



# Franciscan Church, Vilnius

2001

**GEORGE'S ANALYSIS** We see an old, poor church, walls faded and peeling, an uneven floor, and only a few rickety benches at which to pray. A few hardy souls still come to find solace, peace, or forgiveness. The light pours in through the windows and reflects around the church, softly illuminating the right side of the interior, with more dramatic light and shadow on the left. This is a photograph that many can identify with, whether church-going or not.

The photograph is a celebration of light, displaying both its power and subtlety. From the rays of the sun coming in the windows to the glow in the walls of the alcoves, from the light reflected off the simple benches to the varied tones of the floor, the image is about light. Even the arched ceiling is well lit. Undoubtedly, Roman Loranc photographed it in the ideal light. I wonder how often the light is this wonderful. As many of Roman's images do have a subtlety to the lighting and tones, it is clear to me that the beautiful tonality of this photograph owes much to his skill in both photographing and printing.

The building is intriguing, without all the trappings of the usual tourist-route-type churches and cathedrals. There is no organ, no pulpit, and the wooden benches have been polished by many bottoms through the ages. The building is remarkable for both its simplicity and its sense of make-do, with items leaning against the pillars and walls, and no sign of loudspeakers and fancy lighting.

The photograph was never going to be completely symmetrical, the sun's rays shining toward the left as they do. Roman has selected an off-center camera position, playing off of the direction of the light. The dramatically lit left-side wall is seen more in line and thus reducing the relative weight of the bright areas. The right-hand alcoves open up more. Despite the off-center camera position, the line



of benches runs right down the middle of the print to the open doorway. The two doors are asymmetrical, which appears more natural. The benches on the left have highlights, while the floor is darkest to the right.

These exemptions to symmetry give the viewer more to contemplate, another level of interest, one more reason to revisit the photograph. Were the left and right unrelated, the break in symmetry would mean nothing, but as we have arches and alcoves on both sides, each side is tied to the other, yet opposite.

The worshipers appear as black silhouettes, anonymous in person and purpose other than to feel a need to sit in this wonderful building. One doesn't need to be religious to recognize that this is a place to come and meditate.

The photograph has interesting detail and texture everywhere; from floor to vault, the surfaces of the pillars, and the Stations of the Cross simply leaning against the pillars. The movement in the congregation suggests a ghostly element, hinting at changing eras and values.

**THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S PERSPECTIVE** I had always wanted to photograph Lithuania but was never able to do so while the Russian occupation persisted. Specifically, I wanted to photograph and hopefully capture the effects of the occupation and war on places of worship, be they churches, synagogues, or other. Although not affiliated with any specific organized religion, I recognize the presence of God and the spirituality of these special places.

Most synagogues and churches in Lithuania were destroyed or stripped to their bare architectural bones. Relieved of the usual "trappings" of gilt, icons, statuary, etc., the true and pure essence of the structures was revealed in a special way. This particular church had been used as a storage warehouse during the occupation, but the strength and power of it had not been lessened. In fact, if anything, it had been

increased. With the opening of Eastern Europe in the last 20 years, I have been able to travel extensively and rediscover the rich heritage belittled but not destroyed.

Although it is not my practice to ask for permission to photograph such places, in this instance I did. The priest was so fascinated with my concept that he gave me a key to the church and allowed me after-hours access. One day, before receiving the key, however, I was accidentally locked inside the church for the better part of a day. I spent the time studying the light and trying to determine the ideal conditions and time for capturing what I saw in my mind as the image I wanted. It was an incredible experience. I later learned from the head restorer that the church was designed to maximize light spilling onto the altar during the times of Mass.

After almost two months of repeated visits and images that did not quite capture what I was hoping to, this image was accidental (or perhaps preordained). I went to the church to hear some choir music. Arriving early, the workmen who were in the process of restoring the church were just finishing up. Dust particles stirred up during their work filled the air. I happened to turn at a particular moment and saw the image you see captured in the print. The light was incredible. I knew that I had to work quickly. I ran to my car, grabbed my camera, and rushed back into the church hoping that the light was still there. It was. I set up and exposed the film for about 15 minutes. During that period a few people came and went, and some sat quietly for almost the full exposure. The effect created is that of almost ghostly images. And one "miraculous" image.

**BIOGRAPHY** Some photographers believe their strongest work comes from exploring their immediate surroundings. I think of myself as a regional photographer, but that does not mean the photography cannot be understood beyond the region. Right now people all over the United States indicate to

me that regionalism, born of an informed attachment, has universal appeal. I shoot most of my pictures within an hour's drive of my home in California, but I am also interested in exploring my ancestral roots in Europe. For this reason, I make occasional photographic forays to Poland and Lithuania, and more recently, Croatia and Portugal.

I'm fascinated by the ancient churches of my homeland. These are holy spaces where millions of people have prayed for hundreds of years. They are places of great humility and they remind us how brief our lives are. I feel the same way when I'm photographing ancient groves of native oaks in California. I wasn't conscious of this when I began, but upon reflection, I think the oaks are just as sacred as the old cathedrals of Europe. They are sacred in that they have survived for so many years. I'm aware that the native people of California held all living things as divine. For me a grove of valley oaks is as sacred as any church in Europe.

I think about how interconnected the world is. When I'm out on a crisp winter's morning, shooting a stand of native oaks, I see oak galls hanging from the trees. These were once used to make the pyrogallol chemicals I use to develop my negatives. So the oak trees I am photographing played a part in the developer I use to process my negatives of those trees. It is healthy to remember that we are often linked to the natural world in ways we don't even suspect.

I was born in Bielsko-Biala, Poland, in 1956 and emigrated to the United States in 1981. In 1984 I moved to California and shortly thereafter fell in love with the Central Valley. In 2007, I left my cherished Valley for the open spaces of the Mt. Shasta area and the different perspectives it offered.

I have been influenced by Jan Bulhak, a great Polish photographer; Edward Weston; and Roman Vishniac, a Latvian born photographer. Also influential to my work have been Polish painters such as Chelmonski, Gierynski, Stanislawski, and Pankiewicz.

My website is [www.romanloranc.com](http://www.romanloranc.com).

**TECHNICAL** I use a 4x5 Linhof Technika camera, shooting the majority of my photographs with a 210mm Nikkor lens, exclusively using Kodak's classic TRI-X film and hand-printing my negatives on multigrade fiber paper. The innate drama of the landscapes is reproduced through a variable split-toning (sepia and selenium) technique. All the printing, spotting, and archival mounting are done by me.

