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Why The Dead Jews Of Vilna Cannot Rest In Peace

📅 August 17, 2017

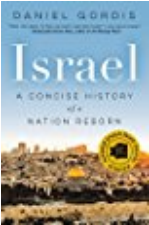
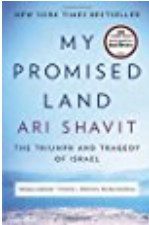
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By Rabbi Zev Friedman

The dispute over Vilna's oldest synagogue has been brewing for more than a decade. Recently, as a result of the involvement and protestations of a coalition of rabbinic leaders and activists, the fight has intensified.

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Brief History Of Jewish Community

The Jewish community in Lithuania is hundreds of years old. The Vilna Gaon, who lived in the 18th century, and other great Torah luminaries helped Vilna earn its reputation as the Jerusalem of Eastern Europe.

The Shoah. Lithuania has rightfully earned one of the most sordid reputations of anti-Semitism based upon its participation in the Holocaust. While almost everyone heard of Babi Yar, where 33,000 men, women, and children were murdered, many have not heard about Ponary, the forest outside of Vilna

where double that amount—approximately 70,000 Jews—were rounded up and massacred by Lithuanian Nazi collaborators.

Bloodthirsty Lithuanian anti-Semites also gleefully participated in the notorious massacres of Jews in July of 1941. Jews were captured and brought to the Kovno garage area which was enclosed. Jews were clubbed to death by Lithuanians while other Lithuanians ran hoses to wash away the blood. When the massacre was over, the Lithuanians climbed atop a pile of bodies and began playing the Lithuanian national anthem.

Approximately 95% of Lithuanian Jews—200,000 out of 210,000—were murdered, representing the highest percentage of any country during World War II.

Post World War II period. The Soviets occupied Lithuania as part of the Eastern Bloc. As a matter of policy, the Soviets took steps to eliminate Jewish religious presence in areas under their control. In the 1970s, they razed all of the tombstones in Vilna's oldest Jewish cemetery. In one area of the cemetery, they constructed a sports complex to "eliminate" the Jewish presence there.

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The Advent of an Independent Lithuania. After Lithuania declared its independence in the 1990, it freed itself from the constraints of Soviet policy. It gained the ability to reverse previous trends of anti-Semitism that the Germans and the Soviets had fomented. Despite the opportunity to reverse the trend, the Lithuanians decided to nationalize the old Jewish cemetery in Vilna.

The Cemetery Controversy

The Lithuanians decided to capitalize on the fact that there is a limited Jewish population remaining in Vilna, and viewed the Jewish cemetery as a real-estate asset. Many of the Jews presently residing in Vilna are not indigenous to Lithuania. Many are not descendants of those interred in the cemetery and have no connection to its history. The Lithuanians planned numerous construction projects for that site and actually built on site, disturbing an unknown amount of graves.

Plans to Build a Convention Center. The controversy over Lithuanian construction on top of Jewish graves brewed into an issue that reached the ears of Congress in 2009. At that point, members of the House and Senate roundly condemned any attempts by the Lithuanians to construct anything on top of Jewish graves.

Lithuanians engaged the services of a rabbinical group in London in order to seek approval for their plans. For some unknown reason (some have alleged bribes) the rabbinical group granted approval. One of the representatives, who wishes to remain nameless, stated that the deal they agreed to would not have been approved today; however, at that time they felt it was “the best they could negotiate with Lithuanians.”



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Unfortunately, the rabbinic group has not rescinded its approval and Lithuanians continue to use this as their main justification to move forward with their construction plans.

The Protest. Due to the tireless efforts of Dovid Katz, an internationally acclaimed professor of Yiddish, and an activist living in Vilna, along with the courageous efforts of Vilna resident Ruta Bloshtein, the Jewish community was galvanized.

Ruta circulated a petition which has over 40,000 supporters. Dovid Katz keeps everyone informed through his blog called Defending History where he has posted among other things a list of world-renowned rabbanim who have openly expressed their opposition to the Lithuanian planned construction.

Meetings with Lithuanian officials. There have been a number of meetings held by various Jewish groups with Lithuanian representatives in an effort to share the deep concerns of the Jewish community at large and voice its opposition. In one such meeting which took place in July when the mayor of Vilnius came to New York, a broad spectrum of Jewish leaders attended.

Dr. Bernard Fryshman, a professor of physics at New York Institute of Technology, pointed out to the mayor that the boundaries of the cemetery are in fact larger than the maps show and that any construction would necessarily desecrate additional Jewish graves. Mr. Emanuel Adler and Mr. Yehuda Friedman came, representing the Union of Orthodox Congregations of America, expressing their concern over the project. I asked how it was possible to do renovations and add additional space without running plumbing underground and desecrating additional graves. Rabbi David Niederman, president of the UJO Satmar, drew attention to the diversity of the group present, all united by the desire to prevent the cemetery's desecration. The group spoke as one voice and strongly advised the mayor to relocate the convention center and show the world that Lithuania has in fact turned the corner on anti-Semitism.

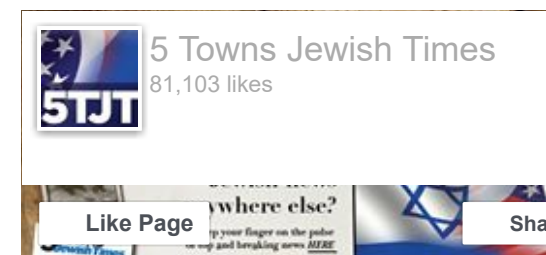
Members of Congress Get Involved. Last week, 12 members of Congress signed a letter addressed to the president of that country objecting to plans to build on the Jewish cemetery.

Official Response of Lithuanian Government and What They Failed to Mention. See Sidebar.

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Future Plans. The fight to preserve the dignity of the Jews of Lithuania continues. Unfortunately, the Terranea is home to the mass graves of Ponary. It's time for them to respect and pay tribute to the Jewish dead who were fortunate to be buried with dignity hundreds of years ago.

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