

From Migration to Memory: The Preservation of the Lithuanian Diaspora Heritage in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay

Gabija Vyšniauskaitė-Danušė 

Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore 

Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas

gabija.vysniauskaite@liti.lt

Abstract. The article discusses the preservation of the Lithuanian diaspora heritage in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay, focusing on the role of migration museums, archives, cultural institutions, and community initiatives. Despite the large Lithuanian diaspora in South America, the mechanisms for preserving its heritage have been little researched. The article aims to assess the role of memory institutions and local communities in documenting and preserving Lithuanian identity, and to identify the main challenges of this process in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. It has been found that the migration museums in São Paulo, Buenos Aires, and Montevideo, as well as the Centre for Latin American Migration Studies in Argentina, contribute significantly to the documentation and digitisation of migration heritage; however, the efforts remain fragmented. A case study of Lituanika neighbourhood in São Paulo, Brazil, shows that although local community initiatives can serve as an alternative form of heritage preservation, the sustainability of such activities has been limited by material and institutional factors. The preservation of diaspora heritage depends on institutional resources and (deeper) community involvement; therefore, by adopting a forward-looking approach and continuously investing in human (especially community) and technological (primarily digitisation) resources, the cultural heritage of Lithuanian migrants in South America can be preserved in a more sustainable way for future generations.

Keywords: Lithuanian diaspora, migration archives, diaspora heritage, Lituanika, Centre for Latin American Migration Studies, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay.

Nuo migracijos iki atminties: lietuvių diasporos paveldo išsaugojimas Argentinoje, Brazilijoje ir Urugvajuje

Santrauka. Straipsnyje analizuojamas lietuvių diasporos paveldo išsaugojimas Argentinoje, Brazilijoje ir Urugvajuje, daugiausia dėmesio skiriant migracijos muziejų, archyvų, kultūros institucijų bei vietos bendruomeninių iniciatyvų vaidmeniui. Nors lietuvių diaspora Pietų Amerikoje gausi, jos paveldo apsaugos mechanizmai iki šiol mažai tirti. Straipsnio tikslas yra įvertinti atminties institucijų ir vietos bendruomenių vaidmenį dokumentuojant ir išsaugant lietuviškąją tapatybę bei įvardyti pagrindinius šio proceso iššūkius Argentinoje, Brazilijoje ir Urugvajuje. Nors San Paulo, Buenos Airių ir Montevidėjo migracijos muziejai bei Lotynų Amerikos migracijos studijų centras Argentinoje reikšmingai prisideda prie migracijos paveldo dokumentavimo ir skaitmeninimo, procesas išlieka fragmentiškas. Lituanikos rajono (San Paulas, Brazilija)

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atvejo analizė rodo, kad vietos bendruomeninės iniciatyvos gali tapti alternatyvia paveldo išsaugojimo forma, vis dėlto tokios veiklos tęstinumą riboja materialiniai ir instituciniai veiksniai. Diasporos paveldo išsaugojimas priklauso nuo institucinių išteklių ir stipresnio bendruomenių išitraukimo, todėl, žvelgiant į ateitį, nuolat investuojant į žmogiškuosius (ypač bendruomenių) ir technologinius (visų pirma skaitmeninimą) išteklius, Pietų Amerikos lietuvių emigrantų kultūrinis paveldas galėtų būti tvariau išsaugotas ateities kartoms.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: lietuvių diaspora, migracijos archyvai, diasporos paveldas, Litanika, Lotynų Amerikos migracijos studijų centras, Argentina, Brazilija, Urugvajus.

Introduction

The article examines the Lithuanian diaspora in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay with a particular focus on key institutions, primarily immigration museums, and methods of documenting diaspora histories, and presents the analysis of a case study of library in Litanika neighbourhood located 80 kilometres from São Paulo, Brazil.

Three South American countries—Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay—were chosen for this study, because the Lithuanian communities are still active there and represent the most significant concentration of Lithuanian descendants in South America.¹ According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, around 250,000–300,000 Lithuanian descendants live in Brazil, 200,000 in Argentina, and up to 10,000 in Uruguay. Another reason for choosing Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay is that the three countries are neighbours geographically, which results in similar challenges in preserving the heritage for future generations. Also, each of the three countries have established a migration museum, which collects information on the Lithuanian diaspora as well.

While documentary heritage on Lithuanian migration to South America is available and accessible, research on the role of archives and museums in preserving it remains scarce. Previous studies have primarily focused on the historical aspects of migration rather than the institutional mechanisms that aim to safeguard cultural memory or the role of archives and communities.² Furthermore, much of the available information on Lithuanian archives in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay is in Spanish and Portuguese, which limits its accessibility for most Lithuanian researchers.³ These gaps highlight the need for a closer examination of the institutions and local community initiatives involved in preserving Lithuanian heritage in South America.

The research of diaspora communities and their cultural heritage preservation cover migration studies, identity theory, and archival research. The Lithuanian diaspora in South America is an interesting case of cultural adaptation and heritage conservation. Although some of its aspects are similar to migration to other countries, there are also some peculiarities relevant only to South America.⁴ Previous studies on European diasporas in South America have emphasized the importance of institutional efforts

¹ See Eidintas, A. *Lietuva ir masinė išeivystė 1868–2020 metais*. Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidybos centras, 2021, p. 189; Aleksandravičius, E. *Karklo diegas: lietuvių pasaulio istorija*. Vilnius: Versus aureus, 2013, p. 292–294.

² See above all, Gudavičienė, E.; Hilbig, I.; Jakaitė-Bulbukienė, K.; Ramonienė, M.; Vaisėtė, E.; Vilkienė, L. *Emigrantai: kalba ir tapatybė II: keturi sociolingvistiniai portretai*. Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.flf.vu.lt/lsk/naujienuosejo-kolektyvine-katedros-mokslininku-monografija-emigrantai-kalba-ir-tapatybe-ii-keturi-sociolingvistiniai-portretai> [accessed 02/03/2025]; Aleksandravičius, E. *Karklo diegas*; Eidintas, A. *Lietuva ir masinė išeivystė*.

³ The opposite is also true; for example, a researcher of Lithuanian origin in South America who does not know Lithuanian but speaks Spanish or Portuguese, as it happened in the case of Erick Reis Godliauskas Zen, a Brazilian researcher working on Lithuanian diaspora topics. See Godliauskas Zen, E. R. *Identidade em conflito: os imigrantes lituanos na Argentina, Brasil e Uruguai (1920–1955): [Tese de Doutorado]*. São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.11606/T.8.2012.tde-14012013-125837>.

⁴ Cf. Žilinskas, P. J. *Kupiškėnai—Patagonijos kolonistai*. Vilnius: Vilniaus dailės akademijos leidykla, 2017. Retrieved from <https://leidykla.vda.lt/Files/file/Kupi%C5%A1kis/Patagonija.pdf> [accessed 02/03/2025]; Bloemraad, I. Citizenship and Immigration: A Current Review. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 2000, Vol. 1. p. 9–37, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-000-1006-4>.

in sustaining ethnic identity.⁵ Concepts of cultural memory⁶ and diaspora identity⁷ help to understand the role of archives and museums in preserving Lithuanian heritage across generations.

The goal of this article is to analyse how migration museums, archives, and cultural centres contribute to the documentation and preservation of Lithuanian identity in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. The objectives include assessing the documentation methods, evaluating institutional efforts, and examining the local community engagement in heritage preservation. Finally, the article seeks to identify the challenges faced by those institutions and communities.

The research methodology encompasses archival research, case study, and site visits to key institutions, including the immigration museums in São Paulo, Buenos Aires, and Montevideo, as well as the archive of the Centre for Latin American Migration Studies in Argentina. The primary sources include archival records, institutional reports, and photographic documentation, supplemented by secondary sources such as academic publications on migration and diaspora studies.

By combining theoretical perspectives with empirical data, the author of the article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Lithuanian heritage has been preserved in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. Additionally, through a case study of Lituania neighbourhood in São Paulo, Brazil, the article provides an example of community-driven archival initiative and the challenges it faces.

The article is structured in eight chapters. The first chapter provides a short historical context of Lithuanian migration to South America and outlines the development of diaspora communities in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. The second chapter presents the research methodology and discusses the sources used in the study. The third chapter examines the challenges faced in collecting data on the Lithuanian diaspora in South America, highlighting issues related to documentation, preservation, and accessibility. The fourth chapter focuses on the key institutions involved in preserving Lithuanian heritage, such as museums and archives. The fifth chapter looks at the visits of Lithuanian archivists to South America and evaluates their contribution to the documentation and preservation of Lithuanian heritage in South America. The sixth chapter presents a case study of the former library in Lituania neighbourhood near São Paulo, illustrating local community efforts to preserve Lithuanian heritage. Following the case study, the seventh chapter discusses the impact of the declining number of Lithuanian speakers on the preservation of cultural heritage. The eighth chapter examines how the limited diplomatic presence of Lithuania in South America affects cultural and community initiatives. The article concludes with a presentation of the main results and their implications for future research and heritage-conservation efforts.

1. Historical Context

The first migrants from Lithuania came to the Americas around 1850.⁸ Not long after that the first Lithuanians travelled to South American countries looking for work and land. The migration was driven by wars, economic shortages, and political uncertainties in Lithuania.⁹ Frequently, when speaking about the Lithuanian diaspora in general, one mentions immigration to the United States and Canada as it

⁵ See, e.g., Baily, S. L. *Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870–1914*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016; Moya, J. C. Immigrants and Associations: A Global and Historical Perspective. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2005, Vol. 31, No. 5, p. 833–864, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830500178147>.

⁶ First of all, see Assmann, J. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511996306>.

⁷ First of all, see Safran, W. Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return. *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 1991, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 83–99, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dsp.1991.0004>.

⁸ See more, Čiubrinskas, V. Reclaimed Identity: Heritage and Genealogy of the Lithuanian Immigrants in Texas. *Acta historica universitatis Klaipedensis*, 2009, Vol. 19, p. 79–91. Retrieved from <https://e-journals.ku.lt/journal/AHUK/article/1764/info> [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁹ See Aleksandravičius, E. *Karklo diegas*, p. 140–142.

was numerous and well-documented (Lithuanians were already living in the US by the end of the nineteenth century).¹⁰ However, the new immigration quotas in North America restricted further arrivals, and new emigrants began to look for opportunities elsewhere, mostly in South America.¹¹ Driven by economic hardships in Lithuania and the desire to own land, combined with declining of immigration quotas in the US, working-class Lithuanians settled in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay.¹²

The three countries invited migrants from Europe to fill a rapidly growing labour market. Brazil lacked a work force as the country has abolished slavery. Argentina opened its borders to a rapid growth of its population and inhabitation of the vast lands, which otherwise would be taken back by native Indians. Uruguay, a new emerging country, tried to build its work force and implement more liberal immigration and settlement rules than the ones in neighbouring Argentina or Brazil. Lithuanians (and other Europeans) were lured into leaving their lives behind and crossing the ocean with the help of migration agents and migration bureaus, enticed by the legends about easy work and high pay. Poor living conditions, unstable political situation, and promises of a better tomorrow motivated young Lithuanians, especially bachelor men, to travel for several weeks and build a new life in South America. Immigration, especially when speaking about an extended period and a larger group migration, is not an individual decision but a complex issue, determined by economic, social, and political shifts in one's home country. The decisions the immigrants make are formed based on the policies of the day and the labour market needs.¹³

Not all Lithuanian immigrants had achieved financial stability in South America. Some of them still lived in poverty or had to return to Lithuania. Most of them did not have a formal education and never learned the language of their new homeland.¹⁴ The influx of Lithuanians coming to South American cities resulted in creation of diaspora communities that functioned as social clubs and self-support organisations. The main hubs had been (and still are) located in São Paulo, Buenos Aires, and Montevideo. Some of the first official Lithuanian communities and organisations include, *Nemunas* (formerly *Vargdienis*, founded in 1909), the Uruguayan Lithuanian Cultural Society (founded in 1929), and the Brazilian Lithuanian Union *Aliança* (founded in 1931). All of the above-mentioned organisations still operate. These and similar communities were established for various reasons, such as bringing together political allies, providing safe environment for religious practice, or simply offering assistance to the newcomers. Over time, these communities shifted their focus to meet the needs of younger generations by offering language and dance classes, organizing events, and promoting Lithuanian culture.¹⁵

Over several generations, the importance of such communities had declined, although some of them are still active today. The organisations played a vital role in preserving Lithuanian identity, while also facilitating integration into the new environment.¹⁶ In the event of crises, such as natural disasters or personal loss, the communities provided financial and emotional assistance. This phenomenon was not exclusive to Lithuanians but was characteristic of various immigrant groups. The city of Berisso, regarded as Argentina's capital of immigration, continues to be home to 22 distinct national communities.¹⁷

Like other migrant communities, Lithuanians abroad have struggled to preserve their cultural identity. The geographical distance from Lithuania, language barriers, and generational shifts have made it

¹⁰ See Norkus, Z.; Ambrulevičiūtė, A.; Morkevičius, V. Relevance of American Diasporas for the Post-Soviet Economic Recovery and Growth of Their Homelands: Armenia and Lithuania in Comparison. *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, 2019, Vol. 50, No. 1, p. 227–228, <https://doi.org/10.3917/e.receo1.501.0207>.

¹¹ See Eidintas, A. *Lietuva ir masinė išeivystė*, p. 182.

¹² See Godliauskas Zen, E. R. *Identidade em conflito*, p. 49.

¹³ Cf. Castles, S.; Miller, M. J. *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* / Fourth Edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; Norkus, Z.; Ambrulevičiūtė, A.; Morkevičius, V. *Relevance of American Diasporas*, p. 207–240.

¹⁴ See more, Daukantas, T. *Pietų Brazilija ir išeivybės perspektyvos*. Kaunas: Kooperatinės B-vės "Raidės" spaustuvė, 1932.

¹⁵ See Eidintas, A. *Lietuva ir masinė išeivystė*, p. 189; Aleksandravičius, E. *Karklo diegas*, p. 201–210.

¹⁶ See Godliauskas Zen, E. R. *Identidade em conflito*, p. 82.

¹⁷ See more, Klimaitis, J. F.; Semenas, A. P.; Borba, S. M. *Lituanos en Berisso—Testimonios de un pueblo*. Vol. 1. Buenos Aires, 2005; Klimaitis, J. F.; Semenas, A. P. *Lituanos en Berisso—Testimonios de un pueblo*. Vol. 2. Buenos Aires, 2005.

increasingly difficult to sustain historical memory. The ability to communicate in Lithuanian usually completely disappears after three or four generations, leading to a gradual loss of cultural ties.¹⁸ While some individuals retain passive comprehension, fluency is increasingly rare. This decline is further exacerbated by diminished diplomatic representation of the home country. Although the language itself is not the only aspect relevant to the preservation of historical memory and Lithuanian identity, it plays an important role. In this context, archives, museums, and libraries serve as institutions helping to safeguard the historical and cultural legacy of Lithuanian migrants.

Several Lithuanian diaspora communities are still present in South America: eight in Argentina (Lithuanian Community in Argentina (Buenos Aires), Lithuanian Cultural and Mutual Aid Society Nemunas (Berisso), Lithuanian Catholic Cultural and Mutual Aid Society Mindaugas (Berisso), Lithuanian Club (Rosario), Lithuanian Union in Argentina (Lanus), Lithuanian Centre (Buenos Aires), Lithuanian Community of Cordoba (Cordoba), and Lithuanian Community Free Lithuania Tandil (Tandil)); three in Uruguay (Uruguayan Lithuanian Cultural Society, Uruguayan Lithuanian Youth Union, and dance groups Gintaras and Rintukai (all three are located in Montevideo)) and four in Brazil (Lithuanian Community in Brazil, Brazilian Lithuanian Union, St. Joseph Lithuanian Roman Catholic Community in Brazil, and Lithuanian Brazilian Youth Union (all in São Paulo)).¹⁹ In some cases, the same person belongs to more than one community or organisation. Depending on their purpose, it may be called a club, association, etc. Some offer only one activity, for example, dances, while others organize a variety of activities, for example, dance and language classes and various events. However, only about 5% of Lithuanian descendants keep in touch with the home country of their ancestors.²⁰ The majority of those who keep ties with Lithuania are motivated not by cultural ties but rather a desire to get a Lithuanian (or, more importantly, EU passport). They can do that through the restored citizenship process, which provides them with an opportunity to get a Lithuanian passport, but only if they have Lithuanian relatives and can prove their relation to them.²¹

Although Lithuanian migration to South America was numerous through most of the twentieth century, these days, there are almost no newcomers. Not surprisingly, there has been a gradual decrease in Lithuanian community members and Lithuanian speakers, as well as in Lithuanian diplomatic presence. Nevertheless, it is not unique to Lithuanian diaspora—same tendencies are observed in most diaspora communities, especially if the distance between the homeland of ancestors is as stretched as it is in the case of Europe and South America.

2. Methodology

The study combines archival research, field visits to institutions in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay, and a case study. Such methodological approach allows both a review of Lithuanian heritage preservation in South America and a focus on a specific case study supplemented by the author's comments and a few photos from the site itself.

Archival research provides access to historical records, migration documents, and institutional reports related to the Lithuanian diaspora. It allows to reconstruct and understand institutional and

¹⁸ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 97.

¹⁹ Data taken from the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania. For more, see <https://globalilietuva.urm.lt/gyvenu-uzsienyje/lietuvos-diasporos-organizacijos-uzsienyje/168> and <https://www.urm.lt/globali-lietuva/prisijunk-prie-lietuviu-bendruomenes/artimiausia-lietuviu-bendruomene/814> [accessed 20/07/2026].

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ See *Lietuva ir Lotynų Amerika: bendradarbiavimo plėtra: strategijos studija ST-2022-1* / parengė A. Bubnys, A. Brazauskas, A. Brazinskaitė, E. Keinienė, L. Minkevičius, M. T. Kėvišas, M. Myštautaitė. Vilnius: Lietuvos nacionalinė Martyno Mažvydo biblioteka, 2022, p. 28, 31. Retrieved from <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1q0XnPrg43GEB13z3Xh5nspiT1-ikX19/view> [accessed 02/03/2025].

social processes that had shaped historic memory and to critically evaluate contemporary narratives about the past.²²

Field visits provided an opportunity to analyse exhibitions, archival collections, and institutional efforts to document Lithuanian heritage. The study offers a comprehensive understanding of the preservation of Lithuanian cultural identity in South America. It not only examines institutional efforts but also highlights the challenges of language loss and community engagement.

Most of the accessible data was gathered through online archives, including digital libraries and institutional collections in Lithuania, Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay, which contain a diverse range of material, such as statistical records on Lithuanian emigration, diplomatic correspondence, letters sent by diaspora members to their families in Lithuania, periodicals, and photo collections.

The article also presents a case study, focusing on the now abandoned Lithuanian library in Lituania neighbourhood, located in the outskirts of São Paulo, Brazil. A case study enables to investigate the transformation of diaspora institutions and cultural spaces in the real-life context.²³ It also provides an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding about the processes, allowing the researchers to explore the changes over time.²⁴

3. Challenges in Data Collection

The author of the article has encountered several challenges in gathering reliable data. While she is fluent in Lithuanian, Spanish, and Portuguese, which helped with the direct communication with the Lithuanian diaspora in South America, language proficiency alone did not eliminate all obstacles. One significant difficulty was the tendency of the local community to present conflicting narratives about certain historical events. This aligns with Alessandro Portelli's observation that the oral history is not always accurate, rather it reveals how people interpret their past and what narrative they choose to do so.²⁵ In many cases, there were no supporting documents to verify the accuracy of personal memories; therefore, the author of the article chose to include no interviews with local communities as they might compromise the historic approach of this study. Although oral stories may be shaped by social and political factors, which may contribute to the content and reliability of the stories being told²⁶; interviews with local communities are an important tool of gathering information and indispensable in learning more about any diaspora.

Internal disputes within the Lithuanian community also contributed to challenges. Rivalries have existed since the establishment of the first Lithuanian clubs and societies in South America, leading to different accounts about the same events.²⁷

A limited access to certain archives due to logistics or security issues (São Paulo, Buenos Aires, and Montevideo are not the safest places to travel for a solo researcher²⁸) was yet another major challenge. Some archival material had been restricted, while others had been lost, destroyed, or discarded. Interviews²⁹ with Lithuanian diaspora families revealed that some historical documents had gone missing, were burned, or deliberately discarded to hide sensitive family matters, such as secret marriages or

²² Cf. Ventresca, M. J.; Mohr, J. W. Archival Research Methods. In: *The Blackwell Companion to Organizations* / Ed. J. A. C. Baum. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2017, p. 805–828, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405164061.ch35>.

²³ Cf. Yin, R. K. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* / Fifth Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2014.

²⁴ Cf. Stake, R. E. *The Art of Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995.

²⁵ See more, Portelli, A. What Makes Oral History Different. In: Portelli, A. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 1991, p. 45–58, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.18255477.6>.

²⁶ Cf. Maiga, H. O. *Balancing Written History with Oral Tradition: The Legacy of the Songhoy People*. New York: Routledge, 2010, p. 92, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203872055>.

²⁷ See more, Aleksandravičius, E. *Karklo diegas*, p. 318, 320, 326, 336–337, 343.

²⁸ The author of the article took several solo trips.

²⁹ The interviews took place during the author's visits to the South American Lithuanian diaspora communities between 2019 and 2022.

illegitimate offspring. This correlates with Jacques Derrida's concept of archival silence, when documents are sometimes intentionally erased or manipulated for personal or political reasons.³⁰ As Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, history is not only "what happened" but also "what is said to have happened." Archives and official records are subject to interpretation and manipulation.³¹

4. Key Institutions That House Lithuanian Cultural Legacy

Several institutions across South America have played an important role in preserving the Lithuanian cultural legacy.

(1) The immigration museums located in São Paulo, Buenos Aires, and Montevideo: *Museu da Imigração do São Paulo*, *Museo de la Inmigración Buenos Aires*, and *Museo de las Migraciones, Montevideo*. The museums function as cultural institutions dedicated to preserving the history of immigration in South America, in some cases, including the Lithuanian community. Each museum showcases exhibits focused on migration patterns, and the Lithuanian diaspora is often featured as a case study in the broader context of immigration in the region through exhibits on site or on the museums' websites as interviews and articles. Although usually the Lithuanian diaspora does not play the main role in such exhibitions, each museum holds Lithuanian-related items in their archives and permanent exhibitions (for example, recorded stories by Lithuanian descendants, ship passenger lists, family photos, etc.). Given the number of Lithuanians who came to South America, this is to be expected as other ethnic groups moved to Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay in much larger numbers.

*Museu da Imigração do São Paulo*³² (Migration Museum of São Paulo) is dedicated to preserving the migration history in Brazil. As São Paulo was one of the first stops for most migrants who came to Brazil, at first, the premises of the museum were used as a facility to welcome immigrants, check their documents and health, and support them during their first days in a new country. The facility operated from 1887 to 1978, when it was reopened as a museum. It collects items related to the former life of immigrants and holds a publicly accessed archive. The museum also functions as a place for community gatherings, workshops, and seminars, dedicated to genealogy and migration. It holds a permanent exhibition and has an expanding online collection of articles and interviews. The newest addition to the museum's website is an online archive consisting of oral history, musical, institutional, and bibliographical sections, where visitors can access video interviews with individuals of Lithuanian descent, migration records, ship passenger lists, and other historical material.³³ It is worth mentioning that the museum together with the Consulate of the Republic of Lithuania in São Paulo hosts the annual Lithuanian culture and history festival LABAS.

*Museo de la Inmigración de Buenos Aires*³⁴ (Immigration Museum of Buenos Aires) is of a similar concept museum in Argentina, as it also used to be a hotel for the immigrants, which operated between 1911 and 1953. The museum offers onsite visits as well as an archive of exhibitions. However, it is more focused on Spanish and Italian immigration and does not offer a broader look to the immigration to Argentina as the museum in São Paulo.

³⁰ Derrida, J. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* / Translated by E. Prenowitz. *Diacritics*, 1995, Vol. 25, No. 2, p. 14, 43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/465144>. See also, Derrida, J. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* / Translated by E. Prenowitz. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 11, 29–30. Retrieved from https://monoskop.org/images/e/ef/Derrida_Jacques_Archive_Fever_A_Freudian_Impression_1996.pdf [accessed 02/03/2025].

³¹ Trouillot, M.-R. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995, p. 2, 25. Retrieved from <https://www.metodos.work/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Michel-Rolph-Trouillot-Silencing-the-Past-Power-and-the-Production-of-History-20th-Anniversary.pdf> [accessed 02/03/2025].

³² *Museu da Imigração do São Paulo*. Access <https://museudaimigracao.org.br/> [accessed 02/03/2025].

³³ One of the examples can be found here <https://museudaimigracao.bnweb.org/bnportal/pt-BR/search?exp=lituania> [accessed 20/07/2026].

³⁴ *Museo de la Inmigración de Buenos Aires*. Access <https://untref.edu.ar/muntref/es/museo-de-la-inmigracion/> [accessed 02/03/2025].

*Museo de las Migraciones, Montevideo*³⁵ (Museum of Migrations in Montevideo) was never a hotel nor a reception site. Established only in 2011 as a permanent exhibition about migration, it belongs to the cultural complex Muralla Abierta [The Open Wall]. The museum aims to highlight the impact of migration in Uruguay; however, compared to other two migration museums mentioned earlier, it has less to offer in terms of migration history and archives.

(2) *Centro de Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos*³⁶ (Centre for Latin American Migration Studies; hereinafter, CEMLA). Although CEMLA is housed in the Immigration Museum of Buenos Aires, Argentina, it should be mentioned as a separate institution as it has different goals than the museum itself. Established in 1985, it provides access to ship passenger records (for example, a museum visitor can search for relatives by their last name and origin). Their digitalized records are available for the public free of charge through its online database. CEMLA is one of the first stops for genealogical research in South America.

Museums and their archives safeguard collective memory, and their activities are crucial for local immigrant communities to legitimize their history and insert it in a broader narrative. The museums play a crucial role in shaping public perception on migration, fostering a generally positive attitude towards the historical contributions of immigrants. In contrast to some contemporary nationalist discourses in Europe and North America, South American societies tend to embrace migration as one of the most important components of their national identity.

Institutions, such as the Immigration Museum in São Paulo and CEMLA, function not only as repositories of historical data but also as platforms for education and community engagement. Their role aligns with Eric Ketelaar's assertion that archives are not passive collections of documents but dynamic spaces where heritage is continually reinterpreted and activated through public participation.³⁷

However, a lack of centralized archival repository for Lithuanian heritage in South America results in fragmented documentation, making it difficult to construct a comprehensive and unified historical record. Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook argue that archival fragmentation leads to gaps in historical narratives, disproportionately affecting the preservation of minority and diasporic histories.³⁸ The absence of a cohesive archival strategy means that many valuable historical materials remain scattered across different institutions, limiting their accessibility and research opportunities. An online repository, the Diaspora Archival Fonds and the Diaspora Archival Fonds Map,³⁹ is worthy to be mentioned here as it attempts to centralize different archives, even though it is not user friendly.

5. Visits of the Lithuanian Archivists to South America

The documentation of Lithuanian diaspora history in South America has been the focus of three official archival expeditions from Lithuania. The most recent visit by the Office of the Chief Archivist of Lithuania to Esquel, Argentina, took place in 2022. Other visits occurred in 2019, when the Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art visited Argentina and Uruguay; in 2016,⁴⁰ when the Office of the Chief Archivist of Lithuania travelled to São Paulo, and in 2018, when the representatives of the Lithuanian Central State Archives visited São Paulo.

³⁵ *Museo de las Migraciones, Montevideo*. Access <https://mumi.montevideo.gub.uy/> [accessed 02/03/2025].

³⁶ *Centro de Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos*. Access <https://cemla.com/> [accessed 02/03/2025].

³⁷ Ketelaar, E. Archives in the Digital Age: New Uses for an Old Science. *Archives & Social Studies: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, 2007, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 184.

³⁸ Schwartz, J. M.; Cook, T. Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory. *Archival Science*, 2002, Vol. 2, p. 16, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435628>.

³⁹ *Diaspora Archival Fonds and Diaspora Archival Fonds Map*. Access <https://diaspora.archyvai.lt/en> [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁴⁰ Lietuvos archyvarų vizitas Brazilijoje. *Lietuvos Respublikos generalinio konsulato San Paule*, 4 April 2016. Retrieved from <https://br.mfa.lt/naujienos/9/lietuvos-archyvaru-vizitas-brazilijoje:82> [accessed 02/03/2025].

More visits were planned, but they failed due to COVID-19 restrictions imposed after 2020. The last visit was different from the other three, as there was no active Lithuanian community in Esquel. The focus of the visit was on a massive collection of Lithuanian artefacts accumulated by a Lithuanian descendent Bruno Lukoševičius in Southern Argentina. The collection-museum is now accessible online thanks to the expedition of 2022.⁴¹

During the expeditions, the Lithuanian archivists interviewed the members of the Lithuanian communities in South America with a goal to expand the archives—by collecting photographs, films, letters, and other valuable items. However, the visits faced obstacles, such as limited resources to cover a large territory of the continent, language barrier (in most cases, the archivists did not speak the local language⁴²), and a lack of diaspora collaboration (sometimes, the Lithuanian community members treated the archivists as if they were about to be robbed of their personal belongings). When possible, original material was transferred to Lithuanian archives, with digital copies retained for the needs of local diaspora communities. Some of the artefacts were used in the exhibitions in Lithuania, i.e., exhibition on Lithuanian diaspora history at the National museum of Lithuania, Pasaulio dydžio Lietuva: mūsų migracijos istorija [A Worldwide Lithuania: Our Migration Story], or online exhibition of the photographs preserved at the Lithuanian Museum Olgbrun in Argentina; however, most of the items have remained in the archives for future use and research.⁴³ The recovery of heritage is influenced not only by physical distance but also by the need to navigate different linguistic and cultural environments. As a result, the transfer of historical knowledge and memory between communities and institutions becomes a negotiated process shaped by multiple cultural perspectives.⁴⁴

6. Case Study: The Lituanika Community in São Paulo

One of the most notable examples of Lithuanian heritage preservation in South America is Lituanika neighbourhood in São Paulo, Brazil. Named after the historic Lithuanian airplane *Lituanica*, which made its transatlantic flight from New York to Kaunas in 1933, the project represents an exceptional collaboration of the Lithuanian diaspora in Brazil.

Lituanika is a Lithuanian-owned private community, located approximately 80 kilometres from São Paulo. Established in 1977, it covers a territory of 26 hectares. The project was designed to be a self-sustained, Lithuanian-owned and governed neighbourhood, featuring private homes, a chapel, a monastery, community gardens, a library, and other facilities. The community had an ambition to create a cultural enclave that would preserve Lithuanian heritage in South America. A variety of events took place on the premises, such as Lithuanian scout camps, youth conferences, Catholic gatherings, masses, etc.

⁴¹ See *Virtualios parodos / įtraukios istorijos*. Access <https://virtualios-parodos.archyvai.lt/lt/virtualios-parodos/34/argentinios-lietuvu-muziejuje-olgbrun-saugomu-nuotrauku-paroda/exh-315> [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁴² While interpreters might have seemed a viable solution, the absence of direct personal engagement often resulted in a reluctance among community members to share sensitive historical material. A personal observation as the author of the article helped with interpreting during one of the visits.

⁴³ For more, see the exhibition Pasaulio dydžio Lietuva: mūsų migracijos istorija (Paroda “Pasaulio dydžio Lietuva: mūsų migracijos istorija.” Lietuvos nacionalinis muziejus, 22 November 2023—27 October 2024. Access <https://lnm.lt/renginiai/paroda-musu-migracijos-istorija/#> [accessed 02/03/2025]) and exhibition of photographs preserved at the Lithuanian Museum Olgbrun in Argentina (<https://virtualios-parodos.archyvai.lt/lt/virtualios-parodos-itraukios-istorijos/34/argentinios-lietuvu-muziejuje-olgbrun-saugomu-nuotrauku-paroda/exh-315> [accessed 02/03/2025]). An example of restored documents and other artefacts can be found here: Brazilijos lietuvių bendruomenės dokumentai. Lietuvos vyriausiojo archyvaro tarnyba. Access <https://diaspora.archyvai.lt/fondai/11/doc720> [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁴⁴ Cf. Atobatele, F. A.; Mouboua, P. D. The Dynamics of Language Shifts in Migrant Communities: Implications for Social Integration and Cultural Preservation. *International Journal of Applied Research in Social Sciences*, 2024, Vol. 6, No. 5, p. 853–854, <https://doi.org/10.51594/ijarss.v6i5.1106>.

Lituanika has streets bearing Lithuanian names (Dariaus ir Girėno alėja, Laisvės alėja, etc.). There are ample examples of Lithuanian woodwork on community buildings, in some cases—on private houses. The site also hosts the only exclusively Lithuanian cemetery in South America.

While Lituanika has been documented by Lithuanian bloggers (for example, “True Lithuania” and “Gabalėliai Lietuvos” projects), this study offers a first-hand view of the community’s struggle to preserve its heritage, especially through its library and cultural institutions. The author had the unique opportunity to participate in a community gathering that took place in the Lituanika library and get a glimpse into the challenges of sustaining cultural identity in a diaspora context.

Historically, Lituanika had a monastery, a cemetery, a library, and even a swimming pool, which still remains in use. However, the library (see Figure 1) suffered severe flood damage and had been abandoned for years. During the visit of Lithuanian archivists to Brazil in 2018, the library was cleaned of debris. The author of this article together with other volunteers and Lithuanian community members helped to retrieve valuable archival photos and documents. The condition of most items was poor, as flood water damaged paper and cardboard, insects ate through the pages and birds nested on library’s shelves (see Figure 2–7). A selection of photographs, documents, and books was successfully recovered and returned to the community and later sent to Lithuania. Today, Lituanika mostly serves as a place for short stays, community events, and weekend trips. There are almost no permanent residents left; the majority comes only a few times a year to spend time in nature or to visit the graves of their relatives.



Figure 1. *The library building in Lituanika, outside view.* 4 October 2018. Photo by Gabija Vyšniauskaitė-Danušė.



Figure 2. *The main hall of the library in Lituania, inside view. 4 October 2018.*
Photo by Gabija Vyšniauskaitė-Danušė.



Figure 3. *The state of some of the items in the library. 4 October 2018.*
Photo by Gabija Vyšniauskaitė-Danušė.



Figure 4. Photograph found in the library. 4 October 2018. Photo by Gabija Vyšniauskaitė-Danušė.



Figure 5. Press credentials found in the library. 4 October 2018. Photo by Gabija Vyšniauskaitė-Danušė.



Figure 6. Bird nest on one of the library's shelves. 4 October 2018. Photo by Gabija Vyšniauskaitė-Danušė.



Figure 7. Recovered items. 4 October 2018. Photo by Gabija Vyšniauskaitė-Danušė.

7. Impact of Declining Lithuanian Speakers

A major challenge in preserving Lithuanian heritage in South America is the steady decline in Lithuanian speakers. This decline directly impacts cultural engagement, as the majority of younger generations lack language proficiency needed to access historical records and archival material, not to mention the ability to communicate directly with relatives living in their ancestors' home country.⁴⁵ Also, the archivists coming from Lithuania in most cases do not have the knowledge of Spanish or Portuguese or often come without a reliable interpreter, which makes research work difficult or sometimes impossible to manage. Without language knowledge, key aspects of Lithuanian cultural heritage risk becoming inaccessible or misinterpreted. According to David Bradley and Maya Bradley, heritage languages serve as a vital link to historical identity. Once they are lost, access to ancestral knowledge is significantly diminished.⁴⁶

The future of Lithuanian heritage preservation in South America depends on two key factors: digitalisation and active local community participation. Digital archives provide an effective way to safeguard historical material, making them accessible to a wider audience while reducing the risk of physical deterioration. However, successful digitisation is not just a technological process, as it requires financial investment, institutional collaboration, and community engagement. Without adequate support and a clear plan for the future, fragmented digitisation efforts may fail to create an easy to understand and effective archival system.

Beyond technology, diaspora involvement is crucial for ensuring that archival material remains relevant. Community members play a vital role by contributing historical documents, personal stories, and participating in preservation projects. In this way, the archives receive material, which would be inaccessible otherwise. Active diaspora ensures that everyday life remains documented and not forgotten, even when the community members cease to speak their ancestral language.

8. Absence of Diplomatic Presence

In addition to linguistic decline, the limited diplomatic presence of Lithuania in South America has further restricted Lithuanian heritage preservation on the continent. Currently, there is only one Lithuanian consulate in the whole continent and no embassies.⁴⁷ Even though the consulate in São Paulo actively engages in local community life, it is insufficient. There were more embassies and consulates, but they were closed due to insufficient financial support from the Lithuanian Government. Local diaspora communities rely on diplomatic institutions for cultural events and human-to-human relations; thus, the state involvement must be constant.⁴⁸ The closure of the Lithuanian embassy in Argentina in 2012 has significantly reduced institutional support for cultural events, thereby contributing to the diminishing

⁴⁵ Cf. Ramonienės, M. Lietuvių kalba Argentinoje. In: Gudavičienė, E.; Hilbig, I.; Jakaitė-Bulbukienė, K.; Ramonienė, M.; Vaisėtė, E.; Vilkienė, L. *Emigrantai: kalba ir tapatybė II: keturi sociolingvistiniai portretai*. Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2019, p. 87, 107. Retrieved from <https://www.flf.vu.lt/lsk/naujienos/isejo-kolektyvine-katedros-mokslininkiu-monografija-emigrantai-kalba-ir-tapatybe-ii-keturi-sociolingvistiniai-portretai> [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁴⁶ Bradley, D.; Bradley, M. *Language Endangerment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 6. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139644570>.

⁴⁷ *Consulado Geral da República da Lituânia em São Paulo*. Access <https://br.mfa.lt/pt> [accessed 02/03/2025]. Although the embassy would be able to perform more tasks, it can be opened only in the capital city. As the biggest Lithuanian community in Brazil is concentrated in São Paulo, the decision was made to open a consulate instead of embassy. This way the diplomatic institution holds less diplomatic power but is closer to the Lithuanian diaspora.

⁴⁸ Cf. Waterbury, M. A. Bridging the Divide: Towards a Comparative Framework for Understanding Kin State and Migrant-Sending State Diaspora Politics. In: *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods* / Eds. R. Bauböck, T. Faist. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010, p. 142. Retrieved from <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssaoar-321629> [accessed 02/03/2025].

visibility of Lithuanian heritage in the region and loss of motivation within the Lithuanian communities in Argentina.⁴⁹

It is worth mentioning the active role of the Lithuanian consulate in São Paulo in organizing the annual festival LABAS in Ema Klabin⁵⁰ museum. Such successful events help to expand the Lithuanian community in Brazil, attract attention to Lithuanian culture, and get media coverage. Although it is not directly related to archives or museums, it helps to raise awareness about the Baltic region and builds trust. The consulate also supports the visits of Lithuanian archivists and helps with the logistics when sending the collected items via diplomatic mail.⁵¹

The shortage of government-backed initiatives has forced Lithuanian communities in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay to mostly rely on self-sustaining, community-led preservation efforts. Although these grassroots movements have had some success, their impact is limited by financial constraints, aging community leadership, and declining participation of younger generations.

Conclusions

The article has shown that key institutions in South America, including the immigration museums in São Paulo, Buenos Aires, and Montevideo, along with CEMLA, have made considerable strides in preserving material related to Lithuanian migration. Through digitalisation, these institutions have expanded their reach and made Lithuanian heritage more accessible to both the diaspora and global audiences.

Lituanika neighbourhood in São Paulo is a good example of a self-organised Lithuanian diaspora community in Brazil that functioned as a cultural enclave for heritage preservation outside institutional framework. The case study has shown that the long-term sustainability of such community-based initiatives is constrained by material deterioration and limited institutional support, which can lead to partial loss of cultural infrastructure. At the same time, the recovery of archival material demonstrates that preservation outcomes are contingent on episodic collective efforts and external interventions rather than continuous institutional support.

The findings indicate that despite the efforts of institutions and communities, Lithuanian heritage preservation in South America remains uneven and complicated. A decreasing number of Lithuanian speakers, together with limited institutional support, requires combining digitalisation with active local community engagement. By continuing to invest in both technological and human resources, it is possible to ensure that Lithuanian heritage in South America remains accessible. With a forward-thinking approach and continued investment in both human (especially communities) and technological resources, the cultural heritage of Lithuanian migrants in South America can be preserved for generations to come.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

⁴⁹ Statement by Argentine Lithuanians on the closure of the Lithuanian embassy, see Argentinos lietuvių pasisakymas dėl Lietuvos ambasados Argentinoje uždarymo. *Lietuvos aidas*, 2013, sausio 23 d., priedas "Naujausios žinios," p. 1. Retrieved from <https://www.aidas.lt/lt/tautos-mokykla/article/7041-01-23-argentinos-lietuviu-pasisakymas-del-lietuvos-ambasados-argentinoje-uzdarymo> [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁵⁰ Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1907, Ema Gordon Klabin was a second daughter of Lithuanian immigrants. Her father was one of the founders of Klabin, a leading paper manufacturer company in Brazil. Ema Klabin developed an interest in collecting. Her first acquisitions were oriental rugs, porcelain, and silverware.

⁵¹ See, e.g., Lietuvos valstybės archyvų iš užsienio šalių 2022 m. gauti archyviniai dokumentai. *Lietuvos vyriausiojo archyvaro tarnyba*. Retrieved from <https://archyvai.lrv.lt/uploads/archyvai/documents/files/Is%20uzsienio%20gauti%20dokumentai%202022%20suvestine.pdf> [accessed 02/03/2025].

Notes on contributor(s)

Gabija Vyšniauskaitė-Danušė holds a B.A. in Spanish Philology and an M.A. in Interpreting from Vilnius University, Lithuania. Currently, she is pursuing a doctorate at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, focusing on Lithuanian diaspora identity. Vyšniauskaitė-Danušė has been actively engaged with Lithuanian communities in South America. Supported by scholarships from the Education Exchanges Support Foundation (Lithuania), she spent five months in Argentina (La Plata and Córdoba) and six months in Brazil (São Paulo), teaching Lithuanian, participating in diaspora activities, and documenting the everyday life of local Lithuanian communities.

ORCID

Gabija Vyšniauskaitė-Danušė  <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6430-5054>

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