

INGRIDA JAKUBAVIČIENĖ

Prezidento SARGYBOJE

Leitenanto
POVILO SKARDŽIAUS
(1912–1992) užrašai



VERSUS AUREUS

Jonas Skardis
REMINISCENCES OF SOFIA SMETONIENE
AND POVILAS SKARDZIUS

My Godmother

I was born in 1950, in the USA, in Cleveland, Ohio. I was blessed to be in a supportive family, with parents, a sister, and a grandmother. Also present, as early as I can remember, was a Godmother. From an early age I was prompted to call her "Mele". When she would appear, there was a special buzz. Often we would be dressed in our best clothes. Sometimes photos would be taken. I was still very young when I got drift of the fact that she was the President's wife.

I never knew the President, but well before school age I knew a great deal about him, about her, and about the context. This was core family information. It partially defined us. I was pleased to have some role to play as a Godchild favored by the famed person, my Godmother, "Mele".

Something that I was very able to pick-up on, even as a young child, was that my father was aglow when she was around.



*Povilas Skardzius and First Lady Sofia Smetoniene
1956, Cleveland, Ohio, Skardis family archive*

Mrs. Smetona seemed to perpetually see me as a young child, even into my teens. Here is a photo of what our relationship was like:



*Jonas Skardis and Godmother Sofia Smetoniene
1956, Cleveland, Ohio, Skardis family archive*

I was special - a focus of her affection. She and I regularly hugged. When I was younger, like in the above photo, we would cuddle for some time. She was sweet to me. She would give me sweets. She would give me money - a quarter here and there, a dollar or more for a name day or birthday. I felt I was never forgotten, always remembered. I still have some of the letters and cards that I have saved from her.



Šis pirms saro mēla, trūksta-
raizis, ir lūnais, kad jo ir. Gļoņas sau-
gots jo nēo nēo pēlto, īsprāyhs di-
nulis gausis, malonis ir, kad nēdusks
jam uānirāts, kad: „lietuvais es-
me mēs gime, lietuvais norime ir
būt.”

Atpaiai būcinojū.

Īare labai mylināti
Mili.

Birželio 24 d. 62 mē.
Klinalandē.

In retrospect, I think I was a surrogate, additional focus for Mrs. Smetona's expression of affection for my father. My father was the age of her oldest son, Julius. Therefore, I was like a grandchild. But, I had no problem with any of it - I liked the love. It was warm and cozy.

It wasn't perfect. She chain smoked. Though I read something about her scandalously smoking Russian cigarettes, what I saw were the American brands Chesterfield and Pall Mall. The cigarettes were always non-filtered. She would break each one in half and insert the finished end into a cigarette holder. She was the only person I knew who smoked with a cigarette holder. I found that very aristocratic and special.

Another feature that interested me, even as a young child, was her skin. It was very, very wrinkled.

What else do I remember about her? She dressed very well. Maybe I saw her in a bath robe on a few rare occasions, but mostly I remember her with a fashionable dress and fashionable yet fairly sensible high heel shoes.

I mostly remember her seated. Oh sure, I remember her upright at times, but I generally think of her as seated. I don't remember her doing much of what we would call housework. That was in the hands of her outgoing and energetic daughter-in-law, Birute. My Godmother would instead hold forth and instruct and order people around from a strategically positioned seat in whatever was the main socializing room.

Her behavior was in some ways similar and in some ways different from my biological grandmother "babule", my mother's mother. Both were very strong women - very strong. Both were very willing and able to speak out strongly in any social situation. My biological grandmother was also able to dress well for such social situations. Both were bossy, with little veneer to soften the bossiness. In social situations, my biological grandmother might speak up strongly here or there, but generally she did not choose to command the room the way my Godmother would. And, there was a class difference. I don't believe this was any irritant or problem for my biological grandmother. The difference, as I saw it, was that my biological grandmother's identity was more tied to excellence and persistence in physical work. Though I had heard of Mrs. Smetona having been more physical here and there back on the Uzugeris farm where she and her husband Summered in Lithuania, her life was mostly tracked to be the First Lady of Lithuania. Later, she was the Exiled First Lady of Lithuania, and always a symbol for all of us in the Lithuanian diaspora, particularly the post-WWII political diaspora. Her work was to be noble, elegant, firm - to represent. She did her work well. She was an icon.

What else do I remember?

Cards! She loved playing cards! Here is a picture from before WWII, of her playing cards with my father.



*Povilas Skardzius and First Lady Sofia Smetoniene
playing cards in 1939, Skardis family archive*

That was long ago in the 1930's, but they never stopped. They kept playing cards for decades. Though they may have played other games, bridge and preferansas were the most common to be played, and they would often play long into the night. It might also be in the recreation room of our basement, with two other men who would regularly participate.

At other times, the marathon card games were at a vacation site that I think was outside of the city near Lake Pymatuning. It was not glamorous. A little vacation house was rented in a lightly forested area well outside of Cleveland. It was a little cooler than in the city. There was a feeling of getting away, perhaps a bit like the get-away she and the President had at Uzugeris, where my father was in charge of security. Anyway, the card playing was ubiquitous, even at this little vacation house where they set up the card table outside in the shade. The participants were Mrs. Smetona, my father, and, in this vacation setting, two ladies who were friendly to me. For my part, I wandered, threw stones, played with a rubber ball and baseball glove, and hunted crayfish in little ponds nearby.

Back in town back then, in the 1950's, the Smetona family lived in a tiny box. Yes, it was a very small and very hot plain, square bungalow. It was one of a large group of very stark, tiny boxes, very unimaginative little buildings, mostly unshaded. I recall how hot it was in the Summer. It must have been a very difficult, small space for my Godmother, with her son Julius, his wife, and their three children.

A bit later, they moved to a much larger home in Cleveland Heights which had once been an upper class suburb, a home of the wealthy. By the time they moved there it was an area that had been declining. It was, nevertheless, a much larger home, more fitting for the First Lady of Lithuania.

Birute, the First Lady's daughter-in-law, was my sister's piano teacher. A main parlor or living room featured a large piano, and that is where my sister received her piano lessons. In retrospect, it seems I was often there hanging out while my sister had her lesson, though I'm not sure why I was brought along - perhaps to just have some additional contact with "Mele" my Godmother.

I was in the youth group of the Ateitininkai, the very active social organization of the Christian Democratic Party, a conservative, moderate right wing party that was just barely to the left of the Tautininkai party, the party of President Antanas Smetona and his wife. This variation in political party affiliations was interesting. It was not a difficult or antagonistic difference, as the Tautininkai and Christian Democrats were historically close allies. Still, I cannot forget my father's lesson to me about the difference. I first heard this important lesson from him when he and I were leaving the Smetona home one dark Winter

evening after dropping Ina, my sister, off at a piano lesson. He then repeated the same lesson to me two other times decades apart. The lesson was this: the Smetona Tautininku core philosophy was "nation first". His philosophy, and that of the Christian Democrats, was "God first, nation second." This meant a lot to him, and sometimes just going to his beloved First Lady's house, stimulated in him to deep thinking about such principles. I just listened. However, I could say that my father undercut that distinction with another deeply felt principle statement that he made to me, his only son. With deep feeling, he said that the greatest thing a man can do is to act for his nationality. I was never successful in fulfilling my father's hope that I would meet that definition of greatness in my life. Now, as you write about Mrs. Smetona, it is at least fitting that I mention how I saw simple social contact with Mrs. Smetona bring out patriotic thoughts of the deepest purposes of life from my father. She also likely inspired many others in a similar manner. I have long seen flaws in nationalism, as it has also been a force that has been the tinder of wars and suffering. I choose to think back at my father's deepest nationalist values, and those of my Godmother, as nevertheless very deep heartfelt values - efforts to define oneself as bigger than one's self, efforts to love and embrace one's whole nation, efforts to grow and become part of a larger collective consciousness.

In December 1968 I came back from college to Cleveland for the Christmas holidays. I was told that my Godmother, Mele, was in the hospital, in serious condition. I was told that it was imperative that I see her. I dressed up nicely and visited her hospital room. I don't remember much about the visit, other than that she was conscious and, as usual, conveyed her special love for me. That was the last time I saw her, as she passed away days later on December 28th.

We are all leaning out for love and we will lean that way forever. Mele loved me, in a love very tied to her affection for my father, who was like a son to her. Though I don't think of her very often, in writing this I find that I miss her.

My Father

Though I was the first of our family to be born outside of Lithuania, it was nevertheless a very Lithuanian setting. We spoke only Lithuanian, in a community of 10,000 Lithuanians in Cleveland, Ohio. In retrospect, we also interacted in largest part with Lithuanians from our wave of political refugees after World War II. An earlier wave of Lithuanian immigrants from after World War I were around, but they were economic refugees who had greater interest in

assimilation into America, and less of a fervent commitment to maintain Lithuanian culture and language.

As a child, I spoke only Lithuanian. But, I watched TV and learned English from 1950's TV shows. Before I began school, we moved away from the inner city to a nearby suburb. It was there that I had my first English-speaking friend, a boy my age who was a neighbor. Suddenly I was speaking English.

My family consisted of my father, Povilas Skardzius, my mother, my sister, and my mother's mother. Living in the same building were other Lithuanian families, another boy my age who was my best friend, and various adults who were like an extended family to me. From my point of view as a young boy, it was all very comfortable and stable. I felt good about my family. I still do.

My father worked a lot. For most all of my childhood, he worked two extra hours of overtime every work day. My sister and I would have our dinner with our mother and grandmother about 4:00 or 4:30. My father would return after 6:00 and eat his own dinner, with my mother serving him and sitting at the table with him to converse.

After dinner, he would have a long, hot bath. After bathing, he was exhausted and went to the basement to listen to baseball. I might join him to listen and converse a bit about our team, the Cleveland Indians.

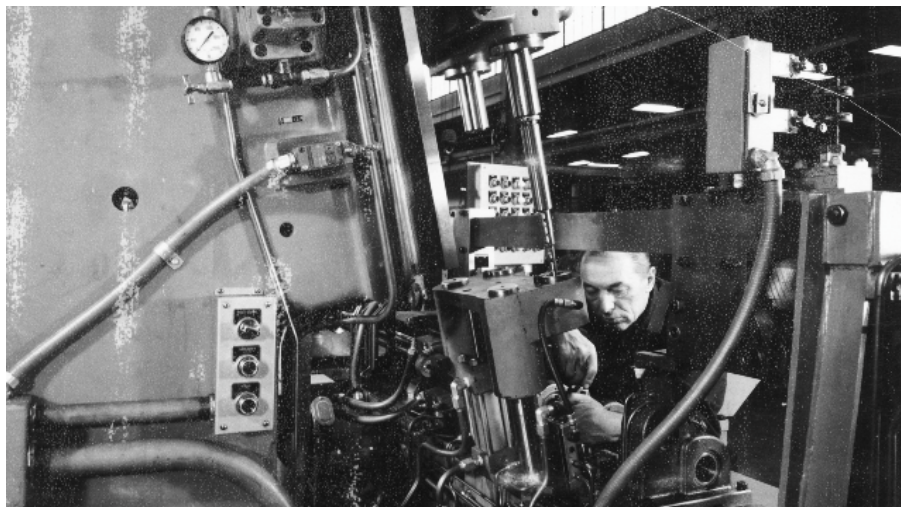
On Saturdays, there might be work to be done around the house. On Saturday evenings there might frequently be some social event in the Lithuanian community. Similarly, Sundays were busy and social. Mass at one or the other Lithuanian parish church was a regular event to look forward to. Socializing followed on the steps of the church, and possibly in the church basement with a bit of brunch. Then, our family may get together with one or two other families at one or another household. For me, this meant being with other Lithuanian kids my age.

From a young age, I was impressed that my father dressed well for church and for all of these social events. He went from humble work clothes to looking very well dressed. It was quite a transformation, and he dressed up and looked sharp visibly better than most men. This visible transformation was evidence to me that he had a whole other side, not justly represented by his factory worker identity during the week. He was most changed when in the presence of Mrs. Smetona, my Godmother. I grew up from a young age experiencing the special bond between her and my father. Starting from an early age, pieces of historical information gradually filled in gaps of my understanding, so that I knew the history, or key parts of the history, even when I was relatively young. I realized early on that my father was a stranger in a strange land, snatched out of another

life that was far more grand. Mrs. Smetona was the peak reminder that his life had been turned upside down by forced escape from Lithuania.

Most Lithuanian fathers of my friends worked in factories. That was the work available. Though it was physical work, in dark, somewhat dirty surroundings, it had its advantages. It was commonly unionized work with decent wages and even a pension. At first, he was just sweeping up and cleaning the floor of the factory. During that early time, the other workers had a worry about the new refugees taking their jobs. My father was called the derogatory name of "DP", short for displaced person. And, supposedly he and others were to some extent beat up. But, they persisted and eventually blended in. The work was not fully secure, and from 1957- 1959 an economic recession led to layoffs. My father was unemployed. My mother worked as a nurse, and my father did what he could. In the Summers, I would walk about a mile and a half with him to the home of a Lithuanian physician to do odd jobs, and then further down the road to do landscaping and other odd jobs for the second home of our sponsors - an industrialist and his wife who my Godmother got to join her as official sponsors for our family.

But, the recession ended, factory activity picked up, and my father got a job in another factory, and then a job to return to the first factory he originally worked in. With time, he rose to the job of an assembler, a technically competent person to put together very large modules of machinery that were to be sent to become parts of assembly lines in other factories making cars or aluminum cans.



*Paul Skardis working as an assembler, late in his years in the Foote-Burt factory
Skardis family archive*

With my grandmother helping out at home, both my parents were able to work and work hard, long hours. They were big savers. They succeeded in

making what would fairly be called a middle class life for our family. We ate well. We dressed well. We were fine, because they worked hard.

Mrs. Smetona passed away in 1968. Life continued for my father.

He had reasons to be happy. Through his hard work and that of my mother, and with their saving habits, we were financially secure enough to live this middle class life. His work and that of my mother were secure, and with good pension benefits going forward. My father and I, like many fathers and sons, found common ground in sports. We were fans together for baseball and other sports, and he supported my participation in sports, particularly tennis. I only understood decades later that back in Lithuania in the 1930's he had at least played against the Lithuanian tennis champion, Vytas Gerulaitis, Sr., whose son, Vytas Gerulaitis, Jr., 4 years younger than me, rose to be ranked 3rd in the world. I became a serious junior tournament and college tennis player, and in retrospect I see my effort guided by unstated hopes of my father. So, my father had many reasons to be happy with the life he made for himself and his family in the United States.

However, I was also long aware of a sad side to my father's life. I always saw the sharply dressed, bright Povilas on the weekends, only to see him exhausted much of the week. Eventually, somewhere in my early teens, I started to judge him as not living up to some potential that I held out for him, or perhaps for myself. I knew that he could be much more politically active and had much to say, but other than a couple of terms as the Chair of the Ateitininkai, no such political activity was forthcoming. Likely from unstated hopes transferred from my father, from later grade school, I began to have substantial interest in world affairs, politics, US foreign policy, civics, and more. I felt such political involvement welling up in me, but that only made me acutely aware that my father did not have the energy or initiative to push in that direction. This enraged me inside, but there was no discussing this somehow.

Why? Because my father, like most fathers of his generation, was hard to talk to. To begin with, he was stuck in his role of the tough, strict, overly moral disciplinarian. It was hard for him to break out of being stern. Many attempts at discussion led to a lecture, which easily turned off my willingness to talk. He, like other dads that I knew of, wanted things done his way. Practically speaking, though, mostly I was under the care of my mother and grandmother.

In the 10th or 11th grade, I recall a particular moment of having an awakening of critical political consciousness. I was actually lecturing about US foreign policy in our high school library when it dawned on me that US foreign policy, particularly in regards to the Vietnam War, may be wrong. That was fine,

but it put me at odds with my father, who was a staunch anti- communist "hawk", or Vietnam War advocate. My sister also had various ongoing issues with my father, and he was staunch in his positions.

Like many sons, I had strong rebellion, and later I had reconciliation. My reconciliation led me at times to act at least somewhat like him with my children. So, major swings in my early adult life were clearly in reaction to my father. It then took me much of my life to sort out my relationship with my father. Decades after his death, I came to some better clarity about my father, and that understanding involved my Godmother.

It came together for me. I saw the two versions of Povilas Skardzius - the bright, social, well dressed Povilas who was at his peak with Mrs. Smetona, and the depressive, exhausted factory worker Povilas. For years in my teens I held this against him, because it put the onus on me to transcend that conflict in my life. It put pressure on me. Only later was I able to detach enough to feel compassion for the tragic outcome of his life. He once had a bright, upwardly mobile exciting life in in which he was friend and confidant to the President and First Lady of independent Lithuania. All that was crushed, tearing him away from his large family in Lithuania, turning him and his little family into homeless refugees. He felt pride about his understanding of the world's classic literature, but he had to sweep the factory floor and take abuse from workers in the factory. He could not go back to his Lithuania for fear of arrest. What a tragic fall!

In the 1980's, spectacular events changed the world and my father's heart. First there were big changes in Poland. Then there was perestroika and glasnost that opened the possibility of Sajudis. This gave my father the courage to return once to Lithuania, feeling that he would no longer be arrested. The resultant heartfelt meeting with his brothers and sisters was a peak moment in his life. But he had a life in the US, with a family he created, a home and a retirement. He returned to the US. The Berlin wall came down. Sajudis continued to grow. The events of 1990 and 1992 in Lithuania clearly made my father's heart race.

Then, Seimas elections in 1992 led to Social Democrat party return to power. Because my father was deeply entrenched as a rigidly positioned anti-communist, this flip-flop of the newly enfranchised Lithuanian electorate was perceived by my father in the worst possible way: as another communist take-over of his Lithuania

There is widespread acceptance of a medical diagnosis of PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder. For many traumatized persons, this may mean a lifetime of high reactivity to activation of old unresolved stresses. My father had been a rising star in the late 30's, in a privileged, meaningful position in the inner

circle of the President and the First Lady. His world tragically fell apart due to the Soviet occupation of Lithuania. His bright, hopeful life came crashing down. Renewed Lithuanian independence in 1990 brought elation to the 77 year old Povilas Skardzius. But the new "take-over" of Lithuania by the former Communists was once again a deep, deep disappointment to my father. Several scientific studies over the past decade have created an understanding that emotional disappointment can, through complex neuroendocrinological mechanisms, cause cardiovascular disease acute events.

About 10 days after the 1992 Seimas elections, my father was raking leaves in front of his nice middle class home when he collapsed and died. The formal cause of death was "complete cardiac arrest". I believe he died of a broken heart.

Jonas Skardis