Jonas Balys, (Lietuvių tautosakos lobynas, XI / A Treasury of Lithuanian Folklore, XI), Silver Spring, Md.: Lithuanian Folklore Publishers, 1989, p. 19.



Lietuvių tautinis klubas Broktone, Masačusetso valstijoje. Lithuanian National Club, Brockton, Mass. Fotografavo | Photo by J. Balys, 1950. *JBl ft 68*.

southwest region of Lithuania. She knew a few immigrant songs as well. According to Balys, "there aren't that many immigrant songs; most of them are created by persons who read books and knew how to write. For that reason, those songs are not that interesting for their poetic form, but they provide information on how the immigrants lived and what they felt a hundred years ago. Usually they deride their new country and complain about many things. It seems everything was better in the homeland. They admit that they left their land of birth for money and in hope for a better life." ¹⁷

For example, song No. 4, sung by U. Žemaitienė, "Užaugau kaimely, pas savo tėvelį" ("I grew up in the village with my father"), was written by a folk poet, Jonas Mykolas Burkus. This song became very popular in America and in Lithuania, and composer Antanas Vanagaitis used both the words and the melody in his arrangement of the song. 18 The song "Aš, Lietuvos bernužėlis, laiškelį rašysiu" ("I, a Lithuanian lad, will write a letter", No. 8, additional lyrics), was created in America, printed on postcards and widely distributed among the immigrants. Even an illiterate person could sign the postcard and send it back home. 19 Some immigrant songs describe the pain of parting (No. 3), others — nostalgic longing for the homeland (No. 6); but some songs are ironic and self-critical (No. 9) and

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 139.

¹⁸ Danuté Petrauskaité. Lietuvių muzikinė kultūra Jungtinės Amerikos Valstijose 1870–1990: tautinės tapatybės kontūrai [Lithuanian Musical Culture in the USA 1870–1990: the Contours of Ethnic Identity], Vilnius: VDA press, 2015, p. 55.

From a recorded lecture by Jonas Balys on immigrant songs. The Lithuanian Folklore Archives of the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, Jonas Balys' Fund (JBl k 56/1).

even give didactic teachings (No. 11). Unfortunately, the poor quality of sound recordings did not allow for the inclusion of some songs with more poetic texts. But those songs were performed and recorded by the folk group *Dijūta* from Vilnius and are included in their CD album, *Dai lakštava lakštuote / So Sang the Nightingale* in the section entitled "Letters from America".²⁰

The results of J. Balys' expeditions, with its numerous recordings of songs and spoken folklore, proved that many of those first immigrants always remained Lithuanians in their hearts, retaining their traditional culture and its regional characteristics²¹. The song texts were enhanced by the native dialects which the singers had retained in varying degrees. Immigrants from Dzūkija (southern part of Lithuania) – the region considered to have the strongest singing traditions – knew many beautiful and rare songs. They are characterized by long texts, often with nine, twelve stanzas. An Advent song "Łėkė łėkė sakalėlis" ("The falcon flew", No. 34) even has 25 stanzas (singer Elena Pigagienė remembered the song with two long parallel descriptions as it was sung during the long winter nights). Especially archaic were the rye-cutting song (No. 32) and family song (No. 33) which she performed with her neighbor Levusia Andriušienė. Men from the Dzūkija region also performed their songs very well: Dominykas Petručionis (No.

Folk Group "Dijūta". Dai lakštava lakštuote / So Sang the Nightingale: Double CD album, edited by Rūta Žarskienė, sound engineer Rimantas Motiejūnas, Vilnius: Dijūta, 2017.

Four songs recorded from the immigrants from Klaipėda region were published in the collection Klaipėdos krašto dainos ir muzika: 1935–2000 metų įrašai / Songs and Music from Klaipėda Region: Recordings Made in 1935–2000, sudarė / edited by Austė Nakienė, Lina Petrošienė, Gaila Kirdienė. Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2017.

14, 15) and Jonas Karauskas (No. 27). Singers from the Žemaitija (northwestern region) - Rožė Maziliauskienė (No. 1) and Ona Gurskienė (No. 18) creatively embellished traditional melodies so that when transcribing them it was difficult to place them within the usual rhythm patterns. Women from Suvalkija – the earlier mentioned "Queen of Songs" U. Žemaitienė (No. 21, 22, 37) and Magdalena Takažauskienė (No. 17, 19) – sang the songs with a quicker tempo, efficiently, not wasting much time. Perhaps because the majority of the older singers were barely literate, their performance was especially appealing because it was as if directly from Lithuania's countryside, not touched by urban culture. Singers from Aukštaitija (northeastern part of Lithuania), Veronika Kasparaitienė and Felicija Kapočienė sang a refrain song with an interesting form "Valungėlė sakė: čiūta" ("The nightingale said: čiūta", No.16) which at one time may have been a sutartinė (multi-part song). The style of these two younger women differed significantly from the older generation, their performance was affected by the sounds of urban choral singing, orchestral music and commercial records.

J. Balys was most interested in singers who sang songs the way they would usually sing them for family members or for casual entertainment of gathered friends. Perhaps those older singers knew something about archaic traditions (e.g. the children's song sung by Stasys Šepikas "Aš turiejau žilą uožį" ("I had a little grey goat", No. 29) is interesting because the singer mimics animal noises and taps the beat). However, in the Lithuanian community there were those who preferred harmonized folksongs, thus continuing the choral tradition from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. This choral

tradition is represented on this CD by the song "Kur tas šaltinėlis, kur aš jaunas gėriau?" ("Where is that spring from which I drank?", No. 7) performed by three professional singers Aleksandras Kutkus, Bronius Budriūnas, and Jonas Valiukas.

In this publication, among the many singers are two musicians representing the tradition of instrumental music. One piece is a polka played on a concertina by Povilas Daškevičius (No. 10) and the other "Tėtės polka" ("Father's polka", No. 24) is played on a violin in a traditional style by Petras Vytautas Sarpalius, a professional musician who directed choirs and orchestras. Sarpalius titled the composition in honor of his father who was a folk fiddler from Vilkaviškis. It's a pity that Balys recorded only a few pieces by musicians; instrumental music was not the focus of his expedition, so the few recordings do not necessarily reflect the actual situation. According to musicologist Danute Petrauskaitė, Lithuanians venturing on the long journey took instruments with them – a fiddle, a diatonic accordion, kanklės (zither-type instrument), a wind or brass instrument - and played them for their own enjoyment after hard work²², also at weddings²³. Especially popular were brass bands (American–Lithuanians called them benai) affiliated with various fraternities and found in almost all mining towns (the first was organized in 1885 in Shenandoah) and in larger cities. Lithuanians took great pride in their bands that played a different repertoire from the American ones, and they performed in almost all community social gatherings. The bands

²² Danutė Petrauskaitė. Ibid., p. 47, 90, 100–104.

²³ A wedding feast among Lithuanian immigrants was described in Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* written in 1904.

were formed "not just to elevate the Lithuanian nation to a higher level, not just to kindle ethnic pride and to reach for higher goals, but also to show other people that the Lithuanian nation is musical, that her sons love music, and that they are able to stand on an equal footing with other civilized nations." Lithuanians in America, did indeed demonstrate their musical abilities – the 20th century saw many professional singers, violinists, pianists, composers and directors.

This CD presents only a small part of J. Balys' recordings and primarily those that were of better quality. It is possible to listen to all of the recordings by visiting the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore in Vilnius. The music library of Folklore Archives also safeguards the folklore collected by Juozas Būga from Lithuanian immigrants in America in 1950. We also hope to receive a copy of the recordings made by E. Bradūnaitė-Aglinskienė during her fieldwork in Pennsylvania²⁵ in 1972–1973, which are still little known, and thus continue to publish works that document the traditional culture of Lithuanian immigrants.

AUSTĖ NAKIENĖ and RŪTA ŽARSKIENĖ

An excerpt from the Statute of Cleveland's Lithuanian Band (see: Juozas Žilevičius. "Amerikos lietuvių įnašas į lietuvių muziką" [The Contribution of Lithuanians in America to Lithuanian music], Aidai, 1956, No. 8, p. 352–362; Danutė Petrauskaitė. Ibid., p. 202–207.

²⁵ Sixteen songs recorded by E. Bradūnaitė-Aglinskienė 1972–1973 and three songs recorded by J. Balys 1949–1951 performed by the Boston's Ethnographic Ensemble "Sodauto" (led by Gita Merkevičiūtė Kupčinskienė), were published on a CD "Ten, kur anglių kalnai stėri" [Where the Coal Hills Stand] in 2004.