

Working group to develop proposals and a concept for the commemoration of the old Jewish cemetery of Šnipiškės and the memorial site in the current Vilnius Palace of Concerts and Sports

Minutes of the meeting of 1 June 2023

1. First Deputy Chancellor of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, R. Kriščiūnas, presented the concept development objective and the draft plan.
2. Presentation of the current situation:
 - a) Member of the Working group, VU History Professor J. Verbickienė, provided an overview of the site's history, starting from the cemetery's establishment up to key events at the Palace of Concerts and Sports during Lithuania's Independence and revival.
 - b) Member of the Working group Dr. D. Fishman made a presentation 'On the Destruction of the Old Jewish Cemetery in Vilnius and of Jewish Cemeteries Across the Soviet Union'.
 - c) Member of the Working group, VU History Professor M. Drėmaitė, highlighted the architectural aspects and historical background of the Vilnius Palace of Concerts and Sports.
 - d) K. Maciulevičius, a representative from Archimenai, the company behind the designing of the Palace of Concerts and Sports, overviewed the existing legal regulation.
3. Ideas on how to give meaning to the area - speeches by the members of the Working group on the topic 'Possibilities and ideas on how to give meaning to the memory of the Jewish cemetery area. Directions for the development of artistic, visual, and other objects'. *Discussion: capturing ideas.*

The main ideas proposed by the Working group:

- The primary focus should be on the old Jewish cemetery of Šnipiškės, showing due respect and dignity. Jewish law must be taken into account.
- The cemetery must not be moved, disturbed, or otherwise desecrated.
- Respect for the deceased must be observed, and commemoration should be carried out with due respect.
- Commemoration should reflect the period when the cemetery was active.
- Commemoration should be dedicated to the cemetery and those buried within it.
- A need for 'physical' content to represent the cemetery was emphasised. Design professionals should think on how to achieve this. An example could be the

legendary tree that grew on the grave of Ger Tzedek - Count Valentin Potocki of Vilna, which could be "planted".

- Although the building is a foreign 'body' within the cemetery, it must be thoughtfully integrated.
 - Attention was drawn to the Agreement signed in 2009 between the Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe, the Lithuanian Jewish (Litvak) Community, and the Department of Cultural Heritage under the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania. All works should be planned in line with the provisions of this Agreement. The effective ongoing collaboration has successfully addressed all previously encountered issues, thus affirming the need to further follow the 2009 Agreement.
 - The Palace of Concerts and Sports should seamlessly blend with the surrounding cemetery area, imparting a tranquil ambiance and narrating the history of Jewish life, culture, science, and education from the GDL to the present day.
 - The building holds immense potential: there is a need for a museum to highlight Lithuania's rich Jewish history.
 - The building will need to be repurposed, with a crucial consideration being that earth-moving works will not be possible. It should also be taken into account how visitors will access the museum.
 - A question was raised on the role of the Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History.
 - Attention was drawn to the fine example of a museum operating next to the ancient Jewish cemetery in Prague, drawing numerous visitors. Similar success stories exist in Krakow, Cologne, and Mainz. Another successful example of historical commemoration mentioned was the Baby Yar memorial, where art harmoniously blends with religion.
 - It was emphasised that, having Prime Minister's approval of the initiative to give meaning to the Jewish history in Lithuania, the project should not be limited/narrowed down. It should be a place for both visitors as well as the residents of Vilnius.
 - Vilnius is home to approximately 98% of newcomers who arrived in the city after World War II, meaning they may not be well-acquainted with their own city. The museum could also serve as a platform to narrate the history of Vilnius.
 - The narrative of the Jewish history should 'fight' the existing myths, stereotypes, explain culture, religion, etc. It should be a place to honour those who are no longer here and those who live now in Lithuania (not only Jews).
 - The importance of communication was underlined: there is a need for a specific communication plan to inform both local residents and potential visitors.
4. The need for the use of the spaces of the Palace of Sports building and directions for its re-purposing. Topic 'The history of the building and the need for functional

areas as well as the possibilities of developing the spaces'. *Discussion: capturing ideas:*

- i. Ideas on how to give meaning to the building's historical significance and memory.
- ii. The need for administrative spaces and areas being re-purposed.
- iii. The needs of the Jewish community.
- iv. The intensity of the building's use, the organisation of possible activities, and limitations.

The main ideas proposed by the Working group:

- Defining the project's objectives:
 - a) protecting the cemetery grounds,
 - b) rekindling the historical legacy of the cemetery and the Jewish community,
 - c) and adapting the building to that purpose.
 - When contemplating the setting up of a museum, it was emphasized that Jewish laws must be fully respected in that process.
 - A museum goes beyond its physical structure; it embodies content such as music, art, and theatre, unveiling multiple layers and historical periods. A museum is an art form that captures the essence of time. Therefore, while artifacts are important, the emphasis should be on the artistic elements.
 - Here, the memorial could extend to the cemetery, the museum, and research elements.
 - Regarding the content of the building, attention was drawn to the possible complexity of the spaces: it could house a research centre, the YIVO collection, storage facilities, etc.
 - As noted, it is important to clearly demarcate/fence the cemetery territory, ensuring that visitors are aware of its historical use. This could be achieved through appropriate fencing and informative signage that conveys the area's significance with respect. The fence should serve as a connecting rather than a dividing element. For an appropriate solution, creative workshops could be organised.
 - Prior to the commencement of the design phase, there was a suggestion to hold an outdoor exhibition featuring old cemetery photographs, maps, and other relevant materials.
5. Summarization of ideas and action plan on how to implement them, guidelines for the development of the concept.
 6. Format and planning for the next meeting.