

Lithuania independence day

1,000-year history affirms Lithuania's place in Europe

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It is my pleasure to address the readers of The Japan Times on this historic occasion — Lithuania has just entered the second millennium of its history. I am confident that this memorable anniversary is a great opportunity to look back at the past of our country and reflect on its identity as a European state.



“In the year 1009, St. Bruno, also known as Boniface, archbishop and monk in his 11th year of conversion, was struck in the head by pagans at the border of Rus and Lithuania,

and along with 18 of his brethren entered Heaven on the seventh day before the Ides of March.”

This is an excerpt from the Annals of Quedlinburg, which were written in the 11th century in the convent of Quedlinburg Abbey, Germany. Although the mission of St. Bruno to baptize the pagan King Netimer had a sad ending, nevertheless these annals contain the first recorded mention of Lithuania, which takes us 1,000 years back.

So let me reflect on the key moments of the Lithuanian nation and state. In 1253, Grand Duke Mindaugas was crowned as the first and only king of Lithuania. An important turning point in Lithuanian history was the coronation of Grand Duke Jogaila as king of Poland at the end of the 14th cen-

tury, which led to the Christianization and Europeanization of Lithuania.

Grand Duke Vytautas the Great was undoubtedly the most famous of Lithuania's rulers. Under his rule, the country's military union with Poland led to the overwhelming victory against the Teutonic Order and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, reaching the peak of its power in the first decades of the 15th century.

In 1569, the Union of Lublin united the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland into a federal republic of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. However, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania ceased to exist in 1795, when Russia, Austria and Prussia

divided between themselves the remaining territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth for the third time. Thus the larger part of the former Lithuanian state was ceded to the Russian Empire.

Since then, for well over a century until 1918, Lithuania existed neither as a political nor as a geographical entity. It was a dark period in its history, with the continuous attempts by czarist Russia to suppress the national identity of the Lithuanians. However, in the latter part of the 19th century, Lithuania experienced a national revival that laid the foundation for a modern state.

During World War I, Lithuania was occupied by the German Army, but the Lithuanian state was restored in 1918 and

became a republic. In 1939, the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed by Germany and the Soviet Union divided Central and Eastern Europe into two areas of influence, and Lithuania fell to the Soviet occupation a year later. In 1990, after 50 years of Soviet control, Lithuania re-established its independence. Since then, Lithuania has made great progress in restoring its international role as an independent state. And it entered a new era in 2004 when it joined the European Union and NATO.

Despite the whirlpools of its dramatic history, Lithuania was and continues to be an integral part of Christian Europe, and the history of Lithuania was and continues to be the history of encounters, links and dialogues with other European

peoples, states and cultures. Therefore it is no coincidence that along with the commemoration of the millennium of the state, the Lithuanian capital Vilnius bears the name of the European Capital of Culture together with its Austrian partner city of Linz.

“Culture Live” is the title and the ambition of Vilnius — European Capital of Culture 2009. Divided into six themes (special projects, conventions and conferences, European art program, culture (re) discovery program, live history program, people program), the national program “Vilnius — European Capital of Culture 2009” aims to promote dialogue and tolerance in Europe, and in other parts of the world. It also strives to elevate culture as a virtue in modern society and

the driving force in city development, which will distinguish Vilnius as one of the most modern and dynamic cities in Central and Eastern Europe, known in the world as a contemporary cultural center, and one with a unique and apparent identity that is open to new ideas and investments.

For the whole year, the streets of Vilnius, squares, museums and art centers, theaters and concert halls will

turn into a huge arts platform for about 900 events that will involve not only professional local and international artists, but the citizens and guests of Vilnius as well. A participant or just a spectator, everyone is expected to add a touch of originality and warmth to the program. So I invite you to visit Lithuania during this memorial year and experience the vital celebration of creativity, making Culture Live happen!

Congratulations
on the Independence Day of
the Republic of Lithuania



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