

Current Affairs - Prague's medieval Jewish cemetery once more in the news

[2000-09-07] By Olga Szantova

Prague's medieval Jewish cemetery is in the news yet again. Just as a brief reminder, it's the cemetery in Vladislavova Street, a part of which was uncovered when the Czech Insurance company started building a new office building on the site which it owns.

Construction on the site started in 1997, and in May 1998 bones were discovered, and archeologists confirmed that these were the remains of a Jewish cemetery abandoned in 1478. Prague's Rabbi Sidon reached an agreement with the insurance company as well as with the Ministry of Culture on how the site could be preserved in accordance with Jewish customs.

But at that point Orthodox rabbis from abroad took up the issue and found Rabbi Sidon's solution unacceptable. The Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe has issued a number of statements criticizing the Czech government for not tackling the issue in accordance with Jewish traditions. Many of those declarations do not correspond to the situation, for instance the fact that the Ministry of Culture has declared the site a protected historic site and the insurance company had agreed to change its construction plans in order to protect the graves.

The cost of reimbursing the company for the site would amount to around ten million US dollars, an astronomic sum for the Czech economy. Critics from Jewish communities abroad have not come up with any proposal as to how that cost could be met. When I asked one of the members of the Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries, Rabbi Abraham Pinter, he answered:

But the strongest words in the committee's last statement are words of criticism for the officials of the Czech government who, and I quote, "show total disrespect and disregard of basic human rights and freedom of religion and are unfortunately continuing in the footsteps of King Vladislav, who closed the cemetery and persecuted thousands of Jews. They have unfortunately not learnt from this chapter of their history and are continuing to behave similarly even in a modern, civilised and democratic world." Those are strong words and I asked Rabbi Pinter whether the committee really meant them: