

# Vilnius court to decide fate of old Jewish cemetery

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Site of the old Vilnius Jewish cemetery in Snipiskes (Piramont) outside the Vilnius Sports Palace, August 15, 2012. (photo credit: Wikimedia Commons)

The European Foundation of Human Rights released a statement Tuesday saying that a preventive claim was filed in a Vilnius court to halt the expansion of an existing sports center next to a historic Jewish cemetery.

The legal appeal follows a petition championed by Ruta Bloshtein who said in an interview with *Tablet* that the cemetery “is sacred ground and should be restored as a cemetery and memorial park to which pilfered gravestones (which turn up all over the city) can be returned.”

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Former Chief Rabbi of Lithuania Chaim Burshtein was sacked after he voiced his objection to the project.

The new convention center is partly funded by the European Union, yet the European Foundation of Human Rights is coordinating the lawsuit, which was submitted to the court by an Israeli of Jewish Lithuanian heritage.

The Jewish community of Vilnius, Lithuania was so illustrious before WWII that it was known in the Jewish world as a second Jerusalem. Jewish people today pride themselves on having Lithuanian cultural heritage, known as being a 'Litvak,' and plenty of jokes are told in which the stereo-typically emotional hassidic Jew from Poland engages the dry, yet sharp, Litvak Jew.

This rich heritage did not mean much to the Soviets who, after annexing Lithuania into the USSR, built a sports center at the center of the old Šnipiškės Jewish cemetery. According to Jewish law it is forbidden to build over graves, yet no matter how disastrous it seemed, today the Jewish cemetery encompasses the sports center and many of the tombstones are still present.

In 1990, Lithuania declared its independence leading many to wonder how will the nation would deal with its complex history regarding Jews and their fate under Nazi occupation.



With the destruction of the pre-war Jewish community with 94% of Lithuanian Jews being murdered, the question of who controls the assets of the decimated community became even more pressing.

One of the most famous Lithuanian Jews was Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, better known as the Vilna Gaon, or genius of Vilnius. Hundreds of his students moved to the Land of Israel in the early 1800s establishing communities in Jerusalem and Safed. Today they are still referred to as Lithuanians.