

English translation of the text [posted in Lithuanian on 7 Jan. 2020 on the official state-restitution-sponsored Lithuanian Jewish Community website](#) (and preserved [as PDF](#)). Published also in the [Russian section](#) of the official community website. (and preserved [as PDF](#)). No responses have been published on the website. Moreover the media here has covered only the “[supposed final agreement](#) between the Jewish community and Turto bankas” (see [DH’s take](#)).

See responses to the article below from [Defending History](#) and from [Prof. Shnayer Leiman](#).

[Key passages are marked in red in this translation only for speed of reference; see esp. FINAL PARAGRAPHS.]

Response to Ms. Ruta Bloshtein’s Letter on the Šnipiškės Cemetery

January 7, 2020

By Geršonas Taicas

There are three crowns—the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood and the crown of sovereignty—but the crown of good name surmounts them all.

Rabbi Shimon HaTzadik (Simeon the Just)

People were being buried in the Šnipiškės Cemetery for 344 years, from 1487 to 1831: that is ten generations of Vilnius Jews, as the average life expectancy was very short back in the day. Most of those buried there are innocent children who died of diseases. Children would be accompanied by their parents: Jewish tailors, shoemakers, street vendors, peddlers, cab drivers, carpenters, bakers, chimney sweeps, melameds, a handful of rabbis, and people of other professions. Jews’ lives were full of danger, poverty, and hardship. There would always be enough Jewish tears and sweat to keep their pillows, sheets, and blankets damp.

In my opinion, there are way more than a hundred thousand people buried in the Šnipiškės Cemetery; epidemics, wars, and famines would often shorten the already difficult lives of Vilnians of the time. On July 29, 1655, the Russian army destroyed the whole Jewish community of Vilnius in one day: 3,000 to 5,000 Jews perished on that day, out of the full number of 25,000 dead Vilnians. Only the Jews who managed to escape the city survived. Vilnius was plundered, demolished, and burned to the ground. Half of the surviving Vilnians died in the resulting famine.

You, Ms. Bloshtein, have misled tens of thousands of people with your petition and your articles. You skipped the fact that the cemetery was almost fully destroyed during the Soviet times, when the Žalgiris open-air swimming pool and the Palace of Sports were built, and then in independent Lithuania, when Mindaugas apartment complexes were built. We both know that the Palace of Sports had working sewage, electricity, and heating systems. What does this fact mean: the existence of external electricity and heating networks, or the installation of complex amenities in the building? **You have also misled the honorable people by writing about the tombstones that keep appearing all over the city.** These are very rare and unique cases, and these occasional findings are not game-changers, far from it. You have also misled the people by writing that the project has plans of new buildings in it, which would mean that another part of the old cemetery would be defiled—when in reality the project consists of nothing more than the reconstruction of the Palace of Sports. In your response, you have not said a word about the former Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Jerusalem and dayan Yitzhak Kolitz, who was the chief arbiter of the halakha burial law. Neither have you mentioned his decision on building on the Jewish Cemetery of Ottensen, a district in Hamburg. Could this mean that you and your company agree with Kolitz’s decision?

Professor Sid Leiman has studied the history, plans, and epitaphs of the Šnipiškės Cemetery extensively and for many years: his research is crucial. In my opinion, not only all Vilnians but the whole world should be thankful for his service. We could establish a special permanent exhibit where information on famous rabbis and scholars would be presented: their biographies and epitaphs on their tombstones, translated to Lithuanian and English. We could also publish a book in several languages on the topic, and have it designed in the style of the ancient tomes. The surviving cemetery plans are very imprecise and the relief of the cemetery’s surface has changed as well, therefore finding the exact spot where a certain person’s remains are or have been is impossible.

About sham or kitschy monuments in the territory of the cemetery: a cemetery is neither a stage nor a warehouse of a local theater, where sham monuments could be piled on top of one another with no sense or order, under open skies, and on no-one-knows-whose remains. Do you really want to exhume all the remains and do DNA tests on them to find out to whom they belong? I think that the utopia of erecting sham and kitschy monuments on the cemetery goes against the Jewish taste. Building absurd monuments is just another way to once again defile the cemetery in both physical and moral sense.

Are you and your company also planning the exhumation of the Vilna Gaon and his relatives from the Sudervė Jewish Cemetery and their reburial in the Šnipiškės Cemetery? The whole wide Jewish world remembers and will always remember the illustrious rabbis and scholars of Vilnius.

Are the esteemed professors Parasonis and Fridberg really demanding that the Palace of Sports was demolished? According to Ms. Bloshtein, I have “torn” their words on the demolition of the Palace of Sports out of their context.

Prof. Josifas Parasonis (Alfa.lt)

I have never suggested demolishing the Palace of Sports, as it is an object of heritage of the development of our construction in the senses of architecture and construction solutions. I know that there are more cemeteries in Vilnius, and not only Jewish, that have been destroyed

practically with no reburials, and there are now buildings (the Vilnius Wedding Palace) or even streets (the Rasos Cemetery) on top of them. Let us join forces with the representatives of these communities and form a joint commission (working group) that would prepare the project of adequate renovation of the Šnipiškės Cemetery territory and choose an adequate functional purpose for the building of the Palace of Sports.

Prof. Pinchos Fridberg (Times of Israel)

But that doesn't mean that the derelict Soviet sports arena on one part of the cemetery should remain as it is. It could readily be converted to a museum celebrating the 700 year history of Lithuanian Jewry, perhaps modeled on the excellent new Jewish museum in Warsaw.

Not a thing that you have told the world has anything to do with the current situation of the Šnipiškės Cemetery; it is but pure lies, profanation of the Jewish heritage, and propaganda of hatred. You need to take down your petition at once and apologize to all those who have signed it. In my opinion, you and your company could instead take up some positive, rational, and constructive deeds to benefit the Jewish people and Lithuania.

In the meanwhile you are doing nothing but setting Jews against each other in Lithuania and the whole world.

I have already started believing that your propaganda campaign has a vested material interest. Somebody is paying for this campaign in hope of material gain.

In my opinion, the dear reader can finally form a clear opinion on these matters; the discussion is over.