



OUR HERITAGE

An arm swing, a scratch of a mysterious pen, and Vilnius Jewish cemeteries disappeared. It all happened not long ago, in 1965.

Today we would not find any of hundreds and thousands of stones that guarded peace on these flattened hills of those who passed away.

They were all turned into macadam under the asphalt surface, bridge support, founding stones or stairs. All this happened in secret and silence, as any other dirty work.

These were the introductory words by R.Dichavičius in the opening of the exhibition "Užupis Jewish Cemetery" held in the State Jewish Museum in 1992.

The tragedy of Vilnius Jews during the Nazi occupation was aggravated by the destruction and disdain of Jewish culture that followed during the Soviet era.

The cemeteries, places of eternal peace for those who passed away, which in every civilisation, always, and for all people were considered sacred and were exclusively respected, did not escape that fate.

In Vilnius, it all started from Šnipekės Jewish cemetery that had existed since the end of the 15th century and hosted a great many of famous Jews, Vilna Gaon among them.

The cemeteries with the remains of dozens of thousands of Vilnius Jews were levelled to the ground and the Sports Palace and "Žalgiris" stadium were built on the site.

The tombstones that were stolen from the cemeteries during the Soviet times were used as building material for the stairs leading to Tauras Hill as

well as other building sites in the city.

To mark this act of vandalism carried out in the Soviet times the Municipality of Vilnius City unveiled a monument to the destroyed cemeteries in front of the Sports Palace in 1993.

However, this monument hides in-

Is Užupis Jewish Cemetery Destined to Disappear?

different approach of Vilnius Municipality and its former leaders to the fate of Užupis Jewish cemetery, which is one of the largest in Lithuania.

Already in 1993, a persuasive cemetery care and maintenance project was drafted and approved; it also included a plan on perpetuating the act of vandalism carried out in this cemetery by staging a display out of the dismantled tombstones which were used on different building sites of the city and which retained the trace of their former inscriptions.

However, the clearing-up work of this cemetery has not been started yet.

And there is not a single sign of an intention to do this. For instance, the recent letter from the Mayor of Vilnius to the Government states that necessary funds are not available, so be as it may.

Time flies, and the status of the unattended and deserted territory of Užupis Jewish cemetery is not getting any better.

Some years ago there were seven

dozens of remaining children tombs with tombstones on the side of the hill leading up to the ritual service bureau in Olandų Street (left side).

The tombstones that were hopelessly deserted have overgrown with grass, and some of them have been

deprived of the last trace of inscriptions, and stand today as a living reproach.

Are these cemeteries looted during the Soviet times and containing dozens of thousands of the remains of Vilnius Jews (no matter that the tombstones have not survived) predestined to "natural" destruction?

It is likely that quite a few Kaunas Jews can complain about Kaunas Jewish cemetery on Radvilėnai highway, as the latter look like after a storm.

And they would be fully right.

The same comments are relevant in reference to Pakruojis Jewish cemetery.

Some raise the issue that, likewise other confessions, the Jews should take care of the place where their forefathers rest themselves. They seem to be unaware of the fact that those who would have really taken care of them lie close to those cemeteries in the pits where mass killings took place, and the remaining majority of the small Jewish community is represented by for-

mer prisoners of Nazi death camps and ghettos who are now disabled or pensioners.

And finally, it cannot be left unnoticed that the costs related to the upkeep of the Jewish cemeteries would make up an insignificant part of the real

to build-up the territory.

This would not only eliminate the problem itself, but would also significantly expand the modern quarter in the prestigious catchment area of the city.

However, responsibility is not a coat, which you can easily dispose off, particularly, when it comes to history.

I wish to conclude my thoughts with the meaningful words uttered by the master of photography, R.Dichavičius, during the opening of the photo exhibition "Užupis Jewish Cemeteries":

"Looking backwards and looking into these photos that have turned yellowish, I have been going through a major shake and tried to comprehend what has happened.

The monument is Memory. It is time frozen in stone. It is the conversation among centuries. It is the chronicle.

Tombstones represent Love and Sorrow enhanced by tears. A human extends a human life through his memory and heart, by continuing the work, which had been launched. That is the sacred sign that joins the earthly existence with the endless universe.

Why should monuments be erected and efforts, love, and creativity consolidated if somebody comes and destroys everything like we destroyed what we have inherited from others?

This will remain until all and each of us realises the simple and eternal truth that to destroy memory is to close the road to the future. To destroy others is to destroy oneself".

Josifas LEVINSONAS,

Daily "Lietuvos rytas" (Supplement "Sostinė").