



■ By Bernard Fryshman, Ph.D.

After more than a year of delay, obfuscation and diversion, the Lithuanian government has admitted it will be driving piles in the old Shnipishok Jewish cemetery in Vilnius. It will be excavating for sewers, heating ducts and water supply pipes to renovate a 1970 desolate building standing in the middle of the cemetery at a cost of \$25 million.

There was no formal announcement. Rather, there was an exchange of correspondence between the London based Committee for the Protection of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe (CPJCE) and Rimantas Vaitkas, the first Deputy Chancellor of the government of the Republic of Lithuania.

CPJCE and the Lithuanian government, in this exchange of letters dated May 5 and

May 12, 2016, speak of “earth movement,” which means massive bulldozers digging trenches. The letters also speak of driving piles in the cemetery. The “fill” to be removed includes the remains of the Jews buried near the building in question, the Sports Palace, a region described by the U.S. Embassy as the “center of the cemetery.”

The agreement reached between CPJCE and the Lithuanian government speaks gently of the “doubt of finding bone fragments.” This is a cemetery where there were Jews buried everywhere. Does a rational being doubt that bone fragments will be discovered here? (Unless the planned digging mirrors the Zürich experience, where giant earth moving equipment excavated a cemetery, crushing all bones and human remains beyond recognition.)

“Concrete flowerpots” are described as preventing “public mass gathering on the cemetery ground,” while “the usage of the Congress center should be in the spirit of the sanctity of the surrounding vicinity.” One can visualize thousands of young Lithuanians leaving a concert or political rally, walking somberly amidst the flowerpots, exchanging sacred thoughts.

We are being told about the destruction and desecration of one of Jewry’s most sacred sites. Of what use will the promised CPJCE “oversight” be as the remains of *kedoshim* are crushed, and the cemetery where the *Gra* and the *Ger Tzeddek* once lay is despoiled? This is a cemetery with an area where Jews feared to enter because *lamed vov tzaddikim* were believed to be buried there.

All the placating words will not change the reality that digging will take place and piles will be driven through the heart of a living cemetery!

It’s important to describe the process whereby the Lithuanians found cover for its nefarious scheme. It began with a representative of CPJCE visiting Lithuania early in 2015 and announcing support for a project without seeing any plans.

It continued with Lithuanian officials meeting Jewish groups, particularly in the United States, publishing photographs of smiling leaders and Lithuanian representatives engaged in friendly conversation. The press was fed glowing reports of friendship

and understanding between American Jews and Lithuanian representatives.

The State Department itself had assigned decision-making authority relating to Jewish cemeteries to the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America’s Heritage Abroad, so that well over a year has gone by without the United States government being heard on this issue. This is probably why the Lithuanian government can speak so confidently about its Congress center “operating in compliance with all relevant international requirements.”

Most shocking is a statement signed by Rabbi Yeshaya Schlesinger and Rabbi Abraham Ginsberg of the CPJCE that:

“Further to the meeting of the rabbinical board, we the undersigned confirm that with the government’s written acceptance of the above clarifications, the CPJCE approves and endorses the ‘Vilnius Palace of Concerts and Sport conversion to Congress Center 2016 plan B’ and wish this venture every success.”

The Lithuanians used another tool to support their proposed excavation in the cemetery. GPR (Ground Penetrating Radar) was proposed to the Lithuanian government in 2008 by a working group that was convinced this technology could detect burials underground. As it turns out, GPR is a highly limited technology that at best can detect “anomalies” which under certain circumstances can be correlated to burials. In a cemetery such as Shnipishok, it is impossible to emerge with anything other than a null result. Bodies buried without a coffin, after hundreds of years of decay, show up no differently than do pebbles and stones. The nature of the sand through which the electromagnetic radiation must travel and be reflected also mitigates against any kind of indication.

It is not surprising then that the Lithuanians undertook a GPR review of the Shnipishok cemetery. It is surprising that they had the effrontery to use a null result to “prove” that there are no burials in the area of the Sports Palace, a section well known to have had hundreds if not thousands of burials.

We will persist in trying to stop this project. But if *chas veshalom* it carries through, there is ample shame and lots of blame to be shared.

Ezer Mizion: A Hand in the Dark Talk Is Not Cheap

“I dreaded the moment when we would have to return the computer... It just was not an option!”

Seven-year-old Shai Chayat suffers from a rare syndrome known as Marshal Smith, which prevents communication through normal speech. Over the last year, Shai began to “speak” through a special augmentative communication computer that enables the formation of sentences, expres-

sion of thoughts, and contact with others.

Shai’s parents borrowed the device, which costs close to \$5,500, from Ezer Mizion’s unique VOCA (Voice Output Communication Aids) Lending Center. VOCA is one of the many divisions of Ezer Mizion, one of Israel’s major organizations assisting the ill, the handicapped, and the elderly.

When the end of the loan period approached, the Chayats knew that they would have to return the device for the benefit of many others awaiting their turn. Some families, at this point, pay for, or raise, the funds to purchase their own equipment, having determined by using the loaned item that this particular model will work for them. The Chayats were unable to do either.

“The tremendous change the computer made in Shai’s life is unbelievable... We could not accept the thought that Shai would have to manage without the computer. It just wasn’t an option.”

But only a limited number of devices were available at Ezer Mizion and time was up.

The devastation of Ezer Mizion staff nearly matched that of Shai’s parents. “If only

more pieces of equipment were available, other options would exist,” a staff member said.

Shai’s story had a happy ending: Shai’s school sent an article about the plight to an American philanthropist. He was so touched by the thought that without the computer, Shai would not be able to say, “I want Grandma,” that he decided to cover the entire expense.

But what about all the other children - and adults - like Shai? What about young children who cannot develop properly? What about teens and adults cut off from the satisfaction of communicating with peers, imprisoned in their loneliness? What about all of these?

Today, the trend in augmentative communication is towards less costly, user-friendly iPad devices, which can be programmed with exciting, auditory feedback programs that open new horizons for the speech-disabled. The programs use instant gratification methods and a combination of audio and visual stimuli to rivet the children’s attention and advance their communication by giant leaps.

For child or adult, Ezer Mizion’s VOCA equipment is like creating a window in a hitherto dark cave. He has so much to say. His ideas and opinions have been chasing themselves inside his mind, trapped. With the program, his thoughts have somewhere to go. He can connect. And the first thought many want to express is, “Thank you. Thank you, all of you, for enabling me to join the world.”

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For further info, call 718. 853.8400 or visit www.ezer-mizion.org.

