

# Caught up in Lithuania upheaval

*Woman with dual citizenship educates others about changes there*

By Stephanie Brommer  
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SANTA MONICA — In the past year, Daiva Venckus has seen Soviet tanks rolling down Lithuanian streets, the unfurling of a national flag and the economic woes facing an independent nation converting from communism to democracy.

Last week, the Santa Monica native took a break from history in the making, returning home to spend the holidays with her Lithuanian-born parents who were forced from the country during World War II.

"It's been like a time warp," said Venckus, 25. "It's like I never left, because everything is the same. In Lithuania, it's changed 360 degrees several times. I feel like I've aged 10 years in one year.

"It's kind of comforting to come home to the same old thing," she said.

Since arriving in Lithuania on Jan. 15 — two days after Soviet tanks took over the nation's streets — Venckus has joined the Lithuanian reform movement and plunged into the thick of the Baltic nation's independence struggle by helping to disseminate information to the world's media.

She recalls curfews, tanks surrounding television towers, economic blockades, food lines, independence rallies and working non-stop giving interviews to Cable News Network, National Public Radio and British Broadcasting Corp. during the aborted Soviet coup Aug. 19-21.

"Overall, things were completely intense," she said.

Editor of the information department for the Supreme Council of the Republic of Lithuania, Venckus, a 1990 political science graduate from Loyola Marymount University, is committed to human rights and the freedom of her parents' homeland.

Trying to make up for what her family lost when forced out of Lithuania by the Soviets, she became a dual citizen of the United States and Lithuania in July and is unsure how long she will reside in the Baltic nation.

Venckus said her American values help her serve as a role model — she shows up at work on time and every day and tries to be helpful and polite.

She has had a lifelong interest in Lithuania. Her first language was Lithuanian, and she regularly attended Lithuanian cultural events and "Saturday School" at her church, St. Casimir Lithuanian Catholic Church in Silver Lake.

"Of course I rebelled and didn't want to go to Saturday School but hang out with my friends on the beach," said Venckus, former president of the Lithuanian Youth Association of Los Angeles. "When Lithuania declared its independence, I realized that being Lithua-



Kim Kulish/Daily News

Lithuanian-American Daiva Venckus has returned to America after a visit to Lithuania to see the changes engulfing that nation.

nian in terms of my identity is more than singing Lithuanian songs, dancing Lithuanian dances and reading Lithuanian poetry.

"I grew up with an identity of a country that didn't exist," she said. "Finally we've made it on the world map."

She proudly holds up the red, white and blue American flag and the Lithuanian flag featuring stripes of yellow standing for wheat fields, green for countryside and red for the blood spilled for freedom.

"I'd rather be there. There's nothing I can do here," Venckus said.

"My goal is really simple — I want to do the most I can to fight for human rights," she said. "I don't see myself in the future just sticking with Lithuanian causes. There's a whole world out there."

With the recent upheaval in the Soviet Union, Venckus is keeping a watchful eye on current events. With up to 90,000 Soviet troops still in Lithuania, she is worried about who will control the military if there is another coup or a civil war.

Environmental and economic issues also are gripping Lithuania as it tries to embrace capitalism, she said.

The tiny nation of 3.7 million people is sitting on the verge of economic chaos, she said. A pair of shoes cost 1,200 rubles while the average worker earns 1,000 rubles a

month, she said. A car costs the same as buying an apartment. Gas is a scarce commodity.

The pollution of rivers and destruction of forests are high in Venckus' mind. Another issue is the government's move toward being a nuclear-free zone, she said.

Churches, forbidden under 51 years of Soviet Communist rule, are being restored.

Since the euphoria of political freedom granted Sept. 6, Lithuanians now are working to understand what it means and what their roles are, Venckus said.

"They're learning to focus more on their individual self rather than being a collective society," she said. "We have full 100 percent political freedom, especially since being admitted into the United Nations in September, and we're delving into the spiritual part of freedom."

Venckus, in the business of educating others about Lithuania, has come full circle: As a youth, she often educated acquaintances about the country.

Her teachers insisted Lithuania didn't exist because it was annexed by the Soviet Union. But she would point out rivers and other markers of Lithuania on the map, she said.

"Nobody knew what Lithuania was. They'd ask, 'Is that a religion?'" Venckus recalled. "Growing up, I thought it would be easier to be French or Italian. But it's not so bad being Lithuanian."