



# THE WEEKLY OF VILNIUS

Issue # 253

Monday - Week of August 7 - 13, 2017

Vilnius, Lithuania



## Week in Review

“THE WEEKLY OF VILNIUS” is a weekly analytical & balanced news digest on Lithuania for a professional foreign audience, covering: internal politics, foreign affairs, economics & business, and societal development.



**“If a news story is not here ... then it is not important or has no impact”**

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**11/08/2017: Twelve US Congress members send a letter to the Lithuanian president urging her to protect & preserve Vilnius' oldest Jewish cemetery from desecration**

"Defending History.com", a web site dedicated to protecting Jewish history in East Europe and the history of the Holocaust from the onslaught of the newly emerging Far Right's East European campaigns, has published a news story on Friday August 11 reporting that 12 United States Congress members have just sent a letter to the Lithuanian President (dated 28 July 2017), calling on her to relocate the planned to be built 25 million Euros Convention Center project in Vilnius into a different location that is away from Vilnius' oldest Jewish cemetery site. *(To learn more about the story of Lithuania's oldest Jewish cemetery, see note-1 below)*

The sent letter stated the following:

*"We write to express our opposition to the convention of the old Vilnius Palace of Concerts and Sports into a convention center on the site of the old Jewish cemetery in the Snipiskes district of Vilnius. Instead of expanding the abandoned Sports Palace, the old Jewish cemetery should be preserved as a holy place."*



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*The cemetery is one of the last remnants of the great Jewish community of Vilnius, and many of the Vilnius' preeminent scholars and figures are interred here. The cemetery is a historical site of enormous cultural significance, both locally and to the worldwide community interested in its preservation. It should be treated with dignity and respect.*

*We fully endorse House Concurrent Resolution 255, passed by the United States House of Representatives in 2008, which states that the continued desecration "is an affront to the international Jewish community, the American people, and everyone who values religious freedom and ethnic diversity around the world" and calls on the Government of Lithuania to take "steps that guarantee the permanent preservation of the cemetery site".*

*The very presence of the existing structure in the middle of the old Jewish cemetery desecrates it and conflicts with the respect for human dignity that forms the basis of Western Civilization. By contrast, moving the convention center project to another site, and permitting the dismantling of the abandoned Sports Palace it was to replace, would affirm the Lithuanian government's commitment to basic human rights.*

*We urge you to move the Convention Center to an alternate site and thereby preserve the old Jewish cemetery".*

Here are the names of the 12 US Congress members who have signed the letter that was sent to the Lithuanian president: 1) Mr. Steve Cohen (Tennessee), 2) Mr. Ted Deutch (Florida), 3) Mr. Eliot L. Engel (New York), 4) Mr. John Garamendi (California), 5) Mr. Joshua Gottheimer (New Jersey), 6) Mr. Alcee L. Hastings (Florida), 7) Mr. James P. McGovern (Massachusetts), 8) Mr. Jerrold Nadler (New York), 9) Ms. Janice Danoff Schakowsky (Illinois), 10) Ms. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (Florida), 11) Ms. Alice Costandina "Dina" Titus (Nevada), and 12) Mr. Randall Keith Weber (Texas).

To read the full news story, here is the link:

<http://defendinghistory.com/12-us-congressmen-call-on-lithuanias-president-to-move-convention-center-project-away-from-old-vilna-jewish-cemetery/89344>

## THE WEEKLY OF VILNIUS NOTE-1:

*"The Jewish cemeteries of Vilnius are the three Jewish cemeteries of the Lithuanian Jews living in what is today Vilnius... Two of the cemeteries were destroyed by the Soviet regime and the third is still active... The oldest and the largest Jewish cemetery was established in the 15th century in Snipiskes suburb, now in Zirmunai elderate, across the Neris River from the Gediminas Tower. In Vilna Jewish culture, the cemetery was known as Piramont.*

*It was closed by the Tsarist authorities in 1831. It was destroyed by the Soviet authorities in 1949–50 during the construction of Žalgiris Stadium. The Vilnius Palace of Concerts and Sports was built in 1971 right in the middle of the former cemetery. In 2005, apartment and office buildings were built at the site. The project was condemned by international Jewish organizations and resulted in a motion being passed in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2008, condemning Lithuania for its "failure to protect the historic Jewish cemetery in Vilnius." In August 2009, Lithuanian government reached an agreement with Jewish organizations on the boundaries of the cemetery and granted it protected status. Buildings already on the site will not be demolished" (Source: The Free Wikipedia)*

It should be noted that the old Vilnius Jewish cemetery still have the remains of many notable Jewish personalities. *"Although the Vilna Gaon's remains were removed from the Old Jewish Cemetery (one of Judaism's spiritual giants), the remains of hundreds, perhaps thousands of Jews are still buried in the Old Jewish cemetery. These include the remains of some of the greatest rabbis, Jewish martyrs, and pious women through the*



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centuries, including R. Moshe Rivkes (d. 1671-2), author of the Be'er Ha-Golah on the Shulhan Arukh; R. Zelmele (i.e., R. Shlomo Zalman, d. 1788), brother of R. Hayyim of Volozhin and favorite disciple of the Vilna Gaon; R. Shmuel b. R. Avigdor (d. 1793), last Chief Rabbi of Vilna; R. Avraham b. Ha-Gra (d. 1809); the Ger Zedek of Vilna (d. 1749), whose remains were not removed from the Old Jewish cemetery (despite claims otherwise); and 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" (Source: Israellycool.com" web site).

## THE WEEKLY OF VILNIUS NOTE-2

It should be noted that an official statement on this cemetery matter was issued by Lithuania's foreign ministry. On January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Lithuania's Embassy in the State of Israel issued an official statement titled: "Clarification regarding the Old Snipiskes Jewish Cemetery in Vilnius". The statement read as follows:

*"We wish to draw the attention of all concerned that the new Lithuanian Government is continuing both the reconstruction works of the Congress Centre, which has been recognized as a cultural project of a State importance, and the commemoration works of the old Snipiskes Jewish cemetery.*

*We would like to stress that in the eyes of the Government the project of the Congress Centre is absolutely not feasible without an appropriate commemoration of the old Snipiskes Jewish cemetery. Both projects are being implemented in accordance to the Jewish traditions and under the supervision of rabbis from the Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe.*

*Vilnius City Municipality together with the Lithuanian Jewish (Litvak) Community and the Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe has prepared project proposals for the commemoration of the old Snipiskes Jewish cemetery. For further details, please refer to the Statement of the Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe made in December 2016":* (<http://www.lzb.lt/en/2017/01/19/the-following-statement-issued-in-the-december-2016-newsletter-of-the-committee-for-the-preservation-of-jewish-cemeteries-in-europe/>)

To read this statement in full, here is the link to Lithuania's foreign ministry:

<https://il.mfa.lt/il/en/news/clarification-regarding-the-old-snipiskes-jewish-cemetery-in-vilnius->

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