Presentation of David and Phil Shapiro at the 110th Anniversary Banquet of the B’nai Abraham and Yehuda Laib Family Society September 2, 2011
Much of who we are reflects the experiences, hopes, and insights of our parents, grandparents, and earlier generations. It is fitting that every five years we think about those who chose to pick up stakes in Lithuania and come to strange places where they would try to make new homes and new lives.

Our search for our history begins with the BAYL Bulletin published on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of our “farain” in 1951. It tells of Laibe Krok, a wine merchant and the owner of a distillery, who lived in a place called “Tzelkay” or “Chalkay,” near Rakisik, around 1800.
Laibe was the father of Rella Krok. Rella’s first husband was Yehuda Laib Romm, from Ponedel, and after he died she married Abraham Abramovitz, a rabbi who lived in Rakisik. The given names of these two men, Yehuda Laib Romm and Abraham Abramson, are memorialized in our family society’s name.
The villages of our ancestors were in a relatively small area in what today is northeastern Lithuania. In the 19th Century, about one-third of the area was farmland, one third was pasture, and one third was forest.

During the 19th Century, the villages were in the Russian Empire, specifically in the Kovna Province, the northernmost province of the Pale of Settlement.¹

¹ The Courland Province was outside of the Pale, though at times Jews were allowed to live in some parts of the province.
Before the Russians occupied this area -- in 1795 -- these villages were in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, a nation that extended remarkable freedoms to Jews. For hundreds of years, Jews in Lithuania and the closely related Kingdom of Poland enjoyed largely autonomous lives. They were free to practice their religion and pursue their own intellectual and cultural activities. They could even decide how to tax themselves to raise the Jewish community’s share of government taxes.
The Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania, c. 1650

It was feudal world, in which the largely Catholic populations of Lithuania and Poland were serfs who were ruled by very powerful noblemen who strongly influenced local economies and national policy.

The Tyzenhaus Estate Mansion, Rokiškis, Lithuania
In this world, Jews could obtain special economic rights. Laib Krok obtained a license to distill wine, which meant that he could operate a tavern and an inn.

Reconstructed Tavern in Plungė, (northwestern) Lithuania

Two generations later, Henech Yatovitz had a license to build and operate a mill on the Shetekshna stream in Kamai, a few miles south of Rakisik and Chelkay.

Henech and Pessa Leba (Romm) Yatovitz, Dvinsk (Daugavpils), Latvia, c. 1901
Why Leave The Pale? In 1795, the Russian Empire annexed the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and much of the Kingdom of Poland. As a result, for all of the 19th Century, Jews in Lithuania were subjects of the Russian czars.
Of The 5,216,000 Jews Who Lived in the Pale of Settlement, About 223,000, or 5%, Lived in the Kovna Gubernya.

For the most part, Jewish life in the shtetls of Lithuania in the first half of the 19th Century was not significantly affected by Russian policies. The shtetls were largely Jewish – typically 75% of a village’s population was Jewish – and life largely continued as it had for centuries during the existence of the Grand Duchy.
Each shtetl was largely self-sufficient, with economic activity built around market days. For example, in Rakisik, most Jews made their living from small businesses and peddling.
Aerial View of Market Square, Rokiškis, Lithuania, c. 1929

Aerial View of “Independence Square,” Rokiškis, Lithuania, c. 2000
The Jews in each community volunteered for, and contributed funds to, a wide variety of chevras, or special-purpose committees. There were, of course, religious committees, such chevrei kadisha, but also committees for the care of the sick (bikkur cholim), for the collection of funds for feeding the poor, and mutual loan societies.

In the second half of the 19th Century, changing economic conditions and new government policies threatened Jews’ economic livelihoods and caused greater anxiety about long-term security. One significantly disruptive factor was the completion of railway lines, which diverted travelers from traditional paths through shtetls and brought cheap, factory-made goods to areas that previously relied upon goods produced by Jewish artisans.²

Myer Smith, the founder of the BAYL, was born in Kupisik, where he was known as Zanvil Zavilevitz. He was sent to Riga as a boy to learn how to make caps. For a while he lived with his grandmother, Rella Krok Romm Abramovitz, in Rakisik.

Zanvil Zavilevitz, known in America as Myer Smith, and is wife Anna Smith
However, he saw that his future was in America and he followed other relatives who had made their way to Baltimore. There he created a chevra, a special-purpose society, which they called a “farain,” composed of “blut freundt” – social relatives.
The purpose of the society was to lend funds to relatives seeking to leave Lithuania, both for the cost of transportation and the initial expenses of making a start in their new communities, whether in America, South Africa, or Palestine.

The borrowers repaid their loans in fixed installments – without interest – and these repayment monies were used to make new loans to additional immigrants. Also, quite critically, the society could provide the required pledge to the U.S. government that
new immigrants to this country would not seek public welfare during their first three years in America.
Some family members remained in Lithuania. Except for those who were able to emigrate before 1941, most were murdered in the Holocaust.

One who survived was a young woman named Rele Krok, who most likely was named for our matriarch Rella Krok. Rele was a nurse in Kaunas who was rescued by the family of a righteous Gentile named Juozas Stankevičius.³

In 2007, we were able to personally thank his daughter, Kazimiera.

³ The English counterpart to this Lithuanian name would be “Joseph Stankevich.”
Few Jews are left in Lithuania and only a few reminders of Jewish life. Since 1997, David and Phil and their sister Judy and her husband Avi have visited Lithuania at various times. In some respects, life in northeastern Lithuania is little changed from the time that our family began leaving at the end of the 19th Century.
Farmers Haying With Scythes, Čelkiai (Chelkay), Lithuania, 1997

Lithuanian Woman in Front of Her Stove, 1997
However, there are no Jews in the Rokisik region, and few reminders of the vibrant Jewish life that was there for centuries.
Scenes from Synagogue Street, Kupisik / Kupiškis
But there is a cultural memory of the Jewish presence. For example, the word for a potato casserole is “kugelis” – a kugel. And there is nursery rhyme known throughout Lithuania of people racing there horses to Kamai to buy large bagels – this more than 70 years after the last bagel was sold in Kamai, the home town of the Shapiro, Silverman, and Yatovitz families.
We are fortunate that three of the four Jewish cemeteries in which our ancestors are buried, including the one in Rakiski, have not been destroyed. In the summer of 2011, David and Phil Shapiro began working with others whose ancestors lived in the area on a project to improve the cemetery’s condition.
Plan for Shrubbery to Define Portion of Border of Old Rokiškis Jewish Cemetery

We have very good support from local municipal officials and the regional museum and hope one day to have a re-dedication of cemetery.

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As the flow of immigrants subsided and subsequent generations of the BAYL became established in America, there was less demand for loans and the society increasingly gave outright gifts supporting the Jewish people.
Contribution To Support Emile Dresner, Child Survivor of Holocaust, 1947

Contribution to Jewish National Fund For Trees in Palestine, c. 1947
On this occasion, the 110th Anniversary of the founding of the Family Society, it is appropriate to note not only the society’s long history of helping family members and others, but to also acknowledge that our very presence here this evening is to directly related to the assistance that brought our grandparents and great-grandparents out of Lithuania.

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The lives that we enjoy of freedom and opportunity are a direct consequence of the assistance that they received.
We have much to be grateful for. Thank you.

We would like to recognize and thank Rachel Shapiro, David’s daughter, for putting this slide show together. We also want to thank Aldona Sudeikienė, our intrepid guide, translator, and dear friend, who sends the Family Society her warmest greetings from Lithuania.

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