



THE BLOGS

Dovid Katz

Lithuania's liveliest cemetery



Symbol for a European capital? by Vulovak/DefendingHistory.com

Back in 2009, a rancorous dispute over the old Vilna Jewish cemetery was [ostensibly solved](#). Two new buildings, despite worldwide protests, would be allowed to remain, and in return, no more land would be pilfered from the cemetery at Pīramont, in the Šnipiškės district of modern Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. The burial ground goes back to the late fifteenth century, at least. After the Holocaust, with virtually no descendants left to worry about, Soviet authorities helped themselves to the gravestones for use in building projects, but left many thousands of graves intact. A galaxy of eminent European rabbinic scholars and authors [were buried there](#). But once the 2009 “Peace of Pīramont” was brokered (with help from Western embassies here), emotions cooled as all sides got on with their lives.

One remaining question was a huge Soviet eyesore from the 1960s: the abandoned, crumbling “Sports Palace” built in the middle of the old cemetery. It was widely assumed this would come down and there would be a pleasantly landscaped memorial park cum cemetery, to which pilfered *matséyves* (Yiddish for “Jewish gravestones”) that [turn up far and wide](#) could be brought to stand with dignity. Precise texts of many old inscriptions had been meticulously transcribed, and approximate locations of the major mausoleums are well known. Much could be restored.

Then, one fine day in April 2015, out of the blue, a popular Lithuanian news show featured [spectacular clips](#) (timecode 7:15) of hasidim from a controversial London-based cemetery “preservation” organization giving their blessing to conversion of the building and planned construction of a new annex as a massive new convention center for Vilnius (the three local rabbis in town were not even informed of the meeting). Welcoming them, and the Jewish community’s titular leader, was none other than the prime minister himself (at 8:13). Has he nothing more urgent to do in these days of geostrategic and economic challenges? Within a few months, [JTA / The Times of Israel](#) and the [Jerusalem Post](#) revealed that it was the same London-based group that had been exposed ([courtesy of Wikileaks](#)) in a dispatch from the US ambassador in Vilnius as having demanded a \$100,000 payment for “supervision” of “exploratory digging” and “beautification” back in 2009.

The fuse was lit. What secret payments might they be promised this time around, for supervising the huge convention center?

You might be inclined to think that an East European country with one of the most painful Nazi-era collaboration records on the continent that has invested so much to repair its image, often with genuinely inspiring good works, would think twice before etching out a permanent self-inflicted scab where revelers would clap, cheer, drink in bars and flush toilets surrounded by Jewish graves. A [protestant pastor](#) pointed out that this would likely not be the case were it a Christian cemetery. A [Latvian-American journalist](#) followed suit. The [Simon Wiesenthal Center](#) weighed in.

In June, it was [announced](#) this would be a twenty-five million dollar project, with a hefty chunk slated to come from the European Union. This would be no “paint job” for the old Soviet-era eyesore. Over the spring, summer and autumn, the international protests began [to mount big-time](#), including the world’s [top rabbis of Lithuanian-Jewish \(Litvak\) origin](#). Names like Feinstein, Kamenetsky, Kotler, and Soloveitchik bring a flutter to the heart of religious and secular Litvaks alike. “But that ain’t nothing.” The London hasidic rabbis, affiliated with the “Aaron branch” of today’s bitterly split Satmar hasidism, were themselves roundly overruled, no more or less, by the main Satmar rabbinic court in New York (affiliated with the “Zalmen branch”), in a [sharply worded ruling](#) that was signed by the grandrabbi (rebbe) himself. Lo and behold, two polarically different branches of East European Jewish orthodoxy, Litvaks and Satmar hasidism, were now in full agreement condemning the planned desecration of one of Europe’s most famous Jewish cemeteries.

Pained Jewish voices from within Lithuania have rejected the acquiescence by the Jewish community’s titular head, a lay leader who is in professional life the nation’s top citizenship lawyer for foreigners in need of an EU passport. Protests have come from [one of the last Vilna-born Holocaust survivors in Lithuania](#) (“Dancing on Jewish Graves in Vilna,” published here in *ToI*), the longtime [editor](#) of the (now defunct) four-language Jewish

community newspaper, [a professor of urban architecture](#), the one kosher restaurant's [kashruth supervisor](#), and the [Kaunas \(Kovno\) Religious Community](#), among others. When the chief rabbi, of eleven years' standing [published his own protest last August](#), he was [rapidly fired](#) by the community's lay leader cum private attorney, for — “spreading lies about the Šnipiškės cemetery in Vilnius” (see the intriguing debate that ensued between [her views](#), and those of [the leading international scholar of the old Vilna cemetery](#), important for its implications, on both sides of this debate, for analogous situations in other East European cities). Then, in response to a letter from a French human rights advocate (published [in *ToI French*](#)), the office of the president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, [made clear](#) that no EU funding would, after all, go to the controversial project.

So why would the Lithuanian government continue to pursue the project with ever more political capital instead of simply moving the project elsewhere? Vilnius has a number of ideal venues for a new convention center. Restoring the cemetery to its rightful place in the city's unique multicultural urban geography fits in perfectly with its marketing as the historic Jerusalem of Lithuania. Possible financial links between property developers and politicians may be in play. Others surmise deeper nationalistic reasons. Some in high places don't want an extensive Jewish site near the center of the modern capital. Others are determined to save the Soviet-era monstrosity (in a land where everything else Soviet is understandably despised) [as a shrine for fourteen unarmed protesters](#) brutally mowed down by Soviet tanks in January 1991. They were killed far from the site, but they lay in state at the old Sports Palace for a few days. The martyrs of 1991 clearly deserve a major monument. The old Jewish cemetery is the wrong place.

Holocaust survivors here and their families have been shocked by the degree to which Western (particularly American and British) Jewish bigwigs have fallen in line with the Lithuanian government. The taxpayer-funded “U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad,” deeply

mired in other scandals, let itself be used repeatedly for the PR of the Satmar sub-sect affiliated with the London “grave traders.” On top of it all, the Lithuanian government financed a brand-new commission to “preserve” Jewish cemeteries in Lithuania, which convened last May. Its published report did not even mention the plan underway, leading it to be taken as a cover-up ruse from day one. Various American Jewish personalities flown in to be wined and dined were acquiescent.

Into this morass walked, as Sholem Aleichem might have said, “Rothschild himself.” In October, the Rothschild Foundation London (Hanadiv) financed a conference on Jewish cemeteries worldwide, held in Vilnius, which included delegates from the London Satmar affiliated “convention center blessers” (by then well-known from the Wikileaks dispatch), but not a single opponent, not even the sacked chief rabbi or the local Holocaust survivors who have spoken out. It was a hermetically sealed “closed” conference (as if delegates could not be trusted to be exposed to a non-sanctioned opinion). At the last moment, two high officials of the embattled US Commission for the Preservation backed out altogether on rather curious pretexts.

By sharp contrast, in a surprise for some, participants (often not Jewish) from the new accession EU countries were the only ones to stand up with courage. Two of them, Dr. Beata Nemcová of Slovakia and Dr. Tomasz (Tomek) Wiśniewski of Poland went on to publish powerful statements. One colleague from Britain phoned me to say, “Quite. Very courageous of them, Dovid, but we just can’t do that, we in Jewish heritage depend on those Rothschild Foundation grants.” A new east-west “free speech continuum”? For the “delegates of silence,” in a sense, the moral legacy may be implicit agreement with a triumphant press release that failed to acknowledge the existence of serious issues deserving a respectful airing.

The story doesn’t end there. Enter Israeli politics. When Lithuanian prime minister Algirdas Butkevičius visited Israel in September, he rushed to alert the media back home not about some new strategic, economic or military agreement, but about his (triumphant) understanding that Israeli prime

minister Benjamin Netanyahu is fine with the convention center in the old Vilna Jewish cemetery, where, incidentally, [some of the his own ancestors](#) are buried. The Israeli government's policies on the Holocaust and antisemitism in Lithuania have [generated spirited debate](#) for years.

One multi-heritage American author, proud of both her Lithuanian and her Litvak culture [put it this way](#): “Seriously, who wants to go to a convention on top of an old graveyard, Jewish or otherwise, anyway?”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dovid Katz is the author of major works on Yiddish linguistics and Lithuanian Jewish (Litvak) culture, and in recent years, on Holocaust obfuscation in Eastern Europe. A native of New York City, he led Yiddish studies at Oxford for many years, and after a stint at Yale, settled in Vilnius, where he was professor of Judaic studies at Vilnius University from 1999 to 2010. He now edits the Web journal [Defending History.com](#). His personal website is [DovidKatz.net](#).