



ROKIŠKIO KRAŠTO MUZIEJUS

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On June 21, Phil and Aldona Shapiro, who are friends and sponsors of the Rokiškis Regional Museum, visited from the USA. Phil and his brother David founded a non-profit organization called Remembering Litvaks, Inc., which is dedicated to preserving and fostering the Litvak cultural heritage of Lithuania. On the organization's initiative, funds were collected for several projects in Rokiškis. For example, it commissioned the Rokiškis Machine Factory to manufacture and install a metal fence and gates along the eastern side of the old Rokiškis Jewish cemetery. It also commissioned Panevėžys sculptor Albertas Jasiūnas to create a memorial that was placed near the gates that is dedicated to the Jews of Rokiškis. Remembering Litvaks, Inc., has also established an annual prize in the name of Ruvín Bun, a volunteer soldier from the village of Pasubatė, who died on November 21, 1920, in a battle near Giedraičiai on the last day of Lithuania's Wars of Independence. This prize is awarded for the preservation and nurturing of the cultural historical heritage of national minorities.

During the June 21 meeting, the visitors discussed several new projects, including those in which the Museum might be a partner. They also received the results of new historical research that the Museum recently conducted.

On May 8, 2017, Marijona Mieliauskiene, the Museum's Deputy Director of the Rokiškis Regional Museum, and Giedrius Kujelis, the Director of the Museum's History Department, visited Jonas Rudokas in Skrebiskis village (who was born in 1934 in the village of Skrebiskis in the Kamajai eldership). The purpose of the visit was to determine the place of killing and burial of a group of Svėdasai Jews.

Mr. Rudokas remembered that in 1941 July or August (he could not recall the precise date) more prosperous Jewish families from Svėdasai were shot on the outskirts of Trakas-Pempiškis forest, near the road leading from Kamajai northward to Rokiškis.

The Museum's staff, together with Mr. Rudokas and his wife, Aldona Rudokienė, went to the site of the Jewish shooting and burial, which is approximately one kilometer from their home. Mr. Rudokas pointed to the site at the edge of the Trako-Pempiškis forest close to the Kamajai-Rokiškis road.

Mr. Rudokas explained that the Jewish families from Svėdasai were being transported in the direction of Rokiškis with their possessions in horse-drawn carts. Their captors then decided to benefit themselves by killing their captives. When the massacre began,

several of the victims tried to escape, but were attacked and shot.

Mr. Rudokas heard from other neighbors that 28 people were shot dead during the incident. Among the massacre perpetrators were men from the Bekintis family who lived in Svėdasai.

Museum Deputy Director M. Mieliauskienė (who was born in 1952 in Pašilės village in the Kamajai eldership) remembers that her parents and grandmother talked about these killings. Her grandmother, Anelė Jasiūnienė (1883-1965) had shown her the place where the murdered Svėdasai Jews were buried.

Jonas and Aldona Rudokas and Marijona Mieliauskienė explained that in the 1960s diggings occurred at the massacre site but they did not know who did the digging or the reason it was done. M. Mieliauskienė had also heard about this from his mother, Liudvika Jasiūnienė (1920-1987).

The Museum coordinators have recorded the specific location, documented the testimony of the witnesses, and drafted an official document regarding the massacre site. The Museum will present this information to the Genocide and Resistance Research Center of Lithuania for further actions. In the opinion of the Museum coordinators, the next steps should be to search for documents in archives, particularly any concerning a possible transfer of the victims' remains, archaeological research, protecting the site, building a memorial sign, and installing a road sign.

There are several mass murder sites in the Rokiškis area, where between June and August 1941 the Nazis killed Jews who were residents of the region. Four of these places have been documented. At Velniaduobė, near the village of Bajorai, 3207 people were killed. They were residents of the town of Rokiskis and residents from other Jewish towns in the area. More than 1160 victims are buried near Antanašė village, south of Obeliai. There are 70 people buried in a mass grave in the village of Vyžuonai and 981 people were killed in the Steponiai woods.

However, there are other massacre places, like the one near the Trakas-Pempiškis forest, that are not marked and have been forgotten by many people. One such location is on the border of the Šeduikiškis and Kavoliškis villages, just west of Rokiškis on the right side of a small field road. It was there that the Jofe and Olkin families from Panemunėlis were murdered and buried. Among those shot dead there was the young poet, Matilda Olkinaitė.

The tragedy of Matilda Olkinaitė has been immortalized by the play of the Theatre of Rokiškis company entitled, "Mute Muses," which was directed by Neringa Daniienė. The theater company did not limit themselves to the performance to preserve the memory of the Olkin family. The theatre company, together with the volunteers from the Lithuanian Army's 506th National Guard unit, which is based in Rokiskis, undertook an expedition to identify the location of the massacre and burial site. There is a plan to mark the boundary of the site and build a commemorative plaque. The association also plans to publish a book of M. Olkinaitė's poetry.