

## The First Lithuanian Mission

Written by Dennis Wodzinski, Congregational Archivist (*Whitehall Franciscan, Vol. 20, Is. 1, 2011*)

Seventy-one years ago from this summer, the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God embarked upon a journey unlike any they took before, and unlike any they have taken since. The late 1930s and early 1940s saw Europe increasingly under the control of advancing communist and fascist-backed governmental systems. It also happened that the sisters established a Lithuanian mission in 1935.



*Sister M. Virginia (left) and Sister M. Urban (right) in Berlin, 1940. According to the Sisters' account, those pictured in the photo are "Jewish refugees who traveled with us to the U.S."*

Due to international circumstances, this Lithuanian mission was unable to remain long in the Catholic country. As a result of these increasing troubles in 1940, the Sisters closed their Lithuanian mission and journeyed back to the U.S.A., taking

copious notes regarding the emotions and realities of European turmoil in times of war. This article will provide a brief look into the accounts of the small band of Whitehall Franciscans who made this journey.

By 1939, the small contingent of Whitehall Franciscans in Lithuania numbered five: Sister M. Imelda Tosh and Sister M. Felicia Pieza who arrived in 1935, and Sister M. Christine Ginkiewicz, Sister M. Urban Kolash, and Sister M. Virginia Pask who joined them in 1938. The group of sisters spent most of their time in the Lithuanian cities of Dotnuva and Kaunas learning the language, taking university courses, and administering to a boarding school of young girls, many of whom were orphans.

The Archives Department maintains a collection of the correspondence between this small Lithuanian contingent and the administration in the U.S.A. Letters and telegrams are composed in both English and Lithuanian and provide a good look at not only the Sisters' work in Lithuania at the time, but also a great insight into the emotions swirling around a Europe on the cusp of conflict and violence.

Sister M. Virginia recalled her trip through Berlin en route to Lithuania in 1938 in a letter to Mother M. Aloysia Yurgutis as the city "was bedecked in swastikas and Germans greeted everybody with a salute and 'Heil Hitler'."

In February, 1939, Sister M. Felicia wrote as a postscript in her letter to Whitehall that conflict was most likely imminent: "Oh yes, there are rumors here in Europe that war will begin in Spring. It would be good if we would have money to purchase passage to America for the sisters if the worst would happen."

Sister M. Felicia's timeline was ultimately not correct, but political maneuvering was already having its effect on the country's geographical boundary. In March, 1939, Adolf Hitler's Germany demanded the transfer of the Lithuania's Klaipeda region into the Third Reich. Hitler's demand was met, and the ceding of Klaipeda was the leader's last geographical acquisition before violence broke out. Sister M. Urban wrote about the emotions of this land transfer after she encountered a Lithuanian soldier who was previously stationed there: "It was sad, the soldier said, to see the Germans pulling down the Lithuanian flag and hanging Hitler's swastika in its place." All Lithuanian flags were destroyed in Klaipeda.

Despite these political and military moves, the sisters maintained their work and study inside Lithuania. However, when war officially broke out in September 1939, uncertainties concerning the mission and Lithuania itself loomed large on the horizon. Sister M. Felicia wrote to the Motherhouse concerning the situation on the first day of war, September 1, 1939:

***"War began in Europe. No boats sailing for America. They are held in readiness for war. Lithuania, as yet, remains neutral, so we stay on. I am preparing my final tests at the university. I have not many, but I will need till Christmas. If war breaks out in Lithuania we shall remove ourselves to a safety zone and watch for an opportunity to sail for America. So far there is nothing to fear for it is quiet and peaceful in Lithuania. We already feel the privations of war-there is no salt or sugar to be had....Don't worry about us. We feel safe and sound."***

Later that week, the sisters received \$500 from Mother M. Aloysia for their safe passage home. But rising transportation costs due to the European crisis made finding passage home a tough task.

Sister M. Felicia wrote to Sister M. Aloysia on September 12th:

***"The condition of the war in Lithuania is not dangerous, but if it would be - we will leave for Sweden and there leave for the passage by waiting. If no trains will be available we will go to one of the villages. Sr. M. Christine and I will try to get passage for October 12th. We do hope it becomes possible....Please pray for us because we are nervous. We could be killed in the warring zones."***

Sister M. Virginia also wrote Sister M. Aloysia on September 12th and stated that ***"On the first day of the war the women began to purchase 3 to 4 kilograms of bread, sugar, salt, and oil. Now everyone is tired of eating dry bread."*** Sister M. Virginia added, ***"I'm not afraid of the war at all. Only my mother worries but she should understand that they won't call me to fight in the front line!"***

In October, according to Sister M. Virginia's letter, ***"the American Council gave orders for all Americans to leave without exception...America's Minister (J.C. Owen Norem) told us we could remain, but in case of danger, he would take care of our safety."*** They decided to begin their departure: On Oct. 8, 1939 Sister M. Felicia and Christine made passage with thirty other American citizens back to the U.S.A. leaving Sister M. Virginia and Sister M. Urban in Kaunas.

In numerous letters that flowed back and forth in the following months, Sister M. Urban and Sister M. Virginia reassured the Motherhouse that they were safe and would continue in their studies and ministry until the situation changed. They kept in close contact with the American Consulate in

Lithuania and heeded warnings that were offered to them. Mr. Norem, the United States Minister to Lithuania, was concerned about their safety and forwarded any warnings he had onto them.

After the initial months of war alarms and anxiety, a short calm fell over the city of Kaunas and the sisters hoped to continue their ministries in a time of prolonged peace.

However, in the summer of 1940, the Soviet Union officially began to take control of Lithuania after having a presence of Soviet soldiers there for several months. It was official in June, 1940, when the Soviet Union occupied and annexed Lithuania that it truly ceased to exist as an independent country.

The sisters wrote the Motherhouse of the June events in a letter dated June 24:

***“Yesterday there was one grand Communistic demonstration in Kaunas. What radical changes are taking place everyday.”***

Thinking of their future, the sisters mulled over their departure strategy in this letter as well:

***“Everybody advises us to leave and leave quick. All the Americans are leaving and plenty of Lithuanians are trying to leave also. The only route accessible right now is through Siberia to Japan and from there to San Francisco. Communication through France might begin within a week or two (Paris had fallen on June 14). If so we can reach Lisbon where there is still regular communication by boat.”***

Instead of traveling by way of Siberia, the Sisters opted for the latter solution through occupied France. This fact is evident because their next communication comes from Lisbon, Portugal. On the trip from Lithuania they crossed Germany and Switzerland with American Minister Norem, several American seminarians and a Jewish family, all who were looking to make it back to the United States. The sisters noted on their trip through France that they had to travel by bus because of the fact that most railroad bridges were destroyed by German bombers.

Thus they arrived in Lisbon in August and noted that ***“Portugal is overcrowded with strangers, a ‘miniature America’, thousands are trying to leave.”*** The two sisters, along with Minister Norem and his wife were fortunate to gain passage on the Italian vessel Exocharda on August 22nd. At the end of the month the sisters were back on American soil after several safety drills and noticing numerous armed ships on their horizon.

By the end of 1940, the sisters had departed and Lithuania was gradually sinking into the mire of war-torn Europe and eventual Soviet control. Lithuania would only reemerge from this governmental system in the 1990s. Fittingly, as they were one of the last contingents to see the dying days of the earlier republic (having departed with the American minister there), the sisters would be one of the first to see the country’s rebirth as a new mission was established in 1992 when Sister Michele Garas and Sister M. Dolorita Butkus arrived in Utena.