

United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad



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Commission Testifies on Communal Property Restitution Before Congress

Chairman Michael Lewan testified at the Helsinki Commission's March hearing entitled "The Long Road Home—Struggling for Property Rights in Post-Communist Europe."

The hearing focused on Holocaust-era assets restitution issues, notably the return of and indemnification for Jewish communal properties taken over by communist governments after World War II.

"The effort to resolve communal property issues is indeed 'the long road home,'" Lewan said. "The historical and moral importance of this journey cannot be underestimated. Emerging democracies must settle old debts."

Such matters are not its direct responsibility, but the Commission has experience in documenting these properties and assisting preservationists in obtaining access to them. That experience has placed it

in a unique position to advise bodies concerned with the restitution and repatriation of Jewish cemeteries, synagogues, monuments, and related cultural properties.

Lewan spoke after Under Secretary of State Stuart E. Eizenstat, who described the difficulties in returning communal properties to religious organizations. Lewan also explained why Americans should care about preserving the buildings, churches, synagogues, and archival material in Europe connected with their ancestral past. His testimony is posted on the Commission's web site at www.preservationcommission.org.

Lewan also spoke of the extent to which the Commission assists with multi-ethnic and religious projects. He agreed to assist the Helsinki Commission in surveying the extent vestiges of Romani culture in Eastern and Central Europe. ■

Lewan Speaks To Holocaust Panel

Chairman Michael Lewan spoke of the Commission's work before the Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets last December. The conference's goal was to continue documenting the record of Holocaust assets and providing some justice to survivors. Lewan stressed the importance of giving special consideration to cemeteries as deliberations continue about communal property restitution — especially since the rising tide of economic development in Central and Eastern Europe threatens them. Lewan expressed support for setting aside a portion of the funds realized for the sale or lease of other communal property for the perpetual care of cemeteries, which often have no local survivors able to care for them. ■

Commission Sponsors Restoration of Sarajevo Cemetery

The Commission, under the leadership of Commissioners Phyllis Kaminsky, Joseph Halfon, and Rachmiel Liberman, is leading what is likely to be the most important preservation effort in the Commission's history.

The Sephardic Jewish cemetery at Sarajevo was a strategically important sniper post during the Bosnian war and sustained significant damage to its ornate prayer house, walls, and tombstones. Upon withdrawal from the cemetery, Bosnian Serbs mined it extensively.

The Commission has been active in determining whether any landmines remain at the cemetery. Although Rabbi Liberman received assurances late last year from the Department of Defense that the cemetery had been cleared, eyewitness reports indicated that mines still posed a threat.

The U.S. Department of Defense informed the Commission this spring that a Norwegian team had re-cleared the cemetery. The team should return later this year to clear the cemetery's perimeter of any remaining mines.

The Commission has received strong support from the Mayor of Sarajevo, Rhim Gacanovic; Bosnia's ambassador to the United States Sven Alkalaj; Congressman Ben Gilman (see picture on page 5); Senators John Kerry and Frank Lautenberg; and the American Sephardic Jewish community — all of whom recognize the significance of rebuilding this cemetery in a Muslim country so torn apart by fighting in recent years. Fundraising to restore the site is under way. Tax deductible donations can be made payable to the Commission. ■

Spring Meeting Features Distinguished Guests, Positive Reports

The Commission hosted Bosnian Ambassador Sven Alkalaj and the Polish Prime Minister's Advisor on Jewish Affairs, Agnieszka Magdziek-Miszewska, in April in Washington, D.C.

Commissioners heard from Alkalaj on the status of the Sarajevo cemetery restoration effort and from Miszewska on the challenges facing communal property restitution efforts in Poland.

During the meeting, Commissioner Zvi Kestenbaum was honored by the Commission for his lifelong dedication to cemetery preservation, especially in Hungary. Kestenbaum, a Commission founder, reported on preservation work in Nyir Karas and Ujfeherto, his birthplace.

In other business, Commissioner Edgar Gluck reported on cemetery restoration in Kaliningrad, Russia.



Commissioner Zvi Kestenbaum stands by a gravestone at the restored cemetery in Nyir Karas, Hungary.

The meeting also included progress reports by Commissioners Joseph Halfon and Gary Lavine on their agreements in the Baltic States as well as a report by Commissioner Ned Bandler on his work toward an agreement in Bulgaria.

Commissioner Irving Stolberg described his recent trip to Slovakia. Commissioner Lee Seeman gave an update on work at the Wyszkow, Poland, model cemetery project; and Dr. Sam Gruber summarized the Commission's survey activities. ■

Commissioners Visit Baltics to Promote Preservation

Commissioners Joseph Halfon and Gary J. Lavine visited Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania last October as a follow up to the Declarations of Cooperation signed by the Commission and the governments of Estonia and Lithuania in June 1998.

The purpose of the meetings was to work out the details of the establishment of Joint Cultural Heritage Commissions for full cooperation in the protection and preservation of religious and ethnic cultural sites that are of importance to the cultural roots of the peoples in

these countries and in the United States. The Commissioners met with government cabinet ministers of all three countries and were received by the President of Lithuania as well.

In Latvia, the government signed a Declaration of Cooperation to work toward the establishment of formal cooperation to protect and preserve cultural sites. Latvia thus joined the other two Baltic States in declaring its intention of cooperating with the Commission on matters of cultural site protection and preservation. ■

U.S.-Ukraine Partnership Bears Fruit, Fall Meeting Planned

The United States-Ukraine Joint Cultural Heritage Commission discussed the progress of implementing the cultural preservation agreement between the two countries at its second meeting in November 1998 in Washington, D.C. Chairman Michael Lewan and Commissioners Chaskel Besser and

Irving Stolberg represented the United States. Vice Minister of Culture and Arts Leonid Novokhatko represented Ukraine. At the meeting, participants commended the July 1998 Cabinet Ministers of Ukraine Executive Order which took steps toward preserving burial sites in the country.

The Commission agreed to co-sponsor the Cleveland Ukrainian-American community's efforts to upgrade a museum of Ukrainian-American historical documents and artifacts. The Commission also agreed to continue the survey of cemeteries and massacre sites in Ukraine. ■

Commission Assists in Restoring Russian Cemetery

A breakthrough in cooperation with Russian authorities occurred when Commissioner Edgar Gluck signed a formal Declaration of Cooperation on behalf of the Commission with the Mayor of Kaliningrad, a major Russian city.

This agreement was the culmination of months of work by the Commissioner to obtain access to the city's historic Jewish cemetery so that a group of preservationists, led by Commissioner Gluck, could undertake major restoration work.

Marshalling the assistance of Congressman Benjamin Gilman of New York, chairman of the House

International Relations Committee, and the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, Commissioner Gluck obtained the cooperation of the city government and also signed with the Mayor the formal declaration for future preservation of places of worship, monuments, and cemeteries associated with the cultural heritage of Kaliningrad. As part of the agreement, the Mayor gave permission for the Jewish community to build a synagogue and a school. During their visit, Commissioner Gluck and the group of preservationists met with the Governor of the region, who promised to fight all traces of anti-Semitism. The meeting aired on Russian national television. ■

Commission Co-sponsors Auschwitz Synagogue Restoration

The Commission is proudly cosponsoring efforts by the Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation — led by visionary New York businessman Fred Schwartz — to restore the Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot synagogue. The synagogue is located in Oswiecim, Poland, less than two miles from the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camps. With the Commission's assistance, it was the first property returned under Poland's new restitution law.

In addition to restoring the synagogue, plans include constructing a study center to serve as a place where Auschwitz-Birkenau visitors can learn more about Jewish life before World War II and reflect on their experiences visiting the camps. Before the war, Jewish culture played a significant role in the rich fabric of the city. To highlight the Jewish experience there, the study center will include a permanent exhibition of Jewish life in Oswiecim. It will also include a small theater, meeting rooms, and a kosher cafeteria.

Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski has noted the importance of this historic effort. He said, "This is a much needed place in Oswiecim, stamped by the Holocaust tragedy and visited by



Commission Chairman Michael Lewan speaks at a High Mass in the Church of the Holy Assumption of St. Mary in Oswiecim, Poland. The mass celebrated the rededication of the Lomdei Mishnayot Synagogue. The Catholic Church continues to play a crucial role as the synagogue restoration project moves forward. Photo courtesy of the Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation.

increasing numbers each passing year, where prayers can be said for the dead and also where thoughts can be directed to a common future."

While in Poland in November 1998, Commission Chairman Michael Lewan was proud to represent the Commission at a moving ceremony to rededicate the

synagogue. In his remarks at the ceremony, held at the Church of the Holy Assumption of St. Mary, Lewan said, "The Lomdei Mishnayot Synagogue stands not as a reminder of death and decay, but as a testament to those vital souls that once prayed, sang, studied, danced, and lived a full Jewish life within its walls." ■

Model Cemetery Project: Wyszkow, Poland

The Commission's Wyszkow cemetery restoration effort continues to be a model of how a broad spectrum of people and organizations can be brought together in an act of quiet charity.

To date, more than 120 individuals and groups have donated funds to restore this cemetery that was totally razed by the Nazis. The cemetery was ignored for 50 years by subsequent local Communist governments. The most recent sponsor of the initiative is the extended family of Hap Miller of Lexington, Virginia, recruited by Commissioner Lee Seeman.

Since the summer of 1998, the cemetery boundaries have been marked by a temporary rail fence. The town has also closed access to a dirt road cutting through the cemetery. Last fall, 3,800 seedlings of a hedge-fence were planted and a watering system installed.

Further fundraising is required to complete the stone facing of the monument and the waterlines, plant meadow grass on the cemetery grounds to stop erosion, and provide for caretaker services. It is gratifying to note that there have been no cases of vandalism at the monument since its dedication in October 1997. ■



The memorial (above) sits adjacent to the Jewish cemetery in Wyszkow, Poland. The monument is nearly finished.

Commission Co-sponsors Restoration of Grave of Slovak Hero

Last September, Commissioner Irving Stolberg attended the rededication of the Washington, D.C., grave site of Dr. Stefan Osusky, a founder of Czechoslovakia and of the League of Nations, who died in exile. Ambassadors of the Slovak Republic and France, where Osusky had once represented Czechoslovakia, attended. The restoration was initiated and co-sponsored by the Commission at the request of the Slovak Embassy and the Slovak-American community.

In April, the Commission was represented at a ceremony commemorating the 110th anniversary of Dr. Osusky's birth. At the ceremony, Commissioner Stolberg noted that it was ironic that Osusky's grave faced the chapel where President Harry S. Truman's Secretary of State Dean Acheson is buried. Secretary Acheson signed the treaty creating NATO. Osusky was the architect of prototypical models of both NATO and the United Nations. ■

Bulgaria Agreement Likely Soon

Plans for a cultural heritage agreement between the United States and Bulgaria are moving forward under Commissioner Ned Bandler's leadership. Philip Dimitrov, Bulgaria's ambassador to the United States, has said the agreement is a personal priority. A signing is expected in 1999. It would include cooperation in preserving cemeteries and other cultural sites, including the American College in Sofia, Robert College, and the Rila Monastery. ■

Commissioner Receives High Award in Poland

Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski presented Commissioner Chaskel Besser in November 1998 with a humanitarian award for a lifetime of service to the Jewish community in Poland. "Rabbi Besser is a human legend in the community of New York, enjoying huge respect of numerous Jews and Poles," said Kwasniewski. Fred Schwartz also received an award for his work with the Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation. ■

Commission Builds Ties In Central Europe

Chairman Michael Lewan and Project Officer Chris Hill traveled to Prague, Bratislava, and Vienna in May to discuss Commission business with government, religious, and preservation officials there.



Chairman Michael Lewan (far left), Congressman Benjamin Gilman (left), Commissioner Joseph Halfon (far right) watch as Bosnian Ambassador Sven Alkalaj signs guest book prior to meeting to discuss efforts to restore the Sarajevo Jewish cemetery.

In Prague, Lewan and Hill met with U.S. Ambassador John Shattuck; Jewish and Catholic leaders — including the Papal Nuncio — as well as with officials from the Mayor's office and the Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs.

In addition to discussing the Commission's work and its interest in enhancing cultural ties with the Czech Republic, Lewan helped bring closer to resolution a dispute over a cemetery site in downtown Prague. In response to a request from the Helsinki Commission, before which Lewan testified in April, the two also met with representatives of the Roma community to discuss the difficult human rights issues they face.

In Bratislava, Lewan made progress toward the signing of an updated cultural preservation agreement with the Slovak Republic in addition to mediating a controversy over a cemetery located

in Liptovsky Mikulas. Lewan also met with U.S. Ambassador Ralph Johnson, Deputy Prime Minister Pal Czaky, and representatives from the Catholic community.

Hoping to learn lessons to apply to Eastern and Central European countries, Lewan and Hill spent the last few days of their trip in Vienna. They discussed with religious leaders there how the more than 50-year-old democracy has put the horrors of World War II behind it.

In particular, Lewan and Hill had an interesting and informative meeting with conscientious objectors to Austria's compulsory military service who fulfill their military commitment by working on Holocaust education throughout the world. ■

President Appoints New Commissioner

The Commission welcomes Anita Freedman of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, who was appointed by President Clinton in November 1998. Freedman brings a wealth of public service experience, serving as a

commissioner of the Portsmouth Housing Authority, a Committeewoman of the Democratic National Committee, and past president of the National Council of Jewish Women. ■

Auschwitz Treatise To Be Republished

Commissioner Warren Miller has successfully raised the funds needed to cover the entire cost of translating a five-volume, authoritative treatise on the history of Auschwitz-Birkenau from Polish into English.

The scholarly work, documented with several thousand footnotes, contains copies of photos and documents obtained when the camp was liberated. The acclaimed treatise has been published in Polish and German by the historians of the State Museum at Auschwitz and is highly acclaimed by Holocaust scholars.

The English translation should be published in late 1999. ■

Little Camp Memorial Project Moves Forward

Commissioner Warren Miller is working to raise funds to construct a memorial on the site of the former Little Camp at Buchenwald.

This project was approved in June 1998 by a group of German curators. Renowned architect Stephen Jacobs will donate his services to the project. ■

Emanuel Foundation Names Michael Lewan “Man of the Year”

The Emanuel Foundation for Hungarian Culture presented Chairman Michael Lewan its Man of the Year award at a benefit dinner on June 15.

The foundation was established in 1987 to commemorate the Holocaust and the 600,000 Hungarian Jews and 6 million European Jews who perished at the hands of the Nazis. Currently, the Emanuel Foundation is working on a documentary film that will tell the story of the resistance during World War II.

Former Congressman Stephen Solarz of New York presented Lewan with the award. Lewan served as Chief of Staff for Congressman Solarz for a dozen years.

President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore praised the foundation and its honorees in the dinner's program. ■



Former Congressman Stephen Solarz (left) presents Chairman Michael Lewan (middle) with the Emanuel Foundation's Man of the Year Award as Menachem Lubinsky (right) looks on. Photo courtesy of the Emanuel Foundation.

Commission Welcomes New Project Officer

Christopher Hill joined the Commission in January after working in the Washington office of U.S. Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut. Hill grew up in Ivoryton, Connecticut. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Gettysburg College with a Bachelor of Arts degree in political science in 1994. ■

For more information on the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, please call (202) 254-3824, fax (202) 254-3934, or e-mail commpaha@erols.com.

The Commission's Chairman is Michael Lewan; the Deputy Chairman is Rabbi Zvi Kestenbaum. Commissioners include Bernyce Adler, Ned Bandler, Chaskel Besser, Anita Freedman, Mandell Ganchrow, Edgar Gluck, Joseph Halfon, Phyllis Kaminsky, Alice Kelikian, Gary Lavine, Rachmiel Liberman, Warren Miller, John Pikarski, Menno Ratzker, Lee Seeman, and Irving Stolberg. The Commission is staffed by Executive Director Joel Barries, Research Director Dr. Sam Gruber, and Project Officer Christopher Hill. ■

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