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BELARUS: Jews fail to recover synagogues or prevent their destruction

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Yakov Gutman, who heads the World Association of Belarusian Jewry, has accused President Aleksandr Lukashenko of "personal responsibility for the destruction of Jewish holy sites" in Belarus. Gutman was subsequently detained by police and hospitalised with a suspected heart attack, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. He claims that Belarusian authorities permitted the demolition of a former synagogue to build an elite housing complex, that the construction of a multi-storey car park will prevent the reconstruction of a sixteenth-century stone synagogue demolished in the late 1960s, and that Jewish cemeteries have been destroyed by two local authorities in recent years. Meanwhile, only 9 out of 92 historical synagogues in Belarus have been returned to believers since 1991, and the new 2002 religion law states that religious organisations do not have priority in cases when a former worship building is currently used for culture or sport. Yakov Dorn, Chairman of the Judaic Religious Association in Belarus, told Forum 18 that "most former synagogues come into that category - so the authorities usually refuse our requests and refer to that provision."

Publicly accusing President Aleksandr Lukashenko of "personal responsibility for the destruction of Jewish holy sites" in Belarus, Yakov Gutman was first detained by police and then hospitalised with a suspected heart attack on 21 January, he told Forum 18 News Service. Following his analogous protest in front of the presidential administration building in Minsk on 14 January, Gutman was also detained by police and given a court warning for holding an unapproved picket.

Speaking to Forum 18 from Minsk on 25 January, the chairman of the World Association of Belarusian Jewry explained that the state authorities permitted the demolition of a nineteenth-century former synagogue in 2001 to make way for an elite housing complex. The planned construction of a multi-storey car park at another site in central Minsk will render impossible the reconstruction of a sixteenth-century stone synagogue demolished in the late 1960s, he added, while Jewish cemeteries have been razed by the local authorities in the cities of Grodno (Hrodna) and Mozyr (Gomel [Homyel'] region) in recent years.

In a response to a query by a group of Belarusian parliamentary deputies, the republic's Ministry of Justice confirmed on 2 October 2002 that the nineteenth-century former synagogue building was a listed heritage monument. On 18 December 2002, however, the Committee for State Control stated that its Expert Commission had decided to annul this status on the grounds that the building had been a Jewish prayer school rather than a synagogue, and that only its shell had survived the Second World War. The vice-chairman of Minsk City Council announced open tender for the construction of the multi-storey car park adjacent to the site of the sixteenth-century synagogue due to heavy traffic in the area, the Committee added.

Gutman argues that the nineteenth-century former synagogue should have been protected and the sixteenth-century synagogue restored under Article 26 of the 1992 Law on the Protection of Historical and Cultural Heritage, which states that only the Belarusian Council of Ministers is entitled to remove a monument from the heritage list, and only in cases when it has been destroyed by a natural disaster or accident and is impossible to reconstruct.

Just nine out of 92 historical synagogues in Belarus have been returned to believers since 1991, according to the chairman of the Judaic Religious Association in Belarus. While Yuri Dorn told Forum 18 on 21 January that six of these had been returned to his organisation's communities in Minsk, Vitebsk (Vitsyebsk), Pinsk (Brest region), Kalinkovichi (Kalinkavichy) (Gomel region), and Borisov (Minsk region), he described the destruction of the nineteenth-century former synagogue in Minsk as "terrible" and the general restitution situation as "very worrying" due to the state's failure to introduce a relevant law. Pointing out that the new 2002 religion law stipulates that religious organisations do not have priority in cases when a former worship building is currently used for culture or sport (Article 30), Dorn remarked that "most former synagogues come into that category - so the authorities usually refuse our requests and refer to that provision."

Speaking to Forum 18 on 22 January, chairman of the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Belarus, Eduard Parizh, confirmed that his organisation, which contains 15 Hassidic communities, has recovered three former synagogues in the cities of Minsk, Bobruisk (Minsk region) and Grodno. To date, he said, no more have been returned precisely due to Article 30 of the 2002 religion law. Asked about the demolition of the nineteenth-century former synagogue in Minsk, Parizh commented that the destruction of every former synagogue was "grievous" because it made it potentially more difficult for Jews to follow their religious traditions. Not

permitted to use transport to attend a synagogue on the sabbath, he pointed out, Jews hardly wish to walk for two or three hours to the nearest one, "so the more synagogues preserved, the better." Currently, said Parizh, his organisation's only synagogue in Minsk has to cater to several thousand worshippers at major festivals.

On 21 January the head of the republic's third major Jewish religious organisation, Yakov Basin, told Forum 18 that his Religious Association of Progressive Jewish Communities has 16 communities in 13 Belarusian cities, but is without a single synagogue. "The state told us that we are not legal heirs to any historical synagogues because reform Judaism is not traditional in Belarus," he explained. Basin added that his organisation asked to put a memorial on the site of the former sixteenth-century synagogue in Minsk, but has yet to receive an answer from the authorities.

On 27 January the chairman of the Belarusian State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Stanislav Buko, confirmed that Belarus had no law on restitution before informing Forum 18 that he would issue a written answer to a question relating to the Jews' property difficulties within ten days.

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=195

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru>

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