

# Suburbanites keep Lithuania's freedom fight alive

By Susan Rosiek  
staff writer

Media attention is focused on the Persian Gulf but a small, committed group of young suburbanites from Oakland and Wayne counties are working hard to make sure people don't forget what's happening in the struggle for independence in Lithuania.

"We wish and pray the world would take notice. We want people to be aware of what's going on (in Lithuania)," said Taura Underys, 31, of Redford Township.

Taura and her husband Vitas, 32, a special education teacher in Farmington Public Schools, along with Dana Petruis, 25, of Franklin and Linas Orentas, 28, of Redford Township, were among a group of some 250 Americans of Lithuanian descent protesting outside the McNamara Federal Building in downtown Detroit on Jan. 13.

The group was protesting the Soviet army's attack Jan. 13 on unarmed Lithuanians seeking to keep their democratically elected government from toppling.

More than a dozen Lithuanian citizens were killed and more than 100 wounded when Soviet paratroops

and tanks moved to take control of the radio and television stations and a television signal tower in Vilnius, the capital, according to U.S. press reports.

THE CENTRAL government in Moscow has been pressuring the Baltic republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to nullify the separatist declarations passed last March by their democratically elected parliaments. The three republics, which were independent states between the world wars, were annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940.

The protesters had hoped the demonstration on Jan. 15 — the deadline which the United Nations had set for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait — would serve as a symbolic reminder that aggression is going on in other parts of the world. However, events in the Persian Gulf preempted any media exposure the group had hoped to get.

"We had hoped the eyes of the world would be on those who had something to say about peace," said Orentas, who helped organize the demonstration.

"After all, what's going on in Lithuania and the other Baltic countries is no different than what hap-

pened in Kuwait or Tiananmen Square. It's naked aggression on the part of the Soviet Union," said Orentas, who is an engineer at Ford Motor Co.

The protest started out as a letter-writing campaign but the group quickly decided that wasn't enough and a rally was organized.

THE DEMONSTRATION was organized by the Detroit Lithuanian Organizations Center, an umbrella agency which includes groups that represent other Baltic and Eastern European nations and of which Orentas is a director.

Shoved off the front page when the U.S. went to war with Iraq, the struggle in the Baltic region of the Soviet Union remains of prime importance to local residents of Lithuanian descent.

Although the group hopes and prays for peace in the region's ultimate goal is independence for Lithuania and freedom for Lithuanians.

Group members continue to lobby Congress and the White House to cut off food aid to the Soviet Union, impose economic sanctions, postpone President George Bush's Feb. 11 summit with Soviet leader Mikhail

Gorbachev and recognize the separatist movement in the Baltic states. The United States never has recognized officially the inclusion of the Baltic states in the Soviet Union.

Although none of the members interviewed for this story advocated military action by the United States, they don't see any difference between what Iraq did in Kuwait to what is happening in the Baltic region.

"It seems ironic but anything said or written about Iraq can be easily applied to what's going on in Lithuania. In any newspaper story you can plug in Gorbachev for Hussein and Lithuania for Kuwait," said Petruis, who works at IBM at

Plymouth and spent the 1989-90 school year as a guest student at the University of Vilnius.

Petruis returned to the U.S. last July and described the atmosphere in Lithuania as "very tense and electric in a positive sort of way." At that time, Lithuanians were politically optimistic, said Petruis.

The group is patient and believes economic sanctions can have a major impact.

"THE SOVIET Union is in dire economic straits. Imposing sanctions could really hurt," said Orentas. Group members, however, are disappointed that President Bush hasn't

been more forceful in dealing with the Soviet Union.

"He's been saying a lot but doing nothing," said Underys.

The President's statements are a formality, there must be action to back up words, Orentas said.

Although the Bush administration has denounced the attacks it has taken a mild line on the troop deployment, according to the protesters. And the administration said it still is planning to hold the summit in the Soviet Union in February.

The protesters say they'll continue their efforts to increase public awareness of the Baltic region's struggle.



Discussing ways to keep U.S. citizens informed of what's going on in Lithuania are (from left) Linas Orentas, Taura Underys, and Dana Petruis of Franklin, Zaranka, 25, is Underys' sister.

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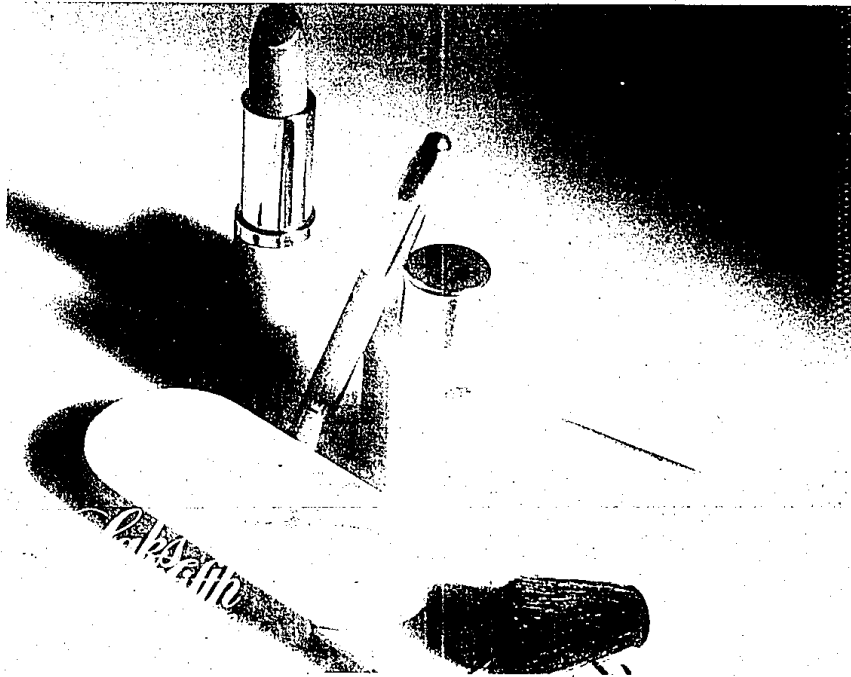
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