The Fates of Smetona’s Family and Friends

Sofija Smetona briefly but concretely described her family’s life in America in her letter of January 26, 1946, to the linguist Pranas Skardžius:

Tabor Farm reminded me of Lithuania. We lived there about five months \([i.e. \text{in} \ 1941 – \text{ae}].\) We were spoiled and loved. Julius joined us there from Brazil. Fearing lest the war separate us completely, we invited them. When fall came we traveled with Julius to Chicago. We had already received money from Washington, and we could begin an independent life. But neither Mrs. Tūbelis with Marytė, or the Valiušases, nor Julius had found any work, and we alone had to support all of them. With matters standing like this, the money we received from Washington was barely enough. Julius began to look for work and with the help of a Lithuanian factory worker he succeeded in getting into that same factory...in Cleveland. An old, dirty factory, long hours of work, and very low pay.

The first period in the factory was a serious trial for Julius. After about two months alone, convinced that with teeth clenched he can survive that factory, Julius rented an apartment and we all moved to Cleveland. My husband worked very hard all the time. He wrote articles, edited books, traveled around to talk to Lithuanian colonies, and organized societies. Disregarding his years he completely threw himself in Lithuanian social work. He was healthy and had enough drive yet to do much for Lithuania’s benefit. In our second year in Cleveland came the fire. My late husband and I lived on the third floor, Julius with his family on the second, and down below lived a sympathetic Swedish family. The fire began in the basement. Not understanding the characteristics of American construction, we did not understand that in a fire it is not the flame but the smoke and gas that one should fear. I barely got out alive, one could say that that was a miracle, but my husband did not make it and suffocated. That was a terrible blow for us. We are only now beginning to recover from that misfortune. After my husband’s death, Mr. Bachunas took me to Florida. He has a hotel there. I stayed there about three months. Immediately after the fire the Žiuryšes took care of us. Mr. Žiuryš is a chemist and has his own factory laboratory. He married Mrs. Yčas, whose husband died suddenly in Rio de Janeiro.

It is difficult to find apartments in the big cities of America. Julius, after the fire, long searched for some small apartment before finally finding a
small house in a military workers’ colony. We are still living in that house. I do not go out much. There is much work at home – I get tired. There is just one thing I cannot give up – flowers and the garden. Around our little house I planted flowers and plant new ones each spring. In Lithuania under the windows I planted roses….Besides flowers, I grow vegetables. I have a garden not far away. When I sit in the garden and the wind blows, then the corn sheaves rustle like reeds around Lithuanian riverbanks. The summers here are long and most often very dry and hot. What do I do during the day? As needed I watch my grandchildren, wash dishes, wash my clothes, I patch and sew. I clean my room, tend the coal furnace, and go walk with the grandchildren. And I still want to read the newspapers and write a letter or two. There is much work; I cannot complete it all. My innate pedantry forces me to do everything very neatly, and so each job takes a lot of time. There are days when I simply cannot work – I am so tired and any feeling of strength. Maybe I will soon have to travel to Abraham, and I would so like to see the Fatherland again. Will I manage to see that happy hour?

We live very far from the center, away from all the better stores. If it is necessary to shop, travel by bus and trolley in one direction takes up to half an hour. By the time you have shopped and returned, the day is done. When there is a wind, it is impossible to heat our house, and especially my room. There are no servants here, and if you could get one, they are terribly expensive. We cannot afford it. I cannot accustom myself to American life. Always, run, hurry, and when you have run, you have no strength. I love my grandchildren very much, they are my greatest solace and comfort, but unfortunately they often tire me out too much.

The oldest, Antanas Algirdas (we call him Muskis) is very good-looking, intelligent and talented musician. From the other room he can without error tell what piano you are playing. He has perfect pitch, which is very rare. He can already play rather complicated works by memory, and, hearing some melody, he can easily repeat it by ear. He is in the first section in elementary school and speaks English like a real little American. He has played several times in his school, and now he is preparing for a public concert.

The second, Juozas Mindaugas (called “Bukis”), born in Berlin in 1940 is five years old and the real antipode of Muskis. Maybe better looking than little Antanas, but endlessly childish and has no interest in anything more serious.

Birutė Smetona, besides her housework, is teaching her Muskis to play and has two more students who come to the house. She recently had an