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The Heroisation Effect and the Ethico-Legal Considerations Behind the Heritage of *Lituanica*

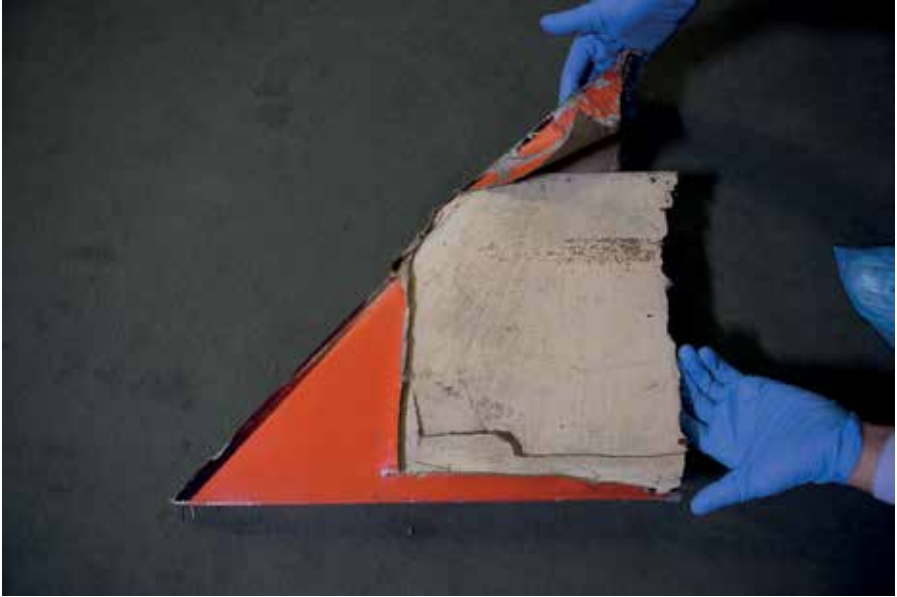
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Heritage: imported and/ or home-made

The scope, the impact, and the popularity of commemoration of the Lithuanian American pilots Stephen William Darius (1896-1933) and Stanley [Thomas] Girch (1893-1933), aka Darius and Girėnas, are considered to be unprecedented in the history of Lithuania and the Lithuanian diaspora. On July 15-17, 1933, Darius and Girėnas flew over the Atlantic Ocean and died in a crash in Germany (now Poland), en route from New York to Kaunas, the interim capital of Lithuania. From then on, regardless of (re-)occurring shifts of ideology and culture, the widespread presence of commemoration of Darius and Girėnas was mostly state-backed, steadfast or expanding (except for the suppression under the Stalinist regime and the early years of Soviet occupation in 1945-1958). Contemporary historiography provided a few, but solid notions of its synergetic sociocultural power, and emphasized political significance which lies in unifying strength.¹ Several studies even contoured the formation of the heroic cult of Darius and Girėnas.²

¹ Egidijus Aleksandravičius: *Karklo diegas: lietuvių pasaulio istorija* [Willow Sprig: Lithuanian World History]. Vilnius: Versus aureus, 2013, 391; Alfonsas Eidintas, Alfredas Bumblauskas, Antanas Kulakauskas, Mindaugas Tamošaitis: *Lietuvos istorija* [History of Lithuania]. Vilnius: VU leidykla, 2012, 173–174.

² Laura Gričiūtė: *S. Dariaus ir S. Girėno kultas: raida ir ištakos* [The Cult of S. Darius and S. Girėnas: Sources and Genesis]. BA thesis, University of Šiauliai, 2011; Aurimas Palaima,



The experimental study to test the 3D-scanning technology for the real scale digital reconstruction of the remnants of the *Lituanica* aircraft, led by the author of this article in 2013-2014, was the first documented independent multidisciplinary exploration of the Vytautas the Great War Museum collection since the official investigation in 1933. The first draft of the digital 3D model was published in 2019 (Sviderskytė. *Lituanica...*). Photo: Eduardas Barcika, Eduardas Silva. Author's archive

Until recently, however, the general tendency has been to give a blind eye to the underlying contradictory trends in the hero-worship of Darius and Girėnas: the popularity of the heroic ideal, the scarcity of the historical facts, and also the unheralded legal inconsistencies and possible ethical controversies behind the material heritage related to the *Lituanica* flight held in Kaunas, Lithuania. How, precisely, does the American origin of the flight relate to Lithuania's possession of the physical remains of

Ieva Judickytė: *Steponas Darius ir Stasys Girėnas istorinėje atmintyje (1933–2013 m.). Įamžinimo sąvadas* [Steponas Darius and Stasys Girėnas in the Historical Memory. Index of Commemoration], BA thesis, Lithuanian University of Educology, 2015.

both pilots, their private belongings and the remnants of the modified *Bellanca CH-300 Pacemaker* aircraft, *Lituanica*? The latest empirical findings suggested that translocation of the remains and remnants from Germany to Lithuania was not entirely in accordance with the pilots' will or with the consent of their families and supporters in the United States.³ It has been a public secret, and finally has become an established fact, that Darius and Girėnas were naturalized American citizens, certified American commercial pilots, and co-owners of an American-registered aircraft: it was acknowledged by the United States Department of Commerce, the State Department, and the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and also provided for by the Memorandum of Agreement by the pilots and by the Indenture between the pilots and trustees.

Combining the archival revelations and the research approach⁴ inspired by the framework for the emerging heroism science,⁵ this article provides further insights into the underexplored aspects of the material heritage of the *Lituanica* flight. This analysis links the heroism discourse in Lithuania with the translocation of the material valuables in 1933 and their subsequent conceptual transformation into the relics of “stuff of dreams” (see footnotes 14–15). The investigation into the effect of heroisation was initially prompted by the idealistic or somewhat dreamy interpretation that transcends the memorial exhibition and the burial place of Darius and Girėnas in Kaunas as well as plentiful memorabilia, popular literature and visual artworks related to *Lituanica*. The methodological approach was shaped in accordance with the remarkable studies on heroes and heroism discourse by the historians, philosophers, and social psychologists Scott Allison, Zeno Franco, M. Gregory Kendrick, Dangiras Mačiulis, Nerija Putinaitė, Phillip Zimbardo, and many others.

³ Gražina K. Sviderskytė: *Lituanica. Nematoma pusė* [Lituanica. Invisible Side]. Vilnius: Aukso žuvis, 2019.

⁴ Gražina K. Sviderskytė: For Whose Greater Good? The Case of Hero-Making: Girch and Darius. *Heroism Science* 1 (2019, vol. 4); interactive: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/heroism-science/vol4/iss1/5> (01.03.2020); idem.: Heroes in Lithuania: Aspect of (De-)Heroization, Case, Approach, *Lietuvos istorijos studijos* 440 (2019), 76–94.

⁵ Olivia Efthimiou, Scott T. Allison: Heroism Science: Frameworks for an Emerging Field, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 58/5 (2018), 556–570.

The archival sources used in this article are related to (a) the pilots' physical remains brought from the crash site in Germany for the state funeral in Kaunas; (b) the pilots' belongings and remnants of the airplane brought to the War Museum in Kaunas; (c) the state and status of these material valuables. They may be grouped as follows: the Memorandum of Agreement by Darius and Girėnas, certificates (purchase, insurance, etc.) of the *Lituanica* airplane and an Agreement of Trustees, the official and confidential correspondence of Darius (1932-1933);⁶ a U.S. State Department special file entitled *Darius & Girch* (1933-1935);⁷ a special file of the Legal-Administrative Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania related to the inheritance of Darius and Girėnas (1933-1937);⁸ the files of the Interdepartmental Committee in Kaunas containing, inter alia, the appendices of an initial German police report (authorized by the Ober-President of Berlin-Brandenburg) and the findings of the Aviation Subcommittee's investigation into the crash (1933-1937);⁹ the files of correspondence between the Lithuanian Embassy in Washington, the Consulate in Chicago, and the General Consulate in New York regarding the historical valuables of the flight (1932-1933);¹⁰ documents of the Foundation and Committee of the flight in Chicago, clippings of Lithuanian and foreign newspaper articles, and miscellaneous documents of the pilots and the aircraft (1932-1933),¹¹ as well as the protocols and materials from the meetings of the Central Committee Bureau of the Lithuanian Communist Party (1957-1964).¹²

The following chapters review (1) the context of the era of aviator-hero and the rationale for the transference of the material heritage of the

⁶ Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture, Darius and Girėnas Collection, Darius's private archive.

⁷ National Archives and Records Administration, RG 59, B 5269, 811.79660M, 1-72.

⁸ Lithuanian Central State Archives, f. 383, ap. 2, b. 132, l. 1-63.

⁹ *Ibid.*, f. 383, ap. 7, b. 1471, l. 1-106. The file of Appendices is held in a private archive undisclosed by the owner's will.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, f. 656, ap. 1; f. 658, ap. 1; f. 663, ap. 2, etc.

¹¹ Vytautas the Great War Museum Archives, G 1354, 6; S 4650-4704.

¹² Lithuanian Special Archives, f. 1771, b. 191; b. 228; b. 234.

flight to Kaunas, (2) the lack of transparency and/ or clarity – unheralded organizational difficulties, legal inconsistencies, diplomatic and political constraints before the flight and after the crash of *Lituanica* – as a catalyst for heroisation, and (3) the cult of power and other distinct features of the heroism discourse in Lithuania. The finalising discussion assesses further applications of the proposed approach.

Chasing the dream: the era of an aviator-hero

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries are justly called the centuries of human flight. Just a few years after the Wright brothers' pioneering heavier-than-air flight in 1903, the author of a book on the history of aviation made a remarkable observation: "No one can foresee the influence of Aviation upon the habits of mankind".¹³ It is still relevant today as no one knows for sure what future holds for humankind in aerospace. The milestone flights and the growth spurt in aviation have been striking: from the Wrights' twelve-second flight to the solo flight of Charles A. Lindbergh ("Lucky Lindy") from New York to Paris in 1927, and to a subsequent boom of aircraft industry and air travel; from the first French aerostat in 1783 with a sheep, a duck, and a rooster on board to the German transatlantic airship service in 1928; from the introduction of a new warfare in World War I to the most technologically advanced air forces and major air campaigns during World War II; then, further on, to the Space Race between the Soviet and American superpowers, the first cosmonaut in space in 1961, and the first astronaut on the Moon in 1969; and onwards, to space exploration and commercialization. Aviation has obtained a special status due to its strategic role in national defence, huge economic impact, and "the link that exists in the minds of many between aviation and national achievement and pride".¹⁴ The history of aviation was "*the stuff of dreams* and has fired the imagination of much

¹³ Alphonse Berget: *The Conquest of the Air: Aviation, Aerospace: History, Theory, Practice*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1911 [revised ed.; 1st ed. in 1909].

¹⁴ Dawna L. Rhoades: *Evolution of International Aviation: Phoenix Rising*. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008 [2d edition], 2–3.

of the world's population" and was "filled with larger-than-life figures".¹⁵ An aviator-hero has become – and on a large scale still is – an embodiment of a new age, a symbol of self-discipline, progress, and perfect order.¹⁶ It can be argued (and partly reaffirmed by the research presented in this paper) that an aviator-hero has influenced the nation-building processes around the globe and formed the social reality of generations – regardless of the actual technological advancement, economic strength, or military power which greatly varied in different states and regions of the world.

Lithuania was among those European states which put their names back on the map in the aftermath of World War I. Lithuania's Act of Independence was signed on February 16, 1918. The modern Republic of Lithuania was born of determination and ambition. The government spared no effort to form and reform the Lithuanian Air Force, and the nation waited with great anticipation for national aviator-heroes. It was hardly a coincidence that in 1927 (right after Lindbergh's ground-breaking transatlantic solo flight and before the 10th anniversary of independence of Lithuania), the Lithuanian émigré press in Chicago spotted a hero candidate: Captain Stephen William Darius was nicknamed "our Lindy" because of his distinct performance in fast air-mail delivery, his participation in the National Air Race, and his public engagement in promoting aviation among the Lithuanian American community.¹⁷ Six years later, "our Lindy" took a daring attempt to fly non-stop from New York to Kaunas. He died in a crash together with his fellow pilot Girėnas, just a few hundred kilometres short of the goal. The glory and tragedy of their flight made the headlines in the foreign media as a sensation and went into Lithuanian textbooks as a defining moment of the modern nation in the making, a national symbol of progress, strength and growth potential.

¹⁵ Ibid. Emphasis in italic by G. K. S.

¹⁶ Fernando Esposito: *Fascism, Aviation and Mythical Modernity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 4–6.

¹⁷ In 1927, S. W. Darius came back to Chicago for a year-long vacation as a Captain of the Lithuanian Air Force. In 1928, he was dismissed from active duty at his own request. He never went back to Lithuania and started a professional career as an American commercial pilot.

It is noteworthy that, until the fatal crash, the flight of Darius and Girėnas was formally unrelated to Lithuania and was perceived as any other flight of the so-called Atlantic Fever: the pilots were duly glorified across the United States and elsewhere as admirable underdogs, daredevils, romantic adventurers and outlaws. A metamorphosis, however, was ultimate and immediate: in less than twelve hours after the news about the crash, the status of patriotic heroes was conferred to the pilots by the Act of the President of Lithuania (*sic!*), and in less than twenty-four hours, the decision of transferring the material valuables was put into action.

With a little help from the diaspora, thus, the Lithuanian nation linked itself to the global spurt of technological development and situated itself within the emerging mythology of the era of human flight. The grandeur of Darius and Girėnas overshadowed the accelerated advance of the Lithuanian Air Force. It also surpassed and outlived the fame of subsequent feats of the Lithuanian and Lithuanian-American aviators – such as the successful flight around Europe of three ANBO aircrafts of the Lithuanian Air Force led by Commander in Chief and chief engineer Antanas Gustaitis in 1934 or Felix Waitkus's solo flight over the Atlantic Ocean with *Lituanica II* in 1935. The legacy and the heritage of Darius and Girėnas was perceived, memorized and commemorated as the ultimate “stuff of dreams”.

Behind the scenes: confusion over the flight and the feat

The archival records of the Vytautas the Great War Museum in Kaunas, which holds the remnants of the crashed *Lituanica* and many other valuables related to the flight, state that “on July 24 [1933], the remnants of the *Lituanica* aircraft as well as the personal belongings and documents of the pilots Darius and Girėnas were brought from the crash site in Germany”¹⁸ (in fact, the first and biggest parcel occupying an entire

¹⁸ Eduardas Brusokas (ed.): *Vytauto Didžiojo karo muziejus 2013 metais* [Vytautas the Great War Museum in 2013]. Vilnius, Kaunas: KAM, VDKM, 2014, 41. Extended description: *Ibid.*, 5, 8–9, 12–13, 15.

railway carriage arrived at the Kaunas train station as early as July 21). A popular narrative similarly implies the inevitability of the state funeral of Darius and Girėnas in Lithuania as if it were a moral imperative: as if their *post mortem* flight from Germany to the *patria* on July 19 symbolized the completion of a heroic feat, and the subsequent two-day ceremony in Kaunas paid a proper tribute to the greatest Lithuania's patriots, the glorious winged Lithuanians.

In fact, to the best of our knowledge, no formal objections were made and no petitions were filed in regard to Lithuania's possession of the physical remains of Darius and Girėnas, the remnants of their aircraft or their private belongings. The problem dwelled, however, in the apparent absence of timely permits. The U. S. State Department officially waived formalities on July 18 – that is, amidst the ongoing process of the dislocation of the remains and remnants from the crash site to Kaunas. Similarly, the pilots' relatives in Chicago and in the vicinity of Kaunas issued *post factum* verbal approvals to Lithuanian officials. The acquisition of the remnants of *Lituanica* and other valuables followed the same pattern. The pilots' Memorandum of Agreement of May 2, 1933, succeeding the Trust Agreement of January 12, 1933, provided that after the completion of a transatlantic flight, the airplane was “to be sold at a private or a public sale, to the highest bidder”;¹⁹ both documents were obtained and disregarded by Lithuanian officials and withheld from the public. Furthermore, in the later aftermath, the Lithuanian diplomats in New York and Chicago acknowledged Darius's hesitation or unwillingness to donate any historical valuables related to the transatlantic flight to Lithuania, and recorded a similar reluctance of his family members in

¹⁹ The Memorandum of Agreement, 2: “In the event both parties agree not to make the return flight to the United States of America then the airplane is to be sold within three (3) months after the arrival to the United States [...] however, with the expressed understanding and provision that the *Lithuanian Government has the first opportunity and option to buy the said aeroplane for the sum of not less than five thousand (\$5,000) dollars*” and upon the return flight to United States – “*not less than seventy five hundred (\$7,500) dollars*” [emphasis by the author]. The Agreement also provided for a division of income and profits from the pilots' writings, articles, etc.

Chicago;²⁰ last but not least, there were notions of some “complicated juridical matter” and “ungrounded claims of the Lithuanian Americans” in the meeting protocols of the Interdepartmental Committee in Kaunas.

If so, why did this shift occur, and how did “theirs” become “ours”? This question not only addresses the American origin of the *Lituanica* flight and Lithuania’s possession of its heritage, but also confronts popular mystifications and conspiracy theories.²¹ The research further shows that the lack of transparency and/ or clarity around the *Lituanica* flight was instigated, inter alia, by (a) initial organizational difficulties and flight plan discrepancies, (b) subsequent institutional confusion, and (c) phenomenal social amnesia.

Darius and Girėnas justly promoted their proposed non-stop flight from New York to Kaunas as a gesture of good faith and homage for their homeland, Lithuania. It started in July 1932 with their first manifesto in Chicago: “We shall fly to Lithuania!” A fundraising campaign was launched and a special pamphlet was printed with the dedication of the flight to “Young Lithuania”. The proposed flight, however, attracted little interest from the Lithuanian government or the media; in Lithuania, Girėnas was a complete stranger, and Darius was just one out of many (relatively known in Kaunas for his volunteer military service and sport activities in 1920-1927). As Darius was among the founders of the Lithuanian Aero Club, in May 1933, the club came up with an idea to organize a friendly “happy landing” welcome in Kaunas; in the meantime, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a formal permission “for the American pilots” to fly over the Lithuanian territory in August (as officially requested by the American Legation in Kaunas). The flight, however, occurred much earlier: when *Lituanica* got airborne on July 15,

²⁰ The Indenture, 4: “in the event of death of either of the beneficiaries, or both, his or their right, title and interest under this Trust Agreement shall pass to the decedent’s heirs at law or whomsoever they may designate”.

²¹ In absence of official comments and due to an inconsistent official investigation into the crash, rumours widely mystified the cause of the crash and mostly blamed Germans for shooting down the *Lituanica*, looting the crash site, and even desecrating or abducting the pilots’ physical remains before sending them over to Lithuania. The “mysteries” affirmed the necessity of translocation of relics and were later exploited in the Sovietized narrative.

1933, hardly anyone – except the pilots themselves – quite understood what it meant. The events took an unexpected turn; but why?

No one in Kaunas, and maybe just a few in Chicago and New York, were aware of the real state of affairs behind the “second-to-none” preparations for the flight. The pilots struggled to reach a compromise on mutual agreement (negotiations may have taken nine months, according to Darius’s diary), coped with public distrust as well as a shortage of expertise and staff in the Foundation and Committee of the flight, and finally, when the last-minute financial and technical complications altered the prepared flight plan and halted the mandatory paperwork, lacked clearance from the U. S. State Department and the Department of Commerce. As a result, they took off from New York defying red tape: without a cleared flight plan, leaving no will, instructions, or even having no insurance. They were well aware and dully informed of the legal sanctions: as professional aviators they risked not only their lives, but also their reputation, future prospects, and wellbeing.²² The flight was a gamble. They ran out of luck.

Some thirty-six hours after the take-off in New York, *Lituanica* was spotted over Berlinchen (now Barlinek), and later was observed in the vicinity of Soldin (now Myślibórz), crossing the lake at a very low altitude and disappearing over the treetops of the Dölziger Stadt Forst – presumably, in the final attempt at forced landing. In the early morning of July 17, 1933, the news about the unexpected flight and fatalities astounded the German institutions as well as foreign diplomatic missions in Berlin. While the American General Consulate telegraphed the State Department expecting the requested “immediate action” in Washington, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Lithuanian Embassy in Berlin proposed a state funeral of the pilots in Kaunas. In the immediate aftermath, presumably under a verbal agreement of the American and Lithuanian representatives (as the official instructions from State

²² Amendment to the Air Commerce Regulations, Section 36, “Foreign Flight”, (B): “Aircraft and airmen licenses may be suspended or revoked for failure to secure prior authorization for foreign flight or for operating in violation of the terms of such authorization” (Important Changes in Air Laws, *Popular Aviation* 5 (1933, vol. 12), 287).



Memorial exhibition of *Lituanica* on display in Vytautas the Great War Museum, Kaunas. Before 1940. Courtesy of Vytautas the Great War Museum

Department to the American General Consulate were pending), the pilots' physical remains and their personal belongings as well as the remnants of the aircraft were removed from the crash site and prepared to be transported to Lithuania. After the state funeral, hasty official investigations into the crash of *Lituanica* in Berlin and Kaunas, as well as significant drawbacks in main commemorative initiatives (hampered construction of memorial exhibition and mausoleum for embalmed remains, postponed creation of monument and cancelled monograph in Kaunas) raised concerns of the pilots' relatives in Chicago as well as numerous Lithuanian-American organisations. After two consecutive years of their relentless efforts, partly due to the limited political reach and influence in Washington and especially in Kaunas, no further steps were undertaken to dispel doubts, disbelief or distrust. The main centre of collective memory and commemoration shifted permanently to Kaunas.

Demonstrably decisive actions of Lithuanian officials were, in fact, an expedient impromptu response to the multi-layered crisis. However, these actions had a profound persuasion effect on the general public. Even Lithuanian Americans who were better informed about the prelude got confused by such a grand finale: from then on, they frantically accused the Lithuanian government of withholding financial support and, thus, pushing the pilots into risk (as if official Kaunas would have been formally involved into preparations for the flight); this hint of plot merged with a cumulative tale about Nazi conspiracy, “the mystery of the Soldin forest”, as it was famously labeled in Petras Jurgėla’s bestseller *Darius and Girėnas* (Chicago, 1935). Confidentially, Lithuanian diplomats in Chicago, New York and Washington as well as Lithuanian officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had acknowledged the discrepancies underlying the transference of valuables and growing confusion, and agreed to suppress the sensitive documents, hoping to minimize public discontent and to prevent a further escalation of the “mystery”;²³ but their strategy utterly failed. Twenty-five years later, Soviet ideologists picked up on the “mystery”: the imagery of the greedy Lithuanian bourgeoisie, ruthless Nazi shooters, and poor working-class sons, fighting their way back to Motherland through storms and bullets matched well with a propagandistic discourse during the Cold War and the Space Race. The “mystery” was at core of the re-opened memorial exhibition in 1958 and the final (re-)burial of the pilots’ embalmed remains in 1964 and 1968. The so-called rehabilitation of national Lithuanian heroes was exploited, inter alia, to camouflage the persecution of dissidents in Lithuania, and, finally, was turned against the “reactionist” émigrés in the United States.²⁴

²³ The German ambassador to Lithuania Wilhelm Zechlin manipulatively kept pressing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania to stop “wild rumours” around the cause of the *Lituanica* crash; two years later, the U. S. State Secretary Cordell Hull wrote to the White House in Washington that the fact that crash has been “the subject of much controversy throughout newspapers around the world” was an “objectionable factor” in the case of *Darius and Girėnas*.

²⁴ Full analysis of “discovery” of the concealed embalmed remains of the pilots, their burial and a decade-long “rehabilitation” under control of the Lithuanian Communist Party and KGB: Sviderskytė: *Lituanica...*, 335–366.

In summary, the chain of legal inconsistencies, diplomatic and political constraints and ethical subtleties could be defined in just a few words – as American private property of Lithuania’s public heritage in a complex historical context. In public, however, it was never discussed – except, perhaps, one instance: in a eulogy of July 19, 1933, an attorney and chair of the Society for the Support of Lithuanians Abroad Rapolas Skipitis asserted that the remains of the pilots and the relics of the *Lituanica* flight were “a gift” of the Lithuanian Americans to Lithuania. Darius’s mother and sisters and Girėnas’s brothers in Chicago, thus, were the first among the most generous Lithuanian Americans. Amidst all asperities of the Great Depression, they coped with grief in proud solitude, only making polite inquiries, and neither favouring the conspiracy nor demanding compensation for the property which they substantially sponsored with their generous donations. They were unsung heroes. Considering the tendencies of heroisation (as reviewed in the next chapter), however, it is hard to predict if they will ever get to be at the centre of our stories and memorials.

Contradictory trends: from progress to inertia

At least three contradictory trends or paradoxes can be observed in the heroisation of Darius and Girėnas: symbolism of progress vs a narrowed and stagnant conceptual framework for “proper” patriotism, dominance and inertia of the century-old nationalistic heroic cult.

In theory, the case of the heroisation of Darius and Girėnas could be remarkably complex due to the ascription of the heroic status to individuals (heroes as persons) and to their actions (heroism as behaviour);²⁵ accordingly, it would imply a twofold transformation of the heroic image of the pilots and their transatlantic flight and tragic death. In practice, however, the dominating discourse offered a simplification. With rare exceptions, the focus is narrowed to the heroes as embodiments of national

²⁵ “Separating these phenomena would disabuse us of the illusion that all heroes are made of acts of heroism” (Ruth M. Curry: Achilles and the Astronaut: What Heroism Humanities Can Teach Heroism Science, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 58/5 (2018), 574).

patriotic ideal and their death as a pinnacle of patriotism. Heroic imagery and story are framed by and focused on patriotism and martyrdom. The flight is perceived as self-sacrifice to the Motherland or, less decisively, a (somewhat) world-class record. Rarely, if at all, it is contextualized and conceptualized as a technological endeavour which required a complete range of expertise and practical skills, including meticulous planning, extensive collaboration, coordination and communication.

It could be argued that, among other factors, the nationalistic cult of power was behind this conceptual narrowing of the *Lituanica* flight and the pilots' feat. In 1928-1930, the 500th anniversary of the death of Vytautas the Great (a ruler of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania) was celebrated with unparalleled support of the autocratic government of the Lithuanian Nationalist Union. The imagery of Vytautas the Great epitomised a heroic ideal: the Great Lithuanian, a colossus of the national spirit, and his ultimate sacrifice to the *patria* and the nation. Little was said or few wondered, thus, what language Vytautas the Great or Girėnas spoke, and what Darius truly aimed by his endeavour to fly twice (*sic!*) over the Atlantic Ocean – to Lithuania and back to the United States. First and foremost, the heroes embodied “proper” patriotism.

The cult of power remained deeply invested in the heroism discourse and cultural memory for decades, one of the reasons being disruptions in institutionalization or professionalization of the history science and the Sovietization of the history discourse. The clichés of the nationalistic as well as sovietised cult of power prevail until this day. The ideological charge remains obvious and unaccredited, unexplained in the display of remnants of the *Lituanica* aircraft and at the burial place of Darius and Girėnas in Kaunas – accordingly, at the Vytautas the Great War Museum and the Aukštieji Šančiai soldiers' cemetery. Notably, both sites are traditionally linked to the Lithuanian history of aviation; but if the Lithuanian history of aviation has ever truly mattered, the interest must have been quite odd: it took thirty-five years to bury Darius and Girėnas' embalmed physical remains, sixty years to build a monument to their flight in Kaunas, and eighty years to explicate the inventory of their aircraft's remnants (which, until present day, remain scientifically

unexplored); moreover, eighty-eight years later, there is still no proper memorial for the better prepared and executed ANBOs flight around Europe or transatlantic flight of *Lituanica II*²⁶ in Lithuania. The complete biographies of Darius and Girėnas have also never been published.

Even in the 1990s and onwards, when heroic cults and ideals were reviewed and reintroduced, the memorial exhibition and the burial place of Darius and Girėnas in Kaunas remained somewhat neglected sanctuaries of the winged Lithuanians, the untouchable “stuff of dreams”. More recently, in the 2010s, this inertia conflicted with the next cultural shift. In Western culture, this shift has been observed since after World War II and is known as “post-heroism”; in the post-heroism era, heroes have become, obviously, distinct rather than extinct: as “traditional heroism – single combat, martyrdom, discovering unknown lands, revolutionary iconoclasm – is in short supply, and super heroes do not exist”, this “shortage” of ideals gives an impulse to a more egalitarian, non-conformist, post-modern anti-hero.²⁷

During the celebration of the 80th anniversary of the flight of Darius and Girėnas, discrepancies between the inertia and backwardness of the heroic cult caused a significant confusion, but quickly dissolved (as if) unnoticed. In 2013, the memorial exhibition (opened in 1937, reopened in 1958, and renewed in 1983) was moved into a smaller hall; it shared the space with another collection and was squeezed into a round-shaped glass case.²⁸ Contrary to the grandeur of the previous display, the new one was tightly packed to be grasped at a glance – more like a collection of artefacts with assigned inventory numbers, rather than majestic relics

²⁶ Regardless of his triumphant reception in Lithuania after his flight, the pilot of *Lituanica II* Felix Waitkus has never become a popular national hero; the *Lockheed Vega 5B* aircraft (damaged during an emergency landing in Ireland) was brought to Kaunas, purchased by the Lithuanian government for a solid price, and then used for meteorological observations at the Air Force instead of enriching the national heritage of flight. More on the juridical and financial aspects of the purchase of *Lituanica II* in: Sviderskytė: *Lituanica...*, 320–321.

²⁷ M. Gregory Kendrick: *The Heroic Ideals: Western Archetypes from the Greeks to the Present*. Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland & Co, 2010, 200.

²⁸ The emptied hall in the Vytautas the Great War Museum in 2013 hosted a new exhibition “The anti-Nazi and anti-Soviet resistance in Lithuania in 1941–1953”.

with ascribed deep meanings. Thirteen aviation veterans filed an official complaint to the Minister of National Defence: their letter stated that the “installation” demonstrated “incompetence” and “disrespect for history”, and questioned if the Museum was the right place to exhibit the relics properly and to pay tribute to the national heroes (obviously, the letter itself reflected a conceptual conflict between the exhibits as sacred relics and sources of research and historical knowledge).²⁹ No further actions or reactions followed; most likely, the discussion was withheld as inconvenient. The alterations made to the exhibition, however, could be an integral part of a broader cultural shift; it was one out of many disruptions of rituals of commemoration and traditional forms of remembrance. The altering of the heroic ideals and the linger or decline of heroic cults has been an underlying tendency for more than a decade in the Lithuanian media, visual arts, and literature.³⁰ But it still remains to be properly accredited and coherently explored.

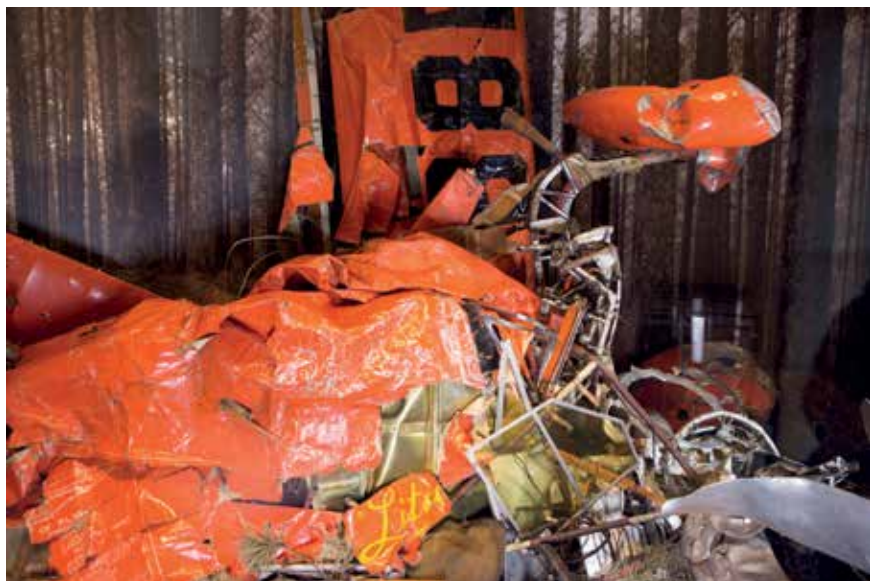
Future prospects: the same heritage, new stories?

A closer examination of the material heritage related to the *Lituanica* flight reveals several distinct features of the heroism discourse and cultural memory in Lithuania. In less than a decade, Lithuanian scholarship cumulated substantial knowledge about the case of Darius and Girėnas. The integration of the scholarly discussion into the public discourse and commemoration activities, however, constitutes a daunting task for academic as well as non-academic circles; in the interim, the inertia of an almost century-old tradition – with a heroic narrative at its core – perseveres as if unaffected.

The legacy and the heritage of the *Lituanica* flight have inspired and empowered generations of Lithuanians as the ultimate “stuff of dreams”. However, the status of material valuables as relics (the consistency of preservation of which have raised serious concerns), was illusory or ambiguous and has limited or blocked scientific explorations, depriving

²⁹ A copy of complaint was obtained privately by the author.

³⁰ Sviderskytė: *Lituanica...*, 367–378.



The current view of the *Lituanica* exposition at the Vytautas the Great War Museum. After the experimental study *Lituanica-3D*, there were no further attempts to launch an in-depth investigation into the aircraft remnants. This state of knowledge was partly predetermined in 1933 when the Lithuanian officials declined an offer of the American mechanic of the *Lituanica* aircraft to inspect the wreckage and showed little interest to get the mechanical drawings from the American designers or the critical primary records from the crash site and other accident data from the German investigators. Photo: Eduardas Bareika, Eduardas Silva. Author's archive

millions of people of considerable historical knowledge. It is important to acknowledge that even if the transference of the material heritage of the *Lituanica* flight to Kaunas was instigated by an idealistic impulse as well as a slightly misperceived moral imperative (to bring *our* heroes *home*), the subsequent long-term conceptual shift and alignment with the nationalistic cult of power was also determined by a set of ideological necessities, unforeseen and unresolved legal issues, as well as political and diplomatic constraints. The dislocation of the centre of commemoration from Chicago to Kaunas was influenced, inter alia, by the political disengage-



Kazys Venclovas, *Darius and Girėnas*. 2008. Iron, 308 × 316 × 8 cm. Photo by Kazys Venclovas

ment of the U. S.-based Lithuanian diaspora and the overall diaspora discourse in Lithuania, by reoccurring disruptions in the development of the history science, and strong inertia in the heroism discourse.

The main underlying paradox in the researched case was that, under less complicated circumstances, in the regime-free and ever-changing sociocultural environment, heroisation is a dynamic process rather than a fixed state of affairs: it is continuously revised, transformed and transforming. The heroisation of Darius and Girėnas, however, was much rather fixed than naturally evolving. The hero-worship of the pilots of *Lituanica* was supposedly based on the universal idea of progress,

strength and growth potential, but, in fact, it was framed by and aligned with the stagnant and inert nationalistic ideal of “proper patriotism” and, thus, safeguarded from change and development. Accordingly, the material heritage related to the flight was phenomenally worshiped and at the same time neglected or ignored.

An on-going cultural shift may signify a further decline of ideologically charged heroic ideals and a transition from the cult of heroic personalities towards the popularity of heroic behaviour – less triumphant, more egalitarian, even banal heroism.³¹ Old-fashioned chivalry, dandyism as well as martyrdom will evolve into the realm of a less predictable, non-conventional, down-to-earth everyday hero.³² What to expect when heroes step down from pedestals as imperfect human beings? What stories will heritage tell when explored from the perspective of contemporary heroism studies? If science based knowledge and intellectual discussion, instead of the “mystery” or conspiracy and cult worship, will transcend our commemorative activities, exhibits and memorials, what will they look like? The possibilities seem endless.

The ongoing discussion on heroes and the heroism discourse in the humanities and social sciences in Lithuania, aligned with the emerging transnational and transdisciplinary heroism subject, opens up new prospects to explore the *Lituanica* heritage. It may offer a unique opportunity to return a debt of honour to the Lithuanian Americans for their gift to Lithuania, to raise awareness, educate the public on historical knowledge, and also to promote and advance the development of the Lithuanian history of aviation as a field of study. With the current pace and scope of scholarly contributions, there is a real possibility that the abiding questions and concerns about the *Lituanica* heritage can be revisited and respectfully resolved in the foreseeable future, before the 100th anniversary of the *Lituanica* flight.

³¹ The concept of the “banality of heroism” (as opposite to the idea of “banality of evil” introduced by Hannah Arendt) was introduced by social psychologists: Zeno E. Franco, Phillip G. Zimbardo: The Banality of Heroism, *Greater Good* 3 (2006), 30–35.

³² Scott T. Allison, George R. Goethals, Roderick M. Kramer (eds.): *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Gražina Kristina Sviderskytė

Lituanicos materialiojo paveldo teisiniai bei etiniai aspektai
ir heroizavimo efektas

Straipsnyje aptariami jautrūs teisiniai ir etiniai aspektai, susiję su Kaune saugomu transatlantinio *Lituanicos* skrydžio materialiuoju paveldu, lakūnų asmeniniais daiktais ir ypač lėktuvo liekanomis. Šių vertybių pargabenimas į Lietuvą iškart po 1933 m. liepos 17 d. Vokietijoje įvykusios *Lituanicos* katastrofos, jų reikšmė ir vyraujanti samprata nagrinėjama heroizmo diskurso ir besiformuojančių heroizmo studijų (angl. Heroism Science) kontekste. Gretinant naujausius archyvinio tyrimo duomenis ir tradicinę herojinio naratyvu grindžiamą paveldo interpretaciją, sprendžiamas klausimas: kaip amerikiečių privati nuosavybė virto Lietuvos viešuoju paveldu, ir kodėl jai prigijo veikiau relikvijos nei tirtinos istorinės vertybės statusas? Svarstomi trys etapai, kuriais reiškėsi heroizavimo įtaka: 1) prielaidas kūrė pasaulinis technologinis progresas, aviatoriaus įvaizdis nacionalinio herojaus diskurse ir patriotinių idealų steigtis Lietuvoje; 2) po katastrofos vertybės į Kauną perkeltos skubos tvarka, be aiškios strategijos, tik oficialiai suteikus lakūnams tautinių didvyrių statusą; 3) perkėlus vertybes, kolektyvinė atmintis susitelkė Kaune, ir herojinį idealą bei relikvijų statusą lėmė tautininkų, vėliau sovietų ideologiniai kriterijai. Kaip inertišką paveldo sampratą ir būklę įtakos heroizmo studijos ir diskurso kaita, mokslinis pažinimas ir atminties kultūros raida? Heroizavimo aspektas *Lituanicos* įvairialypę problematiką įtvirtina dar platesniame tyrimų lauke.