

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 26 October 2023

1. A. Gelūnas, Chairman of the Working group, reviewed key points from the previous meeting, emphasizing the need to finalize decisions on the contents both inside and outside the building. The objective is to honour and commemorate the centuries-long history of Lithuanian Jews and the Šnipiškės cemetery. There was a brief presentation on the plan to fence the cemetery (curated by the Office of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania and the Vilnius City administration). It was highlighted that approval of the Chief Architect of Vilnius was pending, and once her agreement is obtained, the fencing proposals will be forwarded to the Lithuanian Jewish (Litvak) Community (LJC) and the Office of the Government. No work will be carried out unless approved and supervised by the LJC and the Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe. Notably, the fencing will be a temporary unit until the start of the project works.
2. Summarising and adding to the ideas proposed by the Working group.

N.B. Dr. Sid Leiman's proposals were received and emailed to the members of the Working group.

- a. Ideas on how to commemorate the old Jewish cemetery site (around the Sports Palace).

Discussion: capturing ideas.

The main ideas proposed by the Working group:

- The LJC presented its proposals (see attached to the minutes) for commemoration of the cemetery site. The main ideas included adding some historical elements: two gates (entrance and exit), marking of Rabbi Gaon's grave, memorializing Ger Zedek tree, etc.
- It was noted that it would be important to have memorial stones within the cemetery.
- All agreed that the entire cemetery site should have demarcation/fencing fitting with the cemetery commemoration project.
- The fencing should integrate with the city rather than separate from it.
- It was pointed out that the rebuilding of the cemetery with tombstones would be difficult for the local population to understand. And it would be more likely to close the site off from people. It should rather be seen as a park, with paths and special historical signs. It is particularly important not to close this site off from people.
- The cemetery site must be dedicated to the memory, dignity and respect of those entered there.
- Giving information about the cemetery through appropriate signage is essential.

- b. Possible repurposing of spaces within the Sports Palace.

The aim is to compile a list of potential uses for the internal spaces to further develop the project.

The main ideas proposed by the Working group:

- This building in itself has historical experience: how did it happen that a Jewish cemetery turned into a Sports Palace? The Soviet oppression, both against Lithuania and against Jewish cemeteries, also memory and signs, plays an important role here. This is the erasure of Jewish memory. This was the aim of Soviet cultural policy. Vilnius and the Jewish

historical heritage were the victims of Soviet policy. The Jewish heritage was to be destroyed. This is the narrative to be told inside the building.

- The building could also house exhibitions from YIVO's collections and have spaces for research. Possibilities of displaying digitised content would be limitless. YIVO also has a lot of video material from YIVO's activities (pre-war images of Vilnius, everyday life). YIVO has sufficient expertise in this field to be used successfully, notably for youth education.
 - It was pointed out that the building itself is totally alien to Jewish life; it is too big. It is not only the monument/memorial with its exhibitions that is important, but also what else could be placed in it. It is important to think about other functions.
 - Attention was drawn to the lack of Jewish history education in Lithuania. This place might well serve the purpose.
 - The ideas were repeated from the first meeting that the building should 'speak' about the cemetery: its history, those interred therein, story of its destruction, etc.
 - The building itself should speak about what was there while the cemetery was open. The building in the cemetery should speak about pain - persecution, anti-Semitism, Nazis, Soviets.
 - Visitors are not likely to go to a museum about Jewish life when presented in a cemetery. The display of cultural elements within cemeteries is generally considered inappropriate.
 - It must be a 'Place of Memory', albeit limited to the time we are talking about (possible themes: the persons interred there, the history of the cemetery, the memorial hall).
 - It was pointed out that the history of the building itself could be displayed in the building: both the history of the Jewish cemetery that was destroyed and the history of historical events that were important for Lithuania. It could be a 'museum of itself'.
 - The building should be a memorial, telling the story of the place through a permanent memorial exhibition. It should evoke empathy towards the memorial site, telling its story through a permanent exhibition. The building could also accommodate silent research centres.
 - It was noted that the building is more than 15,000 m² in size and it would be difficult to fill. On the other hand, empty spaces can carry a powerful message, and a more impactful one at times.
 - The bunker in Bremerhaven, transformed into a memorial, was cited as an example.
 - Given that we cannot alter history and there exists a building on the cemetery site listed as a cultural value, we must adapt to this reality and talk about the cemetery within the building, paying special respect to those interred there.
 - It was emphasized that the vacant, quiet spaces within the building could hold significant impact. Ensuring that the primary narrative is not overlooked, including specific names and the stories of those laid to rest, is crucial.
 - Highlighting the building's role as more than just a museum, it should stand as a memorial to the cemetery - capturing its history and honouring those laid to rest there. Due to the huge size of the building, considerations should be made on how to integrate additional historical elements of Lithuanian history or other relevant activities.
3. In summary, a plan of action outlining how to implement these ideas, along with guidelines for the development of the concept, was presented.
- The utmost priority is to organize and ensure that both the building and the surrounding site contribute to and serve the purpose of preserving the memory.
 - The entire cemetery site should have demarcation/fencing fitting with the cemetery commemoration project. The cemetery site must be dedicated to the memory, dignity and respect of those interred there. Giving information about the cemetery through appropriate signage is essential.

- The building should serve as a memorial, encapsulating the history of the cemetery and honouring those interred there. Simultaneously, it is crucial to allocate at least 10% of the total area for the history of the building and Lithuania, with the remaining 90% devoted to the memorial aspect.
 - The administrative spaces could also accommodate research and academic activities, specifically delving into the history of Lithuanian Jews. Academic activities are paramount for the future, especially for the education of the younger generation.
4. Format and planning for the next meeting.
- It was agreed that all ideas would be circulated to the members of the Working group by 10 November. The next meeting is scheduled for 28 or 29 November.