



THE BLOGS

Pinchos Fridberg

FEATURED POST

Dancing on Jewish graves in Vilna

A Holocaust survivor decries plans to build a convention center on the site of a historic Jewish cemetery in the Lithuanian capital



Shmuel Levin, chairperson of the Jewish religious community of Vilnius and Lithuania, leans against a wall of the power substation built of tombstones from a Jewish cemetery in Vilnius, Lithuania, May 13, 2015 (AP/Mindaugas Kulbis)



Illustrative photo: Shmuel Levin, the Chairperson of the Jewish religious Community of Vilnius, leans against a wall of the power substation built of tombstones from a Jewish cemetery in Vilnius, Lithuania, May 13, 2015 (AP/Mindaugas Kulbis)

I am a Holocaust survivor. I was born here in Vilnius (Yiddish: *Vilna*), today's capital of Lithuania, known forever as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania" for its vibrant Jewish culture, religious and secular, for hundreds of years. Today our post-Holocaust Jewish community is a tiny remnant, just a few thousand people, but we are vibrant, and, as always, a community of many opinions. Once again, a question has arisen that calls for robust discourse.

Lithuania today is a truly democratic state. We are all free to express our opinions, and that is what I wish to do here today, without in any way detracting from my complete loyalty to our state.

According to [local press reports](#), the new convention center for Vilnius is slated to be built, at a cost totaling around \$25 million, on the site of the old Vilna Jewish Cemetery. The earliest known graves were from 1487, but some think that the site goes back to the early 1320s when Gediminas (Gedymin) founded Vilna and, tradition goes, when he invited people from many backgrounds, including Jews, to settle his new city. I hope to live to celebrate the 700th anniversary of Vilna's founding in a few years.

After the war, the Soviets destroyed the visible (above-ground) part of the cemetery, removing all the gravestones. (They continue to turn up all over the city in a variety of uses, including as [coating for the country's power grid](#) and as [walls of schools](#).) The Soviets built a sports stadium on the site. It is that (now derelict) structure that would be converted to the new convention center at a total cost of \$25 million.

I myself remember very well, as a boy after the war, in 1945, my father Shaye Fridberg taking me specially to show me the old Jewish cemetery, in the Shnĭpishek district (now Šnĭpiškes). In the Jewish folklore of Vilna, however, the actual cemetery location was called Pĭramónt. My father proudly showed me the grave of the Gaon of Vilna (it was one of those later moved to the new Jewish cemetery when the old one was desecrated by the Soviets to make the sports stadium).

I also remember my dear late mother, Chana Zlatkowitz (Khane Zlatkovitsh), recalling to me that before the war, she used to pay one percent of her income into a fund for constructing a new masonry wall for one of the Jewish cemeteries in our city. Incidentally, she also used to recount that her father, my grandfather Yitskhok, who lived on Little Stefan Street (now Raugyklos Street), contributed toward the fund to build the Choral Synagogue, the only one of 160 prewar Jewish prayer-houses to survive, as fate would have it.



Pinchos Fridberg stands at the monument on the site of Vilna's old Jewish cemetery.

I honestly do not know how many of my own ancestors are still buried at the old cemetery (thousands of graves are still there, even if the stones aren't). What I do know is that twenty-eight relatives on my mother's side alone were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators at the mass murder site Ponár (now Paneriai) outside Vilnius.

An [international debate has been growing](#) in recent weeks over whether it is a good idea for the city's new convention center to be built on top of the old cemetery.

In my view, it is a bad idea for our old cemetery to be the foundation for a convention center where people will be cheering, dancing, jumping, singing, and drinking in the convention center's bars.

But that doesn't mean that the derelict Soviet sports arena on one part of the cemetery should remain as it is. It could readily be converted to a museum celebrating the 700 year history of Lithuanian Jewry, perhaps modeled on the excellent new Jewish museum in Warsaw.

This article was translated from the Yiddish.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pinchos Fridberg was born in Vilna (then Wilno, Poland, now Vilnius, Lithuania) on May 24th 1938. He graduated from Vilnius University in 1961 and completed his PhD in theoretical and mathematical physics in 1965 and an additional doctoral science degree in radio physics in 1974. From 1961 to 1978, he was Chair of the Laboratory of Theoretical Investigations at the Vilnius Scientific Institute of Radio Measuring Devices. In 1978, he joined Grodno State University, where he was named professor. In 1989 he became head of the Department of Theoretical Radio Physics at the Zondas Company in Vilnius, where he is now a pensioner.