

PROTECTING THE KEDOSHIM OF SHNIPISHOK

“Kol demei achicha tzo'akim eilai min ha'adomah”

By The Coalition to Save the Shnipishok Cemetery

Lithuania is a country that has struggled to come to terms with its past.

It declared its independence from the USSR in 1990. Tomas Venclova, a Lithuanian writer and Soviet dissident, was a

Today, the country hosts far fewer living Jews than dead. There are approximately 50,000 *kevorim* in the old Jewish cemetery in Shnipishok in the middle of Vilna, in which Jews were buried from 1487 to 1831. These include some of the giants of the city's storied past, including the Be'er Hagolah, the

complexes were built in the cemetery over international protests, and shockingly, the excavated earth and bones were not made available to the Jewish community for reinterment. In 2015 the government announced plans to renovate the sports complex into the “Vilnius National Convention and

lei Yisroel, including Rav Chaim Kanievsky, have signed letters within the past fifteen years *paskening* that nothing may be built in the Shnipishok cemetery other than the *kevorim* and the *matzeivos*.

The proposal calls for construction, in-

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lone voice insisting to his countrymen that a half-century earlier Lithuania had visited unspeakable evil upon its Jews, and Lithuanians bore a great burden of guilt. It wasn't a message they wanted to hear. Having been beset by harsh occupiers — the Soviets from the east and the Germans from the west — Lithuanians tended to see themselves as victims of the great powers. But victims in one arena can be perpetrators in another.

Jews had lived in the small Baltic nation for six centuries by the time their neighbors and countrymen began massacring them at the instigation of the Germans. By 1650, one-quarter of the capital, Vilna, was Jewish. By the early 20th century, a majority of the residents, 57%, were Jewish. At the onset of the WW II, Vilna's 60,000 Jews constituted about 40% of the population. Nearly 160,000 additional Jews lived throughout the country.

THE VILNIUS PALACE OF CONCERTS AND SPORTS



family of the Vilna Gaon (the Gaon himself was exhumed and reinterred elsewhere to avert Soviet desecration), the *ger tzedek* Avrohom ben Avrohom Hy"l, Rav Zelmeh

Volozhiner, the Chayei Adam, and so many others whose legacy we live by.

In 1935, while the area was in Polish



RAV CHAIM OZER'S LETTER ON SHNIPISHOK.

Conference Center”; an international hue and cry followed. In 2020, Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė courageously stood up to powerful opposition and

denied funding to that initiative, effectively terminating it.

Last year, partially in response to pres-

SHNIPISHOK CEMETERY IN 1922.



cluding “earth-moving works,” which will inevitably break the bodies of *niftorim* and exhume them R”l.

Prof. Shnayer Leiman, a member of the Working Group and a renowned expert on Lita, refused to go along with its recommendations and submitted a dissent.

The leaked document refers to the “site” of the Jewish cemetery, as if it were a place where a cemetery once stood. But that is not the case, and it wouldn't be even if ground-penetrating radar hadn't confirmed many thousands of bodies. In *halacha*, a *bais hakvaros* remains a *bais hakvaros* in perpetuity, even if all human remains are gone.

To secularists, a *bais hakvaros* is a memorial to the past. But that is not the case for a *ma'amin*, who knows that the *neshomah* is eternal and will be restored to the *guf* at the time of *techiyas hameisim*.

Tens of thousands of *Litvishe Yidden* had

By the war's end, almost all were gone. But Lithuanians without firsthand knowledge were mostly not aware that it wasn't only the Germans that had made the Jews disappear. Most Lithuanians are also unaware that those *Litvishe Yidden* and their scholarship were the pride of the Jewish world; that their very own Vilnius was known to those Jews as "Yerushalayim de Lita"; and that the legacy of those Jews fills the Jewish world today, with so many learning in the great Lithuanian yeshivos around the world, and so many imbibing thirstily from the Torah of the *gedolei hadoros* of Lita.

hands, the Vilna municipality announced plans to build a sports stadium in the *bais ha-chaim*. Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzenski fought the measure with all his might until his *petirah* in 1940, resisting all proposed compromises. The Germans invaded in 1941.

Under Soviet domination after the war, all the *matzeivos* were cleared and used in paving and construction. The giant "Vilnius Palace of Concerts and Sports," in Soviet brutalist style, opened in 1971, covering a quarter of the cemetery. The facility was left to deteriorate after Lithuanian independence, and it was abandoned in 2004.

Over the next four years, two apartment

sure generated by a coalition of *askonim* working to save Lithuanian cemeteries, a commission (the "Working Group") was empaneled to determine the fate of the Jewish cemetery. The group includes only four *frum Yidden*; several Jews representing various interests, who are not the spiritual heirs of those who repose in the cemetery; and about ten non-Jewish members.

The group's draft proposal has been leaked. It calls for the now-decrepit sports palace to be turned into a facility that "should also pay tribute to the events that paved the road to Lithuania's independence" and include spaces for "art materials." Many *gedo-*

their *kevorim* desecrated in Shnipishok. But those *yesheinei afar* have legions of descendants and *talmidim* who are living, thriving, and maintaining their legacy, and their lips are *dovevos b'kever*. We cannot stand idly by as our forebears and *rabbeim* are desecrated.

Will you join the coalition to save the Shnipishok bais olam? Please contact your U.S. senator or congressman; U.S. lawmakers have influence in Lithuania. Financial support is also welcome. Contact us at savecemeteries@gmail.com or by calling (848)299-2341. May the tzaddikim you protect be meilitz yosher on your behalf.

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