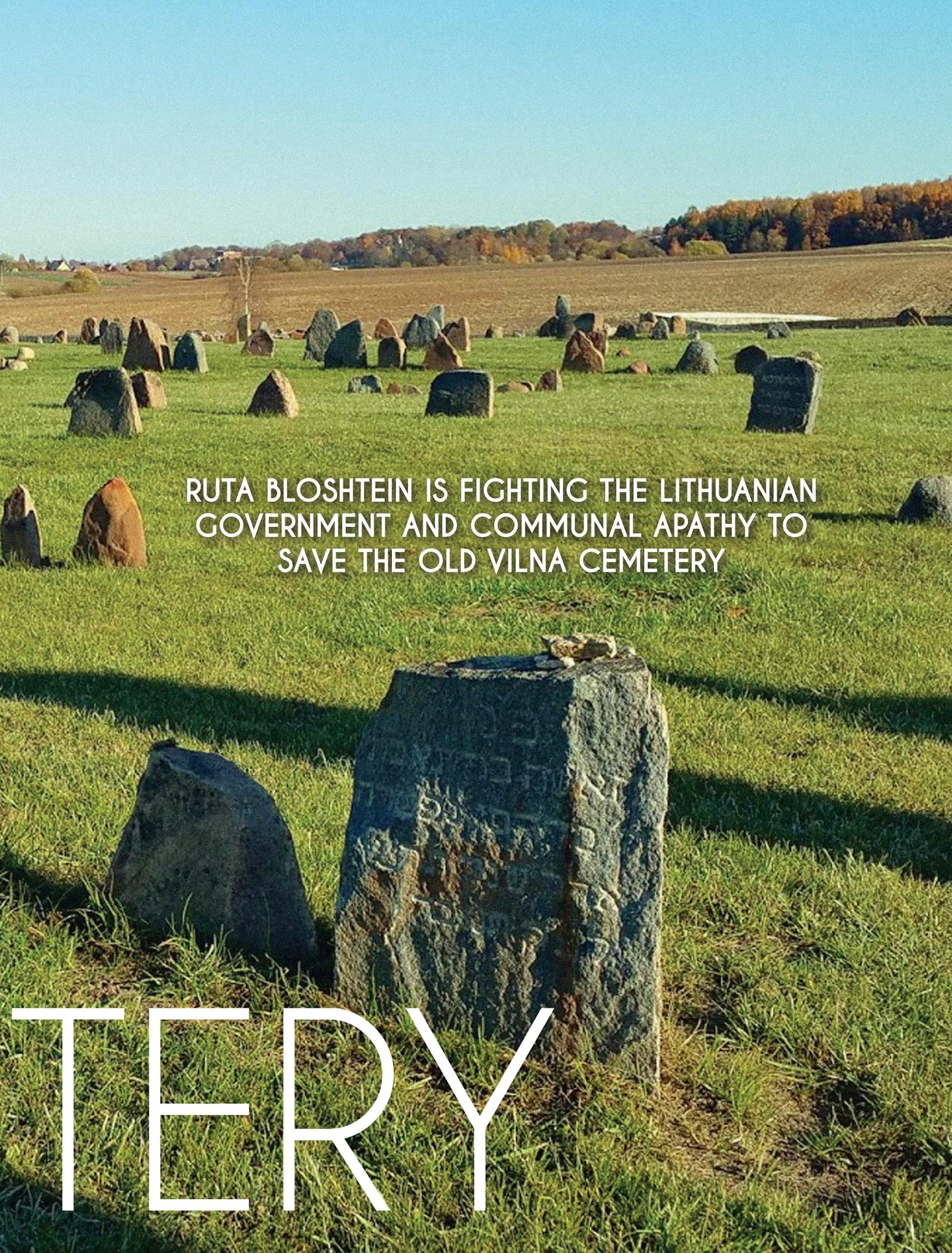


BY RIVA POMERANTZ

GUARDIAN OF THE CEME

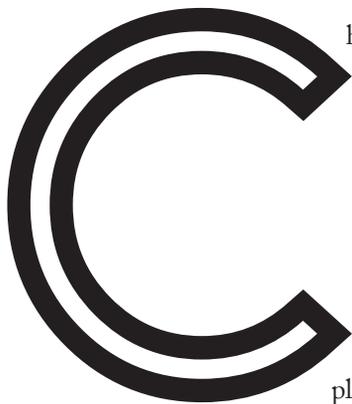


RUTA BLOSHTIN IS FIGHTING THE LITHUANIAN
GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNAL APATHY TO
SAVE THE OLD VILNA CEMETERY

TERY



Vilna Jewish cemetery



Chances are you've never met a person as ordinary and extraordinary as Ruta Bloshtein. But this self-effacing, soft-spoken 48-year-old woman is almost single-handedly taking on the Lithuanian government in a David vs. Goliath battle to save the ancient Jewish cemetery in Vilna.

From start to finish, the story is mind-boggling. Lithuania, once famed as the "Jerusalem of the East" with its prestigious *yeshivos* and *talmidei chachamim*, was completely decimated in the Holocaust; 96.4 percent of its Jews were slaughtered at the hands of the Nazis—the highest percentage of any country in Europe. Unfortunately, the devastation was to remain permanent. Today there are only about 3,000 Jews in the country. Only a handful reside in the fabled city of Vilna (now Vilnius), and even fewer in Kovno (now Kaunas). Religious life is virtually extinct, without a single kosher bakery or restaurant, and although there is an official Jewish school, most of its pupils aren't Jewish. Chabad does operate there, but there is only a single *shul* in the city of Vilna, and its members, most of whom are not *frum*, are paid to attend the daily *minyán*. A bleak picture indeed.

Also devastating is the fact that 75 years after the Holocaust, the Lithuanian government has embarked on an audacious *Judenrein* project targeting not the living but the deceased. In 1972, Lithuanian residents awoke to find

a sprawling sports and convention center under construction in the center of town. Construction is, of course, no surprise. What was shocking was the location of the project. The team of bulldozers was systematically razing the old Jewish cemetery where hundreds of our illustrious ancestors are buried, including Rav Moshe Rivkes, author of the *Be'er Hagolah*; Rav Avraham Danzig, author of the *Chayei Adam*; Rav Shmuel Strashun, better known as the Rashash; and Rav Zelmele Volozhiner, *zecher tzadikim livrachah*.

A dearth of local Jewish voices, apathy among secularized Lithuanian Jews, and possibly money transferred to the right hands had all made it possible for the project to go through unchallenged. The sports center was a done deal, and although a part of the enormous multi-acre cemetery still survived, headstones had been looted and used as paving material, and the remains of thousands of Jews had been destroyed.

If the Lithuanian government had been satisfied with its initial effort, the scandal might have shriveled up and died. But in 2005 a construction team again appeared on the cemetery grounds, and in a nighttime operation quickly carted away vast amounts of earth and remains, and then erected two new buildings and destroying another huge swath of the old Vilna cemetery.

After protests from a number of international Jewish organizations, an agreement was reached in 2009 that no other parts of the cemetery would be stolen for develop-

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ment; in return for this there would be no more protests about the two buildings, which now contain housing, restaurants and a bank.

Enter Ruta Blushtein.

Although she is Lithuanian born and bred, Ruta's connection to her city—and her roots—began only eight years ago, when her soul awakened at age 40 to the beauty and truth of *Yiddishkeit*.

"At age 40, I finally started to think," she says with a quiet laugh. A tiny spark of contemplation about the meaning of life burst into flame, and she began to pursue the Jewish education she had never had, attending lectures and reading books voraciously in an attempt to quench her endless thirst. After spending several years in Eretz Yisrael, Ruta, now fully observant, returned home to a land where Jewish observance is practically nonexistent.

That was when the cemetery situation really hit home for her.

"Beforehand, I had known that the cemetery was being destroyed, but it hadn't really meant that much to me, probably because I didn't feel very attached to my roots. After I became religious, it was so painful for me to see what was happening," she explains. "I felt like I had to do something."

Although Ruta does not have a close personal connection to the Holocaust since her mother and grandmother had fled to Ukraine and then to Russia, her feelings about the cemetery were further intensified by her unique line of work.

"I'm a librarian in the official library of the Lithuanian government, catalog-

ALTHOUGH SHE IS LITHUANIAN BORN AND BRED, RUTA'S CONNECTION TO HER CITY—AND HER ROOTS—BEGAN ONLY EIGHT YEARS AGO, WHEN HER SOUL AWAKENED, AT AGE 40, TO THE BEAUTY AND TRUTH OF YIDDISHKEIT.

ing hundreds of rare, ancient manuscripts," she tells me in her gentle Hebrew. "As I handle these precious manuscripts every day, I find my heart breaking when I think about the fact that many of the authors of these *sifrei kodesh* are buried in this very cemetery in Lita that is being razed. What a terrible tragedy!"

Although she is not a fighter by nature, Ruta drew upon a previously untapped reservoir of inner strength and began to protest the project. It was almost laughable—one woman's voice clamoring for justice against thousands of hard-nosed politicians and businessmen interested only in profit.

The buildings that were erected in 2005–06 had managed to raise eyebrows and even an international ruckus, but in 2009 the above-mentioned agreement was reached. However, Ruta, who was well-versed in some of the dirty tricks of the Lithuanian government, saw the writing on the wall.

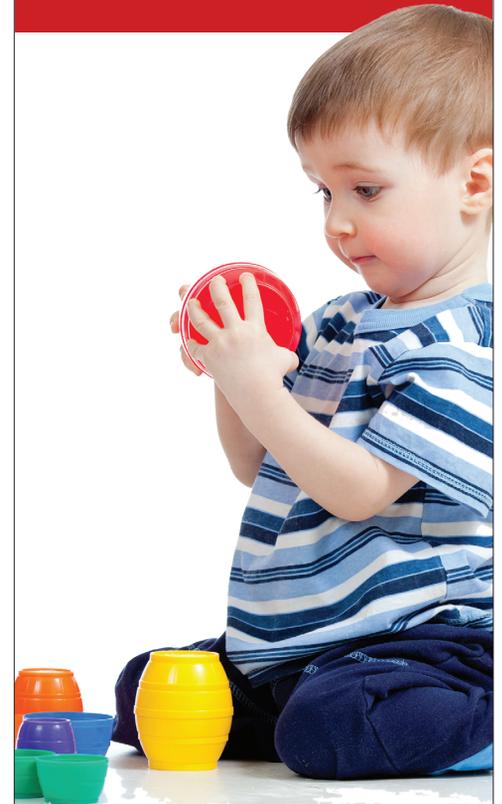
"It's just a matter of time," she prophesied back then to friends and a small circle of supporters. "They'll wait a few years and it'll all calm down, and then they'll steal the next piece of land for another building project."

And so it came to pass.

In April 2015, the evening news broadcast a report about the Prime Minister of Lithuania announcing the construction of a brand-new convention center right in the middle of the old cemetery. This would be, so to speak, the

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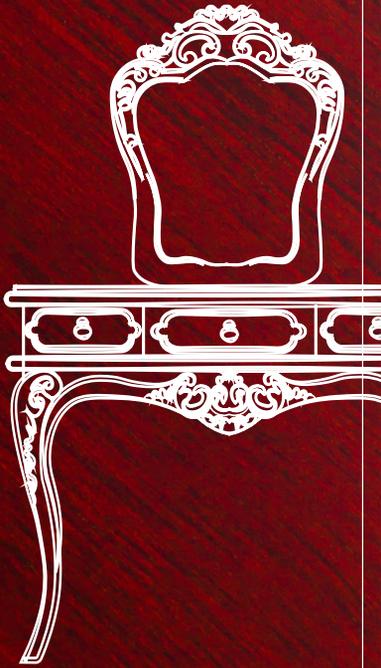
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final nail in the coffin, and it would demand a totally new, much more aggressive approach. The question was, what to do?

Any attempt to oppose the plan would certainly prove to be an uphill battle, especially since the local Jewish community had supposedly acquiesced to the project. But Ruta staunchly persisted. She began to reach out to her friends and contacts, trying to elicit support to oppose the project. She also began to work voluntarily as a tour guide for the many foreign tourists who frequent the city on heritage trips, showing them the famous Jewish sights of yesteryear and pointing out the graveyard scandal, urging them to report what was happening in Lithuania to their communities back home. Although she had never seen herself as a community activist, Ruta Bloshtein found herself suddenly thrown into a fierce battle for a cause she believed in.

Despite her best efforts to speak out against the government's plan, she could not garner enough support to make an impact. But that changed when she reached out to Vilnius-based Professor Dovid Katz, a Brooklyn-born Yiddish linguist, cultural historian and Jewish activist who writes extensively on topics unfolding in the Lithuanian Jewish world, particularly the campaign to rewrite the history of the Holocaust.

"To be honest, Ruta had told me about the cemetery scandal for a few years, but I was involved in many different causes and I didn't really take a personal interest. But by 2015, when I saw that many people were being duped into supporting this project and there was no real dissent, I realized that *b'makom she'ein ish...* Someone had to do it."

He credits Ruta as being the primary force behind the project, even though she is too modest to acknowledge her real role.

"Ruta is *the* voice of the Orthodox community—the only voice," says Profes-



Jew Street today
(insert) Jew Street before
WWII

sor Katz. “She bakes challos for the poor and for *frum* tourists. She worked as the *mash-gichab* in the kosher restaurant while it was open for a year. She is the one keeping an eye on the cemetery destruction, and she’s really the only one who cared enough about it to get other people to care about it too.”

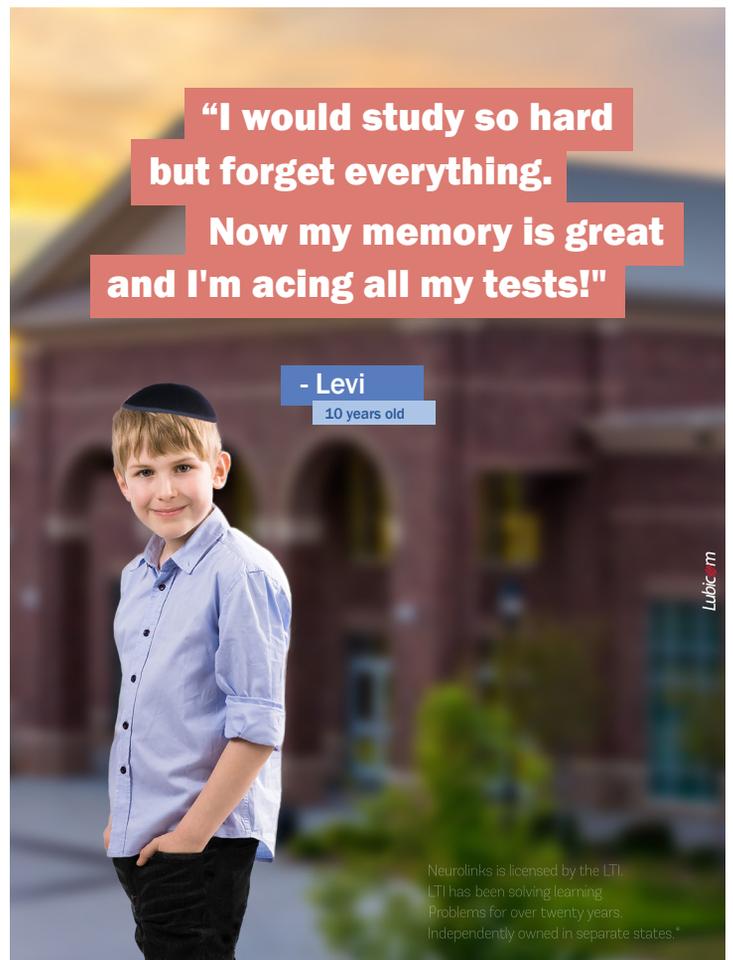
Ruta downplays her part, claiming that Professor Katz is the “engine” of the project and that he has drawn a lot of publicity and attention to the

plight of the cemetery.

Through tireless networking, Ruta and Professor Katz, along with several other supporters, reached out to community leaders, *rabbanim*, Jews and non-Jews around the world, urging them to take up their cause. Professor Katz, who had prior experience with change.org, a petition forum that automatically forwards petitioners’ signatures to the email addresses of their target audience, helped Ruta set up the official petition. It is being delivered to the president of the Republic of Lithuania, the mayor of Vilnius, the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the President of the European Commission. It is respectfully entitled “Please Move New Vilnius Convention Center Project AWAY from the Old Jewish Cemetery.”

Ruta herself wrote the petition’s emotional appeal in her native Lithuanian, and it was professionally translated into poignant English.

“For close to 500 years, thousands of Jewish residents of Vilna, the capital of Lithuania, were buried in its old Jewish cemetery at Piraumont (in the Shnipishok/Šnipiškės district), including many of the great Jewish scholars of the city once known as the ‘Jerusalem of Lithuania.’ During the Soviet Union’s rule, the gravestones were all pilfered and a sports arena was built in the middle of the cemetery, on a base mixed with human remains. Most of the graves on all four sides were left untouched, and thousands are still buried there. It is sacred ground and should be restored as a cemetery and memorial park to which pilfered gravestones, which turn up all over the city, can be returned. Instead, greedy business interests, coop-



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erating politicians, anti-Semitic nationalists and 'pliant Jewish figures' have joined forces to put up a new national convention center where people would revel, cheer, sing, drink and use bathrooms surrounded by Jewish graves.

"Because of the Holocaust and the murder of around 99 percent of Vilna's Jews, the buried people, whose families paid money over centuries to maintain their place of rest, have no local descendants to take up their cause. To make matters worse, the developers and the politicians have boasted that millions of dollars in European Union 'structural funds' would be put toward the project. (Euro-

BECAUSE OF THE HOLOCAUST, THE BURIED PEOPLE, WHOSE FAMILIES PAID MONEY OVER CENTURIES TO MAINTAIN THEIR PLACE OF REST, HAVE NO LOCAL DESCENDANTS TO TAKE UP THEIR CAUSE.

pean Commission leaders have thus far failed to take a clear moral stand on this.) Such a fate would never befall a major Christian cemetery here in the 21st century.

"There has been staunch opposition on the part of local Jews and non-Jews, as well as people around the world. Prominent rabbis from a variety of international communities have published protests expressing their shock and calling on the nation's leaders to reconsider. The city has many ideal alternative sites for the new convention center.

"I myself am an Orthodox Jew born in Vilnius," continues Ruta, "and I write in the hope and belief that this cause will also be close to the hearts of people of all faiths and backgrounds."

Her heartfelt words were heard, but the going was slow.

"In the first week we'd reached only a few hundred signatures," says Professor Katz. "Ruta came to us in tears, worried that we'd never get it going. Such a small number of signatures would actually be counterproductive—it would mean that nobody really cared."

Meanwhile, Professor Shnayer Leiman, an acclaimed scholar, ramped up the campaign with a moving appeal to garner signatures:

"I don't ordinarily get involved in signing petitions, but this is a matter that cries out for protest against the massive desecration that is about to take place. I'm sure you know that the Lithuanian government has announced plans to build a new convention center over the old Jewish cemetery of Vilna. Although the Vilna Gaon's remains were removed from the old Jewish cemetery, the remains of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Jews are still buried there.

"These include the remains of some of the greatest rabbis, Jewish martyrs, and pious women through the centuries, including R. Moshe Rivkes (d. 1671-2), author of the *Be'er Hagolah* on the *Shulchan Aruch*; R. Zelmele (R. Shlomo Zalman, d. 1788), brother of R. Chaim of Volozhin and favorite disciple of the Vilna Gaon; R. Shmuel b. R. Avigdor (d. 1793), last chief rabbi of Vilna; R. Avraham b. HaGra (d. 1809); the Ger Zedek of Vilna (d. 1749); Traina (date of death unknown), mother of the Vilna Gaon; Chanah, first wife of the Vilna Gaon (d. 1782); and Gitel, second wife of the Vilna Gaon, who apparently outlived the *gaon* (precise date of death unknown). Virtually every Jew who died in Vilna before the year 1831 was, in fact, buried in the old Jewish cemetery.

"The petition does not call for the Lithuanian government to cancel plans to build a new convention center (funded largely by the EU). It simply asks that it be built at a different location in Vilnius, which can easily be done."

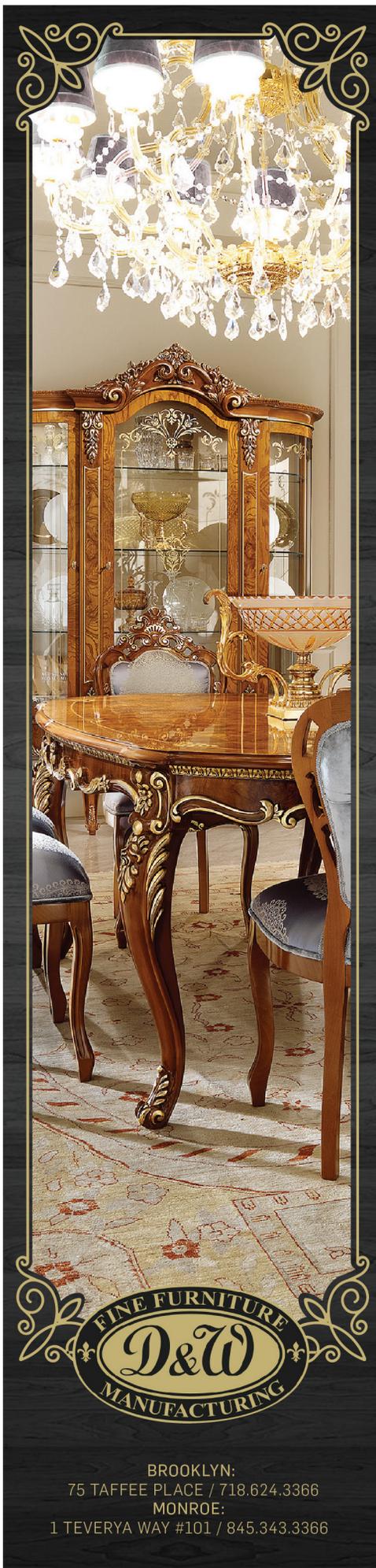
He continues with an endorsement of Ruta Bloshtein and a call for every Jew around the world to sign the petition, if only to avert a potential *chillul Hashem*.

"A wonderful Vilna resident, Ruta Bloshtein, a *shomer Shabbos* woman who bakes challah for members of the Vilna *kehillah* every Erev Shabbos, has taken upon herself the responsibility of spearheading this write-in campaign. She started three weeks ago and has about 250 signatories so far. She needs at least 1,000 signatures; if she doesn't get them, it will be a *chillul Hashem* even beyond the destruction of the Jewish cemetery itself. It will be a signal to the Lithuanian government that Jews neither care nor count.

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“I’M HOPING THAT MY WORK TO SAVE THE CEMETERY WILL BE A ZECHUS FOR MY TWO CHILDREN TO BECOME TORAH-OBSERVANT,” RUTA CONFIDES.

If she gets 3,000 signatures, the political authorities will have little choice but to take the petition into account before making any hasty decision. She needs, and deserves, our help.”

With the growing support of prominent *gedolim*, both *Litvish* and *Chasidish*, and Ruta’s indefatigable efforts, the campaign took off, *baruch Hashem*. It has gathered a whopping 26,000 signatures, and the number is growing. “Ruta’s petition has done more than all my articles about the cemetery put together,” avows Professor Katz. Ruta and her supporters hope to reach at least 40,000 signatures.

The question is, will the petition work? So far the petitioners have heard nothing from the authorities, but Professor Katz is certain that the issue will have to be looked at through different eyes as the signatures mount.

“It’ll be a lot easier now to go to elected representatives in the US and the UK and other countries and ask them to speak up against the plan now that so many have signed,” he asserts.

Another question is the Lithuanian government’s true intent. Is anti-Semitism at the root of the cemetery desecration?

“The Jewish community enjoys good ties with the government overall,” says Ruta diplomatically. Then she adds, tongue in cheek, “As long as there are no politics involved.”

Professor Katz feels that the project is being driven forward primarily by commercial interests; the developers stand to make huge profits by renting out the center for events. At the same time, he acknowledges that there is a group of anti-Semitic nationalists who are small but powerful and don’t want a Jewish cemetery so near the city center. “They say, ‘Let the Jews have their memorials at Ponar out in the forest,’ where 70,000 Jews of Vilna were killed during the Holocaust,” says Katz.

He identifies a third group as “the *meshuchadim*, who have taken or been promised bribes by the builders and their political lackeys; they are assuring the builders and the government that there are almost no Jews left in Vilna and that all the *matzeivos* have already been stolen anyway.”

Meanwhile, Ruta Bloshtein isn’t taking any chances. She monitors the cemetery regularly to make sure there is no surprise construction taking place.

“What if they do start to build? What will you do?” I ask. “Will you lie down in front of the tractors?”

She gives a sorrowfully laugh. “I don’t know,” she says sadly. “I don’t know what I would do.” She is leaving the results in the Hands of Hashem, the *Dayan Ha’Emes*, even as she does everything in her power to stop the desecration.

“I’m hoping that my work to save the cemetery will be a *zechus* for my two children to become Torah-observant,” Ruta confides.

May this special woman from Lithuania be blessed with *nachas* and *brachah* in all of her noble endeavors. □

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