

With liqueur and pride, Lithuanian Hall marks its 100th anniversary

Gathering place stands as
a bastion of Baltic culture

BY IAN DUNCAN
The Baltimore Sun

The traditional honey liqueur was flowing early Saturday afternoon, handed out in little cups and commemorative bottles, as Baltimore's Lithuanian community assembled to celebrate the centenary of the Lithuanian Hall.

Maryte Ludwig, the hall's president, buzzed among the crowd of 200 or so guests who filled the main hall. Its stage adorned with crossed American and Lithuanian flags. The bright winter sun filtered in through lightly frosted windows.

"This is our grand meeting place," Ludwig said, proud that the Lithuanians still have a hall after so many others have fallen into disuse.

The celebrations were scheduled to go late into the night with speeches, feasting and dancing and plenty of that honey liqueur, which is called Viryta and is said to have been drunk by Lithuanian kings.

Lithuanians began establishing their slice of the Baltic in Baltimore in the late 19th century and founded the Lithuanian Hall Association in 1914 so they could have a permanent place to meet.

In 1916 the association began buying up the property that now houses the hall two three-story row houses at 851 and 853 W Hollins St. that underwent major renovations, according to a history of the hall passed out to guests.

The Lithuanian Hall formally opened near the end of February 1921, with a month long celebration of banqueting, plays, music and sports marking the occasion. For years, the association struggled with shaky finances and only paid back the last of the \$47,000 it borrowed to build the hall in the 1970s.

The hall, a favorite watering hole of film director John Waters, came to be known as the home of the Night of 100 Elvies impersonator contest and trendy dance parties including the monthly club night Save Your Soul.



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John Maskevich, commander of American Legion
Lithuanian Post 154, leads the Color Guard during the
Lithuanian Hall 100th anniversary celebration.

In a 2010 interview, Waters summed up the appeal of that night: "It's all young kids dancing to their grandparents music, not their parents'. It 's a great club."

But the hall still serves as a spiritual home for the Baltimore area's Lithuanians, who have spread to the Halethorpe and Arbutus area and beyond. The Lithuanian Hall is a repository of the county's history, housing portraits of its medieval leaders and independence banners that people flew as its Communist government was crumbling

The first wave of Lithuanian immigrants came to Baltimore in the 1880s to work in the garment trade and moved into houses in the neighborhood where the hall would eventually be set up. And when the Soviet Union annexed Lithuania in the 1940s, more immigrants arrived.

Over the decades, the hall became the site of rallies against Nazism and communism as the community supported pushes for an independent Lithuania. After Lithuania declared independence in 1990, members of the Lithuanian community banded together to lobby the administration of President George H.W. Bush to recognize the new republic.

When Bush announced that he would do so on Labor Day 1991, 500 people rushed to the Lithuanian Hall to celebrate.

Zygmantas Pavilionis, the Lithuanian ambassador to the United States, said the support of Lithuanian immigrants and the pressure they could bring to bear in Washington was vital throughout the country's turbulent years in the 20th century.

"Without American support we wouldn't have survived," he said, adding that museums like the one at the Lithuanian Hall helped preserve the country's culture.

Pavilionis said he wanted to use Saturday's celebrations as a chance to think about how Lithuania and America can work together in the face of a newly aggressive Russia.

Pavilionis said he envisioned a time when liquefied natural gas is exported from ports in Maryland to Lithuania, freeing his country from the need to buy energy from Russia.

To underscore the point, Pavilionis said he preferred to mark celebratory occasions with whiskey rather than vodka.

"Whiskey is a freedom drink," he said.

Iduncan@baltsun.com