



### ***Restorer's Workshop***

## **"ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR GAMES IN AMERICA", S. DARIUS AND AN EXHIBIT FROM THE INTERWAR PERIOD**

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There is probably no person in Lithuania who does not know the courageous and tragic story of Steponas Darius and Stasys Girėnas: their successful flight across the Atlantic Ocean and their death under unclear circumstances, when less than a tenth of the way was left to Kaunas. Yet, do many people know that one of them, Steponas Darius, was not only a pilot, but also a participant in World War I who volunteered for the US Army and fought in the battles in France? When he returned to Lithuania in July 1920, he immediately joined the Lithuanian army and took part in the fights for independence. He graduated from Kaunas Military School in 1921 and became a military pilot in 1923. He was involved in the operation of capturing Klaipėda Region on January 10-15, 1923, and even led a soldier group who captured Šilutė and participated in the attack on Klaipėda City. From 1927, he was an aviation captain, distinguished by the fact that he did not cause any accident while flying. At the same time, S. Darius was very active in sports: he played basketball, baseball and ice hockey, did boxing, athletics, etc. He was a coach and a referee in competitions. He played as a goalkeeper for the Lithuanian national football team and participated in international competitions. In 1922, he initiated the first Lithuanian baseball championship and played in it. He published booklets on sports games and gave advice on healthy lifestyle. He

prepared the design of the first stadium in Lithuania and led its construction in Kaunas in 1925-1926. He initiated and participated in the first multi-day motorcycle race "Around Lithuania." S. Darius did not smoke or consume alcohol and followed the motto "A healthy soul in a healthy body." He, one of Lithuania's best-known people, plunged into the life of a young state being rebuilt with vigour and full force. He was a person who could serve as an example for the present generation.

The collections of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum contain an interesting exhibit that indirectly takes us back to the interwar period, when, thanks to S. Darius, a game previously unknown to anyone, only somewhere far away in the "Americas", was introduced in Lithuania. In Lithuania, people first heard and saw baseball in 1920 in Kaunas. Most probably, it is hardly possible to find out where the first ball was hit with a wooden baseball bat, but we can be sure that it was S. Darius who did it. However, it was not until 1922 that the game started to gain popularity, when the magazine "Sportas" started to write about it. As S. Darius wrote, "Baseball is the national game of the United States of America; Americans of European origin received it from their present-day Indian brothers. It has become one of the most popular games in America." The pioneer of baseball in Lithuania wanted the game to become popular in his homeland as well. A number of articles, written of course by S. Darius, were published about baseball, its history, origins and its rules. The articles were illustrated with drawings.

The very first Lithuanian baseball game took place on July 30, 1922. It was between the L.F.L.S (Lithuanian Physical Education Union) and "Aviacijos" baseball teams (at that time, there were simply no other baseball teams). Clements J. Edwards, the US Consul in Lithuania, was invited to open the game and throw the first pitch. Unfortunately, baseball in interwar Lithuania was played only until the Soviet occupation in 1940, when it was banned as a game of American "capitalist" origin, i.e. alien to Soviet culture.

The baseball bat preserved in the museum collections was made in around 1930. It is 62 cm long, carved from ash or maple and has windings on the working surface to prevent the ball from slipping off the bat. One end is wider, for hitting the ball. The handle is narrowing, but its end is widened for easy gripping. The exhibit arrived at the restorer's workshop of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum in poor condition. The wood, which had been stored for many years in unsuitable conditions, had dried out, a layer of dirt and grime covered the surface; it was stained with oil paint. Mould appeared in several places and a part of the handle fell off. The stick was examined, and traces of previous restoration were found, as the splits had been attempted to be removed by nailing the wood together. The nails rusted away and no longer served their original purpose. It was decided to restore the exhibit by restoring the split handle, cleaning the dirt, removing the mould, disinfecting it and coating with protective wax. This way, an exhibit from the interwar period was preserved for future generations.



Before restoration © KDFM / Matas Laužadis



After restoration © KDFM / Rasa Pranskevičiūtė



Photograph. Steponas Darius is resting while holding a baseball bat. 3rd decade of the 20th century. The original is stored at Vytautas the Great War Museum