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GOVERNMENT, JEWISH REPS OPTIMISTIC ON ENDING TO CEMETERY SAGA

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B. VILNIUS 258

Classified By: Ambassador John A. Cloud for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: The GOL and representatives of a group that works to preserve Jewish cemeteries found much common ground and no obvious irreconcilable differences at a May 21 discussion about protection of a historic cemetery in central Vilnius. The GOL on May 18 announced its plan (ref A) to prevent development on the cemetery site, but had not discussed that plan beforehand with the Jewish community. Some specifics of the procedures for determining cemetery boundaries remain to be negotiated, and sources must be found for the costs of rabbinical supervision during investigative digging and for future beautification of the site. The Jewish representatives also said repeatedly that excessive publicity would limit their flexibility to move forward with the plan. End summary.

2. (C) British Rabbi Herschel Gluck and Israeli engineer Arieh Klein, representing the Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe (CPJCE), met May 21 with Vice Minister of Culture Donatas Valanciauskas, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Sarunas Adomavicius, Director of the Department of Cultural Heritage Diana Varnaite and other Lithuanian officials to discuss the GOL's new plan to protect what remains of the Snipiskes Jewish cemetery, which served as the main Jewish burial ground of Vilnius for several centuries. Construction a few years ago of the Mindaugas apartment buildings on what many consider to be part of the cemetery led to protests and condemnation from groups around the world.

3. (C) Rolandas Balcikonas of the development company UBIG also attended the meeting, then met one-on-one with Klein later in the day. Faina Kukliansky, chairwoman of the Vilnius Jewish Community, also was present, as were British Ambassador Simon Butt and two U.S. Embassy officers. Kukliansky said the local Jewish community would defer entirely to the expertise and wishes of the CPJCE concerning Snipiskes. Balcikonas said UBIG's only concern was to know with certainty what parts of the land it owns could or could not be used for its planned development project (ref B). He said UBIG needed the CPJCE's agreement to the GOL plan by the end of May in order to move forward with its next phases. Klein told Balcikonis that the CPJCE would get him an answer as soon as possible.

SETTING CONDITIONS

4. (C) Gluck and Klein cautioned that final word on the acceptability of the GOL plan would come from Rabbi Elyokim Schlesinger, head of the CPJCE, but told the GOL that they agreed with most of the plan. The plan prohibits any development on land identified as cemetery grounds, and requires any digging or development in adjacent buffer zones to be done under rabbinical supervision as well as the oversight of the Cultural Heritage Department.

5. (C) Gluck and Klein were adamant on conditions that would need to be established for any digging to take place. Klein suggested splitting the buffer zone into two categories. The first, Zone A, would include the Mindaugas apartments and the 1971 Soviet-built Sports Palace, which nobody disputes was built in the cemetery. Zone B would include the rest of the buffer zones as charted by the GOL. Klein spelled out what he expected the CPJCE's requirements to be for the buffer zones:

-- In Zone A, digging or other invasive work would be prohibited. "If you absolutely have to replace a pipe, do it under rabbinical supervision," Klein said. Nobody on the GOL side spoke out to disagree with this idea.

-- In Zone B, once the developer was ready to begin work, then an agreed-upon program of excavation would take place, done by the developer's workers and supervised by the CPJCE rabbis, Klein, and the Cultural Heritage Department. Klein, Gluck, and Varnaite agreed that any area in which human remains were found in anatomical positions -- that is, graves -- would immediately be declared cemetery, the remains would be left undisturbed, and further investigation of the nearby area would be conducted. In addition, Klein said, "If

substantial human remains are found near the outer (eastern) boundary of the buffer zone, then we want to go another 5 or 10 meters farther out to see if we've really reached the end of the cemetery, until we're completely sure that's it." In a side conversation with Klein, UBIG's Balcikonis tacitly agreed that expansion of the buffer zone would happen in such a case, if only because of the public outcry that would occur if it did not. On the other hand, if no remains were found

and the rabbis were satisfied that an area in Zone B was not part of the cemetery, the requirement for oversight in that area would end and the buffer zone would contract.

-- Investigative digging should not go as deep as graves, but only deep enough to determine whether a grave is below, so as not to disturb human remains unnecessarily. Klein said digging about a meter deep would generally be enough.

-- The threshold for an area to be considered cemetery should not be the presence of bodies found buried in anatomical positions, but "substantial human remains," regardless of whether they were in graves. Scattered or individual bones, they agreed, could be reburied elsewhere. The CPJCE and GOL representatives did not thoroughly discuss how to define "substantial human remains" as opposed to scattered remains, however the GOL seemed to agree in principle that significant findings of remains would be protected in situ, rather than removed and reburied.

6. (C) A small area that is shown as part of the cemetery on historical maps was excluded from the cemetery boundaries in the GOL plan. That area, a small section of Rinktines Street and its sidewalk, must be protected, Klein insisted. If digging needed to be done on the road, rabbinical supervision would be required. Varnaite said she was sure a solution could be found, but questioned how such supervision could be arranged quickly if emergency repairs were required.

7. (C) Another condition that Klein and Gluck implored the GOL to accept was that publicity and public comment on the plan should be kept to a minimum. The GOL had already issued press releases and given media interviews about the plan before the May 21 meeting. Klein and Gluck asked them to give the project a much lower profile, saying that publicity would limit the CPJCE's flexibility to move forward.

8. (C) Klein and Gluck met with Schlesinger May 24 in London; Klein later told us that Schlesinger had agreed with all of the requirements his representatives had laid down in Vilnius, and Klein was drafting a list of the CPJCE's conditions for Varnaite, whose department will draw up the procedures for digging or development in the buffer zones.

WHO WILL PAY?

9. (C) In a separate meeting, Klein told us that he estimated the cost of rabbinical supervision of digging for the entire project at 100,000 USD. It would be very difficult for the CPJCE to raise that amount, he said; instead, he saw UBIG or the separate company that built the Mindaugas buildings as a possible source. He agreed with us that the GOL, rather than the CPJCE, should approach the developers about possible contributions.

COMMENT

10. (C) The GOL has taken a large step forward on this issue by unilaterally introducing its plan to prevent further development of Snipiskes cemetery. UBIG, which will have to forego development of a few hectares of its expensive land in central Vilnius, has been cooperative. And the CPJCE appears to be striving for maximum flexibility -- to the point of accepting exploratory digging in or near the cemetery, a stance that would infuriate some other Jewish groups should they learn of it -- in order to bring this dispute to a successful conclusion. With good will and good luck, such a conclusion could be near.

CLOUD

References to this document in other cables

[09VILNIUS456 \(/plusd/cables/09VILNIUS456.html\)](#)

References in this document to other cables

[08VILNIUS277 \(/plusd/cables/08VILNIUS277.html\)](#)
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