

PRESS RELEASE

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Statement on Behalf of Chessed Advocates for the Protection of Cemeteries

Dr. Bernard Fryshman, speaking on behalf of Chessed Advocates for the Protection of Cemeteries, issued the following statement in connection with the proposed conversion of a Soviet-era structure situated within the Vilnius Shnipishok Jewish Cemetery into a Concert and Convention Center.

Lithuania, like all Western democracies, is bound by the fundamental principles of Western civilization. Among these principles are respect for human rights, property rights, and religious freedom. The proposed project, however unintentionally, would undermine all three.

Those interred in the Vilnius Shnipishok Jewish Cemetery were laid to rest with the expectation—shared by all who are buried in cemeteries throughout the world—that their graves would remain undisturbed in perpetuity. To alter the character of this sacred ground is to violate the understanding under which they took possession of their final resting place. In this sense, the rights associated with that burial are property rights deserving of respect and protection.

The proposal also raises profound concerns regarding religious freedom. A cemetery is more than a repository for the dead. It is a sacred place that embodies the values, traditions, and beliefs of a faith community. It serves as a link between generations and as a means by which religious teachings and historical memory are transmitted to the young. Activities incompatible with the sanctity of a cemetery diminish its religious character and interfere with its essential purpose.

There is also a broader human rights concern. Every individual who chooses a burial place does so with the reasonable expectation that a civilized society will honor and protect that choice. Respect for the dead is inseparable from respect for the living. When a government permits the desecration or inappropriate use of a cemetery, it disregards the rights of those who, during their lifetimes, entrusted their remains to the care and protection of future generations.

By proceeding with plans involving this Soviet-built structure, erected in 1971 at the heart of an ancient cemetery, the Lithuanian government risks departing from the standards of respect for human dignity, religious liberty, and historical memory that characterize democratic societies.

As advocates for the protection of all cemeteries, regardless of faith or nationality, we call upon the Lithuanian government to dismantle this lingering symbol of Soviet domination and to permit the restoration, to the fullest extent possible, of this sacred site.

Chessed Advocates for the Protection of Cemeteries serves as a voice for the departed. We affirm that all cemeteries are sacrosanct and that every cemetery, as a member of a revered class, is entitled to protection, preservation, and respect.