Introduction to Lithuanian Genealogy

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Why me?

• All four grandparents and both parents were born in Lithuania
• Relatives include Catholics and Lutherans, as well as some unidentified Ashkenazi
• I grew up speaking Lithuanian and went to Lithuanian school
• I’ve been to Lithuania about 10 times
• My **family tree** now includes 12,341 family members
Factors that will affect your ancestor searches

• **Language:** Lithuanian is one of the oldest languages, and closest to the original Indo-European root language
  - More similar to Sanskrit than any Slavic or Scandinavian language
  - Grammar more similar to Latin and Greek

• **Calendar:** Gregorian calendar replaced Julian calendar in Russian territories Feb. 14, 1918, losing 13 days
  - Most of the rest of Europe changed over in 1752, when 11 days were lost

• **History and geography:** Changing borders and occupying countries will affect the language of your records and where to look for them

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lithuanian:</th>
<th>Sanskrit:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dievas dave dantis, Dievas duos duonos</td>
<td>Devas adat datas, Devas dasyati dhanas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish:</td>
<td>Swedish:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bóg dał zęby, Bóg da chleb</td>
<td>Gud gav tänder, Gud kommer att ge bröd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God gave teeth, God will give bread</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Borders of Lithuania over the years

- Originally many **Baltic languages**: Old Prussian, Curonian, Galindian, Lithuanian, Latvian, etc.
  - Estonia, though called a Baltic country in modern times, is genetically and linguistically closer to Finland
- The tribes were **pantheistic pagans**, known to Western historians mostly for their **amber trade**
- Prussians resisted the Prince of Masuria’s attempt to conquer them; the Prince brought in the “unemployed” **Teutonic Knights** for help
Borders of Lithuania over the years

- In 1230, the Teutonic Knights began their crusade to Christianize the Old Prussian and Lithuanian tribes
  - Old Prussians were massacred; their language became extinct, replaced by German
  - Lithuania fought them for centuries, defeating the Knights at the Battle of Grünwald (Žalgirio Mūšis) in 1411
- Largest country in Europe under the pagan Grand Dukes of Lithuania (yellow area on map)
  - Could explain why your DNA findings may include Balkan blood
Borders of Lithuania over the years

• When Lithuanian Grand Duke Jogaila married Polish Queen Jadwiga in 1386, an early version of the **Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth** was formed

• As part of the treaty, Lithuania officially became Roman Catholic and ended the years of being the last pagan country in Europe (i.e., **few church records before then**!)
Borders of Lithuania over the years

- In 1795 the “final partition” of the Commonwealth awarded most of today’s Lithuania (within the blue border) to Russia, with Lithuania Minor going to Prussia.

- After WWI when Lithuania declared independence from Russia, Poland invaded and took much of Suvalkija and Dzūkija—some church records will be found in the Polish archives.

- Part of the Prussian area became part of Lithuania and part later became Soviet Kaliningrad.
Borders of Lithuania over the years

• During Czarist rule (1795-1918), Lithuania was administered under Russian “gubernias” that spilled across current borders. If your ancestor’s immigration records say they came from Kovno/Kaunas, it’s likely to be from the region, not necessarily the city.

• The **heaviest emigration** out of Lithuania came:
  • After 1861 when the serfs were finally freed; my Sinickas ancestors went to Riga for a few decades before returning 1918
  • In the early 1900s when the Russian army was conscripting Lithuanians to be cannon fodder in their wars
Implications of history on language of church records

• Any church records before 1386 would be for nobility who had converted early to Russian Orthodox Catholicism; they would be written in Cyrillic Russian. Jewish records would be in Hebrew. Possible Lithuania Minor records available in German.

• Starting in 1386, they were likely to be Roman Catholic records written in Latin

• Since virtually all Catholic priests came from Poland, many records started being written in Polish

• After the Reformation, most Protestant ministers came from Prussia, and their records were written in German

• In 1864, Russia banned the use of the Western alphabet so most records were written in Russian, using the Cyrillic alphabet

• Starting about 1918, church records began being written in Lithuanian and continued so through USSR occupation, though most records became civil, not religious
Now, for your new ABČs

Lithuanian includes letters that don’t exist in English:

- Č = CH  
- Š = SH  
- Ž = ZH

Šulčas = Schultz

And some familiar letters are pronounced differently:

- C = TS  
- J = Y  
- Y = EE

Šinickas -- in English might become Shinitskas
Jakštas -- in English might become Yakshtas
Not all family members have the same surname
## Most likely variations for female surnames

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ending of surname</th>
<th>Modern married female version</th>
<th>Archaic married female version</th>
<th>Modern single female version</th>
<th>Archaic single female versions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-as or -a</td>
<td>-ienė</td>
<td>-ene</td>
<td>-aitė</td>
<td>-ate, -ike, -kke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-is or -ys</td>
<td>-ienė</td>
<td>-ene</td>
<td>-ytė</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-us</td>
<td>-ienė</td>
<td>-ene</td>
<td>-iutė</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Old Polish endings:**
- **Maidens:** -owna, -anka
- **Wives:** -owa, -ina, -yna

**Old Germanic endings:**
- **Maidens:** -in

**Russian endings:**
- **Women:** -a
Every noun has seven possible endings (declensions)

• Lithuanian has **no articles**: no “a,” “an” or “the”

• Lithuanian uses **fewer prepositions**: “to the,” “of the,” and “in/on the” are all indicated by a change in the ending of the noun
  • **Implication for genealogy records:**
    “John Vaitkus, son of John Vaitkus” would be written as
    “Jonas Vaitkus, sūnus Jono Vaitko”

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who/What?</th>
<th>dangus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whose?</td>
<td>dango</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To whom/what?</td>
<td>dangam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object of verb?</td>
<td>dangų</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using what?</td>
<td>dangumi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where?</td>
<td>danguje</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hey ___!</td>
<td>dangau</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sky
Versions of common Lithuanian names in different languages

- **Augusta**: Agutte
- **Elzbèta**: Elze, Else, Elske
- **Eta**: Etta, Henriette
- **Lute**: Charlotte, Lotte
- **Madlyna**: Made
- **Margareta**: Gryta, Grita, Grete
- **Marija**: Maria, Mare, Maryke
- **Mina**: Wilhelmina, Vilhelmina
- **Ona**: Anna, Anniike, Ennicke
- **Uršule**: Szule, Schule, Urte
- **Andrius**: Endrus, Endrik, Heinrich
- **Antanas**: Anton, Ansas, Anussis
- **Jonas**: Joannes, Johann, Hans, Jons, Ivan
- **Juozas**: Jozef, Josephus, Iosif
- **Jurgis**: Yuri, Georg, Igor
- **Kristupas**: Xtups, Christof, Christian
- **Martynas**: Mertins, Merczus
- **Motiejus**: Matas, Mateus
- **Mykolas**: Mikkelis, Miks, Mikhail
- **Pranas**: Frank, Franz
- **Steponas**: Stefan
Language transformations affecting surname searches

- **Transcription of sounds:** The sounds of “š” and “č” in Lithuanian might become “sz” and “cz” or “sch” written by Poles or Germans.

- **New endings:** Polish adds a “-wicz” to many names that often became “-vičius” in Lithuanian; Vaitkus might become Vaitkevičius. Names ending in “-skas/-skis/-skus” turn into “-ski,” “-skow” or “-skov” in Polish or Russian.
  - “Szynicki” and “Sinikich” are two ways my surname was written.

- **Prussian names** often ended in “-ait” or “-eit,” as in Schneidereit, distinguishing them from German; Lithuanian versions are now Šneideraitis, Pėteraitis and Kleinaitis.

- **Non-existent letters:** Lithuanian has no “H” or “W.” “Herrmann” became “Ermanis”; Lithuanian “Vanagas” was written “Wanags” in German.
Writing errors

- **Consonant or vowel shifts:**
  Bikneris/Bitneris and Bendiks/Bendigs used interchangeably for the same family; same with Jakszt, Jokzas, Jekszt, Jeksztatis.
  - Different clergy “heard” names differently; parishioners were illiterate
  - Baptisms were sometimes done by non-clergy (a teacher) and the information was transferred on scraps of paper to the clergyman; many errors, including switching names of a parent with a godparent
  - **Track all similar names in research**

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Jons Bikneris, 20, of Poberzen, son of Kstps Bikner
& Else Bendikike, 20, of Alangen, dau of Ensies Bendiks,
Married Aug 1, 1837 in Taurage

Mertin, son of Jons Bittner & Elze Bendigs of Alangen
Born Nov 14, 1843  Bap Nov 17, 1843

Mertins Bikneris of Alangen
& Else Endrejatike of Melaczen
Married Nov 22, 1872  Taurage
Indexing errors

- **Archaic handwriting:** Some indexers do not have a good grasp of archaic ways of writing certain letters, or interpreting them
  - Lower case “s” is often interpreted as an “f”
  - The “sz” combination is often interpreted as a “p”
  - Lower-case “k” often interpreted as “n”
  - Final “t” not always crossed, looks like “l”
  - The Polish lower case “ł” is often interpreted as a “t” instead of “l”
  - Some capital letters could be anyone’s guess!
Search tips to capture all possible variations of endings

• When searching indexed records, **search for the root** of the surname and **add an “*”** at the end to capture all versions of the same surname
  - Marija Bendikaite
  - Mar* Bend*

• If you have seen the vowels or consonants changing in a name you are researching, **use “?”** in place of each non-key letter
  - Jakstas
  - J?ks*
Coming up next: Lithuanian genealogy resources

- Official archives
- Online documents
- Online discussion forums
- How DNA matches can solve tree puzzles
- **Ensuring you found the right relatives** (since the same names were recycled in several branches of families)
Questions?

Type them into the “Chat” box