

Outcry Over Renewed Threats to Vilna Cemetery

RAFAEL HOFFMAN

Jewish groups reacted with alarm to a statement by Lithuanian Prime Minister Algirdas Butkevicius regarding construction planned for one of Jewry's most sacred sites, the Snipisek Jewish Cemetery in Vilnius.

Although local authorities claim that new plans will only affect an already standing structure, *askanim* fear desecration of the holy spot will inevitably occur.

"We spoke to experts who said clearly that there is no way for them to do the renovations without digging," Rabbi Lazar Stern of Asra Kadisha told *Hamodia*. "Even if they wouldn't have to uproot anything, the idea that there should be a concert hall on such a holy spot is *chillul hakodesh*."

The historic and halowed site, known as Vilna's

"old" cemetery, is the resting place of the *Ger Tzedek*, 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 any visitors and was known as the burial place of the "*lamed-vav*" *tzaddikim*.

Sadly, none of the original tombstones remain — victims of Nazi occupation and Soviet rule.

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

Despite international efforts to protect Snipisek, the Lithuanian government's designation of the site as a "former Jewish

cemetery" has allowed several construction projects to go on. In 2005 and 2009, two apartment complexes were built.

"They [the government] claimed that there was nothing there, but when they dug, they unearthed bones everywhere. It was terrible," said Rabbi Stern.

Yielding to outcries from various Jewish groups, the site was granted "Cultural Heritage" protection in 2009, but it continued to be used as a staging ground for public events for more than a year after that.

The "Sports Palace" has been abandoned for decades, but now Lithuania's Prime Minister Algirdas Butkevicius announced that it would become a modern "Congress

Center." Subsequently, he added, "private investors could build a hotel, parking lots and other infrastructure."

In a "respectful but firm" statement, Asra Kadisha and the Conference of Academics for the Protection of Jewish Cemeteries expressed protest over the planned project. Pointing to a "decade of diversions and duplicity" on the part of Lithuanian authorities, Rabbi Lazar Stern and Dr. Bernard Fryshman, respectively, speaking on behalf of Asra and the Conference, decried the "planned incursion and desecration of one of the Jewish people's most sacred sites."

The statement evokes the International Religious

Freedom Act of 1998, passed by Congress into law in August 2014, which includes the desecration of cemeteries among the many forms of violations of the right to religious freedom.

A formal request was also submitted to the State Department asking that immediate and high level contacts be established with Lithuanian authorities to forestall any construction in the cemetery.

"[Snipisek] is in a wonderful location overlooking Vilna's river, so the spot is in demand," Dr. Fryshman told *Hamodia*. "Our claim, however, is very simple. The cemetery belongs to the Jewish people and not the Lithuanian government."

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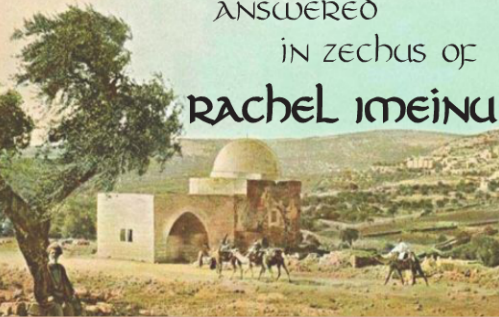
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