

Interview with Benedict Zemaitis

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Interview # 1: June 22, 2010

Interviewer: Carol Esarey

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Esarey: This is Carol Esarey, and the date is June 22, 2010. The person across from me being interviewed is Benedict Zemaitis. We are also conducting another interview, in absentia, about Vita Zemaitis, Ben's wife. This interview is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's *immigrant stories* and is a historical document.

Now Benedict, I'd like to start at the beginning, first to verify some of the information that we spoke about last week. As you said, you're both from Lithuania. Could you please give me Vita's date of birth?

Zemaitis: Vita was born in 1936, July 12 of 1936 in Kaunas, Lithuania.

Esarey: Of course, her primary language at that time was Lithuanian?

Zemaitis: Lithuanian was primarily used in Lithuanian language.

Esarey: Her father was?

Zemaitis: Her father was Doctor, Professor Joseph Zubkus. He was both a professor at a medical school, and he was a prominent ear, nose and throat surgeon. He has



Vita Zubkus as a baby in 1936.

written a number of articles in, I think, about fifteen different languages. His works have been published in about fifteen different languages.

Esarey: And internationally.

Zemaitis: Yes.

Esarey: And Vita's mother?

Zemaitis: Vita's mother was Kazimiera Dalide Zubkus. She was also Lithuanian. She had studied at the university, but after marrying, she devoted her life of being as a mother and a wife and a housekeeper.

Esarey: Vita's siblings, her brother, sisters.

Zemaitis: Vita had one older brother that was born in 1929. His name was Sigitas Zubkus.

Esarey: I believe we have that spelling.

Zemaitis: Yes.

Esarey: And was her brother with her when they immigrated, when the family left Lithuania?

Zemaitis: Yeah. The whole family left Lithuania at the same time. That would have been roughly in June or July of 1944. That was when the Russians were pushing Germans out of Lithuania.

Esarey: That is when they left as a family?

Zemaitis: Right.

Esarey: Now, when Vita was young, where on the map that we have here were they were living?

Zemaitis: In Kaunas, Lithuania. That's almost in the center of the center of the map.

Esarey: So, they were right in the middle of the country.

Zemaitis: Right. That was Kaunas; Kaunas was the second largest city in Lithuania. Vilnius was and is Lithuania's capital and the largest city, although both Kaunas and Vilnius were cultural centers in Lithuania, with opera houses, museums, universities and so on.

Esarey: What was Vita's life like as a child? What did she do and how did she live?



Vita's Zabkus' home in Kaunas, Lithuania in the years before WW II came to Lithuania.

Zemaitis: One of her likings or aspirations was to become a ballerina.

Esarey: Really?

Zemaitis: She loved music, and she told me a number of times that when guests gathered at her parents' home, a lot of times she used to do some ballet dancing for the guests, to show off her ability.

Esarey: That takes some self-confidence.

Zemaitis: Yes. I guess, fortunately or unfortunately, I guess fortunately for me, that as she grew up, she had an athlete's body and was maybe her bones were too big to become a ballerina. (both laugh) So, I guess, later on in life she turned her energies and aspirations into sports.

Esarey: Into being a good athlete. We will talk some more about her athletic ability and prowess, as it developed. When she was very young—let's say she was five, six, seven, eight years old—she went to an elementary school in—

Zemaitis: She didn't go to an elementary school in Kaunas, since her parents were pretty well-to-do, they used to travel quite a bit in Lithuania. I have a picture here of Vita and her father sitting by their car. That was like a 1935 Buick. This is from Kaunas, Lithuania.



A favorite picture of the family's American 1938 Buick. Vita rode often with her father in this car all over Lithuania as he traveled as a physician.

Esarey: I have to ask this. How did he get a 1935 Buick, a Buick from the United States? How did that happen?

Zemaitis: Yes. Well, that's basically... I don't know really the story, but since he was a surgeon, I think they could afford it. But then they used to travel in that Buick all over Lithuania.



Vita and her brother Sigitas Zubkus, circa 1942.

Esarey: It's very distinctive.

Zemaitis: Yeah

Esarey: Was her brother younger?

Zemaitis: Her brother was older.

Esarey: Was there an extended family that she got to spend time with as a child?

Zemaitis: I think there were a couple of her uncles that were still alive in Lithuania. She did have a number of cousins, both on her father's side and her mother's side.

Esarey: Yes, there are several pictures. There's another picture with quite a number of young people about her age. Was there a significance to this the picture with the Buick, or is this symbolic of the kind of life she had as a child?

Zemaitis: Well, she had a very close, loving relationship with her father. So, that picture sort of illustrates their closeness.

Esarey: The closeness between Vita and her dad.

Zemaitis: Yeah.

Esarey: As she was growing up—

Zemaitis: Actually, she did not really have too much time to grow up in quiet circumstances.

Esarey: How old is she in this picture with the Buick?

Zemaitis: In this picture she must be...four or five years old.

Esarey: And she would have been...This would have been about 1940 then?

Zemaitis: Yes.

Esarey: This is when things started to happen in the country.

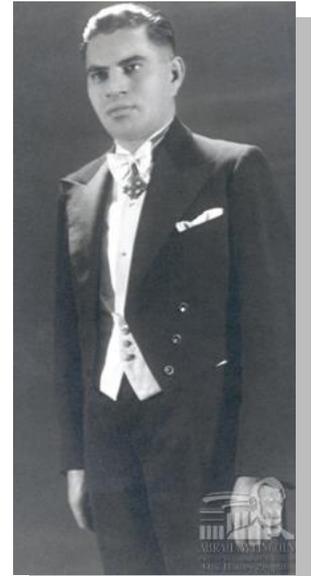
Zemaitis: Nineteen forty was the year in which Lithuania was occupied by Soviet Union the first time.

Esarey: The first time .

Zemaitis: In June of 1940, the Red Army took over the country by force.¹

Esarey: Where was the family at that time? What was going on?

Zemaitis: I think at that time they were living in Kaunas, and actually after the takeover, her father continued practicing as a doctor. Really nothing much happened probably during the first eight or ten months of occupation.



Vita's father Joseph Zubkus, decorated for his medical achievements in Lithuania, date unknown.

¹ The Red Army was the Soviet army, created by the Communist government after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

Esarey: Which would have been?

Zemaitis: That's in 1940.

Esarey: In 1940.

Zemaitis: Nineteen forty. The Russians, though, they were getting prepared for... They were compiling the list of people to arrest. They were going to plan to arrest and deport to Siberia.

That started happening in the beginning of June of 1941. They started mass arrests of people, primarily people who were professionals and educated people.



Vita's aunt and uncle lived in this structure in Siberia - Jonas Zubkus, Koste Zubkus, and an unknown man.

Fortunately, in June of 1941, in about, I believe it was around the twentieth or twenty-first of June of 1941, Russia was attacked by Germany. So German Army pushed the Russians out. They pushed them out, all in one day. It was one day of fear from—

Esarey: On the map, where would that have happened, do you think?

Zemaitis: They were coming in... On the map, where's it's showing the Russians federation Kalihingrad, Leningrad, that used to be the old East Prussia. That was Germany. Where you see the border right now, that was the border between Germany and Lithuania. The German Army swept from the west to the east, and Russia at that time was where it's Belarus right now.

So actually, then the start of war. I believe it saved Vita's family from being arrested, because they were scheduled to be arrested. They found in the secret police files the list of people that were supposed to be arrested that Sunday.

Esarey: Tell me how that all happened, the secret police files and how you came to find—

Zemaitis: Well, the secret police files were uncovered after Germany took over. Obviously, Germans did not want to... They did not hide the fact that the Russians were bad, okay? So that was made public.

Esarey: Printed in the paper or broadcast or both?

Zemaitis: They actually printed in the paper and broadcasted. As one interesting sideline, my own parents—we lived in Vilkaviškis, a different town—we were also on a list to be arrested that Sunday.

Esarey: Your parents were, as well?

Zemaitis: My parents, right. When we talk about it, I'll go into a little bit more about that, because at that time my father was already hiding, because the secret police used to come to our home at night, looking for my dad.

Esarey: Could you describe to me a little about what the secret police persona is, for lack of a better word. Who were these people?

Zemaitis: These people were trained military, but there were special training in interrogation techniques of beating people up and so on. They used to have their... Their uniform used to be sort of like a leather jackets, leather caps with a red star on it and wore military belts with little side arms. And, of course, they all wore boots, high boots.

Esarey: They would come in groups?

Zemaitis: These people were coming from the Russian secret police. They were from Russia, Russians.

Esarey: Yes. And come to peoples' homes?

Zemaitis: Yes.

Esarey: Which reminds you of like the Nazi SS.

Zemaitis: Do you want me to digress a little bit to tell you about it?

Esarey: Well, probably we don't need to do that yet. But you certainly can, if you wish.

Zemaitis: Well, basically what I'm saying is that during that time—and we're digressing from Vita now, back to mine—I'll never forget one night, my mother woke us, woke me and my brother up. They said, "Kids get up. We've got the secret police is here." So the secret police lined us up in a hallway, my mother, my brother and me, while they searched the house, looking for my father, but he was not there. So they couldn't... Basically what they did, they did not arrest us. They left us. From what I understood, it was like a bait. They were waiting for our father to come back, because they knew that, if they arrested us, he would never come back.

Esarey: So they were leaving you in the house.

- Zemaitis: Right. For that was like everything remember. I think that was what my mother said, that it was about, like 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning.
- Esarey: Since we are talking about you for a moment, I'd like to know, how old were you when that happened?
- Zemaitis: Well, I was seven.
- Esarey: You were seven years old?
- Zemaitis: I was seven, yeah.
- Esarey: It's a vivid memory, isn't it?
- Zemaitis: Oh, that's something that's indelible. You never forget.
- Esarey: The fear.
- Zemaitis: Or the fact that, later on then in June, when I said the mass arrests started. We used to see the trucks loaded with arrested people being transported to the train station for deportation.

So, just before the war, when the eastern front started coming nearer—that was the summer of 1944—Vita's parents and her brother and her and, I think, a couple of her uncles, they actually...they went from Kaunas to a farm that her father owned that was closer west, closer to the German border.

- Esarey: Where were they from 1941 to 1944?
- Zemaitis: Well, 1940, oh, okay. We need to get back to...okay, 1941, Germans occupied Lithuania, as I mentioned, in June of 1941. And, as a matter of fact, at that time, this sounds very peculiar and odd right now, when we look back at what happened on what the Germans did, but the German soldiers were met with flowers.
- Esarey: By the Lithuanian people?
- Zemaitis: Yes, because they were being looked at as the saviors [of] people being saved from the Soviet terror. So that was in 1941.

During the German occupation, it became clear that they were cut from the same bolt as the Soviets, because they were repressive of any kind of national activity. As a matter of fact, they arrested a number of people who they suspected of being in the undercover activity.

Vita's father, in 1941, 1942, was also a dean of a medical school in Kaunas. As such, they received an order from the German High Command that they needed to register all the students for the war duty in Germany, in

their war battalions. They demanded that they would proclaim...they would ask for the volunteers and also provide them with lists. Vita's father refused. So, he and two other professors, who were in the university administration, were arrested. He spent a week in a German prison, being interrogated by Gestapo.

Esarey: You're in Lithuania, and you send—

Zemaitis: That was in Lithuania. They let them out, because they said, "We got the information anyways," because what they did, they sent their agents to university and took the files. But they let them out with a warning that, if it happened again, they would be facing a firing squad.

Esarey: That was a very dire warning, wasn't it?

Zemaitis: Yeah.

Esarey: Did they ever register the students?

Zemaitis: Pardon me?

Esarey: Did they ever register the students? Did they go ahead and do that, in spite of the protest?

Zemaitis: What happened... This was, I think, the early '43. By this time, the front was collapsing in the east. That was when Stalingrad and battles, and the Russian Army was approaching. So actually, at that time, Germans did not really have time to put their plans into action.

Esarey: This was about 1942 and 1943?

Zemaitis: This was '43, now early '43s.

Esarey: And in 1942, you had the Germans occupying Lithuania.

Zemaitis: Yes.

Esarey: We have all of the—

Zemaitis: During that time, from June of 1941 to roughly June of 1943, or actually...I'm forgetting my years, actually '44, because from June of—

Esarey: It looks like a three-year period of time, the Germans were there.

Zemaitis: Right. During that time, the Germans unfortunately... There's quite a few Jewish people who lived in Lithuania at that time. And there was a mass arrest, and executions of the Jewish people took place by Germans in Lithuania.

Esarey: Did you see that? What was the... You couldn't help but be aware that these things were happening?

Zemaitis: When I was growing up, they actually... I really didn't see really any Jewish arrests. They used to work at night at that. But what I did see was the Germans also mistreated terribly their Russian prisoners of war. There was, in a town where I lived, Vilkaviskis. They had a prisoner of war camp full with Russian soldiers, that's Vilkaviskis in—

Esarey: I think we need to get that word down there then.

Zemaitis: Yeah. That's right here. You've got that, right? Vilkaviskis is right here. I used to, each morning, early in the morning, we used to see it off in the winter time, used to see the Russian prisoners pulling a wagon, loaded with dead corpses of prisoners that died during the night.

Esarey: These would be prisoners of war that were Soviet?

Zemaitis: Right. Actually, they passed from starvation.

Esarey: That died of starvation in the **German** camps. And at the same time, the Germans were... I guess the word was exterminating was what they were using.

Zemaitis: Exterminating, yes.

Esarey: ...the Jewish population, the Lithuanian Jewish population. Is that correct?

Zemaitis: Yes. I know that some of the Lithuanian families that knew some of the Jewish families tried to hide them. I know that my best friend's parents—my best friend that I went to grade school at that time—their parents, they were hiding a Jewish family in their barn. The Gestapo found out about it. Basically what they did, they arrested their parents and just executed them.

Esarey: Did they execute your friend?

Zemaitis: No, that was a kid; they left them.

Esarey: What happened to him?

Zemaitis: Well, their family... One of his uncles took him took him in.

Esarey: Oh my.

Zemaitis: And then during the war, I don't know what happened after we left Lithuania.

Going back to Vita, as I mentioned, that in the summer of 1944, when the eastern front was collapsing, their family moved to a country farm, which

was close to the German border. As coincidence would have it, my parents also had a farm, and they were actually next to each other in Lithuania.

Esarey: That's quite something, the parallel circumstances of both your families.

Zemaitis: Right. Our family also moved westward, towards the German border.

Esarey: This was to get away from?

Zemaitis: To get away from the front, because my dad found already the front was like in Vilkaviškis on Kaunas; that was, they were already in a battle zone.

Esarey: And that meant you had to leave your homes.

Zemaitis: Yes. Basically, and what apparently they did, they just packed a couple of suitcases at that time, Vita's father's Buick was confiscated by the Germans. So, when they moved, they moved with a horse and a buggy. That was the same way with my parents when we moved to the farm.

Esarey: They took the Buick?

Zemaitis: Yeah.

Esarey: Is this the time that she's talking about in this?

Zemaitis: Yes. This is when she was talking about Lithuania. That's when she's talking about a country home.

Esarey: And this would have been in 1944?

Zemaitis: Right, summer of 1944.

Esarey: Summer of 1944. Perhaps this is this is a good time for you to read this article, to read what she said.

Zemaitis: Yeah. Before reading the article, I would like to say that Vita wrote a lot of articles, but this is the only one that she wrote about herself. She wrote:

“The November 11 article by Mark DePue about Kasimir Ladney and events from World War II brought back memories for me, also. Back when World War II started, it also started for me.

“There was this beautiful large, fragrant Linden tree in full bloom in my mother's country home in Lithuania. Right under the tree, I was proud owner of a sandbox where, barefoot in shorts, I built my sand castles and talked to the chickens as they pass me by.

“All of a sudden, my mother came running, grabbed me in her arms and said there was shooting nearby. We were told by the German Army to leave. There was no time to dress, no time to put on shoes. Our car had been confiscated, and there was only an old wagon and a couple of old horses. She threw me in the wagon with a couple of blankets and off we went. My father and my brother also were surprised by our hurried departures.

“Russians now were being pushed back by Germans, and there was fighting. We crossed the border into Germany. I was still barefoot, wrapped in a blanket and soon became very sick. My fever lasted for days but my father was a doctor and managed to keep me alive.

“We rode through different villages and cities. Some cities were in smoldering ruins, and I remember the stench of burning bodies. Allied bombing brought hope that this conflict will end soon and [that] soon Americans and the British will be in control.

“Many refugees ended up in displaced person camps, administered by UNRA (United Nations Relief Agency). We used to say “ōōn'-rā” and the American Red Cross. We received boxes of food, and besides essentials powdered milk, flour and sugar, we also received peanut butter. I thought that was the best thing I ever ate.

“Eventually, we were allowed to immigrate to USA. It took two weeks on a violent seas, and I was sick again. During the storm, several people died. Finally, we reached the shores of United States, but they had to carry me in.

“I knew that I would be learning a new language again. Father didn't think that was a problem. He spoke Lithuanian, Russian, German and English, and as a medical doctor, had to know Latin. Here we go again, I thought. At least they have peanut butter, and there will not be any fighting.” Signed by Vita Zemaitis, Chatham.

Esarey: Thank you. That's a good story, an excellent story.

Zemaitis: This article was printed on December the 8th of 2009.

Esarey: Not long ago.

Zemaitis: Six days before she died.

Esarey: That makes it especially poignant, doesn't it? Do you have stories like that as well, with things that happened to you when you moved to the farm?

Zemaitis: Well, it's—

Esarey: I'm shifting this a little.

Zemaitis: Our stories were similar. We had a similar situation. The German Army unit dug in a position in the backyard of our farm or country home, as Vita would call it. We were told to move out, because that was a battle zone. So here, again, we had a old wagon and an old horse. We loaded our belongings or whatever we could have and take it with us. Like I said, the Germans said to move on. We had to move, so we moved across the border into East Prussia, Germany.

Esarey: This is in 1944?

Zemaitis: This is 1944. It probably would have been...I think it's probably July, somewhere around July of 1944, about the same time—

Esarey: About the same time Vita and her family, all of these people.

Zemaitis: ...who also had to go into Germany.

Esarey: So, if I'm understanding this correctly, many of the people who fled the cities had to leave their cities, move to the country, as best they could, if they could.

Zemaitis: Yeah.

Esarey: And then they had to keep moving and keep moving to stay ahead of the troops?

Zemaitis: Right. Like in our case—

Esarey: In your own country.

Zemaitis: Right. In our own case...Like in Vita's case, the problem, there was no choice. You had to move, because you had to go someplace. You could not go east, because they were already...you had to pass a battle zone, and you were pushed out by...The army took on their positions, so they just moved on. We were just thousands and thousands, a mass of people moving, moving west.

Esarey: Did you see them on the roads? Were these people you just saw moving, moving, moving?

Zemaitis: Yes. As a matter of fact, what was happening, my brother was still too young, and my father was too old. But in some of the families, where there were some younger men, they were taken off the wagons and told by the troops to

put them to forced labor, to dig the positions. Like in our case, where my father was too old and my brother and I was too young, so—

Esarey: They were conscripted into the army?

Zemaitis: Into all the labor battalions.

Esarey: Into the labor, into labor camps?

Zemaitis: Yeah. The one thing I would say is that, as we're moving, the people in East Prussia and Germany were very, very nice, fed us, shared their food with us and shelter and so on. Then later on, after this exodus, if you will, took place, probably for about two weeks, and when we're deeper in Germany, Germans have planned refugee camps, where you have a couple thousand people staying in one spot for, you know... They did feed us. They did feed us and provided shelter in Germany. Then after that, they did provide... allowed to move further west into Germany.

My father, who kind of was following what was happening during the war, he knew that Germany's days were ended, and we could not stay east. We had to move west, so we would end up under the British, American or French allies.

Esarey: He was heading towards where the Allies were.

Zemaitis: Right. So basically, what we did, we got permission to go to Bavaria, to a city called Würzburg.

Esarey: How did you get permission to do that?

Zemaitis: They just applied because, see, a wife of a doctor, my dad's friend's wife, was living in Würzburg.

Esarey: Ah, so could sponsor you.

Zemaitis: Her husband, actually... The reason we're allowed to... her husband actually died during the 1941, when Germany attacked Russia. He was giving first-aid to this wounded German soldier and got killed. So, they allowed his wife to move to Germany. My father told the story to the commandant about that, so they gave him permission to go to see her.

Esarey: In Würzburg.

Zemaitis: Yeah. So, we moved to Würzburg. That was in—

Esarey: Would you write that down, the name of that city? I just need to know, how old was you father at that time and your mother?

- Zemaitis: My father was born in 1890, so he was 54.
- Esarey: But considered too old to work in the camps, right? They were just taking the younger—
- Zemaitis: That's Würzburg, Germany. Now my mother was a dentist, so when we moved to Würzburg, she actually was...she found she got a job working with a German dentist. So, this was late of 1944, fall. We lived in Würzburg until it was bombed out. I'll go into the details in a moment.
- Esarey: Where was Vita's family during that time?
- Zemaitis: Vita's family, at that time, they also moved out west. They ended up in the northern, northwest Germany.
- Esarey: In northwest Germany?
- Zemaitis: In northwest Germany.
- Esarey: And Vita's father continued to be a physician?
- Zemaitis: Vita's father, actually, then he worked in a hospital as a surgeon, in Germany.
- Esarey: What did Vita do?
- Zemaitis: Vita knew. She said that used to be a free time, because she did not really go to school. She did not know German language.
- Esarey: So, she didn't go to school?
- Zemaitis: No. So, the mother used to teach both her and her brother at home. So this was, again, this would be talking about late '44, early '45. Then, of course, before the—
- Esarey: We're getting close to the end of the war.
- Zemaitis: Yeah. March of 1945, Würzburg—that's the town where we lived—got wiped out in an air raid at one night.
- Esarey: And that's where you were living, that was wiped out.
- Zemaitis: Right. That's where we're living.
- Esarey: By whom? Who wiped it out?
- Zemaitis: The bombers, there was British.
- Esarey: The British bombers?

Zemaitis: British. Later on it was estimated that they had 225 planes. They that were dropping bombs. So, the whole... They used the phosphorous bombs, so everything got on fire.

Esarey: Where were you when that was happening?

Zemaitis: We were in the air raid shelter, which was in a basement of the building where we had an apartment.

Esarey: So, you were all down in this?

Zemaitis: We're all down there. Then, when the bombs stopped exploding. Somebody, the air raid warden, came out, went up and he says we have to leave, because the building is on fire.

Esarey: Oh my. And this is where your home was. This was where you were living.

Zemaitis: Right, that's where we're living, right. My father... Inside the air raid shelter, they had these big barrels with water, in case there was fire. So my father doused... We had some blankets, and he doused some blankets in water and wrapped each one of us, him and my mother and my brother. We had each blanket on our heads, and we left the building, ran out into the street. The street, everything was burning. It was almost like a tunnel of fire.

Esarey: What did it smell like? What did it feel like?

Zemaitis: Well, this was like a burning, a big fire. Everything was burning; everything was burning. You could not see the sky. It was only the flames all around us.

We were very fortunate. The building where we lived was only one block away from River Main. That's the main river that was running through Würzburg. My father knew that, which way the river was, so we actually ran through that tunnel of fire, if you will, for one block, to the banks of the river. Of course, there's nothing burning on a river. That's how we survived.

Esarey: Did you stay by the river? What did you do?

Zemaitis: Well, this was at night. So we stayed there 'til the morning. By that time, everything was burned out. The fires were already out. Everything had burned up.

So, we went back into town, looking for food. One thing is that the Germans were very well organized. They, the army, already had, in city, a field kitchen, set up, feeding people soup and bread and stuff like that, while the others were basically, were loading, piling up dead bodies on the sidewalks. But they estimated about 200,000 people died that night. (Later, the dead count was changed to 5,000)

Esarey: In the city?

Zemaitis: In Würzburg, in the city, right. Incidentally, the city was full of refugees, because, even though a lot of people from Berlin and Dresden, all the other big cities...because Würzburg was considered a hospital and church city. When you looked at the city from a hills...If you went on a hill next to the River Main and looked on the city, all you could see was just red crosses on the roofs, because each hospital used to have a red cross on the top, so it would prevent bombing. But it did not help.

Esarey: It did not work, did it?

Zemaitis: No, it did not work. Later on, we read that that was basically, that was a conscious move or decision to help to break down the fighting spirit of the German Army. That[‘s] basically saying that you are fighting now, but your loved ones are not safe while you do that.

But we were lucky. Like I said, we were at the right spot.

Esarey: Well, you were survivors.

Zemaitis: We survived it. After that, I guess the Germans provided trains for the refugees to channel them out into the smaller towns alongside in Bavaria.

Esarey: And is that where you went then?

Zemaitis: Yeah. Basically, what we did, we went on a train. The train stopped. They said, “This is the end of the line.” So we got off and was in a small...It was in a small village. We went from door to door and finally found a farmer who had some room in a barn that it could take us and provide us with a shelter.

Esarey: And you lived in that then?

Zemaitis: Then we stayed there. About a month later...No, not a month later, actually, this was March, April, May, June, about three months later, that was like when American troops came in.

Esarey: And that’s where they found you?

Zemaitis: Yeah.

Esarey: To go back to the bombing of the city for just a moment, you said that about 200,000 people, you heard later, had perished.

Zemaitis: Yes.

Esarey: Were they all Lithuanians?

Zemaitis: No. This was, I would say, primarily Germans.

- Esarey: Primarily Germans. That's why you said that there was a conscious decision to—
- Zemaitis: Right.
- Esarey: Your loved ones are not going to be safe. We're going to break your spirit, and we're going to bomb this city.
- Zemaitis: We were living in that village. My father sent my older brother to the nearest town to see if we could buy some provisions, you know, canned goods and stuff like that. While he was on a train, the train got strafed by a fighter plane, and he escaped by accident. He bent down when he was sitting, and the bullet killed the guy right next to him. If he would not have bent down, he would have been killed. So he survived that. This was now summer of 1945.
- Esarey: Nineteen forty-five.
- Zemaitis: This was '45, after the war.
- Esarey: And the Allies are coming into Germany.
- Zemaitis: Yes. They already were taking over. We ended up in the American zone.
- Esarey: Where did Vita's family end up?
- Zemaitis: They ended up in the British zone.
- Esarey: And that was a different part of Germany?
- Zemaitis: That was in northern Germany.
- Esarey: In northern Germany. And you were in what part of Germany?
- Zemaitis: We're Bavaria. Oh, then after the war, my parents found out that the Lithuanian refugee camp was being formed in a town that was probably about thirty miles away, including opening up of a Lithuanian high school in the camp.
- Esarey: Really?
- Zemaitis: My brother and his friend... There was another family, Lithuanian family, in that village, refugees also. They took off to go to register to high school. As misfortune would have it, on that trip, he got killed.
- Esarey: Your brother? This is your brother you're talking about?
- Zemaitis: I mean, my brother, yeah.
- Esarey: Oh, dear.

Zemaitis: He got run over by a truck. It was a bicycle accident, and that was actually his own fault. It was a mountainous region and where they traveled, a bicyclist used to hang on to a truck, so they could be pulled them over. There was a truck with a trailer, and the trailer already had two bicyclists. So he and his friend, they got on onto the truck end. My brother's bicycle hit a rut in a road, and he got thrown underneath the trailer and got killed on the spot, unfortunately. He survived the war, (emotional) and then died in a silly, stupid accident, actually.

Esarey: After all of that.

Zemaitis: That was terrible. So, anyways, then we moved off. After my brother got killed, we still moved on to that refugee camp, and I went to Lithuanian high school in there.

Esarey: In the refugee camp?

Zemaitis: Right.

Esarey: Is there a town that that was in?

Zemaitis: Yes. That was in Eichstätt.

Esarey: And the country is?

Zemaitis: That's in Bavaria, Eichstätt, Bavaria.

Esarey: What was your father doing?

Zemaitis: That's actually this area, right between Munich and Nuremberg. You've probably heard the Nuremberg trials.

Esarey: Absolutely. I think we've all heard that one.

Zemaitis: Yeah. So the Eichstätt was located right, sort of in between, in Bavaria. A sidebar on that, President Adamkus was also going to that high school. I was in the—

Esarey: You were in his class?

Zemaitis: No. He was eight years higher—

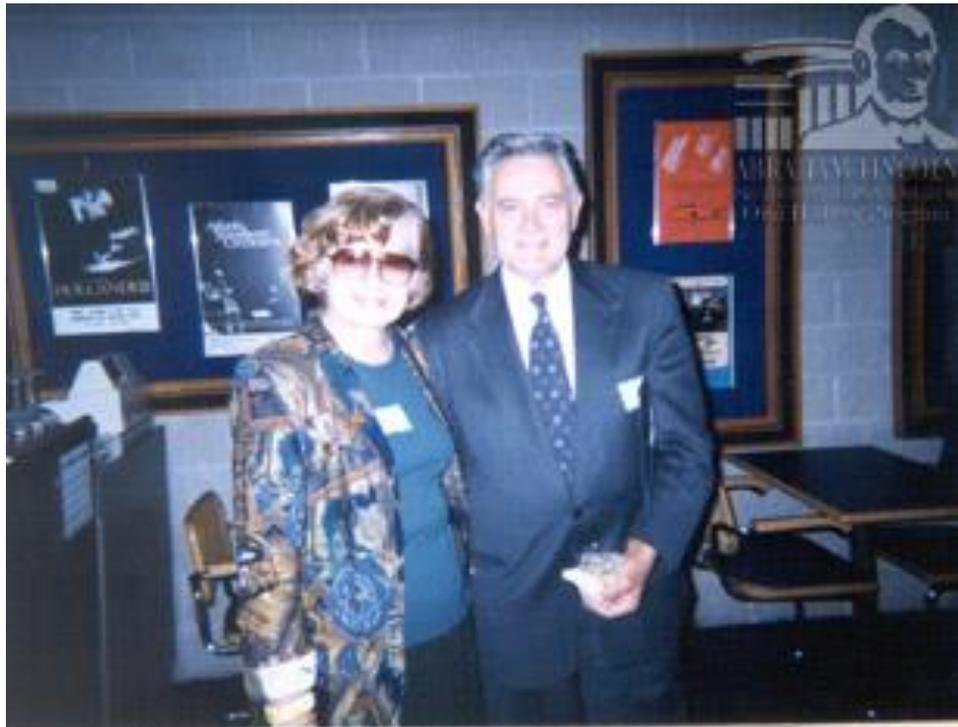
Esarey: Older?

Zemaitis: Older. He was already in a graduating class, and I was just starting.

Esarey: He was a refugee as well?

Zemaitis: Yes.

Esarey: He and his family. This is a good picture. What we have here is a picture of Vita with the president, right?



President Valdas Adamkus

America's penchant for self-criticism makes it easy to forget that much of the world looks to this country for leadership. This is especially true of European states emerging from the long shadow of the former Soviet Union. People of the heretofore "captive nations" long have yearned for the freedom and efficiency of American life, yet 45 years of Moscow-directed communism inevitably weakened the expertise necessary to manage such a society.

Intuitive peoples, however, have a knack for finding what they need.

Last weekend, voters in Lithuania reached out to Valdas Adamkus, until recently a career federal administrator here in Chicago, and by a narrow margin elected him president of that proud Baltic nation.

Adamkus might seem an unlikely choice in several respects, not the least being that he moved to Lithuania less than a year ago after retiring from his post as Midwest regional administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency. And even though the Lithuania-born Adamkus served ably at the EPA for 27 years, his name was by no means a household word here, much less in international circles. (Although he now, surely, has the distraction of being the only person to lose a race for the Metropolitan

Sanitary District of Greater Chicago and win a title for president of Lithuania.)

Val Adamkus, a graduate of the Illinois Institute of Technology, may be exactly what Lithuania needs: this delicate moment. Any upper-level federal bureaucrat who can survive the comings and goings of a presidential administration—namely by staying away from politics and getting the job done—has something special to offer. He is also a notorious straight shooter, having refused more than once to bend his findings and recommendations to conform with the profligacy of powers in Washington.

There is a need for such talent in Lithuania, where the vacuum left by the Soviet Union's collapse has been filled too often by opportunists who make the own rules. Indeed, the candidate edged out by 471-year-old Adamkus in a runoff, Arturas Paulauskas, is a former top prosecutor.

Look for Adamkus to build bridges to Paulauskas and to parliamentary leader Vytautas Landsbergis. Look for him, also, to reach back to the Chicago and Lithuanian community—the world's largest outside Vilnius—for support both moral and practical.

Swiftly congratulate on your election, Valdas Adamkus, and wish good luck!

Vita Zemaitis meets with the new President of Lithuania, Valdas Adamkus in 1998. The article appeared in either the SJR or Chicago Tribune (he did not remember, Benedict took the picture himself.

Zemaitis: University of Illinois], right here in Springfield.

Esarey: He visited.

Zemaitis: Yeah. And I think I got a picture that I can lend you.

Esarey: Thank you. We'll put that down as one of the pictures to be sure we have. Just so that I understand some of the things that are going on, you're in this refugee camp, and it's about 1946?

Zemaitis: We got in the refugee camp in late summer of 1945 and stayed there.

Esarey: You're how old then, just approximately?

Zemaitis: Okay. In '45, I was twelve.

Esarey: You were twelve years old. And you'd been on the run essentially, your whole family, for a number of years.

Zemaitis: From 1940. All the turmoil started in 1940, with the first Russian occupation, then the German occupation years, then the flight to Germany and getting through the war, then the years after the war, in the refugee camp.

The refugee camp years were not really that bad, in a sense. We had pretty good food, Red Cross packages and shelter. We were fed, and we had shelter. My mother was practicing dentistry in the camp. She was a dentist for the refugee camp. My father, who was an attorney, he was a legal eagle in the camp. So, it was not bad; it was not bad.

Esarey: Considering what you had been through, yes.

Zemaitis: Yeah. Just one episode, though, during the year, left a bad taste in my mouth. My father was arrested by American intelligence.

Esarey: For?

Zemaitis: Being anti-communist.

Esarey: Being **anti**-communist?

Zemaitis: Yes. Remember, this was 1946.

Esarey: Describe the political circumstances; describe that to me.

Zemaitis: This was what President [Franklin] Roosevelt, Yalta Conference, with a buddy, Joe [Joseph] Stalin [premier of the Soviet Union], through Potsdam Conference by President [Harry] Truman we're looking at the Soviets as the Allies. My dad was not in a bad company. General Patton was also anti-Russian.² (Esarey laughs) If you read history, he got into trouble with Eisenhower and for being anti-Russian.

² General George Smith Patton, Jr. was a senior officer of the United States Army, who commanded the U.S. Seventh Army in the Mediterranean and European theaters of World War II, but is best known for his

Esarey: Yes, he did.

Zemaitis: Yeah. Patton said, "Let's just turn east, and let's keep going until we reach Moscow."

Well, anyway, my father was held and interrogated. He admitted... He says, "Yes, I'm anti-communism." From what we learned later on, the local commander got over-anxious. He did something and then when, the higher headquarters found out about them, told them to cease and desist. So, everybody was—

Esarey: Yeah. Just stop that. Stop doing that.

Zemaitis: Yeah. See, the same commander also later on attempted to load the inhabitants of the refugee camp and turn them over to the Russians, too.

Esarey: You're talking about the commandant of the refugee camp?

Zemaitis: No, the American military commander, who was in charge of the area.

Esarey: Do you know the name of that person?

Zemaitis: No. We never find out. I wish I would. (Esarey laughs) But, anyhow, that's kind of a brushes with... Keeping politically, some of them, the Russians, were considered our allies.

Esarey: It was a very confusing time.

Zemaitis: Yeah.

Esarey: And more so for you, for the whole Lithuanian country. You literally didn't have your country.

Zemaitis: Besides that, besides a couple of these incidents, it's the life I got. I took to sports quite a bit. I learned to play basketball from American GIs.³

Esarey: Did you? You must have been pretty good too, huh?

Zemaitis: We played basketball, table tennis and volleyball, yeah.

Esarey: That's when you became a good athlete, correct?

leadership of the U.S. Third Army in France and Germany following the Allied invasion of Normandy in June, 1944.

³ G.I. is an acronym used to describe the soldiers of the United States Army, airmen of the United States Army Air Forces and also for general items of their equipment. The term G.I. has been used as an initialism of "Government Issue" or "General Issue."

- Zemaitis: I think so. That was my learning years, if you will. That was '45, which was at twelve to '49, when I'm sixteen. In 1949, that's when we immigrated to the United States.
- Esarey: And what a wonderful thing for you to be able to—let's say, for lack of a better word—use all that energy in a good way, for sports, after going through all those years of not having anything.
- Zemaitis: That organization, which was, like I said, U-N-R-R-A... [United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency] Then also, that was taken over by IRO, which stood for International Refugees Organization, or International Relief Organization. They did a good job. They provided food and shelter, and they channeled the... They were very much—
- Esarey: It was called the IRO?
- Zemaitis: Yes.
- Esarey: I'm sorry to interrupt you.
- Zemaitis: Right, I-R-O.
- Esarey: Which stands for?
- Zemaitis: That's International Relief Organization. Yeah, they provided the athletic equipment, basketballs and volleyballs and soccer balls and gym shoes so—
- Esarey: Well, you have some good memories of those particular years.
- Zemaitis: Yes.
- Esarey: But, since we decided we're kind of switching back and forth, because this is how it's needing to go to, back and forth to where you were at certain periods of time and where Vita was at certain periods of time. That seems to be working a little better. What was she doing?
- Zemaitis: Vita, at that time, also after the end of the war, they ended up in the refugee camp in northern Germany, Hanau. And her father continued to work medicine. He also worked at a... There was also a university, where he was a teacher.
- Esarey: And what did she do?
- Zemaitis: She was going to school. Then she started going to school, Lithuanian school.
- Esarey: To a Lithuanian school in northern—
- Zemaitis: Lithuanian grade school.

- Esarey: A Lithuanian grade school in northern Germany.
- Zemaitis: In a refugee camp.
- Esarey: In a refugee camp, a different one.
- Zemaitis: Right, right.
- Esarey: You still have these parallel lives.
- Zemaitis: Right. Her family immigrated to the United States one year earlier, in 1948.
- Esarey: Yes. You mentioned in our last meeting that, because he was a surgeon—
- Zemaitis: Right. That was one of the things—
- Esarey: So, this was advantageous.
- Zemaitis: ...they considered him as an essential person that could do some good in the United States.
- Esarey: And they immigrated. Let's just put that down. They immigrated—
- Zemaitis: Nineteen forty-eight.
- Esarey: Nineteen forty-eight, how? How did she get into the country?
- Zemaitis: By ship, like it said. Like her letter said, she got really sick.
- Esarey: She got it, here in the letter, did you say? I'm sorry.
- Zemaitis: See, the transportation by ship, they used to... The transportation to the United States, back in those days—
- Esarey: Did they go through Ellis Island, or how did they go?⁴
- Zemaitis: Yes. However, they used to use troop ships.
- Esarey: To bring these people?
- Zemaitis: Right. That was a troop ship, troop transport ship. I remember the name of my ship was General Heintzelman, USS General Heintzelman. That was my ship.
- Esarey: Would you write that down?
- Zemaitis: I just have not thought about it for a while, but now—

⁴ Ellis Island, in Upper New York Bay, was the gateway for over 12 million immigrants to the U.S., as the United States' busiest immigrant inspection station for over 60 years from 1892 until 1954.

Esarey: Well, it's quite amazing. But I guess it would be one of those things you wouldn't forget. And it was a troop ship. She went in 1948 and went through Ellis Island, and you came, what year, '49?

Zemaitis: August 15, 1949.

Esarey: And you went through Ellis Island as well?

Zemaitis: Right. But that was actually just a couple hours. We got off the ship to the Ellis Island. They gave us train tickets, loaded up and took a train to Chicago.

Esarey: That's how you ended up in the Lithuanian community in Chicago?

Zemaitis: Right.

Esarey: And Vita was already there? She went to Chicago as well?

Zemaitis: She was already there, yes. She was there already a year. And, of course, we still have not met. (both laugh) See, Chicago had a...It still has a very large Lithuanian community.

Esarey: Tell me, did Vita graduate from high school and where?

Zemaitis: She did not graduate in Germany. She—

Esarey: She attended in Germany.

Zemaitis: She started in Germany, and then she attended the Nativity DVM Grade School. That's a Catholic grade school in Chicago. Then—

Esarey: Did you finish high school and where?

Zemaitis: I finished the system. The education system is sort of different. In Europe, you go four years of grade school and eight years of high school. That's twelve years. In the United States, it's just the other way around. Eight years of grade school and four years of high school. I had four years of education, so I qualified to enter as a freshman in a high school in Chicago.

Esarey: That's wonderful. It really worked out well, didn't it?

Zemaitis: I already knew English language pretty well at that time. Again, that was associating with GIs. I used to talk to—

Esarey: Is that where you learned your English?

Zemaitis: Yeah. Talking to the GIs. And I used to love to read westerns. You know, they used to give these Pocket Books, the old Pocket Books.⁵ They're sort of oblong sheets, long ways, for the GIs for their armed forces personnel. I used to ask GIs for those books. So, I used to get them, and I used to read all. I loved to read westerns.

Esarey: In English?

Zemaitis: Right. Max Brand, that was my favorite, Zane Grey.

Esarey: Oh, the Zane Grey novels, of course.

Zemaitis: Yeah. I knew English pretty well, but there's also a story behind that. When we came to Chicago, of course, you have to, and we did have... My cousin and his family, they say they had a large apartment, like two bedrooms.

Esarey: (laughs) Oh, boy.

Zemaitis: So, what they did, they took us in. They gave us one bedroom. The key thing was then how you have to earn a living. Now, my mother, being a dentist, she could not practice. The United States did not recognize European dentistry. You had to go to the dentistry school all over. So, she was able to find a job in a sewing factory. My dad, he was an attorney, but the law in Europe and law in the States are totally different. In United States is a case law, and in Europe it's Napoleon codex.⁶ So it's totally apples and oranges. But his hobby was working on a radio, so he got a job in repairing radios.

Esarey: In Chicago.

Zemaitis: In Chicago. And, of course, I got a job, because when we come in August, this was in between the school year. So I got a job in a plating factory, working with the metals. I thought I had a good job, eighty cents an hour; that was at eighty cents an hour.

Esarey: That wasn't bad then.

Zemaitis: September came, and my dad said, "Well, okay, son, time to go to school." I said, "Dad," I said, "You must be out of your mind." It's like, I've got a good

⁵ Armed Services Editions (ASEs) or Pocket Books were small, compact, paperback books, printed by the Council on Books in Wartime for distribution within the American military during World War II. This program was in effect from 1943 to 1946. The ASEs were designed to provide entertainment to soldiers serving overseas, while also educating them about political, historical and military issues. The slogan of the Council on Books in Wartime was, "Books are weapons in the war of ideas."

⁶ Napoleon Bonaparte gave this civil code to post-revolutionary France. Its first coherent set of laws concerned property, colonial affairs, the family and individual rights. This was the first modern, legal code to be adopted with a pan-European scope and strongly influenced the law of many new and developing countries, attempting to modernize through legal reforms.

job, and you want me to quit a good job and to go to school?" So, I didn't. I did not register that semester; I continued working. But it was working with acids and the metals. It was a dirty... When I think about it, it was probably the worst job I ever had.

But while I was working there, I saw this guy with a white shirt and a big cigar walking around. He was our straw boss, foreman. I asked, I said, you know, "How does one become like him?" He says, "Oh, he's a high school graduate." (Esarey laughs) Boom! Idea! The lamp lit up in my head that, actually, maybe my dad is not so foolish after all.

Esarey: Yeah. Did you ever admit to him that he actually knew something?

Zemaitis: Well, basically, this was during Christmas holidays. "Dad," I said, "I'm going back to high school." So, I joined; I went to high school in the mid-year.

Esarey: He must have been thrilled that you went back to school, right?

Zemaitis: Yeah.

Esarey: Did any of your family ever have to fight in the war on either side? Were they ever pulled in, with either the Soviets or Germans?

Zemaitis: Well, like I said, my brother was too young, and I was too young.

Esarey: So, they didn't?

Zemaitis: My father was too old, so I didn't have to.

Esarey: Right. And Vita's?

Zemaitis: With Vita is the same thing.

Esarey: Her brother was still too young?

Zemaitis: Yeah. Her brother was born the same year as my brother, 1929. So he was... And her dad, being a physician, that automatically... that exempted him from any kind of being—

Esarey: When you were living in the Lithuanian camps, were you exposed to what was going on in the Nazi Germany regime, the things that were happening at that time? Were you aware of what was happening around?

Zemaitis: Well, of course, during the war, that's when... Before the war, there was not even a whisper anywhere about that. In the aftermath, some of that became aware. They did just show some films in the camp, you know, about the extermination.

Esarey: But not until after the war was over?

Zemaitis: Not until after the war. What I think [is] the Nazis kept that pretty much under wraps, because I know that, in the afterwards, a lot of Germans could not believe that that was going on. They said, that's American propaganda. But, that's the German side.

Esarey: And you left, the first chance you had. You emigrated when you had an opportunity to leave.

Zemaitis: Yes. We had the... My parents made a choice, you know, they had a choice. You could apply to several places for immigrate. Australia was taking people then. So, some of the Lithuanians immigrated to Australia. Some of them went to South America; Brazil was taking in quite a few people. A friend of mine, right here in Springfield, his parents emigrated from Germany to Brazil, some of them to Argentina. Canada was taking in refugees also, but they limited taking in people within a certain age. They chose people who were young enough to work in the forest, lumberjacks and stuff like that. So, they were not taking elderly people. The United States had no restrictions in that regard. I think the only restriction they had is you had to go to a screening process to see whether you had any connections with the Nazis.

Esarey: Oh.

Zemaitis: Yeah.

Esarey: That was one of the questions that would be asked?

Zemaitis: That was one of the questions. In other words, if somebody served in, let's say, the German military, that was, they were not allowed to immigrate.

Esarey: And I would guess that there would have been some Lithuanians or other countries, other immigrants, that possibly were conscripted into the—

Zemaitis: Because, actually... See, what happened—and maybe jumping back to 1941—

Esarey: I knew we would jump back and forth. That's okay.

Zemaitis: In 1941, when Germany took over, kicked the Russians out, a lot of Lithuanian men wanted to volunteer. But they wouldn't take them in. They say, "We don't need any help. We're going to handle it ourselves." Again, remember, this was 1941.

The German army moved through Lithuania like hot knife through butter. The Russian army were surrendering by thousands, not by single, but a whole army would drop their guns. That was back in 1941.

I read, someplace that if the Germans would have treated Russian POWs (prisoners of war) as human beings, Russia would have lost. Basically, what it is, when they [the Germans] starved them [Russian POWs] to death, I

think basically the Russians used that as their propaganda for their own troops. They said, "Hey, if you want to live, you have to fight, or you're going to die in a German prisoner of war camp."

Esarey: That's very effective, isn't it?

Zemaitis: Yeah.

Esarey: I was hoping we would... You have so many wonderful pictures.

Zemaitis: What I wanted to ask you, if you—

Esarey: If we could go through, and perhaps there are some stories connected with some of these pictures that we want to make sure we have in this interview. We've been talking for a while here, so let's make sure we get some of these in. Then we'll take a break.

Zemaitis: Oh, here's a picture of Vita, her mother, her brother and her dad in northern Germany. This is still during the year. This must be 1940. It's got to be 1944, I would say.

Esarey: And what was happening then?

Zemaitis: That's when they were in... This is just before the end of war. This picture, that's her dad. He was a Red Cross director for that region, in Germany after the war. So that's couples. That's he and his staff.

Esarey: These would be pictures in 1944?

Zemaitis: Yeah. These are the pictures from 1944, right here. This is probably... This is '46. This was a little bit later.

Esarey: We have this wonderful picture with the Buick that went away. And are there any younger?

Zemaitis: You would like to get up?

Esarey: I would like to have that one, for sure. Is this a copy?

Zemaitis: I believe so. That's made from a negative. What Vita did, she got some pictures from Lithuania and then had them made.

Esarey: When we're through talking about the pictures, then we'll stop the recorder and we'll make sure we have the labels and the names for the pictures.

Zemaitis: Okay.

Esarey: Alright. What is that one?

Zemaitis: Okay. That's Vita, her brother, her godfather and her grandmother.

Esarey: And when was this taken?

Zemaitis: This was... I think she must be about three years old.

Esarey: Three years old.

Zemaitis: This should be '38, '39, I would say.



Vita Zemaitis and family members: Agota Zubkus, Ignas Zubkus, Vita and Sigitas (1938-1939)

Esarey: And they were still in Lithuania?

Zemaitis: That's Lithuania.

Esarey: It's always great to see the pictures of everybody when they're so young, the young pictures, pictures of children, when folks are very young. There are some pictures here that are immensely striking. Some of them quite old.

Zemaitis: Some of them are quite old.

Esarey: These are some of... Who is this?

Zemaitis: I've got some pictures that go back to... Oh, the other thing what I wanted to mention is this, that... Okay, that's her father. He had to serve military duty in Lithuanian army. He was commissioned as a lieutenant doctor.

Esarey: As a lieutenant doctor?

Zemaitis: Lieutenant doctor. So that's him. That's got to be in the... I don't know [if] they've got a year. Sometimes she has a year.

Esarey: Well, I think pictures with Vita and maybe her parents.



Joseph Zubkus, Vita's father in his Lithuanian Army uniform, 1920's.

Zemaitis: This is actually... This is an original. You can see that's Lithuanian.

Esarey: We'll have to be careful of that. It's in Lithuanian, wonderful. That's a wonderful picture.

Zemaitis: This is, this is Vita's father and her mother. Her mother was a very good-looking woman. Although Vita, she looked more like her father.

Esarey: Than her mother?

Zemaitis: She has her father's features. Oh, wow, that's her father. Take a look at this; this has got to be probably from... Let's see, he was born... I'm trying to think when her father was born. This is probably at least—

Esarey: It's an old picture.

Zemaitis: That's when he was... He was a high school student, and that's an original picture. If you'll notice, that's how they made a picture.

Esarey: It's an amazing picture. Your father, was he in the military?

Zemaitis: My father was actually in the military during the First World War

Esarey: And what did he do?

Zemaitis: He was a medic.

Esarey: In the first World War.

Zemaitis: He was medic, because he was studying medicine, actually. He was studying medicine.

Esarey: Well, he did quite a shift into law.

Zemaitis: Yes. He said he was okay until they got to... They have to work with a cadaver, you know, dissect them. And he said, "That's it for me." (Esarey laughs)

Esarey: Yeah. It was probably a good move for him, wasn't it? It was a good choice. I think we've gone up to about where I'd hoped we could go today. It was about when you were both in the United States. You haven't met yet.

Zemaitis: Nope.



Joseph & Kazimiera Zubkus, Vita Zemaitis' father and mother.



Joseph Zubkus' High school picture in 1910.

Esarey: You haven't met yet, and that's where I was hoping we would start the next time, to talk about what happened in the Lithuanian community and how your lives got together and then some of the activities that brought you to where you are today. I think this would be a natural break, at this point. I don't know if you know this, but you have been talking, almost non-stop now, for several hours. So, it's a good time to take a break.

Zemaitis: This is a very interesting picture.

Esarey: What is that picture?

Zemaitis: That's Vita and her brother with a horse and a buggy.

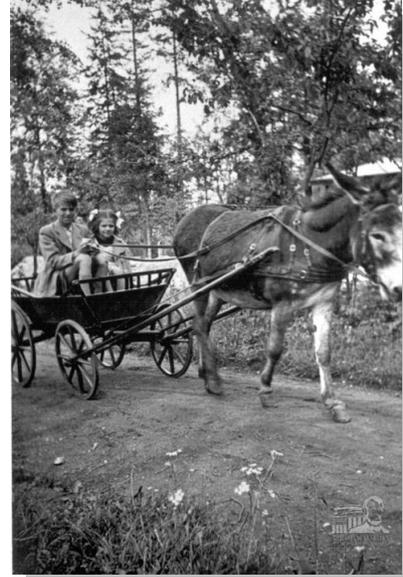
Esarey: This was just fun, right?

Zemaitis: Lithuania. Just for fun, right.

Esarey: I'm going to stop now.

Zemaitis: Okay.

(end of transcript #1)



Vita & Sigitas Zubkus riding in donkey cart in Lithuania,

Interview with Benedict Zemaitis

IM-A-L-2010-030.02

Interview # 2: July 15, 2010

Interviewer: Carol Esarey

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Esarey: This is Carol Esarey. I'm a volunteer with the Oral History Project. The date today is July 15, 2010. The name of the person being interviewed is Benedict

Zemaitis, and the location of our interview is at his home. This interview is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's *Immigrant Stories* and is considered a historical document.

When we had our first interview, we discussed the first years of both your life and Vita's life through the war and all of the experiences, as many as we could think of at the time, up to when you had completed your time in Germany. I would like to start with a few more questions about your actual immigration, about leaving Germany and what was involved with that. We may go back and forth some, as we discuss Vita's life at that time, as best you can. We'll switch back and forth a little bit. Could you please say what the dates were when you emigrated, when you left.

Zemaitis: Actually, we left Germany from Bremerhaven on a ship, *U.S.S General Heintzelman*, to New York, New York City. We arrived at New York on August 15, 1949. I believe that we had left...I'm not sure, but we left Bremerhaven ten days earlier. It took about ten days to cross the Atlantic.

Esarey: Could you describe the ship a little bit and the crossing. What was your experience on the ship?

Zemaitis: Well, the experience was very different from the standpoint [that] we enjoyed, probably for a long, long time, very good food. *U.S.S General Heintzelman*, was a U.S. military transport ship, so the accommodations were basic. But were comfortable and, as I mentioned, the food was terrific.

Esarey: Describe that.

Zemaitis: The food was actually American. It's scrambled eggs in the morning and orange juice and stuff like that, which we did not have when we were in displaced persons camp. That was kind of a very positive, very positive experience. The other thing is, the crossing was made in August, when the Atlantic was comparatively calm. Very few people got seasick. You could eat and really enjoy it, enjoy the trip.

As part, I did have a part-time job, if you will. They did ask for volunteers to help clean up the officers' quarters, and I was one of the people they used to help clean up the officers' cabins.

Esarey: Tell us again your age at the time and about your parents' circumstances.

Zemaitis: Well, I was born in 1933, so that puts me at the age of sixteen. My father was born in 1890, so, let's see, he was fifty-nine. My mother was born in 1892, so, let's see, that's what? Fifty-seven. Probably the trip was easier for me than for my parents.

Esarey: Because?

- Zemaitis: Because of my youth, and they were probably worried about what's waiting ahead, when we come to the United States. Of course, I as a teenager had no care in the world.
- Esarey: (laughs) Let me ask you this. How many people would you say were on the ship?
- Zemaitis: I really don't know, but it's quite a few. There's quite a few. The ship was full. I don't think they had a single sleeping berth that was not occupied.
- Esarey: Describe the sleeping arrangements.
- Zemaitis: For the sleeping arrangements, sort of, you were sleeping like on a hammock, because, I think, that since the ship was moving. I think it was arranged in such a way so your hammock swung with the movement of the ship, so you could not fall out. (both laugh)
- Esarey: Did they have the passengers in first, second, third, different classes, or was it all the same?
- Zemaitis: This was all the same. I think the only difference they had, they did have different quarters for men and women.
- Esarey: So, the men and the women were separate.
- Zemaitis: Right. And if there were any small babies, they stayed with their mothers. But otherwise, it was different quarters for men and women.
- Esarey: How did you get your job on the ship?
- Zemaitis: Well, they made an announcement, if anybody wanted to do some work to keep busy, and I thought it would be interesting to... It also got a chance to talk to the officers.
- Esarey: You knew English?
- Zemaitis: I did know some English, right.
- Esarey: And where did you learn English?
- Zemaitis: Yeah, I picked it up in Germany from both reading... Well, first of all, the English language was taught in the Lithuanian high school, so I did have four years of English language of schooling in school. Then I was an avid reader; I loved to read the western novels by Zane Grey and Max Brand, just to name a few. Plus, I had a chance to practice English talking to the GIs, because we did have a part of the displaced persons camp; they did have a garrison of military, U.S. troops. I think most of the GIs liked to talk to the kids.

- Esarey: Did they share their reading material with you?
- Zemaitis: Yes, very much so. They had special publications for the GIs, Pocket Books that were sort of oblong. Once the GIs found out that I was interested in reading the books, I had plenty of them. They were very nice to the kids, sharing their books and the chewing gum and stuff like that.
- Esarey: That sounds good. It sounds like it was much more of a positive experience, as you said, for yourself.
- Zemaitis: Yes, very much so.
- Esarey: Were all of the people on the ship from Lithuania?
- Zemaitis: No, it was mixed. Well obviously, all the people on the ship were refugees, political refugees, but there were many nationalities. Lithuanian was a few; there were Latvians, Estonians and Ukrainians. Primarily, the contingent consisted of the political refugees from the eastern countries that had escaped the communists into Germany, during the war.
- Esarey: And after the war the United States soldier were there, correct? In Germany?
- Zemaitis: Yes.
- Esarey: And we have talked about some of the experiences in the camp. Describe, if you would, what your family expected to find when they arrived in the United States. You kind of alluded to the fact that your mom and dad were sort of apprehensive about what they would discover when they got to the United States. What were their expectations?
- Zemaitis: Well, from my perception, is that first of all, they were looking their personal safety, if you will. After going through both [refugee camps], our family was slated for deportation to Siberia by the communists. So the getting away from Europe, at that time, was also almost a guarantee they will not have to deal with Russians again.

As far as what their expectations, both of them were professionals, so I think at that time, they did have some expectation that they may be able to practice their professions, which later turned out to be [that] they could not do that. My mother was a dentist. At that time, the United States did not recognize dentistry degrees from outside of United States. So, in order to practice dentistry, you had to go back to dental school, to the medical school. My father was an attorney, and he could not practice, because the basis of law in the United States was based on case law, where in Europe was based on Napoleon's codex. So basically, they're sort of like apples and oranges.

But, of course, they did not really know that before the emigration. That probably was one of the disappointments, that when they came to the

United States, that they could not do it. That was on a negative side. On a positive side, at that time it was no problem finding a job. So all three of us were able to become gainfully employed within weeks after coming to the United States.

Esarey: Did that happen because you had contacts in the United States?

Zemaitis: Well, yes. First of all, in order to come to the United States, you have to have a sponsor. There was a gentle Lithuanian, American gentleman that had a farm in the northwest of Chicago, in Antioch, Illinois. He sponsored us because before that, he sponsored my father's brother, who came to the United States probably half a year before us. That was sort of a connection. He asked Mr. Berkel—that's the name of the gentleman that sponsored us—to sponsor us. Basically what he did, he guaranteed the job for us, with an understanding that when we come we'll have to find some other job, because he obviously could not accommodate all the people on his small farm.

Esarey: What was your expectation for coming to the United States?

Zemaitis: Well, my own expectations, I really didn't think too much about it. This was sort of like getting to a new place, yeah, and I just was going to come out and find out.

Esarey: It was a positive thing for you.

Zemaitis: Yeah.

Esarey: You told me at our last interview that, when you arrived, after you crossed the ocean and were embarking, that it was a short process. That surprised me. Could you describe again for me what that was like, coming to the United States and getting off the ship and moving on?

Zemaitis: Well, actually, we did go to the Ellis Island when we got off of the ship, but it was a very fast process. Basically what they did, they checked the identity of the people and the documents. At that time they already had arranged for the trip between New York City and Chicago; that's where we were going, with the train tickets already arranged. So basically, all it took was about three, I believe it's either three to four hours of getting off the ship and getting on a train on the way to Chicago. That was very, very fast, very efficient process.

Esarey: Who arranged that for you?

Zemaitis: That was the Catholic relief organization that helped the refugees to make a contact. Basically, they bought our tickets, with an understanding that they would have to be repaid, which we did later on. But I know that was a very positively; they trusted people that they... They helped when the help was needed.

Esarey: And they did this—

Zemaitis: So basically, we got into New York in the morning, and that afternoon we were already on a train. We arrived in Chicago the following morning.

Esarey: How much luggage did you have with you? What did you bring with you?

Zemaitis: Basically, we had three pieces of luggage, one suitcase each.

Esarey: That was it?

Zemaitis: That's it.

Esarey: As you were making your way through Germany and hiding out and in the camps, that's it. That's what you had?

Zemaitis: Well, when we started from Lithuania, we had a much more things, which were... We have yet to mention. We were going by a horse and a buggy, so there was a wagon. It was loaded with all kinds of stuff. But then, as we moved through Germany, we found out you really couldn't take anything with you, because you are moving along. Then, whatever we had accumulated in Würzburg, got all wiped out when the city was destroyed. At that time, at that point, we just got away with just the shirts on our backs and a couple of blankets.

Esarey: Wow.

Zemaitis: That was in March of 1945. Then later on, in a period between 1945 to 1949, again, some things got accumulated. But at that time, very, very little accumulation, because primarily it was sort of existence, [a] bare existence from day to day kind of a thing. Most of our belongings consisted of strictly our personal clothing and some hygiene items, like comb and a brush and stuff like that. So, when we came to the United States, we were kind of travelling light. (both laugh)

Esarey: I imagine that was true of many of the refugees coming from all of the other countries.

Zemaitis: Right.

Esarey: You were really considered political refugees? You've mentioned that several times.

Zemaitis: Yes, yes.

Esarey: Because you were considered a professional family.

- Zemaitis: Yeah, because, with all that they did before coming to the United States before being allowed to immigrate, all the applicants have to go through a screening process, which was set up by the U.S. military government to weed out any possible Nazis and other, maybe criminal activities and so on. At that time, that was kind of established that these people were there because they were looking for political asylum, if you will.
- Esarey: Is that what it was called, political asylum?
- Zemaitis: Yeah. Because, obviously, going back to Lithuania was not a possibility.
- Esarey: No. Now let me just ask this, because I'm thinking of now. (laughs) Have you been back to Lithuania?
- Zemaitis: Oh, yes.
- Esarey: Good.
- Zemaitis: Yes. Actually first time I went, Lithuania was still under the Russian occupation. That was in 1988. That happened because of, I guess, our basketball connection.
- Esarey: We will get to that more.
- Zemaitis: Right. But that was in 1988, so that was very interesting trip. In order to get to Lithuania, we had to travel to Moscow. That's a story in itself.
- Esarey: Would you like to talk about that now?
- Zemaitis: Sure.
- Esarey: Alright. Let's just talk about that now.
- Zemaitis: Sure. Basically, as I mentioned, we had made friends with Lithuanian basketball players, who were playing for the U.S.S.R. [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics] national team. We met in Springfield, Illinois. And here there was a schedule between the U.S.S.R national team and the Illinois State University at the Prairie Capitol Convention Center. When we found out, we found out a name, so I was able to...I contacted the Russian coach, and I said I wanted to meet the players, because I was a Lithuanian. They allowed that, so that's how we met.

We met Šarūnas Marčiulionis and so on.⁷ So that sort of developed into a pretty close friendship over the years. Marčiulionis, who ended up later on playing for the Golden State Warriors on the NBA [National Basketball

⁷ Raimondas Šarūnas Marčiulionis (born June 13, 1964) is a retired Lithuanian professional basketball player. Widely considered one of the greatest international players ever, he was one of the first Europeans to become a regular in the National Basketball Association.

Association] team, he kept talking to me that I should come and visit Lithuania. I told him, I said I made a promise to myself not to come back to Lithuania until such time when I can visit the city where I was born, which was Vilkaviškis. I think you have that name.

Esarey : I have that.

Zemaitis: At that time, to visit that city, you needed a special permit from the government, because that was close to the German border. So the Russians were very, very iffy. But anyways, to make a long story short, I got a call from Šarūnas Marčiulionis on time, he says come. He says, "I can guarantee that you will be able to go to visit your city." So, we did make arrangements, and in 1988 we did travel to Lithuania.

Esarey: You and Vita?

Zemaitis: Me, and...Right, together with Vita. We did have to go through Moscow; that was a requirement. I guess the Russians were looking for the tourists to spend U.S. dollars, to leave some dollars in Russia.

Esarey: Did you?

Zemaitis: Well, we have to. You know, we have to stay in a hotel.

Esarey: Under protest? (both laugh)

Zemaitis: But anyway, so when we ended up in Lithuania, Marčiulionis, he was...I guess all the guys who played on the national team, they have special privileges. So, he did have a pass, where his car could go anyplace in Lithuania. That's how [I] was able to visit my town where I was born, Vilkaviškis.

Esarey: How was that visit. What was it like for you?

Zemaitis: Oh, it was kind of a bittersweet type of thing. The house where I was born, where I once lived, it was actually destroyed during the war. Back, you know, almost forty years later, there's nothing rebuilt. So, I found it was still sort of an empty lot, burned down house. But it was very...I was able to find some relatives that lived close by. So, that was a very, very good trip.

Esarey: Having established contact with the relatives.

Zemaitis: Right.

Esarey: Did Vita travel to any of her homes?

Zemaitis: Vita traveled, yeah. Vita traveled with me.

Esarey: She traveled with you. Did you visit her home?

Zemaitis: Yes. She was born in Kaunas, Lithuania, which was the second largest city. The house where she was born and where her father practiced was still standing. So, we were able to visit that.

Coincidentally, my friend Marčiulionis, his parents lived in Kaunas. That was kind of... We visited Vita's home when we visited Marčiulionis' parents. The house where she was born—that used to be occupied by one family at the time—when we visited—this was in 1988—they had about fifteen families living in that one house. Each family had one room. It was a big house, fifteen room house, and there's fifteen families living in it.

Esarey: It's almost like *Doctor Zhivago*, where these large homes would be divided into... I remember you showing me the picture of their home, a very beautiful, large building.⁸

Later, I'll ask you to write down some of the names of those basketball players, because I know we won't be able to spell them. (laughs)

Did Vita talk to you about her experiences in coming to the United States, what her expectations were when she came over? She came over before you, did she not?

Zemaitis: Yes, she did. They did come a year before us, in 1948. Her situation was different in that regard, because her father was a known ear, nose and throat specialist surgeon. Actually, [he] was known world-wide for his work. So, they were able to come to the United States, what they call under affidavit.⁹ I don't know exactly how that worked. But basically, he knew where he was going to work. I guess he was recruited by Holy Cross Hospital at Chicago, to work in there. So, they did come in 1948.

Their crossing, from talking to Vita from her memory and what she related to me, was quite a bit different. Their crossing was in February, when it was a very rough, very rough Atlantic, very rough Atlantic crossing. As she related, as a matter of fact, a few people even died on that trip, because of the rough weather. She herself got quite sick, but since her father was a medical doctor, I think that helped quite a bit for her to get over that.

Esarey: Did she have siblings with her?

Zemaitis: Yes. She has an older brother that was four years older.

⁸ *Doctor Zhivago* is a novel by Boris Pasternak, first published in 1957 in Italy and named after its protagonist, Yuri Zhivago, a physician and poet. It takes place between the Russian Revolution of 1905 and World War II.

⁹ An affidavit of support is a document an individual signs to accept financial responsibility for another person, usually a relative, who is coming to the United States to live permanently.

Esarey: He came with them?

Zemaitis: They came together as a family.

Esarey: And how did they enter the United States?

Zemaitis: Same thing, Ellis Island. Then [a] train trip to Chicago. From that standpoint, it's about the same. In their case, they also had some relatives who were already living in Chicago, or the same thing like with us. Once you come over, then your relatives take you in to help you to get settled.

In her case, was a little bit rougher from a standpoint. I knew English pretty well. She knew very little English at all, so her transition was probably quite a bit more difficult, because when she started going to school, where everything was taught in English, she knew very little English. That was a little bit tougher.

Esarey: Yeah. Does your family at this point keep in touch with anyone in Lithuania?

Zemaitis: Yes. Yes, I do.

Esarey: Are current?

Zemaitis: Actually, I've found out that I have some of the family that I found out was [there] after my visits in Lithuania. When I did some work in Lithuania, I didn't know that they even were there. I had an uncle, who I thought died in Siberia. He was arrested and deported to Siberia as a young man. That was my mother's youngest brother. I thought that he was dead. Later on, I found out that he was alive and back. As a matter of fact, he reached the ripe age of a 103.

Esarey: Good genes.

Zemaitis: He just died about three years ago. He's the one, when I talked to him, when we reestablished contact with him, he jokingly contributed his longevity to the tough life that he had to live in Siberia, the cold. The cold climate in Siberia preserved him. (Esarey laughs) He used to laugh. But anyways, now I do stay in contact with his son's family and his son's wife, et cetera.

Esarey: Who live in Lithuania?

Zemaitis: Who live in Lithuania, in Kaunas, yes. At the same time, Vita still has a number of relatives, a number of cousins, in Lithuania that we visited. I stay in contact with them also.

Esarey: Good.

Zemaitis: So we stayed in contact with them over the years, and I still do.

Esarey: Let me ask you this. Now with the advent of technology, you can stay in contact much more easily, can you not?

Zemaitis: It's a lot easier, I think. As we talked earlier, we stay in contact with Skype, so you can see when you talk to the people and also the electronic mail.¹⁰ It makes it so much easier.

Esarey: It does, both ways. I didn't ask you about this at all, but the Lithuanian culture is rich with many different kinds of interesting rituals and pastimes and things that are central to the Lithuanian culture. Do you have any particular pastimes and rituals that you hang onto, that you really practice?

Zemaitis: Well, first of all, the Lithuanian language is very rich. It's probably one of the older Indo-European languages that are still in use in the world. It's a very rich language, but is very difficult, very difficult to learn.

As far as the pastimes, Lithuania is a basketball country. That's our piece of trivia. But I guess the basketball program got established in Lithuania, back in the late '20s, early '30s by the group of American Lithuanian basketball players who actually played on the U.S.A. national team at that time.

Esarey: Did you have some—

Zemaitis: Names, yes. One of the guys was Frank Lubinas. That's L-u-b-i-n-a-s. He played for the U.S. Olympic team as a center. Then Notre Dame's "Moose" Krause. His Lithuanian name was Kriauceliunas. Basically, what they did in the late '20s, they went to Lithuania and established sort of like a basketball camps and so on. It took off. As a result, in the early '30s, Lithuania became European basketball champion. They won the championship twice.

Since that time, in the modern era, Lithuania won three bronze medals in the Olympic Games, which is going back just a few years ago. The cap to it all was that the Lithuanian basketball players made up the majority of the Russian national team. And in 1988 Olympics, USSR with the Lithuanian players, won the gold medal that beat the United States.

Esarey: And you have some pictures of that.

Zemaitis: That's 1988.

Esarey: Don't you?

¹⁰ Skype is a telecommunications application software product that specializes in providing individuals and businesses with free video and voice, one-to-one and group calls, instant messages and shared files with other people who are using the program.

Zemaitis: And that was...right. And the four starting players, out of five, were Lithuanians. These are the Lithuanian basketball connections I've been mentioning earlier.

Lithuania, by religion, is predominantly Roman Catholic. The education level usually is pretty high. The country as a whole is primarily agricultural, just with some light industry, which I guess in today's age makes it pretty tough, because there's really not many natural resources. There's no oil, nothing like that, or any mining.

Esarey: Which is why many people emigrate.

Zemaitis: Right.

Esarey: And emigrated at the beginning of the 1900s.

Zemaitis: But Lithuania regained independence from the Russians in 1990. Actually, this year's the twenty years anniversary of their independence. That happened when the Soviet Union sort of got busted up. A lot of other nations regained their independence at the same time.

Esarey: What did you think about that breakup of the Soviet Union?

Zemaitis: Well, that was fantastic thing. I think it had to come. You cannot subjugate a people; you can subjugate people only for so long. Lithuania is a very pro-western country, probably the most western-looking country out of the Eastern Bloc.¹¹ They are part of NATO.¹² They're part of European Union.¹³ There are Lithuanian troops in Afghanistan, very much pro-American.¹⁴

Esarey: It was a fantastic thing to see that happen and how.

Zemaitis: Probably the favorite U.S. president in Lithuania is Ronald Reagan.

Esarey: I was wondering about that. Yes, because he took a very aggressive stance.

Zemaitis: Right.

Esarey: And how did you feel about that?

¹¹ Eastern Bloc referred to the former Communist states of Eastern and Central Europe, including the countries of the Warsaw Pact, along with Yugoslavia and Albania, which were not aligned with the Soviet Union after 1948 and 1960 respectively.

¹² The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is an intergovernmental military alliance between several North American and European countries, based on the North Atlantic Treaty that was signed on 4 April 1949.

¹³ The European Union is a unified trade and monetary body of 28 member countries. Its purpose is to be more competitive in the global marketplace.

¹⁴ In 2007, a squadron of the Lithuanian Special Operations Forces was deployed to the NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation in the south of Afghanistan.

- Zemaitis: The Lithuanians considered that Reagan's policies were very much responsible for the break-up of the Soviet Union.
- Esarey: So, as far as the Lithuanian community is concerned, Ronald Reagan did a good thing.
- Zemaitis: Yes.
- Esarey: I'm going to ask you a few questions about your military experience. Do you have some pictures to share?
- Zemaitis: Yes, I do.
- Esarey: We will get you to show those.
- Zemaitis: Yeah, we can do that.
- Esarey: I would really like to be able to look at your pictures, and we'll work with those.
- Zemaitis: As far as my military is actually, I, as every other young man of my age, had to be registered for the U.S. Selective Service System.¹⁵
- Esarey: And you graduated from high school.
- Zemaitis: Right. When I graduated from high school, when I entered into university, I received the exemption from draft, which was valid until you graduated from university. In 1956, when I graduated from University of Illinois, I received greetings from my neighbors, (Esarey laughs) as you say, greetings. Uncle Sam called me into service.
- I was inducted into the U.S. military in November of 1956, got my processing at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, then got shipped for basic training to Fort Carson, Colorado. When I was in Fort Carson, Colorado, I guess they thought that, even though I was a college graduate, they thought that my aptitude was someplace else, nothing to do with management or business, even though I had a degree. So, the military in their wisdom sent me to army aviation school in Fort Rucker, Alabama. That's for the advance training, where I went through, received the training as a helicopter mechanic.
- Esarey: And could you tell me what exactly your—I guess it would be in military language—what your—
- Zemaitis: Well, at this time I was private first class.
- Esarey: Private first class.

¹⁵ The Selective Service System is an independent agency of the United States government that maintains information on those potentially subject to military conscription.

Zemaitis: Private first class. While I was in Fort Rucker, Alabama, the 101st Airborne Division's recruiting officer came over, looking. They needed helicopter mechanics and crew chiefs to man the helicopters that the division had. That meant that...Of course, they could not take anybody. You have to be a volunteer, because a volunteer in the airborne have to be totally voluntary.

Esarey: This is 101st Airborne?

Zemaitis: Right, the 101st Airborne Division.

Esarey: They only took volunteers?

Zemaitis: Only volunteers, right.

Esarey: And you volunteered?

Zemaitis: I volunteered. Myself and a couple of my friends volunteered.

Esarey: Because?

Zemaitis: Pride. (Esarey laughs) I kind of felt that the regular army that I was in was kind of sloppy. Kind of sloppy, and in here the airborne was considered an elite unit. So we volunteered, and we went. Had to go through the airborne training to become jump qualified, because everybody in the unit had to be jumpers, paratroopers. So, after the—

Esarey: Describe that training a little bit.

Zemaitis: Well training, basically, it was very short, very intensive training. Basically it consisted of three weeks, two weeks ground training and one week of jumping.

Esarey: In Fort Butler.

Zemaitis: That's Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

Esarey: Oh, you went to Kentucky for that.

Zemaitis: Fort Campbell, Kentucky. That's the home of the 101st Airborne. But basically, what it boiled down to, you had a lot of physical activity, a lot of harassment. They did try to make you quit. The idea was that only those who really wanted to stay would stay. There was a number of people quit, but I kind of persevered and stayed with it. It was tough training, but later on we realized that that was good. They have to put you in a good physical condition, because when you are actually making parachute jumps, there was always the chance of getting injured. So, the better condition you were in, the less chance were that you would get injured.

- Esarey: Well, you were already very sports-minded, anyway.
- Zemaitis: Very much so, yes.
- Esarey: You had been a good athlete, as I recall, correct?
- Zemaitis: Right. From a physical activity was not really that difficult. Probably the most difficult part was the psychological harassment, if you will.
- Esarey: Did they give you any trouble because you were Lithuanian?
- Zemaitis: Oh, no. This was training for everybody. This is basically to weed out—
- Esarey: No matter who you were?
- Zemaitis: ...to weed out the people who really did not want to be there.
- Esarey: It had nothing to do with an ethnic thing. This is called we're just going to get—
- Zemaitis: It's a similar idea. The Marine Corps got the same type of training. Once I got through with the training, then I got assigned in a unit, and I served as a crew chief on a helicopter.
- Esarey: And did you have a different rank then?
- Zemaitis: Well, over private first class, my career ended with specialist fourth class, which is sort of like a corporal. I did at the end—
- Esarey: Where did you end up? Where did you actually finish up your military career?
- Zemaitis: Well, specialist fourth class.
- Esarey: At what place?
- Zemaitis: That's at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. They did offer me a direct commission at the end of my years into Army Intelligence Corps, but I—
- Esarey: Oh, I wanted to hear a little bit more about that. There was some recruiting. Who did that recruiting?
- Zemaitis: Basically, anybody that was about to leave the service, you talked to the Army recruiting. What they did, they examined your qualifications, your record. They wanted to see if they could retain you back in the service. Because of my background, being Lithuanian background, speaking fluent Lithuanian...At that time, remember that you're talking about now nineteen—
- Esarey: Fifty-eight?

Zemaitis: Nineteen.

Esarey: Fifty-eight?

Zemaitis: Yeah, 1950... We're talking 1959.

Esarey: 1959.

Zemaitis: I got '56; no, 1958.

Esarey: 1958.

Zemaitis: Yeah, 1958. This was in the middle of the Cold War.¹⁶ So the knowledge of a language behind the Iron Curtain country language was considered a necessary thing for the Army intelligence.¹⁷ Basically, they offered me a commission as a second lieutenant in Army Intelligence Corps. But I thought... I was tempted, but the reason I declined it was because, if you stayed in the Army, you had no choice where you were. One day you could be in the United States; the next day could be overseas in Europe or Asia or whatever. So I decided to say good-bye to my military career, which I did.

Esarey: And you declined.

Zemaitis: I declined it, yes.

Esarey: Did you think they might send you to the Iron Curtain countries or to spy?

Zemaitis: No, I don't think there was nothing like that. That was primarily... At that time I was already married to Vita. Probably if I was single at that time, my decision most likely would have been different. But since I was married, I wanted to live with Vita, not some place 1,000 miles away from her.

Esarey: When did you and Vita get married, while you were in the service?

Zemaitis: Well, actually, we got married before I got into service.

Esarey: Before you got into the service. We'll go back to that.

Zemaitis: That was, yeah, that was kind of a—

Esarey: Because I'd like to talk about... We didn't talk about that at all on our first meeting.

¹⁶ The Cold War was a state of geopolitical tension after World War II between powers in the Eastern Bloc (the Soviet Union and its satellite states) and powers in the Western Bloc (the United States, its NATO allies and others).

¹⁷ The Iron Curtain was the name for the boundary dividing Europe into two separate areas from the end of World War II in 1945 until the end of the Cold War in 1991.

- Zemaitis: Yeah. We got married in September of '56.
- Esarey: That was just before you went in.
- Zemaitis: Just before I went in. It kind of also ties in...My mother was sick at that time in '56, as a matter of fact, and one of the things...She was still alive.
- Esarey: Your mother?
- Zemaitis: ...before I went in the service, and she hadn't met Vita. One thing, when she found out I'm being called in the service, she says, "Well, you guys need to get married before you go in the service, so that then I can die peacefully." We had to promise that we'll get married. As a matter of fact, then she passed away a couple of weeks later. Then we did get married in September. Then I had to report for duty in November.
- Esarey: I think I might ask you now, what was it like for Vita to be the wife of a soldier, at that time? Where did she live, and what was it like for her?
- Zemaitis: Well, I think it was tough on her from the standpoint that while we [were] just newlyweds, and I was going through the basic training, and obviously, you could not be. So that was the bad news. The good news was that when I went to my advanced training in Fort Rucker, Alabama, [where] the soldiers were allowed to bring in their wives, bring them over, and I was allowed to live off post. She joined me, and we lived in a small town called Ozark, Alabama.
- Esarey: Oh, boy. (laughs)
- Zemaitis: Ozark, Alabama, which was probably about ten miles outside from Fort Rucker, Alabama. So then she followed me. While I was in Fort Rucker, we lived in Ozark, Alabama. Then, when I went to the 101st Airborne Division on Fort Campbell, Kentucky, we rented an apartment in Clarksville, Tennessee.
- Esarey: The life of a military wife.
- Zemaitis: Yeah. Right.
- Esarey: I think you told me this, and I wanted to verify that this is true, that the 101st Airborne became involved, at one point, in the whole integration issues, right about that time, that your particular group was more on call. You were not directly involved with that Arkansas—
- Zemaitis: Little Rock.
- Esarey: Little Rock, yeah.

Zemaitis: Right, in Little Rock. That's when they had the unrest in Little Rock. Some of the battle groups from the 101st Airborne Division were sent over to quell the unrest in Little Rock. My group, since I was part of what are called the Command and Control Battalion, Aviation Company, we were a back-up, if we need to. But we never had to go back in, and my group did not. Part of the division was in there, but we did not have to.

Esarey: What did you think about that?

Zemaitis: Well, being in the military, we had a lot of black Americans in the unit. So, even though we're in the deep south, being in Kentucky...Fort Campbell, Kentucky's on the Tennessee border, so that's in the middle of the south, but the overall feeling was pro-integration.

Esarey: It was?

Zemaitis: Yeah, within the military.

Esarey: That's interesting to know.

Zemaitis: Because our friends and a lot of buddies were right there and were black Americans.

Esarey: And you become friends?

Zemaitis: Yes.

Esarey: You are friends. What did you do right after you left the military? Where did you go next?

Zemaitis: Well, I was allowed to leave, actually, military two months earlier than I would have left earlier, in order to go back to graduate school.

Esarey: Oh, so you went back to school?

Zemaitis: Right, so I went back to school. I had a Bachelor's in management from University of Illinois, and I decided that I wanted to get a Master's degree in accounting. But basically, at that time, my evaluation was that management degree by itself was not enough. So, I went back to graduate school at Roosevelt University in Chicago.

Esarey: May I ask? How did you do that financially? I mean, was this the G.I. Bill or did you—¹⁸

¹⁸ The GI Bill provides educational assistance to service members, veterans, and their dependents.

- Zemaitis: G. I. Bill, yes. They did pay for the tuition. But, of course, after I was going to graduate school at nights. During the day, I did get a job, and I was working full-time.
- Esarey: What did you do?
- Zemaitis: Oh, I worked as an internal auditor for a company called Aldens, Incorporated. It used to be one of the top, big four mail order houses, like Sears, Montgomery Wards, Spiegels and all of them. Those were the big four.
- Esarey: Of course, Montgomery Wards had a huge store then.
- Zemaitis: At that time, I did. I worked during the day, and I went to graduate school at night.
- Esarey: What did Vita do during that time?
- Zemaitis: Vita, during that time, she worked as a legal secretary for American Bar Association in Chicago. She was working also, both of us. But then, of course, our son arrived. And also—
- Esarey: When was he born?
- Zemaitis: He was in 1959.
- Esarey: Nineteen fifty-nine. Darius. Is that his name?
- Zemaitis: Darius, yes.
- Esarey: And he grew up in the Chicago area, then?
- Zemaitis: Yes, he grew up in...He graduated from grammar school in Chicago, and then we moved to the suburb Downers Grove [Illinois]. Then he went to the junior high in Downers Grove. And then when we moved to Springfield. I think it was 1970...Time flies, '73, I think. We moved, and then Darius graduated from Glenwood High School, here in Chatham.
- Esarey: Oh, so he did. He graduated from here. Did he just grow up feeling all American, just like an American kid?
- Zemaitis: Pardon me?
- Esarey: Did he know Lithuanian? Was he—
- Zemaitis: Yeah, he did speak Lithuanian.
- Esarey: He did speak it, but he felt, I'm an American.

- Zemaitis: He was bi-lingual, and we felt that it's a second language; it's not an impediment.
- Esarey: No, not at all. Did he play basketball?
- Zemaitis: No. He actually...He took on Vita's sport, tennis.
- Esarey: He was a tennis player.
- Zemaitis: He was very good at tennis. He was very good at tennis. As a matter of fact, at that one time, he was even good enough to give some tennis lessons.
- Esarey: Oh, he got that gene. He got the tennis gene, didn't he?
- Zemaitis: Yeah. That, of course, was...Tennis was Vita's strength.
- Esarey: Yes, Let's talk a little bit about Vita's interests and her talents in sports, because, as I recall in our first conversation, you said this was how you met. You met at a sports event. Just tell me a little bit about that.
- Zemaitis: Overall, the Lithuanian community is very much sports minded. And we took that back in a displaced...In the refugee camps, that's how we used to spend our spare time, a lot of athletics.
- Esarey: Boys and girls.
- Zemaitis: Boys and girls, right. I never took up tennis until I met Vita. I played basketball, volleyball, soccer, table tennis. But Vita, when she started, even when she was in grammar school, she participated in track events, short distances, the dash, you know—
- Esarey: She was a sprinter.
- Zemaitis: ...sixty-meter dash and so on and tennis. In the summertime, the Marquette Park area in Chicago, which is the southwest side, the Marquette Park had a lot of athletic activities during the summer. Since the surrounding community was predominately Lithuanian, a lot of the athletic events drew a lot of Lithuanian youths.
- Esarey: And there you were. (laughs)
- Zemaitis: And one time, I guess we're playing; there was a game of mixed volleyball. Both guys and gals played in there, and we're playing in a volleyball match. It so happened [that] both of us were on the opposing teams, but we saw each other. And that's how we met kind of. After that...But she was going out with somebody else, steady, and I was going with somebody else at that time too. But we first met on a volleyball court. And as time went on, the circumstances brought us together, usually through summer athletic events, either as

participants or as spectators. Eventually sort of, we felt attracted to each other, and we started dating. I guess she broke up with the guy she was going to and I broke up with the gal that I was going to. We met, and we got started going steady.

Esarey: And it worked. Did you have a...Is there such a thing as a traditional Lithuanian wedding?

Zemaitis: Not really. Traditional Lithuanian weddings were no longer practical. Traditional Lithuanian wedding usually involved having a wedding feast that lasted three days and three nights. (both laugh) That would be the traditional.

Esarey: I see. (laughs)

Zemaitis: That's how they used to be, the old. Of course, we had—

Esarey; You had an abbreviated wedding feast?

Zemaitis: Abbreviated, right. But, of course, from a traditional standpoint, both of us... We did not have a big wedding, because both of us... My mother had just passed away, so we had sort of like a quiet wedding, with only close relatives and friends attending.

Esarey: And you were about to be—

Zemaitis: And I was about to be inducted into service. So, it kind of was a happy...then it was kind of a somber affair.

Esarey: Um-hmm, a serious thing. How did Vita keep up her tennis to become such a star? As you said, she played tennis until she was almost forty.

Zemaitis: Well, first of all, Darius started playing. And after I met Vita, I started playing tennis, myself. So, what we did, when we were in Downers Grove, she was part of Downers Grove Tennis Club. They had a lot of activities, tournaments and like a challenge ladder plays and so on.¹⁹ So she played on a Downer's Grove club team and participated in—

Esarey: Just kept it up.

Zemaitis: ...United States Tennis Association [USTA] tournaments and so on. So she kept it up.

Esarey: I have a few notes, that you told me she was just an excellent tennis player.

Zemaitis: Yes, she was excellent. She won a number of trophies. After we moved to Springfield, she participated again in both local and the USTA tournaments.

¹⁹ A tennis ladder is a way for local tennis enthusiasts to meet and play matches with other similarly skilled players, at mutually convenient times.

She kept up playing until...well, gee, thirty-six. She kept playing until she was about thirty-nine, forty. She always played in an open division; she never played in the seniors. She could have, but she says, "I don't want to."

For a couple years in a row, she was pretty high ranked in the Central Illinois region, like in the women's singles. Besides playing in the singles, we played a lot of tennis. We used to play a lot of mixed doubles. Like weekends, we used to spend maybe at least five, six hours on Saturday and five, six hours on Sunday on the tennis courts. We put in a lot of tennis, both of us.

Esarey: You put in a lot of time playing tennis.

Zemaitis: We were in a group that sort of...we rotated, kind of like a mixed doubles.

Esarey: Here in Chatham?

Zemaitis: Right here in Springfield.

Esarey: You mentioned—I think I have a note here—that there's an active Lithuanian group here, in this area?

Zemaitis: Yeah. There's the American Lithuanian Club.

Esarey: Here in Springfield?

Zemaitis: Right here in Springfield, right. She was—

Esarey: Was that here before you came here?

Zemaitis: It was already in existence. As a matter of fact, prior to us coming, Sherman [Illinois] even had a Lithuanian parish, a Catholic parish, because, basically, Springfield area had a lot of Lithuanians who worked in the coal mines.

Esarey: Yes.

Zemaitis: I guess you had coal mines around Springfield, and there was a lot of coal miners [who] were from Lithuanian descent. When we came over, there was already Lithuanian, American Lithuanian Club. She became active in the club, and she served as an officer or treasurer for several terms.

She got interested in teaching Lithuanian language. Actually, she taught Lithuanian language at Lincoln Land Community College.

Esarey: She was like one of the adjunct professors?

Zemaitis: And, basically, because some of the people with the Lithuanian descent, their language, Lithuanian language, was kind of very rusty, so they wanted to bring it up.

Esarey: And so she did that.

Zemaitis: Yeah. Interestingly enough, a couple of her students in Lithuanian language were known people, like Robert Poorman [president of Lincoln Land Community College at the time].

Esarey: Really?

Zemaitis: Right. He took her classes because he was... He went on a Fulbright Scholarship program to Lithuania, to help Lithuania University establish the university administration. So, before going to Lithuania, he took some lessons from Vita. As a matter of fact, today I was just going over some old correspondence. She has some correspondence of letters from Mr. Poorman from Lithuania to Vita, saying how much that helped. Senator Durbin [U.S. Senator from Illinois, Richard Durbin]—

Esarey: Senator Durbin. Describe that. Why did he do that?

Zemaitis: Well, Senator Durbin has Lithuanian roots. His grandmother emigrated from Lithuania to United States.

Esarey: I didn't know that.

Zemaitis: So he was interested, and he made a couple—

Esarey: He's second generation.

Zemaitis: Pardon me.

Esarey: He's second generation, then.

Zemaitis: Yeah.

Esarey: So he wanted to learn.

Zemaitis: He wanted to learn some, a few words, because he made a trip. He was very much supportive of [the] fight for Lithuanian independence, when he was legislator and so on.

Yeah, so she was involved. Of course, Vita was involved in a lot of things, very varied interests. She got very much interested in the American Indians, American Indian plight and the history and so on.

Esarey: What did she do?

Zemaitis: Oh, she became very supportive, making donations and staying in contact. As I forgot, somewhere along the line, one of the tribes sent her an honorary membership in the tribe certificate to her, for her.

Esarey: A very active woman.

Zemaitis: Yes. Loved gardening. She was a Master Gardener, graduate of Master Gardener program, University of Illinois Master Gardener program. Now that keeps me busy to keep up with the—

Esarey: Are you a master gardener?

Zemaitis: No, I'm not. (both laugh)

Esarey: It's beautiful. You have a beautiful, beautiful yard.

Zemaitis: Arts. Interested in arts, in opera, ballet and so on.

Esarey: Shall we take a short break?

Zemaitis: Sure, yeah.

(brief stop)

Zemaitis: Then, while I was going to high school, I had a part-time job at Armour & Company in Chicago Stockyards.^{20,21}

Esarey: I'm listening.

Zemaitis: And that was, in a sense a very, a very, very good job. It was very good pay. Armour & Company, in a sense, put me through school, because my parents were not earning enough where they could financially help me. So I did work at Armour & Company while I was going through school, through university.

Armour hired me for their controller's staff, after I graduated from University of Illinois, since they felt I was a good person. I knew the plant. I was the only one on the controller's staff that knew how the things worked in the plant. That was prior going to service.

Then after I got drafted into the service, obviously, I worked for Uncle Sam.²² While I was in the service, Armour & Company moved most of their operations out of Chicago to Kansas City and Omaha, Nebraska. That was sort of part of the liquidation of Chicago Stockyards. I could have taken the job, either in Kansas City or Omaha, since that was my rights as an ex-GI, to go

²⁰ Armour & Company was an American company that used to be one of the five leading firms in the meat packing industry. It was founded in Chicago in 1867.

²¹ The Chicago Stockyards, was the city's meatpacking district for more than a century, starting in 1865. Over that period of time, it was one of the city's world-famous wonders, visited by princes and maharajahs and almost every tourist.

²² Uncle Sam (initials U.S.) is a common national personification of the American government or the United States in general, which, according to legend, came into use during the War of 1812 and was supposedly named for Samuel Wilson.

back to work, a guarantee. I decided that I did not want to move from Chicago, since I was married, and Vita did not care to move, neither.

So, I started working for Aldens, Incorporated as an internal auditor. As I mentioned, at that time, I also was going through the master's degree program. While I was at Alden's, they used the internal audit staff as a recruiting ground for their management people. After a couple years working as an internal auditor, I got promoted as a junior executive as a credit manager. Then I got promoted to the cost controller, and then I got promoted to the merchandise manager for the discount store division. Over the number of years I kind of climbed the ladder.

Unfortunately, at the time that they started, the company got an economic squeeze, and my position got eliminated. I moved over to the competitor, to Montgomery Wards. (Esarey laughs) I worked for Montgomery Wards in their internal audit group.

A good friend of mine was working for Internal Revenue Service at that time, and they were looking for internal auditors, also. I found out for that, and I decided that I wanted to move to, probably to the government service at that time. So I moved into internal audit of the Internal Revenue Service. I worked for Internal Revenue Service—

Esarey: Twenty-five years?

Zemaitis: A number of years. Actually what had happened from [my job at the] Internal Revenue Service, one day [I] got a call from Aldens, Incorporated. They said, "Your position had been eliminated, but we're reconstructing the company. We want you back." They made me an offer that I could not refuse. They bridged my seniority for the time that I was away, so I went back to Aldens. I went back for Aldens.

Esarey: That's amazing.

Zemaitis: A couple of years later, I got a call from State of Illinois. My boss that I used to work for [at the] Internal Revenue Service had retired from Internal Revenue Service and was appointed as a chief internal auditor at Illinois Department of Revenue. He was looking for a second in command. That was in 1969. In 1969, I decided that [I'd] switch over now to government again. I came over to the Department of Revenue in 1969, as an assistant chief internal auditor. That was in Chicago.

My chief, Edward Kane was his name, unfortunately, he suffered a very massive heart attack, and the doctor told him that he really should not be working. He left the Illinois Department of Revenue, and at that time, then I got appointed to take his place as a chief.

Esarey: That's a big job.

Zemaitis: So, that was in 1970. Then, at that time, most of the operation was based in Chicago, even though most of our work was in Springfield. One of the things that I suggested to the director of revenue was to move the internal audit operation to Springfield. That's where the job was. I said, "Basically, what's going to happen, if we don't do it ourselves, probably auditor general is going to recommend that, because we're spending the state funds for travel, where we could be doing it right on site."

That's what happened, so we consolidated all the internal audit operations in Springfield, and I moved to Springfield. Now that was '70, '71, and I served under a number of administrations. I started out—

Esarey: How many?

Zemaitis: ...I started out, when I got appointed, the governor was Governor [Richard B.] Ogilvie. Governor Ogilvie, Governor [Dan] Walker—I'm trying to think—Thompson?

Esarey: Jim Thompson.

Zemaitis: Jim Thompson.

Esarey: Edgar

Zemaitis: Jim Edgar, George Ryan. Oh, I retired around 1999.

Esarey: I think that was still George Ryan.

Zemaitis: Yeah, that was still...Let's see, we didn't mention Edgar.

Esarey: Yes, Jim Edgar.

Zemaitis: So, in a sense, we started out with very simple internal audit operations, everything probably manual. During those years, computer technology advanced, so we became a fully integrated audit shop. We used computer as an audit tool. I guess, that's maybe one of the reasons for my success of being retained, because I kept moving with the progress of technology.

While I was doing that, I was also very active in a professional organization. I got involved with the Institute of Internal Auditors, which is an international organization, served as a local chapter president, served on a number of international committees, chaired some of them, including a term on the International Audit Standards Committee. We promulgated standards and so on. As part of the work with that organization, also, while after Lithuania gained their independence, I helped Lithuania join the Institute of Internal Auditors.

Esarey: You helped Lithuania do that?

Zemaitis: Right. I helped. I also translated internal audit Professional Standards from English into Lithuanian, which got published in Lithuania. I also helped them revise Lithuania's Internal Auditing Act in their laws. All of these things were happening while I was still working.

In 1999, after I retired, I was asked by Lithuania's president, whom I knew back from University of Illinois days. President Adamkus, he asked me if I would agree come to Lithuania and help Lithuania update their auditor general's audit programs to include performance auditing, which I... After consulting with Vita, since it would have involved quite a bit of time travelling away from home, we decided that I needed to help them. Through the latter part of '99 and most of the year 2000, [I] spent, in and out of Lithuania, helping them establish performance audit program for their national auditor general staff in auditing the government agencies in Lithuania.

Esarey: How did you actually get to meet and know the president of Lithuania?

Zemaitis: Well, actually, I met president while we're still in Germany.

Esarey: How did that happen?

Zemaitis: He was resident of the same refugee camp as I was. That's in Eichstätt. I was starting Lithuanian high school at that time, and he was already in a graduating class. I met him because my cousin was in the same class with him, so I sort of met him through her.

Then later on, over the years, we found ourselves on the same campus on the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. He was in the school of engineering, and I was going to management school. The other thing is this; he was also very much involved in athletics. We belonged to the same sports club, Lithuanian sports club, that consisted primarily of the students. That was sort of like academic sports club. That's where I met him.

When we made a visit... Vita and I made a visit to Lithuania in 1999, sort of going on a vacation, on a tourism. I gave a call to the president, (laughs) and he asked me to stop over, said if I could stop over. I said, "Sure." When I got over, he says, "Okay." After talking, he says, "Now that you are retired, you've got all kinds of time." He says, "We need you." (Esarey laughs) He says, "We need our auditor general's programs are primarily very much rudimentary, and they needed to get something, to get more involved into the performance reviews and so on."

He had me meet the controller general of Lithuania at that time. After the meeting, I agreed that I would come over and give them seminars, sort of like a training program for their existing staff. To do that, I did receive a lot of help from the auditor general, Bill Holland, in Illinois. I also worked with the

General Accounting Office in Washington, D. C., as far as getting training materials, manuals and so on, which they shared with me, that I was able to take over to Lithuania.

At the end of '99 and through most of the year 2000 and the beginning of 2001, I probably made about ten trips to Lithuania. I basically used to stay about four weeks at a time, four to five weeks at a time. Then I'd come back to recharge the batteries. (laughs)

Esarey: Wow! Huge commitment.

Zemaitis: But, what it ended up, they started from ground zero, if you will, to now they have about seventy performance auditors on their staff. It was started with nothing.

Esarey: Congratulations.

Zemaitis: Yeah. A couple years ago, they were very nice. They were commemorating the fifty years anniversary of the auditor general's office, they're going back to the old independence. They awarded me a special merit recognition medal for the work that I have done in there. That was very nice of them.

Esarey: Do you have a picture of that?

Zemaitis: I have; let me take a look at them. I don't think I've got a picture, but I got a—

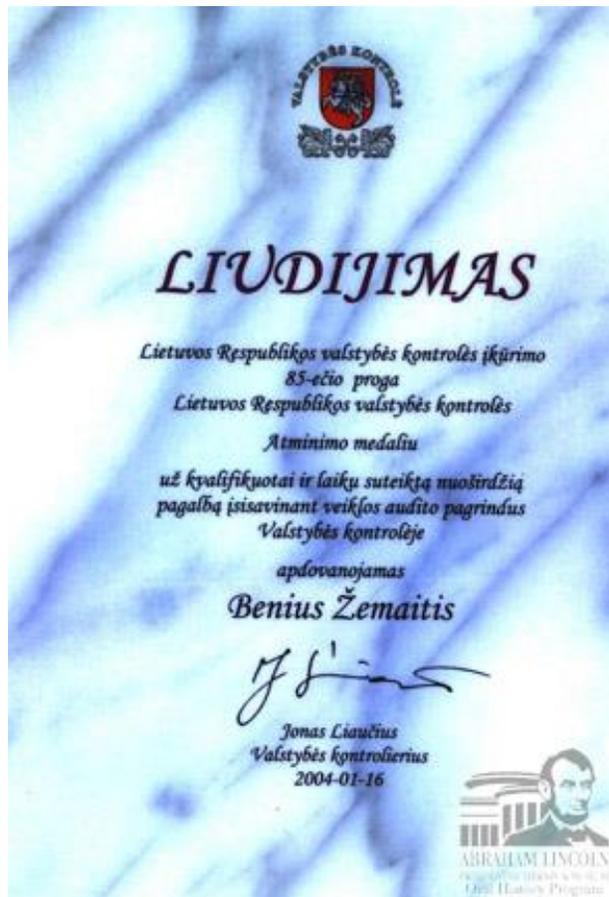
Esarey: Well, we'll look at it after.

Zemaitis: Okay.

Esarey: Yeah. We'll come back to that; we'll remember that. I'll make a note. Describe to me what you're doing locally right now.

Zemaitis: Locally, right now, I'm—

Esarey: That you offered to be a



Benedict Zemaitis was presented the National Award from the Lithuanian Auditor General in 2004. Benedict noted that only four people received this national recognition that year, part of the 85th anniversary of the establishment of the Auditor General's Service.

volunteer.

Zemaitis: Well, I have been working with the Illinois Department of Revenue, director of Illinois Department of Revenue. I did meet with them a couple of times to give some suggestions regarding reestablishment of internal audit programs and gave my perceptions what those programs should be, how they were conducted and so on. I think they're on their way to getting it done.

Otherwise, I'm just pursuing some of my hobbies, like I'm an avid backgammon player. There's a backgammon club in Springfield. We meet once a week. I have to tend all the flowers and bushes and greenery that Vita established in our backyard and so.

Esarey: Its takes time.

Zemaitis: Take care of the kitty cats. We have three cats that Vita was very fond of. Vita's friend, Grazina, that you have met, had come over from Lithuania in January, after Vita's death. I asked her if she could come over to help me out. She helped me work on a project. Vita wished that, after her death, that we would gather all the books and publications she had and donate them to a library in town, where her father was born, to honor him, to commemorate him. We sent over... When we ended up, it was close to 800 books, altogether, that we ended up sending to Lithuania.

Esarey: This was to?

Zemaitis: Radviliskis.

Esarey: We may need to write that down on the word list here. It's a Lithuanian art museum?

Zemaitis: No, this was the library at Radviliskis. The art museum is the next project. Anyway, so the books arrived and—

Esarey: That is the name of the city there, Radviliskis?

Zemaitis: Radviliskis, yeah. As part of that project, basically what I did, I helped them. I financed to build up a special shelving for the books and the exhibit material, and I gathered the various documents pertaining to her father's work as a surgeon, as a professional doctor. They established a permanent exhibit in the library to commemorate her father. The official opening occurred on April 23 of this year [2010], in the library.

Esarey: Just very recently.

Zemaitis: Yes.

Esarey: And we will have pictures of that.

Zemaitis: Yeah. I've got a whole bunch of pictures of that.

Esarey: Good. We'll take several of those.

Zemaitis: And all of that was part of to commemorate and honor both her father and Vita.

Esarey: Was the president of Lithuania a part of this?

Zemaitis: Of that? No. As a matter of fact, he retired. The constitution allows only two terms, and his terms had expired last year.

Esarey: He remains a friend?

Zemaitis: Yes.

Esarey: Tell me about the painting.

Zemaitis: While her father was [a] practicing surgeon in Chicago, after arriving in Chicago, he performed an operation to a Lithuanian artist named Zaromskis, who was pretty known name. But, anyways, the artist, like a lot of artists are, I guess, he told the doctor after the operation, he says, "Doctor, I have no money. I can't really pay you anything. But instead of that, would you accept my painting as a token of my appreciation for the operation you did?" He did. He donated a painting, which depicted Portofino. That's the Portofino Harbor and the area.

Esarey: And that is the picture.

Zemaitis: And that, of course, remained in Vita's... Her mother inherited the painting after her dad passed away, and Vita inherited after her mother passed away, and I inherited from Vita after Vita passed away. Vita never really talked about the painting, but I felt that there was sort of history attached to the painting, and I questioned myself, What is going to happen to the painting when I am gone? Probably it may end up in the hands of somebody that does not appreciate or really know the value.

I knew that a lot of this artist's paintings were already exhibited in the Lithuanian national art gallery [the National Gallery of Art] in Vilnius, in the capital. So, I contacted the director of the art museum, of the national art museum, and asked whether they would be interested in that painting. He asked for me to send him a picture of the painting, which I did, and they said they definitely would. So I decided to donate it to them, with a stipulation that that painting would be permanently exhibited, number one. And number two, that they would attach a plaque next to it that's saying that this is being donated to commemorate Vita and her father.

Esarey: That's wonderful.

- Zemaitis: They agreed. I shipped the painting. It was received by them this June, this June.
- Esarey: Very recently.
- Zemaitis: Upon receiving that painting, they transferred it to the special exhibit. Right now, in the art gallery, national art museum, they have a special exhibit to commemorate twenty-eight years of Lithuanian independence. This painting now is hanging as part of that special exhibit.
- Esarey: That is a wonderful, wonderful story.
- Zemaitis: They valued that painting at somewhere between \$10,000 and \$20,000 that they could have sold it on the market.
- Esarey: But you weren't about to do that.
- Zemaitis: It's in the right place now.
- Esarey: Will you go over there to see it?
- Zemaitis: I'm planning to go to Lithuania next year.
- Esarey: Good. I think that would be good.
- Zemaitis: In 2011, European Basketball Championship will be held in Lithuania. (laughs) I'm going to—
- Esarey: You have an ulterior motive.
- Zemaitis: Yes. (both laugh) I want to be there during the basketball championships and visit the gallery and visit the library.
- Esarey: That's going to be a very good experience for you, something to look forward to.
- Zemaitis: Yeah.
- Esarey: Have I missed anything you want to make sure we note about Vita? We've talked about her young life. We've talked about much of your life together, some of her interests. Is there something that is of note that you want to make sure we remember of her?
- Zemaitis: She was an extraordinary person from a standpoint, (emotional) she always thought about everybody else except herself. As I mentioned, she had a lot of varied interests. All of them involved helping the fellow human beings.

- Esarey: Sounds like she did just that, too. I'm going to switch a gear here and ask you a few more questions about politics. What was your reaction to the fall of the Berlin Wall?
- Zemaitis: Fantastic. (both laugh) We didn't think it was going to happen at all, because it looks like, as you know, like the whole idea about slowly falling, the Soviet Union falling apart was unthinkable. Somehow I never think it is going to happen, so that was automatically... We felt that, after that, there was hope.
- Esarey: Besides [Ronald] Reagan, are there any presidents that stand out in your mind, either good, bad or ugly? (laughs)
- Zemaitis: Most Lithuanians felt that both President [Franklin] Roosevelt and President Truman [Harry] sold out the Baltic countries with the Yalta Conference and then followed by Potsdam Conference by Truman, where they basically... United States agreed for the Soviet to take over of the Baltic countries and a few other things. Those two presidents, those names, are not mentioned with affection in Lithuanian circles.
- Esarey: Are there any other presidents mentioned with affection besides Reagan?
- Zemaitis: Well, going back in history, Lincoln's name is known. (Esarey laughs)
- Esarey: To go back a ways.
- Zemaitis: Well, all the way back. He's known as the champion of freedom.
- Esarey: Abraham Lincoln?
- Zemaitis: Yeah. Ronald Reagan. [Dwight] Eisenhower was being looked at us also very favorably.
- Esarey: How about LBJ? [Lyndon Baines Johnson]
- Zemaitis: I think that's really not much. It's sort of like a lukewarm, no strong feelings.
- Esarey: John Kennedy?
- Zemaitis: Kennedy, yes, also very positive.
- Esarey: I guess they were all certainly involved. Still the Soviets were very—
- Zemaitis: Yeah. Probably the one that really the Lithuanians liked the most was the... Oh, George [W.] Bush, very positive.
- Esarey: Tell me about that a little bit.
- Zemaitis: Because basically, again... A lot of it... You have to also understand that, from a political standpoint, Lithuanians were very much for strong presidents who

were strong anti-Russia, okay. So, Kennedy made his mark when he...you know, the Cuban—

Esarey: Cuban Crisis.

Zemaitis: ...Crisis. That earned a lot of points in Lithuania.

Esarey: I just have a couple more things here, but one of them was, you got a jersey and trunks.

Zemaitis: Pardon me?

Esarey: You got a jersey... You got some sort of a gift from some basketball players in Seoul [South Korea], from the Seoul basketball players?

Zemaitis: Well, actually, the basketball players that we got to know and became friends and we met a number of times, when the Soviet national team played in the United States in the various cities. After the Soviet team won the gold medal in basketball in Seoul in Olympics, Marčiulionis, Šarūnas Marčiulionis, who was one of the starters on the team, as a token of his friendship, brought back and gave me his uniform that he played in, while he was playing for the gold medal game. I have his jersey and his basketball shorts.

Esarey: That was it. This was 1988?

Zemaitis: Yeah.

Esarey: I just wanted you to mention that.

Zemaitis: That's from 1988, that's 1988 Olympic Games.

Esarey: It's a very unique thing that you have. I think we're there. Please feel free to talk about anything else that I, perhaps, did not mention. Are there any of the pictures and artifacts that you have here that have stories behind them that we should not forget about? Tell me about this picture.

Zemaitis: This was of Vita and our Lithuania president.



Vita Zemaitis meets with the new president of Lithuania, Valdas Adamkus in 1998.

- Esarey: What was the Lithuanian president's name again?
- Zemaitis: Adamkus.
- Esarey: We'll write that down, here on the list. And she met him—
- Zemaitis: There is a little history behind him.
- Esarey: Please.
- Zemaitis: Like I said, he was studying in University of Illinois, and our paths crossed many times because of athletics. I know one time, after a basketball game, the whole group of us going back from the gym to a local pub to have a couple beers. We started talking, who's going to do what after they graduate. Different people said different things, and he made a comment. He says, "You know, guys, you'll think this is I'm nuts, but I'll tell you what, one day I'll be president of Lithuania." (laughs)
- Esarey: He said that?
- Zemaitis: And now we're talking about... This was around 1955.
- Esarey: He was president in what?
- Zemaitis: In the middle of cold war. And we told him, I said, "You're totally nuts. How can you be a president of a country who's under the Communists?" He says, "It's not going to be that way all the time."
- Esarey: Wow.
- Zemaitis: So, in a sense, he had a vision. Then later on, he became active in the government service, in Environmental Protection Agency. He served as administrator for the Great Lakes Region.
- Esarey: That's tremendous.
- Zemaitis: I forgot under which president now, but that was a presidential appointment. Then, when Lithuania became free, he decided to become a candidate, and he got himself elected. He served two terms.
- Esarey: What years?
- Zemaitis: His term ended in 2008.
- Esarey: How long are terms?
- Zemaitis: Four-year term, so he served eight years.
- Esarey: About eight years. That's quite a story.

Zemaitis: Yeah.

Esarey: I will be president. That's great.

Zemaitis: Yeah. This particular picture actually was taken in Springfield. He visited. This was before he got elected, before he was elected as the president.

Esarey: Describe to me these passes again, what they meant.



Pijus and Janina Zemaitis' Foreigners German Passes, 1944.

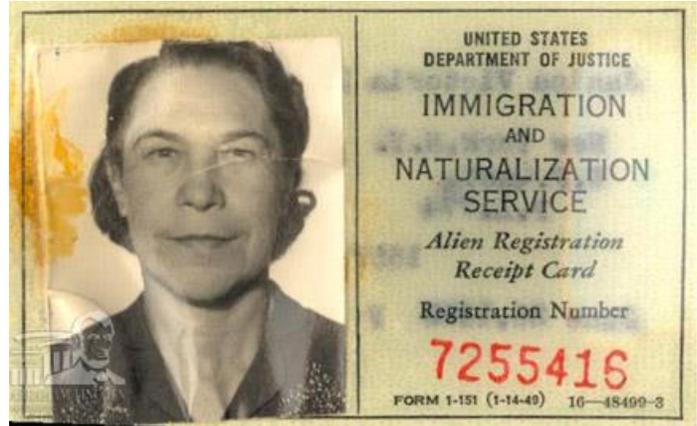
Zemaitis: Okay. What I have, these are the passports that were issued to the non-Germans, what they called the foreigner's pass, because like in Germany, you have to have identity papers on you all the time. Anyplace you went, a person without identity papers would be in trouble, probably would get arrested. So they used to issue papers. These two, one of them is for my mother, and the other one is for my dad. Of course, I, as a kid, did not need any identity papers, per se.

Esarey: You did not?

Zemaitis: No.

Esarey: This one here, the green card.

Zemaitis: This one, this is the green card that my mother was issued once we came to United States as a permanent resident.



Janina Zemaitis' Green Card, 1949-50.

Esarey: Are there any other pictures that have a story that we should get on the record?

Zemaitis: Well, we talked about a picture with the president, right?

Esarey: We have this one.

Zemaitis: I've got a couple of pictures from that library, from an opening, when they were opened up. This is from some of the exhibits. I don't know if there's any interest. This is being exhibited in Lithuania in that library. You can see that vignette picture. That's her, her father.



Zemaitis, a proud member of the famed 101st Airborne Division, is ready for his first parachute jump in 1957, at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

Esarey: We'll write that up. Are there any military pictures that you can share that might have a story behind the picture that we want to make sure we talk about a little bit. Now, there's a soldier. Is that you?

Zemaitis: Yes. That's a picture before my first jump.

Esarey: It's great. You were where?

Zemaitis: This is on Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

Esarey: What year?

Zemaitis: This was in 1956.

Esarey: You were how old?

Zemaitis: Fifty-six, let's see, twenty-three.

Esarey: Twenty-three years old. Ready to do your first jump.

Zemaitis: Right. This was before, right. If you'll notice on the helmet there is a number. Each candidate had a number.

Esarey: You were number 116.

Zemaitis: It's three, one, one, six.

Esarey: Oh, three, one, one, six.

Zemaitis: Yes, three, one, one, six.

Esarey: You were identified by number.

Zemaitis: By number, everybody. This was a picture that before making a first jump.

Esarey: You look determined.

Zemaitis: In order to qualify to get your paratroopers wings, you had to make five successful jumps. You jumped five days in a row.

Esarey: Forgive me for asking this, but what would be an unsuccessful jump?

Zemaitis: Break a leg or something like that, get injured. (Esarey laughs) They don't want anybody staying in who gets injured. This picture, on one of the jumps... You see that one parachute right in the middle?

Esarey: Yes.

Zemaitis: That's me.

Esarey: There you are.

Zemaitis: We're not supposed to do that, but what we used to do, we used to jump sometimes with a camera in your hands.

Esarey: And somebody took a secret picture.



Zemaitis and fellow paratroopers are finally 'airborne,' drifting to the ground during their jump at Fort Campbell, Kentucky



A C-119 "Flying Boxcar" awaits Zemaitis and fellow paratroopers for their upcoming jump in 1957.

Zemaitis: Yeah. And this is a picture of the plane we used to jump from.

Esarey: What is that plane? What kind is it?

Zemaitis: That's, a C-119.

Esarey: Alright, I'm going to stop now, unless we have... Describe what this is.

Zemaitis: This is basically, this is... We used to spend a lot of times in the field. They're maneuvers, so this is during maneuvers.

Esarey: You with a gun.

Zemaitis: Yeah, right. That's my M-1 rifle.

Private Benedict Zemaitis strikes a pose while training at Fort Carson, Colorado in 1957.



(end transcript #2)