



UNITED JEWISH ORGANIZATIONS OF WILLIAMSBURGH AND NORTH BROOKLYN

פאראייניגטע אידישע ארגאניזאציעס פון וויליאמסבורג

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To all interested parties,

The UJO is an umbrella organization for the Jewish community of Williamsburg and North Brooklyn, representing the community of 70,000 and hundreds of congregations and charitable organizations. We are writing to express the anguish of the worldwide Jewish community regarding the state of events surrounding the future of the old Jewish cemetery of Vilnius.

Vilnius was for many years considered a metropolis of Torah study, and it is very dear to the international Jewish community. The old Jewish cemetery (also known as the Snipiskes Jewish cemetery) is the resting places of many famous Torah scholars and leaders including: the Gaon of Vilna Rabbi Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman¹, Reb Zelmele of Volozhin, Rabbi Moshe Rivkess and Rabbi Avraham Danzig. These individuals were responsible for a myriad of accomplishments in the Jewish community. They were authors and scholars whose work would influence the dynamics of Jewish life—their influence can be felt in Lithuania, greater Europe and here in the United States of America.

World Jewry followed with trepidation plans to construct a Convention Center over the abandoned Soviet-era Sports Palace that had been built on the cemetery grounds in 1971. They expressed their wish numerous times that this holy site be preserved solely as a cemetery, not to disturb those interred there, and used for prayers and solemn reflection. Several years ago, our President, Rabbi David Niederman, travelled to Vilnius with a delegation of the most prominent leaders of Jewish communities in the United States that follow Lithuanian-Jewish traditions, where they visited the cemetery. They were heartbroken that this holy site is threatened by desecration, and pleading for the preservation of the cemetery.

We hereby reiterate our community's pleading to the Government of Lithuania to rectify – and certainly not to perpetuate – the decades old desecration to this sacred cemetery. We strongly urge the Lithuanian government to revoke any development plans on cemetery grounds and permit the international Jewish community to dismantle the Sports Palace. This will preserve the entire site with the proper respect accorded to cemeteries, especially one of such a great heritage value and so sacred to the international Jewish community.

We conclude with heartfelt blessings and prayers for all who would assist in the efforts to preserve this holy cemetery.

¹ Sadly, after WWII, the Communist regime ordered the community to disinter his grave and move it to a different location.