

# Nostalgia, Empathy and Hope

By Lala Wilbraham



A glimpse into Édouard André's garden design in Lithuania at the turn of the 20th century was the unexpected result of research into one family's turbulent history.

I have excellent reasons for not writing this piece: I'm neither a horticulturalist, landscape designer nor historian; I've never seen a garden by the great French designer, Édouard André, and – as a Pole born in Argentina, brought up in Brazil and living in England – I've never been to Lithuania. Yet I do have a compelling reason for putting pen to paper on this topic: a space somewhere in my chest, suddenly full to the brim with nostalgia, empathy and hope. And yes, a garden I've never seen is an integral part of it.

It all began as I started to translate material about my family for my grandchildren. Things became rather

poignant: the story embraced splendour and extravagance, philanthropy and public service, patronage, great visions, tragedy and loss. All the while, I could see a dogged patriotic battle to defend national traditions, regional identity and a sense of self. I immersed myself in my family's psyche and extraordinary life at the <sup>TURN</sup> of the 20th century, then metaphorically slipped and tumbled into my great-grandparents' garden, which was designed by Édouard André (1840-1911).

*Above:* Lentvaris, after decades of neglect. Credit: Marius Jovaisa.

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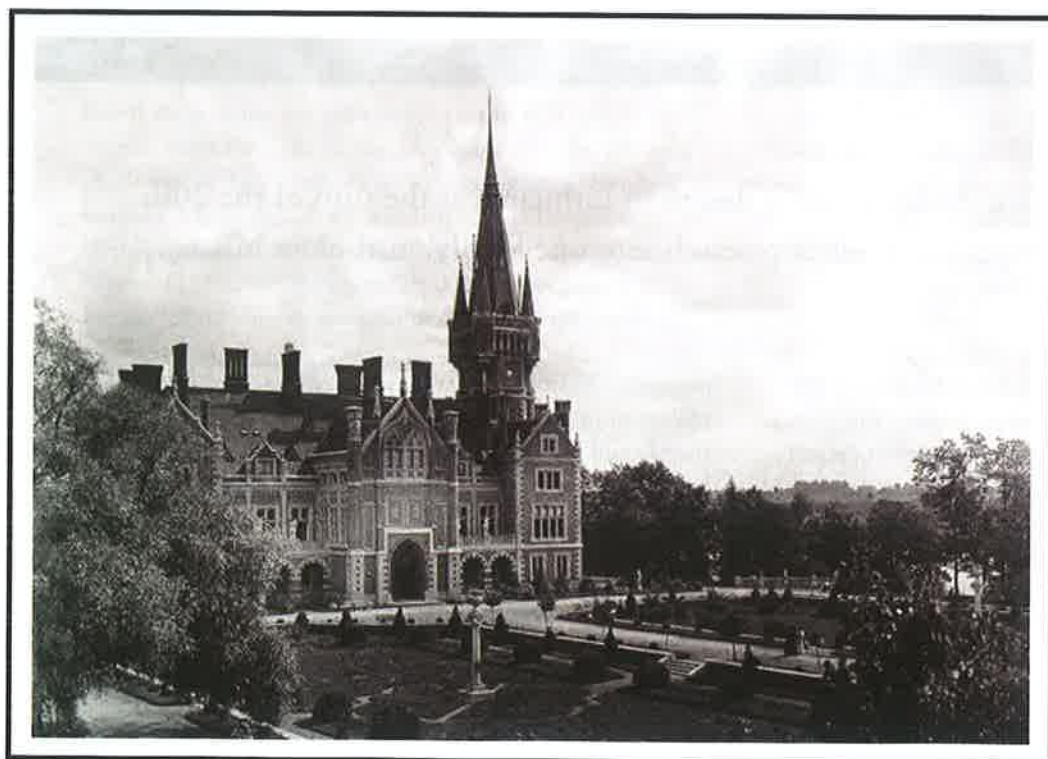
Something wonderful happened as I glanced at the internet: Florence André (Édouard André's great-granddaughter), materialised on the screen, talking about Édouard's own garden in La Croix-en-Touraine. I promptly emailed her and she shared my delight: *her* great-grandfather had designed *my* great-grandfather's garden over 100 years ago and now we'd found each other. She told me about the correspondence between Édouard André and my forebears in the Tyszkiewicz family, and rejoiced in the fact that they had made time to understand each other's visions.

In 1898 Édouard André designed and started work on four gardens simultaneously for my ancestors in Lithuania: Lentvaris (Landwarów), Palanga (Połaga), Trakų Vokė (Waka) and Užutrakis (Zatocze). This was his most ambitious project for a private client. (The Polish names are in parentheses.)

It is the garden and park at Lentvaris, commissioned by my great-grandfather, Count Władysław Tyszkiewicz (1865-1936), that resonates with me most. As a child in Brazil in the 1950s, I often ran my finger along the paths of a crude aerial view of it, drawn by my grandmother on a scrap of paper to show me the favourite routes she and her siblings ran along. Whenever I briefly inhabited the magical garden of their childhood, these little moments entranced and hurt in equal measure. The devastation that two world wars

*Above:* Édouard André (1840-1911) painted in 1902 by Édouard Debat-Ponsan. The plant in the urn is an *Anthurium Andreanum*, named after him.

*Below:* Lentvaris in 1916.



wreaked on Poland and Lithuania, and the irrevocable destruction of my grandmother's world, could never quite be pushed aside.

The Tyszkiewicz are Polish. The title of count and the right to sit in the Lithuanian Parliament were awarded to one of them, Wasyl, in 1569, for services to the nation, by the King of Poland who was also Grand Duke of Lithuania. For centuries the Tyszkiewicz held high offices in the church, in politics and at court. They were at the height of their political power in the mid-1600s and by the second half of the 19th century were the richest landowners in Lithuania. Not surprising, then, that they picked Frenchman Édouard André – then the most prolific and versatile designer of



parques and gardens in the world – to transform their aspirations into reality.

At the age of 20, André (1840-1911) had been apprenticed to Jean-Charles Alphand and Baron Haussmann, and later, as Head Gardener of Paris, he oversaw the planting in many public spaces including the Parc des Buttes Chaumont and the gardens of the Tuileries. At 26, he won an international competition with his design for Sefton Park in Liverpool and the world lay at his feet.

In 1875, he collected thousands of specimens in South America, including the *Anthurium andraeanum* and many Bromeliads, and in 1892 he became Professor





Left: Countess Tyszkiewicz, née Princess Maria Krystyna Lubomirska.

of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture at the French National School of Horticulture in Versailles.

In *L'art des jardins: traité général de la composition des parcs et jardins* (G. Masson, Paris 1879) he describes his projects: the gardens of Monte Carlo; the Funchal garden in Madeira; the public park in Cognac; the

Villa Borghese gardens in Rome; the municipal park in Luxembourg City's old fortress; public parks and plazas in Montevideo; the imperial gardens in Rio de Janeiro; the Tsar's gardens in St Petersburg, and many more.

The gardens Édouard André designed for private clients

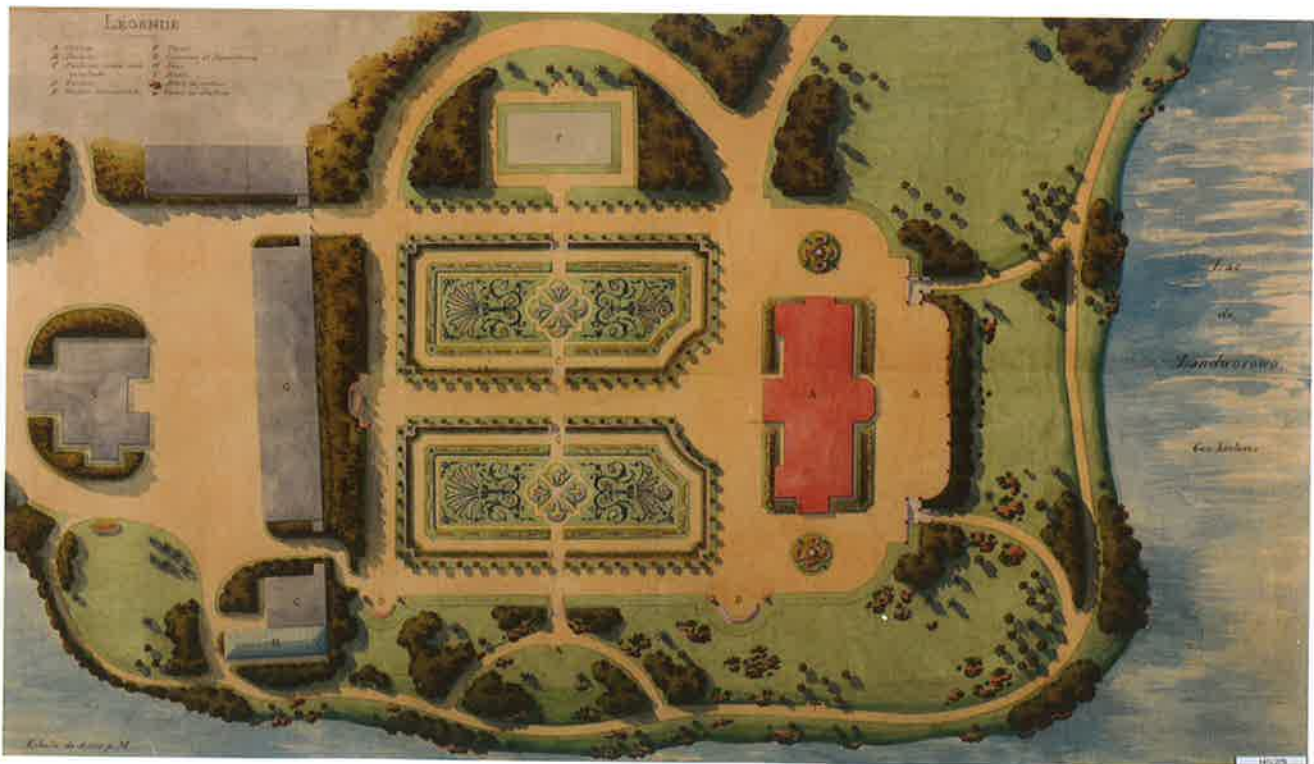
include the four Tyszkiewicz ones in Lithuania. My great-grandparents' garden was to be the cherry on the cake for my great-grandfather, determined as he was to beautify Lentvaris for the woman of his dreams, Princess Maria Krystyna Lubomirska. For four years she'd said "maybe" to his proposals of marriage, since, for her, Lentvaris was at the back of beyond: 284km (177 miles) from the buzz of Warsaw and a daunting 645km (400 miles) from her family home in Kruszyna.

Finally she said "yes" and they were married in 1892. Władysław had enticed her with a home worthy of her status, but it was only in 1898, six years after their wedding, that he, his two brothers and a cousin commissioned Édouard André to design their gardens. Three of the estates were very close to each other, but Palanga was some 400 km (250 miles) away, on the Baltic coast.

With the help of his son René and the noted Belgian landscape architect, Jules Buysens (1872-1958), André embarked on his massive Lithuanian project. He wrote to his wife on 21 June 1898 about Lentvaris, that "The park is by the shores of a lake, which makes it interesting." Two days later, he received a deposit of 6,215 rubles, which today would have an approximate value of £110,000. To put this into context, an average worker in the late 1800s earned only about 300 rubles a year.

The lake referred to by Édouard André had been created by Władysław Tyszkiewicz's father, who had inherited

Below: A plan by Édouard André dated 1898 for the parterre at Lentvaris.



By permission of Florence André and the Archives Départementales des Yvelines.

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Lentvaris as a young man. He had diverted water from a natural lake via a 6km (4 mile) canal and, with the impatience of youth, flooded the area without first clearing the trees. Apparently, fishermen's nets became entangled in the underwater branches for decades.

My grandmother (Róża Tyszkiewicz), born in 1898, the same year as André's design for Lentvaris, was too young to share in all the excitement but she certainly remembered her father telling her later that she and the garden were the same age and would grow together.

André's design thrilled my great-grandfather, presenting as it did grandeur and intimacy, formality and freedom, vistas, hideaways and surprises, spaces that could be theatrical and natural, beautiful and useful, and where active outdoor fun could coexist with contemplation.

Although I was born 14 years after Władysław's death, I don't feel I'm putting words into his mouth. I'm merely paraphrasing my grandmother, and the message was loud and clear: he was elated with Édouard André's vision and said so often. The garden became his pride, joy, comfort and the place he most longed for during his exile in Italy. But that's another story.

The terrain in Lentvaris was undulating. André re-shaped existing hillocks, scattered faux

and real rocks, built grottos and channelled waterfalls. The considerable canalisation and heavy planting were largely carried out by soldiers and prisoners. Some token gardening was done by family members, whose names were attached to each of the saplings or shrubs they tended.

Around the parterre, architectural formality required columns, urns, small statues, a balustrade and benches to enhance the structured planting where, amongst other flowers, were rare varieties of begonias imported from Belgium and France.

Evergreens such as avenues of holm oak, box hedges and Eastern arborvitae (*Thuja*) added colour to winter views. In her extensive memoirs (*Echa Minionej Epoki* or *Echoes of a Bygone Era*, housed in the Polish National Archives), my great-aunt Zofia Potocka (1893-1989) described

the effect of the paths encircling small *rond-points*.

Walkways were delineated by box hedges and – beyond the central hedge – lilac bushes concealed administrative buildings and stables and provided a backdrop for the bust of a 17th-century Tyszkiewicz bishop on a stone plinth.

A path meandered through the park, much of it following the shore of the artificial lake, past unexpected vistas towards a waterfall, a shaded bower, a small chapel and a discreet pavilion. In an otherwise austere corner you might find humour in a bench with artificial roots for legs, or mushroom-like stone stools.

Whilst strolling through established native trees (lime, birch, maple, oak, pine and fir) around gentle bends, a





visitor would come across a striking foreign specimen or small groupings of them when the artist's eye dictated: Douglas fir, European larch, Northern white-cedar or Eastern arborvitae, broadleaf lime, European elder, silver maple, birch, willow, forsythia and elm.

One area of the park was referred to as 'Riviera'. Here, in a secluded pine wood, my great-grandfather commissioned a tiny open-air chapel, with neither walls nor roof, just wooden benches on mock root legs and an image of Our Lady of Czestochowa in a faux roots frame. An oil lamp burned night and day, and everyone was welcome.

In an area called 'Switzerland', a stream flowed through a naturally wooded ravine, and paths and steps on various levels led towards grottos, benches and small waterfalls. At the top of the ravine, a bower with a root-like fence and straw roof offered nesting for a stork: symbol of good luck.

Since for Édouard André aesthetics should coexist with practicality, orchards, vegetables, herbs and flowers weren't walled off but separated by more natural evergreen hedges. Within these areas, there were countless roses but also cottage flowers: sweet peas, stock, poppies, snapdragons, mignonette, as well as all the necessary plants for the resident herbalist, who made remedies for the whole family.

The more I glimpse into what Édouard André brought into my great-grandparents' garden, and therefore into their life, the clearer becomes the perfect balance between the formal and the natural, gentle transitions and sudden



surprises, aesthetics and functionality. No wonder my great-grandfather rejoiced in showing off the garden and park just as much as strolling through them by himself in silence.

I'm glad he died in 1936, before being banished from his beloved Lentvaris, which is what World War II brought to the rest of his family. The decline in wealth and power for the Tyszkiewicz had started (as it did for other magnate families) with World War I, Poland's war with the Bolsheviks, the agrarian reforms of 1929 and the world stock market crisis. World War II was the final nail in the coffin: Stalinism undercut the roots of Eastern European aristocracy, confiscated family palaces and estates, and took

over or destroyed collections of cultural treasures assembled over many generations.

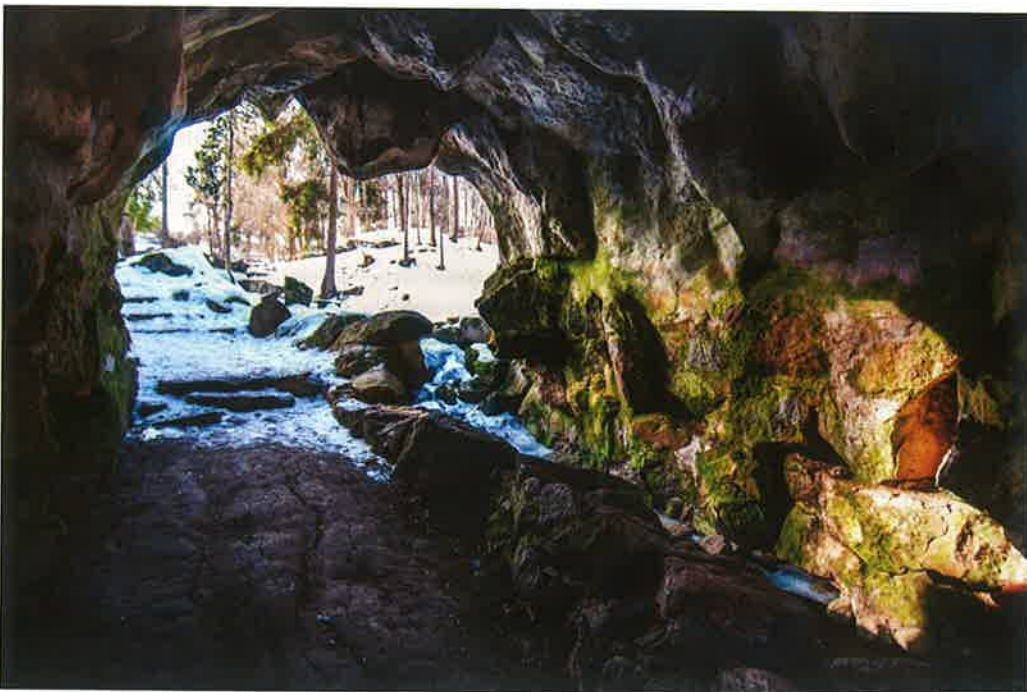
Yet, if we gloss over certain pages of history, I believe today, my great-grandfather would be touched and proud. Although Lentvaris is the most neglected of the four Tyszkiewicz estates, I still think that he and Édouard André would be gratified by what remains.

*Opposite page:*

The area in Lentvaris known as 'Riviera' as seen in 1905 and 2017.

*This page:*

The grotto in 1902 and today.



Dimitrij.

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Those who dedicate themselves to furthering the understanding of André's principles of garden and park design, to melding his and their own visions of urban and rural development, to restoring and preserving these parks without freezing them in time, those people haven't given up on Lentvaris. I hope that all four Tyszkiewicz parks will work in perpetuity as exceptional public areas and that the four palaces will also be active parts of the country's heritage, used profitably for the common good.

I believe this notion would sit well with my great-grandfather. The Vilnius newspaper *Kraj* (1902, number 50) wrote: "Count Władysław Tyszkiewicz is relentlessly driven by the family's all-consuming commitment to public service." I'd like to think he is up there on his cloud hoping these parks will belong to a Lithuania that will both honour Édouard André's creations and benefit from them for years to come. Hope springs eternal, as indeed it must.

## POSTSCRIPT

In September 2017, I attended an international conference in Trakų Vokė that commemorated the 150th anniversary of the birth and the 75th anniversary of the death of René André, who worked with his father Édouard in Lithuania. In addition to the joy of meeting Florence André, Vaiva Deveikienė and other remarkable people, I saw the Tyszkiewicz estates and their gardens for the first time. Whilst I was there, it was confirmed that the new owner of Lentvaris Palace, Mr Ugnius Kiguolis, had obtained permission and a partial grant to restore it for use as a hotel. The parkland, gardens and many outbuildings don't belong to him but to several disparate owners, namely the municipality and various former long-term squatters who, after the fall of Communism, were allowed to legalise their

Vaiva Deveikienė



Above: André's design for Lentvaris in an illustration from 2007.  
Below: The pond at Lentvaris today.

ownership. This made Lentvaris the least protected of the four Tyszkiewicz estates and, understandably, EU grants, which funded most of the restoration of Palanga, Trakų Vokė and Užutrakis, are not forthcoming for my grandmother's childhood home.

André's creation in Palanga, which lies between Tyszkiewicz forests and the beaches on the Baltic shore, is now the Palanga Botanical Gardens whilst the palace houses the Palanga Amber Museum and has been visited by more than eight million people.

The restoration of the garden and palace at Trakų Vokė is in its final stages and Užutrakis has a well-maintained park surrounding the palace, which is today a museum. In contrast, seeing Lentvaris for myself was both depressing and uplifting. The dilapidation of the buildings, the loss of vistas and the threat to botanical riches is very sad to see. Yet I can't but be hugely impressed with the unstinting drive of the people who continue to battle to save it. Thus, the third word in the title of this article – hope – has to remain. ❁

**Lala Wilbraham (Klara Mycielska)** was born and brought up in South America. She has a BA Hons in Psychology from Manchester University, where she later became a Research Assistant. She has worked freelance as a translator and interpreter, has co-authored an academic book, written articles for magazines and assisted her husband in his work in the realms of musical theatre and the West End.



Rasa Puzanienė