



38,000 Sign Petition to Save Old Vilnius Jewish Cemetery

Builders Plan to Convert Soviet-era Ruin into National Convention Center in Cemetery's Center

VILNIUS, LITHUANIA, February 7, 2017 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A [petition](#) by Ruta Bloshtein, an Orthodox Jewish woman born and bred in Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital, protesting current plans to site a new national convention center in the middle of the city's old Jewish cemetery, has garnered some 38,000 signatures from around the world, mostly from Litvaks (Jews of Lithuanian heritage).

It is the largest Litvak public affairs project since the Holocaust, when around 96% of Lithuanian Jews were annihilated.

The old cemetery, which dates to the 15th century, is still the burial place of thousands of Jews from Vilna (as the city is known historically), including many illustrious Jewish scholars over the centuries. The headstones and commemorative structures above ground were all stolen by the Soviet regime during its occupation of Lithuania. Stones keep turning up all around the city. The petition urges they be returned and the cemetery restored as a matter of honor for modern democratic Lithuania.

The campaign for the cemetery's preservation is spearheaded by the online publication [Defending History](#), based in Vilnius, which has been chronicling the [international opposition](#) to the "convention center in the cemetery" project.

Campaigners for the cemetery have expressed "deep disappointment" at the ongoing failure to speak out by the taxpayer funded US Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad (USCPAHA), which enjoys close links with the State Department, and is alleged to have connections with groups that stand accused of offering "permissions" for building developments at East European cemeteries in return for material considerations. DefendingHistory.com's section on USCPAHA is at: <http://defendinghistory.com/category/us-commission-for-preservation-of-the-heritage>.

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