

Descendants of Jewish Emigrants Encourage Us to Better Promote Rokiškis

By Audron • BALTUŠKAIT •



Philip S. Shapiro (first from left to right), Judy M. Auerbach and David B. Shapiro loved the sight of Nepriklausomybės aikštė (Independence Square), its cleanliness, and sincerity of Rokiškis residents. Photo by K. Sarkaitė.

The Rokiškis Region Museum and the newspaper *Gimtasis Rokiškis* had unexpected visitors of Jewish origin from the U.S.A. and Israel. Descendants from Jewish families whose ancestors originated from Rokiškis area were fascinated by great changes in our town and encouraged us to advertise Rokiskis more in order to attract more tourists of Jewish origin.

The two brothers (both of them are lawyers) Philip S. Shapiro from Virginia and David B. Shapiro from Maryland are visiting Rokiškis for the second time. Their first visit was 10 years ago. The goal of their visit is to see their ancestors' land – Kamajai -- once again, find their family roots, and make a family tree. Their sister Judy M. Auerbach, who lives in Israel and works as a tour guide for a travel agency, joined the brothers and is visiting Lithuania for the first time.

The guests noticed that Rokiškis has changed a lot during the period from 1997 to 2007 and the people look much happier and friendlier. However, to their mind, Rokiškis is not being advertised on the Internet as it should be, no tourists are being invited to come for visits here. According to P. Shapiro, the majority of residents in Rokiškis before World War II were Jews. Some of them emigrated. "Their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren as well would certainly love to visit their

ancestors' land. This would be very beneficial to the business people of the town who sell their services," added the guest.

Philip and David Shapiro belong to the BAYL Jewish Community in Baltimore, MD (founded in 1901) on the basis of Jewish emigrants from Lithuania. It is considered to be one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world. At present it unites 3,500 members. All of them appear to be very active as they keep gathering every two months and every five years a big community reunion is held and a special bulletin before this important occasion is published. By the way, the community's website contains much information on Rokiškis.

D. Shapiro told us that the very first Jewish residents of Kamajai, Pandėlys, and Šelkiai started emigrating in 1896. This wave lasted till 1912. In those days new emigrants to the U. S. A. used to get together on Sundays and deposit a contribution of money to the society's savings so that they might be able to buy a one-way ticket to the U. S. A. for their fellow –countrypeople that were willing to emigrate. The cost of the ticket then was 20 USD.

Brothers Shapiro tried to come to Lithuania several times, but the Soviet officials did not give them permission. The possibility to visit their grandfather's birthplace turned for the better only when Lithuania regained its independence. Unfortunately, they didn't succeed in finding grandfather's house in Kamajai. Luckily, thanks to the surviving records in the archives and the records of land and property descriptions, they were able to trace the exact location his residence.

The guests are also going to visit Pandėlys, Kupiškis, and Pasvalys as a very large number of Jews emigrated from these particular areas.

[Translation By Aldona Sudeikienė]