



TILTAS The Bridge



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CONTENTS

13th January 1991: our Victory Day, by <i>Dr Laima Andrikienė MP</i>	2
Dr Laima Andrikienė was re-elected to <i>Seimas</i> in October 2020. She first entered politics as a member of the independence movement <i>Sąjūdis</i> and was a signatory of the 11 th March 1990 Act of Restoration of Independence. She has served as a Member of <i>Seimas</i> (1990-2000), Government Minister (1996-1998), Member of the European Parliament (2004-2014, 2016-2019). Cover photo: 13 th January 1991, outside Supreme Council building. Photo by A Girdziušas	
The Amber Lady meets the Iron Lady – 1990, by <i>Paul Markevičius</i>	6
Paul Markevičius was the Lithuanian Association in Great Britain's Press Officer in 1990-1991 during the early days of Lithuania's independence movement when international recognition was crucial.	
The British Lithuanian press up to 1990, by <i>Dalia Cidzikaitė and Silvija Stankevičiūtė</i>	9
Dalia Cidzikaitė and Silvija Stankevičiūtė are curators of diaspora publications – the Lituanica collection - at the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania in Vilnius.	
The immigrants, by <i>Janette Holt</i>	12
Janette Holt is a second-generation Scottish-Lithuanian, born in Edinburgh. Until her retirement she worked in the Civil Service. She holds an Open University BA and is a member of the OU Open History Society. She is a long-standing member of the British Lithuanian Society.	
A Brit in Lithuania: <i>An interview with Hannah Shipman</i>	14
Hannah Shipman is an English teacher from the UK. She has lived in Vilnius for seventeen years.	
The phenomenon of stage director Miltinis, by <i>Nomeda Simėnienė</i>	16
Nomeda Simėnienė is community activist, journalist, publicist and publisher, editor and owner of "Kupiškėnų mintys" newspaper. She was a member of the editorial board of the <i>Sąjūdis</i> publications "Sąjūdžio žodis" and "Laisvas žodis". In 2019 she received the Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė "Tarnaukite Lietuvai" award.	
A synchronised step into the unknown, <i>Maria Kielmas</i>	18
Maria Kielmas is an energy journalist and consultant, and a member of the British-Lithuanian Society. She has worked previously as an academic in the field of earthquake engineering, an adviser on earthquake and natural hazards to the reinsurance sector, and as an explorationist in the oil industry.	
Kaunas special-needs school and The Tiltas Trust, by <i>Gintarė Dantienė and Tom Macan</i>	21
Gintarė Dantienė teaches English at the Kaunas Pranas Daunys Education Centre and is also the centre's link person with the Tiltas Trust. Tom Macan is Chairman of the British-Lithuanian Society's charitable arm The Tiltas Trust.	
Horse therapy at Rumšiškės and Pranas Daunys School, by <i>Tom Macan</i>	23
Tom Macan was HM Ambassador to Lithuania in 1995-1998. He is Chairman of the Tiltas Trust and a member of the British-Lithuanian Society.	
Book review: by <i>Maria Kielmas</i>	24
Richard Butterwick, <i>The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: Light and Flame</i> , Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2020	
Books listing: compiled by the Editor	25
Lithuanian and English bird names, by <i>Andy Cuckson</i>	26
<i>Liputis – the treecreeper</i> <i>Vandeninis strazdas – the dipper</i> Andy Cuckson is an amateur ornithologist. Over recent years he has spent much of his time in Kretinga, his wife's home town. He is a member of the British-Lithuanian Society.	
The British-Lithuanian Society	28

Kaunas special-needs school and The Tiltas Trust *Gintarė Dantienė and Tom Macan*

It was in 2017 that The Tiltas Trust (TTT) began to develop a relationship with the Kaunas Pranas Daunys Educational Centre [Kauno Prano Daunio ugdymo centras]. "Tiltas" readers may recall a touching article by our blind supporter Alice Robinson and her friend Sister Marie in Tiltas Volume 19, Number 1. So, who was Pranas Daunys and what does the institution named after him do?

Pranas Daunys (1900-1962) was a pioneering advocate for the education of the blind in Lithuania. He volunteered for the Lithuanian army in 1919, achieving the rank of corporal. During the Wars of Independence he was injured by an exploding grenade, lost his sight and partially lost his hearing. In 1925-1926 he studied at the Riga Institute for the Blind. Subsequently he was actively involved in the work of the Lithuanian Institute for the Blind, and adapted the Braille alphabet for the Lithuanian language. He was a proficient musician, taught music at the Institute and gave public piano recitals. He was also one of the founders of the Lithuanian Institute for the Deaf-Mute.

The Pranas Daunys Educational Centre comes under the responsibility of Kaunas City Council. Initially it was for the blind and partially-sighted but more recently it has extended its curriculum to meet the needs of those with wider developmental issues, particularly those with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). So, today, the centre's mission is to provide an education which meets these children's basic and special needs, to identify relevant areas of development and on that basis, to educate, develop and instil key values, based on individual educational strategies.

176 children of all ages are currently on the centre's roll. 26 pupils are visually impaired, while 150 have a range of ASD, 49 of whom are in the kindergarten.

The centre is structured with:

- A kindergarten, catering for children aged from 2 to 7 split into pre-school and pre-primary education groups;
- A primary school providing education for years 1 to 4;
- A basic school for years to 10, with separate classes for those with visual impairment and those with ASD.

In addition to the teaching staff, the school draws on support from therapists, specialist subject teachers, speech therapists, tiflo-pedagogues [teachers focussed on the needs of visually-impaired learners], psychologists, ergotherapists, rehabilitologists, physiotherapists, masseurs and kinesia specialists.

As well as education, an important part of the centre's work is the provision of social help and health care services for its pupils. Its outreach service provides specialist pedagogical help for children with visual disabilities who are studying at home or in mainstream educational institutions, and to adults who have lost their sight. It also sees a role in

providing methodological and advisory support for all teachers, therapists and parents across Lithuania involved in the teaching and upbringing of children with educational challenges.

The centre attaches high importance to non-formal education. There is a music school within the centre while other activities include sport (swimming pool, expression of movement); art (art therapy, ceramics, folklore); craft; woodwork; and computing.



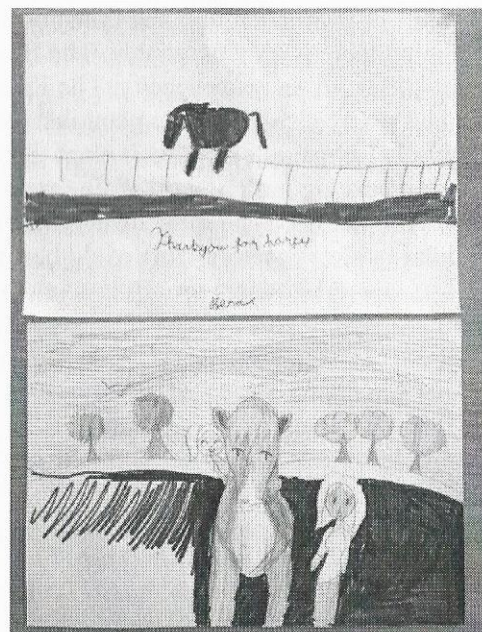
Visitors from England: Sr Marie, Kevin Lonergan and Alice Robinson, 2018

In providing some of these activities, the centre enjoys the support of various governmental and public organizations. Universities and other institutions of higher education are very important, and in some cases their students are able to gain practical experience at the centre.

TTT's initial involvement with the centre was to enable Pranas Daunys pupils to experience therapeutic riding (hippotherapy) and related activities with the horses at Rumšiškės, which the Trust had previously supported with the help of Riding for the Disabled (RDA UK). The first sessions were supported by Alice Robinson.

Last autumn four groups of our children and teachers returned to Rumšiškės for more hippotherapy sessions. In the morning of the first trip the weather seemed really bad but the sun appeared by the time we got to our destination. As the children caught their first sight of the horse, we could see fear, confusion; later, after touching, communicating and the riding horse, smiles and joy. Their parents expressed their appreciation in a letter to the centre: „In the name of all the parents, I wish to sincerely thank your school for organising the hippotherapy. Being with a horse, riding, caressing it, gave our children joy, laughter and fun. Communicating with the horse calmed them,

reduced tension and fear, our children become more self-confident and more independent. From the photos taken by their teacher we could see their smiles, which did not disappear till they got back home that evening. They returned glowing with joy“.



Children's thanks for the horse therapy at Rumšiškės

More recently TTT has been seeking to support work with ASD children. In the UK, the National Autistic Society (NAS) is the leading organisation and the Trust has funded the centre's membership for a three-year period. A particular concern of the teaching staff has been the preparation of the older pupils for „life after school“. They have identified NAS training on „Sex and Relationships Education“ as well-suited to their needs and the Trust is co-funding an on-line training course.

Please visit the centre's website
<https://www.kasuc.lm.lt>

Related articles

- Justina Jazdauskaitė, *Visiting UK Hippotherapy centres*, Tiltas Vol.17, No.1
 Kevin Lonergan, *A visit to Lithuania: Where hope meets heart*, Tiltas Vol.18, No.2
 Sister Marie Tighe, *A retreat with a difference*, Tiltas Vol.19, No.1
 Wendy Howe, *Kaunas Pranas Daunys School*, Tiltas Vol.20, No.1

Horse therapy at Rumšiškės and Pranas Daunys School

Tom Macan

Many Tiltas readers will be aware of the support that The Tiltas Trust (TTT) has given to the horse-therapy programme for disabled youngsters at the Rumšiškės Folk Museum. For some this means actually riding a horse; for others it may be simply being in the presence of horses, helping with grooming or saddling-up, perhaps even mucking out stables.

More recently, the Trust has given specific support to the Pranas Daunys School in Kaunas which originally provided education for the blind/partially-sighted but now is almost entirely focussed on the needs of autistic youngsters. We have been inspired and supported in this by Alice Robinson who is herself blind. In 2018 and in her 88th year, she visited Pranas Daunys and Rumšiškės: Kevin Lonergan and Sister Marie, two friends who accompanied her on this adventure recorded their impressions in the Autumn 2018 and Spring 2019 editions of Tiltas.



Horse therapy at Rumšiškės

At a time when so much activity in both the UK and Lithuania, not least TTT's programme of exchanges, was brought to a standstill by Covid-19, it was immensely encouraging to learn that Pranas Daunys had been able to sustain a number of days of activity at Rumšiškės, particularly for autistic children.

In a recent letter, Lolita Andriuškevičienė (Deputy Director (Education) at Pranas Daunys School) wrote: "I send thanks to TTT from our pupils and

parents. We are very grateful and happy for making this possible." She also enclosed the children's artwork and photographs, some which accompany this article.

Even more touching was a letter of thanks from the parents of one of the children:

"On behalf of all of the parents, I would like to thank the school community and administration for the education that was arranged for hippotherapy.

For our children being next to horses, riding, stroking them gives them joy, laughter, cheerful and happy memories. Being in the vicinity of horses soothes them, reduces tension and fear and leads the children to have greater confidence in themselves and become more independent.

From the photographs that the teacher took, we saw how the children were smiling, how the smiles remained on their faces until the evening, how many overcame their fear and made efforts to ride. The children on their return lit up with joy.

Thank you for the opportunities that you made possible and, even in this difficult time, providing joy and pleasant memories."

Pranas Daunys School has also, with TTT encouragement, entered a small group for the Duke of Edinburgh's International Award. Our understanding is that these are the first disabled children to participate in the award in Lithuania.

To provide further support for the school, TTT has funded its membership of the National Autistic Society (www.autism.org.uk) for a three-year period. We are now investigating with the school and NAS whether the latter might be able to provide training (probably remotely by Zoom) to help the school meet the challenge of preparing older pupils for independent, adult life.