

(Philately is more than just the study of stamps, just as Philatelists are more than just stamp collectors. This autobiography of Andrew Kapochunas (Kapočiūnas) -- LPS member, American Philatelic Society Examiner for Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Memel/Klaipeda, and former Co-Editor, along with Jerome Norton, of the Bulletin of the Lithuanian Philatelic Society of New York -- goes to show why someone came to be a member, and how a member's life influenced his interests.)

I always have a tendency to go overboard when I develop an interest. While on vacation in 1988 in the Adirondack Mountains, I found myself in a small bookstore, looking through a bin of old prints, when I saw a nicely-colored old map. Because of my interest in geography, going back to when I collected stamps for a few years as a child, I immediately recognized the coastline as that of Lithuania and Poland. The map's cartouche read: "**GERMANO-SARMATIA, VENEDI, et AESTIAE, PEUCINI et BASTARNAE, 1703, N. Sanson.**" The store owner said he had no idea what the map depicted, and said he was certain that was why he hadn't been able to sell it. I had no real idea of the map's worth, but my \$70 cash offer was immediately accepted. Today, the same map in good condition easily goes for \$300 - \$500 or more.

That purchase was the genesis of what has become (thanks originally to visits to map dealers in the U.S, London and Amsterdam, and these days primarily to Internet auctions) a gallery of 24 framed, original, antique maps of the Lithuania area all housed in my Jersey City, New Jersey, condo, where I and Aileen, my artist wife of 35 years, have lived for nearly three years. Each map (dating from 1574 to 1795 -- a cutoff date I chose to align with the date of the final partition of Lithuania) has a transparent label on the glass, listing the date, title and mapmaker. My wife has always refused to allow me to post museum-type labels on the walls beneath the maps, saying they would make our home look too much like a museum (my not-so-secret desire!). So, as my collection grew, I created an illustrated catalog, with personal catalog numbers corresponding to the labels and locations, to facilitate a tour -- which I happily offer visitors. My potential display area is tightly controlled: my wife's and our friends' art get the living and dining room walls, I get the hallways, the two bedrooms and one of two bathrooms. My wife says if I run out of space in those areas, I can always use the ceilings. The restrictions have forced me to be creative: my bathroom is wall-papered with non-antique Lithuanian-area maps, including a 6' by 8' pieced-together panoramic map (horizontally from Gdansk, Poland to Smolensk, Russia, vertically from Helsinki, Finland to Bialystok, Poland) of declassified British military intelligence maps originally created to guide pilots in the event of a low-level invasion of the Soviet Union. The maps are divided into quadrants identified with the elevation of the highest structure within them, and include heights of smokestacks, TV antenna towers and steeples, surface markings like peat-cutting areas that would help a pilot orient himself, and known "shoot on sight" areas protected by Soviet artillery. In the lower center of the map is a red pin -- the location of my father's ancestral home in the Žiežmariai area, halfway between Kaunas and Vilnius. That's where my story really begins.

My father, Vincas, joined the Kaunas police force after serving as a sergeant in the Lithuanian army and was assigned to be President Smetona's bodyguard in the late 1930's. In 1937, President Smetona attended the funeral of my grandfather in Žiežmariai, and he appears in a photograph taken on the front steps of the church there, alongside my father. Being married to the President's bodyguard was, unfortunately for her, the high point of my mother's life. A window clerk in the main Kaunas post office, my mother, Marija (Šimonytė), routinely accompanied my father and the President at the opera, at concerts, and at state dinners. The happy memories of those days haunted my mother for the rest of

her life: she was never again to live in such bliss, or to move in those circles. Her life, along with Lithuania's status as a free nation, began unraveling with the first Soviet occupation in 1940 and the Nazi occupation of 1941. By the time of the impending second Soviet occupation, in the summer of 1944, my father was able to leverage his connections one last time: hearing that Soviet forces were on their way to Žiežmariai, he called his youngest brother -- the one chosen to stay on the family farm -- and told him to drop everything and bring the property's deed to the town clerk, so as to „give“ the farm to the town. When Soviet troops arrived at his door soon after, my uncle was able to say with honesty that he was a tenant farmer -- and he was left alone. (Two uncles were not so lucky: one, a Lithuanian soldier, was sent to the Vorkuta, Siberia, mines; another, a teacher, was shipped off to a labor camp in Kazakhstan.) Meanwhile, my father implemented his escape plan: he finagled a government car, and began driving west with his wife and two children, headed ultimately for Switzerland. Along the way, they witnessed the Allied fire-bombing of Dresden in February 1945, while sitting on a stopped train bound for the city center. They actually made it to a boat on Lake Constance, but were turned back by a Swiss patrol boat. Resigned to their fate, they eventually wound up at the Displaced Persons Camp in Kempton, Bavaria, in the foothills of the Alps. The camp had many Estonians (years later I would collect their DP Camp stamp issues,) but it also had a Lithuanian community. I was born there in 1947 while the family waited to be allowed to come to the US. Finally, early in 1949, sponsored by cousins in New York, our family was permitted to leave.

So that both my parents could work full time in Greenpoint, Brooklyn-area factories, and because I was a big kid who could pass for older, my mother enrolled me in two different schools, one after the other, each time as a new Kindergarden student. A vivid memory at one school was an audition for an Easter play. As one of my sisters and I got on stage, a teacher called out „What are the two little Nazis doing up there? Let Americans take their place.“ I resolved never to be taken for a foreigner again, and told my parents that I would never again speak Lithuanian at home in the hopes of more quickly losing any accent I possessed.

Unlike my older sisters, I was never interested in participating in Lithuanian-oriented activities -- they joined Lithuanian scouts, rooted for Lithuanian soccer teams, and attended dances sponsored by the Lithuanian Church of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. After my father's lungs were ruined by working around corrosive chemicals in pharmaceutical plants, he wound up in the only organization that would hire him without a medical check up: Church of the Transfiguration, in Maspeth, Queens, where he was the Sacristan for many years, reporting to the noted Monsignor John Balkunas, who was active for decades in Lithuanian causes. But as soon as I had the opportunity to leave Maspeth's Polish-Lithuanian neighborhood, as a precocious 13-year-old accepted to a special high school in Manhattan -- Stuyvesant -- I jumped. I was tired of life there. A neighbor, one of the cousins who had enabled our US arrival, routinely spit as I passed his house, saying loudly: „Depukas!“ I realized then how I was defined in the eyes of some Lithuanians. I realized only much later that it was also how I defined myself -- as a displaced, stateless person, That all changed when I became fascinated with Lithuania and my roots, beginning with my first map purchase in 1988, and, soon after, by my 8-year-old daughter Rachel saying she'd like to collect stamps.

But as a teenager in my high school, one that has produced many Nobel prize-winners in math and science, I was the only Lithuanian-American. I was able to completely ignore my roots and focus on preparing for what I expected would be a career as a biological researcher. Between the long daily

commute and schoolwork, I had no time for other concerns. I graduated at 16 and entered the City College of New York, majoring in Biology. Along the way, I became convinced that my true calling was to be an artist. (My poor grades in Calculus and Advanced Chemistry had something to do with that realization!) To enable me to graduate on time as a student with half his credits in science, and half in art, the college created a unique degree: BA in Biological Illustration. Happy to be done with school, I used the money I saved from working summers and weekends (first at the pharmaceutical companies where my parents worked, later as a moving man) on traveling in Europe in 1969.

On the flight over, I sat next to a young woman who asked me why I was going to Europe. I decided then to present myself as a German artist, returning from a trip to New York – my years studying German (which I thought would be useful in a scientific career) allowed me the opportunity, and I knew that immersing myself in the language would be the best way to become fluent. Also, I admit I enjoyed speaking broken English with a German accent. I wound up living for three months in Berlin, painting an occasional canvas, but mostly looking at art in the many museums. Thanks to the intercession of my girlfriend, who had arrived earlier to enroll for some courses in German at the Frei Universitat, I had a room waiting for me. She had met a young woman in the Berlin airport -- a girl whose father was the UK consul to Berlin – who was able to finagle rooms for us in a housing project meant for Yugoslav temporary workers. There, as the only male in a women-only building (the men-only building was full), I developed a taste for stuffed grape leaves and spicy Balkan food, and very quickly became accustomed to shared facilities.

At night, I could hear rifle fire from the nearby Berlin Wall, and my curiosity brought me to Checkpoint Charlie, where I was detained for hours as East German soldiers pondered my American passport showing a German birthplace. They ridiculed me as a traitor -- to my German birth -- who had escaped to America. They wondered out loud if my purpose in visiting East Berlin was to help other Germans leave. Finally, they allowed me passage, but I soon became aware of a Soviet soldier following me at a distance. As I tried to engage passersby in conversation, they looked over my shoulder and quickly turned away. Rounding a corner, I greeted a new man who asked my nationality – I said I was a Lithuanian living in New York. He smiled and said he was a neighbor. He was from East Prussia, he said, and wanted to ask me two quick questions. I expected either a harangue about the US presence in VietNam – identifying myself to Germans as an American always led to recriminations -- or a request for help in leaving Berlin. His questions: „Are bananas easily available in America?“ And „Are there many Mercedes in New York?“ I said yes to both, but as I prepared to ask him questions about life in East Berlin, he noticed the soldier now behind me, and turned away. I turned to confront the soldier, and we locked eyes. I now knew he would not leave me, so I turned away, and started back to Checkpoint Charlie, walking faster and faster, almost running, not turning around, hoping I would not be stopped. I reached the checkpoint with my heart racing, anticipating trouble, but the same East German soldiers at the checkpoint only laughed this time, and quickly passed me through.

As long as I was in Berlin, I decided to try and visit Lithuania. I wrote my father, asking for advice on where I should go and who I should try to see – he never spoke about his life and work in Lithuania before or during the war, so, at the time, I had no idea what relatives, if any, were still there. He quickly wrote back that if I went to Lithuania, his life and my mother's, not to mention mine, would be in jeopardy from the KGB. I thought that was far-fetched, but decided not to make the trip. (Over 20 years later, during my first visit to Lithuania, my newly discovered first cousins, children of my father's

youngest brother -- the one who stayed on the farm -- confirmed that the KGB made regular visits to their homes, asking if they had heard from my father. To my cousins, he was a hero who had disappeared.) I soon left Berlin and went west, and it was in a Paris bistro, three months later, on a July night in 1969, that I watched Neil Armstrong walk on the moon. On that day, it suddenly became great to identify oneself as American -- everyone was so proud of us! But I was getting used to being a chameleon. When my girlfriend bought a motor scooter with Italian plates from Americans desperate for cash (so that we could stop hitch-hiking) the persona for the rest of my trip was clear: an Italian Hippie. No one but Italians spoke the language, and I did nothing to discourage assumptions.

Many countries and experiences later, my „Europe on \$750/year“ over, I returned to the US, got a haircut and shaved my beard, and searched for a real job. I wound up in publishing for 13 years, rising in six years to Editor-in-Chief of a tabloid consumer finance magazine, Moneysworth, which had a million subscribers. One day, while having lunch with the head of the magazine's business side, I found out the guy made twice my salary. I went to the publisher that day and asked to learn the business of publishing. Two years later, I was the Associate Publisher, running the company and 45 people day-to-day, and making a lot more money. I've been a businessman ever since. My wife -- whom I interviewed and hired for a job at the first publishing company I worked for -- and I were happy hiking, climbing mountains, and occasionally snorkeling with our two young children, living in the suburbs of New York. I thought then that I had found my true identity. But soon, with the help of my daughter -- and map and stamp collecting -- I would find out who I really was.

In the fall of 1988, my daughter came home from school and said a postal worker had given a lecture on collecting stamps. She had a packet of US issues and asked if she could get an album. I relived my childhood stamp collecting experience as together we hinged stamps in her new Scott Minuteman album. I remembered the Minkus Worldwide album I had as a kid, and asked my oldest sister if she still had it -- I had long ago given it to her for her five sons and daughter. She was happy to return it, and when I received it and began looking through the pages, instead of giving it to my daughter, I caught the stamp collecting bug all over again -- worse than ever. I decided I wouldn't attempt to collect worldwide, but focus instead on Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and the Memel/Klaipeda issues. I knew I needed different album pages, and after research, I decided the Ka-Be hingeless pages and albums were what I needed. I also began researching philatelic literature on the area, buying and reading everything I could find about that part of the world -- and my collection of books rapidly expanded as a result of the Internet. I expanded to Central Lithuania, Soviet issues with Baltic themes, and Lithuanian German DP Camp issues. Estonian provisional cancels came next -- thanks to a membership in the Estonian Philatelic Society in New York. I also discovered the Lithuanian Philatelic Society of New York, and I soon began attending meetings. I met and became friends with philatelists like Charles Matuzas, Vincent Alones and Jerry Norton. I heard all about Jerry's famous father and uncle -- and then read their work as I acquired and studied all the back issues of the LPSNY Bulletin. When we merged with the Toronto Lithuanian Philatelic society, I became better acquainted with Paul Barbatavičius, and enjoyed his company at summer picnics in Vince Alones' yard.

Because of my writing background, I volunteered to co-edit the NY Bulletin with Jerry -- and had a ball doing it! My knowledge grew quickly as I studied all the catalogs, both the old and new, joined the Lithuania Philatelic Society in Chicago, and began a friendship with John Variakojis. John put me in touch with a number of philatelists, some of whom I was able to visit while on business trips to Chicago,

men such as the gracious and generous Vytautas Valantinas, who shared both wisdom and material, and Steve Ivanauskas. John also asked Witold Fugalewitsch (Fugalevičius) to get in touch with me, and I then began a romance with cancels that continues strong to this day. My goal (which has narrowed a bit the last few years) became getting a “Socked on the Nose” cancel from every post office in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Memel -- *for every stamp issue*. These days, with complete or nearly complete collections both mint and cancelled, as well as many plate blocks and full sheets, I focus on Memel/Klaipeda issues: all possible cancels of all issues, and all Michel and Becker varieties.

I became an expert in my chosen areas in three primary ways:

1. About ten years ago I offered to proofread and edit Scott Marusak’s new Memel album pages (being able to do my own translation of Michel didn’t hurt!) which have spaces for every Michel variety. Also helping Scott, who was then at Philatelic Album Smith in North Carolina, was John Neefus, who could assist Scott much more than I ever could. I became acquainted with John virtually, via membership in the Germany Philatelic Society’s “Plebiscites and Memel” research Group. I acquired and read all the back issues of their bulletin. (My still-actively-added-to Memel albums are two sets of those pages, one for Mint and one for cancels, to which I added mounts so as to be able to avoid hinges. Most recently, I added pages created by John Neefus for Becker varieties. The other albums to which I still add are three 3 ½ inch loose-leaf binders with hundreds of pages of two-sided black plastic stock sheets, with copied and cutout cancels from the Fugalevičius cancel catalog as a guide, one binder for Memel/Klaipeda, and two for Lithuania. After each copied cancel variety I’ve placed the stamps with those cancels, all in Michel catalog order.)
2. I was allowed by more than one stamp dealer for years to look through their own untouched auction winnings of Baltic material, in return for picking out the valuable stamps and annotating them in stock sheets with Scott and Michel catalog numbers and values. Items I did not already own, I itemized and paid for at an agreed-upon percentage of Michel value. There is no better way of learning than by actually looking at tons of material.
3. I applied my knowledge when viewing APS Baltic sales circuits. The more material and counterfeits I saw, the easier it became to understand and spot varieties and “lemons.” Because I so often corrected (via notes) the catalog numbers of Baltic-area stamps, and warned circuit members and the APS when I saw a counterfeit stamp or bogus surcharge, I was invited in 1997 to become an official “Examiner” of Baltic-area stamps submitted for sale or expertization. I was no overnight wonder as an examiner, and I submitted copies of stamps whose authenticity I was unsure of to those I knew were the real experts: people like Vytautas Valantinas, Jerry Norton, John Variakojis, and others. I am eternally grateful for their advice and generosity, as well as for the help and guidance of everyone in the field whom I’ve met, including dealers. Philatelists, in my experience, are always generous with their time.

These days, having looked through well over 100,000 Baltic-area stamps, and retaining nearly 35,000 for my own collection, each recorded by source, date, price paid, and current Scott and Michel value in my own hand-written catalog, I enjoy looking at APS expertization submissions – I did ten just the other day – and finding the inevitable counterfeit Estonian airmails, the poorly produced Latvian counterfeits, the misidentified Memel stamps and counterfeit Harbor issues with fake cancels. It’s like “shooting fish in a barrel” for me -- and still fun. I look at hundreds of stamps and maps each week on eBay, win the

occasional stamp, scold the purveyor of obvious fakes, and add to a growing collection of Memel and Lithuania pre-war picture postcards – I now have a few hundred. I now donate more stamps each year to the APS than I acquire -- material in which I've lost interest: Latvian parcel cards, all my Baltic and Soviet post-WWII covers, etc. I recently received another Lithuanian-area map I purchased online from a New York map dealer whom I know. As of right now, I don't yet need the ceilings to display my maps, and they have the virtue, unlike my stamps, of giving me pleasure every time I walk through my home.

My professional life has been successful: I have now worked at Dun & Bradstreet, a global business information company with \$1.7 billion in revenue, for 11 years, and I'm contemplating retirement. I'm a staff marketing and data processing consultant, consulting to companies from Bank of America to OfficeMax on how to keep their customer data clean and accurate, and how to acquire new customers. A process I devised ten years ago to keep global customer data clean has just been accepted for a patent in the US and in Australia – the application to the European Union is still on hold. It represents a revenue stream of \$180 million per year for my company – not that I get a commission on it! Even Google has finally decided it will use my process on its own customer data. I have been very lucky, and have led a full life: my daughter got married last year to a great guy and is a successful journalist in Washington, DC; my son Simon is an attorney in the New York City mayor's office and loves living in Manhattan; my wife's work is shown all over the country and in Europe:

<http://www.aileenbassis.com/index.html>. I've had the opportunity to accompany her for part of the artist residencies for which she has been accepted: this coming summer she will attend a residency in Barcelona, and next summer, one in Ireland. I'll jump from Ireland and do a single-malt-distillery tour in Scotland, focusing on Islay and its briny, smoky, peaty malts (Ardbeg, Lagavulin, Laphroaig, Bruichladdich, Bunnahabhain, Bowmore, and Caol Ila) which remind me of the smell of the Lithuanian countryside.

And I finally know who I am. It was stamp and map collecting, after all, that led me to send a letter, in March, 1992, addressed simply to "Kapočiūnas, Žiezmariai, Lithuania," stating, „If you're reading this letter, we're probably related: my father was Vincas – perhaps you knew him.“ And through the mail, I found my family in Lithuania. In September, 1996, I made the first of many trips to Lithuania to see the country, my first cousins and their children – with whom I have become very close. When I first set foot on the tarmac at Vilnius Airport, I felt -- for the first time in my life -- that I was home.