

Congress Members Protest Planned Desecration of Vilna Cemetery

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NEW YORK – Amid renewed threats to one of Jewry's sacred sites, the Snipisek Jewish Cemetery in Vilnius (Vilna), a group of 12 members of the United States Congress have sent a letter to Lithuania's president, protesting plans to build on the spot.

"The cemetery is one of the last remnants of the great Jewish community of Vilnius and many of Vilnius' preeminent scholars and figures are interred there," reads the letter in part. "It should be treated with dignity and respect."

Activists from Jewish communities around the world have been fighting for the *beis hachaim's* preservation since plans for various construction projects were announced over a decade ago. The spot in the center of the city is void of tombstones, victims of desecration that occurred during Nazi occupation and Soviet rule. The only structures are a small memorial and an abandoned "sports palace" built in the 1960s. Since then, two apartment buildings were put up on the grounds as well.

Plans to replace the arena with a modern convention center were met with protests from Jewish groups, but the local government remained undeterred. This year, the company that had contracted to build the center was found to have

falsified the financial documents they submitted during the bidding process and the plan was canceled. Jewish activists were hopeful that this development would open a window for a new round of negotiations, but announcements from Vilnius officials that bids were being sought for construction of a similar project dashed these hopes.

The letter makes reference to a resolution passed by the House of Representatives in 2008 calling desecration of the site "an affront to the international Jewish community," and calling on Lithuanian authorities to take "steps that guarantee permanent preservation." In the past, appeals have only focused on stopping future construction. The present appeal asks for the removal of the sports center, saying its continued presence "conflicts with the respect for human dignity."

The signatories include Representatives Jan Schakowsky (D-Illinois), Randy Weber (R-Texas), Steve Cohen (D-Tennessee), Ted Deutch (D-Florida), Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Florida), Jerrold Nadler (D-New York), John Garamendi (D-California), Dina Titus (D-Nevada), James McGovern (D-Maryland), Josh Gottheimer (D-New Jersey), Eliot Engel (D-New York), and Alcee Hastings (D-Florida).

Dr. Bernard Fryshman of the Conference of Academicians for the Protection of Jewish Cem-

eteries is one of those heavily involved in efforts to preserve the spot.

"They [Lithuanian officials] come with smiles and are ready to listen to our position, but at the end of the day these projects continue," he told *Hamodia*. "Our position has always been very simple: It [the cemetery] was taken from Vilna's *kehillah* originally and it should be given back to the Jewish People."

The historic and hallowed site, known as Vilna's "old" cemetery, is the resting place of the Chayei Adam, Reb Zalman of Volozhin, and many other Lithuanian *Gedolim*. Harav Michel Yehudah Lefkowitz, *zt"l*, originally of Vilna, related that in his youth, the *beis hachaim* contained a section that was closed to visitors and was known as the burial place of the "*lamed-vav tzaddikim*."

When the *beis hachaim* was threatened with construction by the Lithuanian government in 1934, Hagoon Harav Chaim Ozer Grodzinski, *zt"l*, wrote that all possible efforts must be made to save it: "We cannot agree to any compromise" on the matter.

The Vilna Gaon and the Ger Tzedek were originally interred there, but their remains were moved in the 1950s, when the communist government began construction of the sports complex on the cemetery's edge.