



UCSJ: Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union

"The Voice of Emigration, Jewish Survival, and Human Rights in the Former Soviet Union Since 1970"

2200 Pennsylvania Ave NW ♦ East Tower, 4th Floor ♦ Washington, D.C. 20037
(202) 507-5788 ♦ Fax (202) 507-5601
ucsj@ucsj.org ♦ www.ucsj.org

PETITION TO PRESERVE THE CEMETERIES IN VILNUS, LITHUANIA April 07, 2020

The Old Cemetery of Vilnius, capital of Lithuania, at Šnipiškės /Piramont is in danger of desecration by the Lithuanian government which wants to renovate an old building erected on the cemetery grounds in Soviet times and turn it into a secular conference center. The Old Cemetery of Vilnius was the burial place from 1487 to 1830 for over 50,000 of Jewish residents of Vilnius, including many of the great Jewish scholars of a city once known as Jerusalem of Lithuania.

During the Soviet time, the gravestones were pilfered, and a sports arena was built in the middle of the cemetery on a foundation mixed with human remains. 99% of the Lithuanian Jewish community was wiped out during the Holocaust and cannot resist, but descendants of those buried there and tens of thousands of Jews worldwide are fighting back.

The government of Lithuania has allowed the construction of the Convention Center to take place within the perceived boundaries of the Old Jewish Cemetery and the desecration continues into the 21st century is an affront to the International Jewish Community, the American people, and everyone who values religious freedom and ethnic diversity around the world and that the failure of the government of Lithuania to protect the Jewish cemetery violates the October 15, 2002 bilateral agreement between the US and Lithuania on the protection and preservation of certain cultural properties, including cemeteries.

This agreement requires each country to take appropriate steps to protect and preserve the cultural heritage of all national, religious, and ethnic groups that reside or resided in its territory, specifically including victims of genocide during WWII. This obviously includes the Jewish community of Lithuania which was most concentrated in the city of Vilnius. The agreement specifies that "cultural heritage" include cemeteries and would prohibit, for example, any action by Lithuanian government which would constitute or lead to desecration of cemeteries of the former Jewish community, including the Jewish cemetery at Šnipiškės.

In 2008 the US Congress passed the joint resolution expressing "outrage of the construction that occurred within the perceived boundaries of the historic Jewish cemetery located in the Šnipiškės area of Vilnius" and declared: "cemeteries are sacred sites and are established to

remain undisturbed in perpetuity, and the sanctity of a cemetery is determined by the bodies buried therein” and that while “construction of a commercial building on the site disgraces the cemetery, it does not change its status.” In October 2014, the US Congress passed legislation which added desecration of cemeteries to the list of violations of religious freedom which are listed in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, violations of which have certain adverse consequences. This legislation determined that: “Cemeteries are sacred sites of national religious, and ethnic groups, which include cemeteries in the United States and abroad.”

Today, the Sports Palace, the Soviet-era structure built atop the cemetery, appears to be problematic itself: structure is derelict, unsafe and attracts inappropriate uses by unauthorized individuals. The sacred ground should be restored as a cemetery and memorial park to which pilfered gravestones can be returned.

Time is of the essence to act. The protection of this cemetery is necessary as once building of the convention center is started, the desecration of the cemetery is not reversible. Let remain at peace thousands of ancient Jewish scholars, religious leaders and other revered ancestors.

The purpose of our call for support is to make sure that the all desecration, including the currently proposed construction, development and future use of this site be halted, and to the extent the cultural or convention center is necessary, a different location be identified. The decision to mock the memory of Vilnius Jewry with a convention center in the middle of the city's medieval Jewish cemetery would be a grave error with unfortunate consequences.

Our ASK for US Government:

- Influence the Lithuanian government to reconsider its decision to build a convention center on the Old Jewish Cemetery and enforce existing bilateral agreements between the United States and Lithuania to prevent desecration of sacred sites.
- Provide support to UCSJ and other NGOs fighting for preservation of Jewish sacred sites.

Our ASK for NGOs:

- To support our letter and join UCSJ in our struggle to preserve Jewish heritage in Lithuania and in other former Soviet states.

Please send your support voice to ucsj@ucsj.org

Signatures:

1. Larry Lerner, UCSJ President
2. Rabbi Roger Lerner
3. Leonid Stonov
4. Anastasiia Aseeva
5. Meylakh Sheykhet, UCSJ Lviv Bureau
6. International Helsinki Association
7. Center for Civil Liberties, Ukraine