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: Vilna Jews fail to save historic cemetery

• By MARTIN OLINER

The official leadership of the Vilnius Jewish community has betrayed the vast Jewish heritage of the storied Jewish community in Lithuania by not doing enough to save the city's 500-year-old historic Jewish cemetery.

Last month, then-Lithuanian prime minister Gintautas Paluckas announced that a run-down sports complex that was built by the Soviets on the site of graves in the middle of the cemetery would make way – instead of for a proper memorial to the Jews buried there – for a multimillion dollar conference center with restaurants and bars.

Despicably, booze will flow over the Pirmont Jewish Cemetery in the Snipiskes neighborhood, which is the city's oldest graveyard and bears the remains of countless rabbis and Jewish leaders. The Soviets allowed only seven bodies to be removed from Pirmont in 1949, including that of Rabbi Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, the great Vilna Gaon.

The previous Lithuanian government had agreed to convert the Vilnius Sports Palace into a Jewish heritage site. Work should have begun on knocking it down right away, before the government changed hands and the decision was reversed. Since making this outrageous decision, former prime minister Paluckas resigned due to a series of corruption allegations. It is still unclear whether his successor will reverse the move.

The official Jewish leadership of the Vilnius Jewish community must be held accountable. Their watered-down condemnations of the decision are lip service and merely going through the motions.

Rabbi Andrew Baker, the American Jewish Committee's director of international Jewish affairs, and Faina Kukliansky, the chairwoman of the Lithuanian Jewish Community, should have stopped this from happening.

I just had the privilege of spending a week in Vilna, where my grandson was volunteering with Caritas, a local Christian social organization that does tremendous charity

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LAST MONTH, then-Lithuanian prime minister Gintautas Paluckas announced that a run-down sports complex built by the Soviets on the site of Jewish graves would make way for a conference center with restaurants and bars, states the writer. (Ints Kalnins/Reuters)

and kindness, feeding and taking care of poor people. The Jewish community there no longer has anything similar. Nevertheless, I got to see the noble efforts of the Chabad emissaries to Lithuania, Rabbi Sholem Ber Krinsky and his wife, Nechama Dina Krinsky, who have made every effort to revitalize Jewish life among the few Jews left in the city.

Even though Chabad is the city's sole source of Judaism, it has not received any substantial part of the meager reparations from the Lithuanian government to the official Jewish community – which does not do nearly enough to help Vilna's few Jews.

There were some 60,000 Jews in Vilna before the Holocaust, constituting roughly 30 % of

the city's total population. It was the center of the Zionist movement in the Soviet Union, hosting the Hibat Zion movement, Poalei Zion Party, and Chovevei Zion conventions.

Zionist leader Theodor Herzl visited Vilna in 1903 and was warmly welcomed.

The great Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski headed the city's rabbinical court for decades and was a strong leader of the Jewish community, along with great yeshiva heads Rabbi Shimon Shkop and Rabbi Boruch Ber Leibowitz, all of whom are buried in other Lithuanian cemeteries.

Countless students of the three great rabbis were murdered in the Holocaust, and their memories have been defiled.

President Isaac Herzog, whose grandmother Sarah Herzog was born in Radviliskis, Lithuania, visited the Ponar Holocaust memorial site on August 4. He also paid a visit to the Vilnius Choral Synagogue, also known as Taharat Ha-Kodesh, built in 1903, and the only pre-war synagogue left in Vilna. There were 135 synagogues there before the Holocaust.

Unfortunately, the Chabad rabbi's activities in the synagogue are restricted due to internal disputes within the Jewish community. The modest Krinsky, who has 11 children and several foster children, does not charge for the services he provides and all the good he does. There is no other sign of religious observance in Vilna.

The Jews of Vilna – both alive

and dead – deserve better. The international Jewish community must protest Paluckas's outrageous decision and try to stop it.

The Jewish High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are approaching. They are a time of reversals of fortunes. I pray that this awful decision will be reversed, and those who allowed it to happen will be held accountable. May there be better days for the Jews of Vilna.

The writer is chairman of Religious Zionists of America, as well as a committee member of the Jewish Agency. He currently serves as a member of the US Holocaust Memorial Council and is author of In Praise of Donald Trump, available at Amazon. The views expressed here are his own. Reach him at Martinoliner@gmail.com.