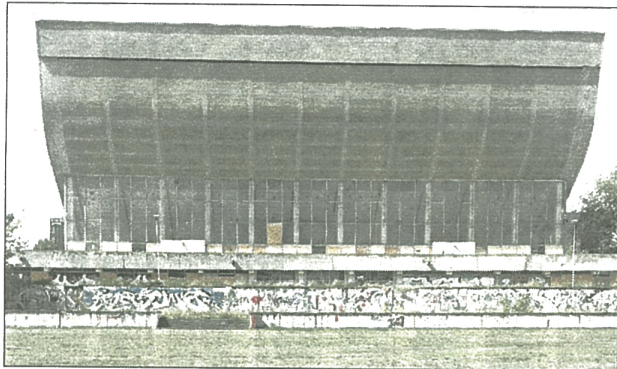


Save cemetery!



Brooklynite Dov Fried (r.) is among those who want the Trump administration to press Lithuanian officials to block restoration of the Palace of Concerts and Sports (above) on the grounds of the cemetery (below).



Push for U.S. to help stop desecration of Jewish site

BY REUVEN BLAU
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

Top rabbis and Brooklyn activists are in a heated battle to protect from desecration a historic 16th century Jewish cemetery in Lithuania amid planned renovation of a dilapidated building atop the sacred burial ground.

The Lithuanian government aims to restore the long-abandoned Palace of Concerts and Sports on the grounds of the Snipiskes Jewish Cemetery, the final resting place for prominent Jewish scholars in an area once known as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania."

Opponents, fearing the historic site is about to get trampled on, want the Trump administration to apply pressure to kill the renovation plan.

"This could threaten the integrity of every cemetery in the world," said Bernard Fryshman of Brooklyn, who has filed a federal lawsuit against the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad. "If a government can go ahead and

desecrate a cemetery in such an obvious fashion, what's to prevent other governments from taking similar actions?"

Fryshman, a physics professor at the New York Institute of Technology, argues the federal commission "failed to act" to protect the site, and that its inaction should worry "every single American."

The head of the commission insists the White House isn't ignoring the issue.

"There's never been more attention paid to the cemetery than under the Trump administration," said commission Chairman Paul Packer, who's visited Lithuania twice in the past six months.

The cemetery saga reaches back more than 600 years, when the Lithuanian capital Vilnius was the center of Jewish culture in Europe. The burial grounds hold the remains of tens of thousands of Jewish people, according to historians.

During World War II, the cemetery was seized by the Nazis; later, it was taken over by the Soviet Union. At some

point, the gravestones were removed and likely used for construction.

Then in 1972, Kremlin officials built a "Sports Palace" in the middle of the cemetery — a structure that's been abandoned for years.

Lithuanian government officials now want to convert it into a concert and convention center, but Jewish community leaders, including Israeli Chief Rabbi David Lau, believe that renovation will require digging up and disturbing remains.

"You are talking about a huge project," Fryshman said. "It will entail digging up other spots in the cemetery for sewers, water supplies, and electrical conduits."

They also believe there are still bodies beneath the structure, noting some Jewish cemeteries have had as many as 14 bodies buried on top of one another.

"The new center would also profane the sacred site by bringing thousands of people every day to meet and enjoy themselves on the cemetery's grounds," the lawsuit argues.

Lithuanian government officials counter the project has the approval of the London-based Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe. The group, founded by Rabbi Elyakim Schlesinger in 1992, has negotiated a series of protective measures for the site.

But activists say the group doesn't represent Jews of Vilnius and other places. A petition in protest of the project has collected nearly 50,000 signatures.

For Brooklyn resident Dov Fried, 72, the preservation push is personal.

"My father is from Vilna," he said. "If this goes through and they are able to desecrate the cemetery, then there's no cemetery that's safe anymore."

"It's like David fighting Goliath," he added.

Jewish dignitaries buried in the cemetery include Rabbi Abraham Danzig, the author of the Chaye Adom, a scholarly book on Jewish law.

"The is not just a Jewish issue," said Fryshman. "It's a human rights issue."

