Preservation vs. Development under the shadow of the Holocaust

Prof. Mordechai Za

Dept. of Jewish History, Ben-Gurion University, Israel

The collapse of the USSR and the fall of the "Iron Curtain" in the early 1990's awakened dormant longing of tens of thousands of Jews from all over the world to their ancestor's villages and towns in Eastern Europe. Thus, a slow trickle of visitors that began in the early 1990s had become a steady stream numbering tens of thousands of "pilgrims". Oftentimes however, this emotional loaded search of the imagined past resulted in a deep frustration due to the contrast between the true or imagined historic reality and the current reality, which in many cases proves to be miles away from their expectations. The idea that "living in history" and that the opportunity to experience past times daily lives is not actually possible, irrationally suppressed by the desire to feel, taste, smell and sense the world that was and no longer is. Apparently, the most reasonable response to this demand is the initiation of vast projects of preservation, and even reconstruction, of the pre-WWII "Jewish" spaces of life, in most cases in the hearts of these towns and cities. At the same time, however, one cannot ignore the problematicalness of maintaining or reconstructing historic elements (synagogues, schools, etc.), in many cases at the expense of the developing needs of business, commercial and residential centers. Understandably, "the shadow of the Holocaust" constantly hovering above, Makes it extremely difficult to maintain an orderly and rational decision-making process with regard to this sensitive issue. Moreover, despite oftentimes the prevailing narrative of the Jewish preservation initiatives contradicts local historic narratives, whether national, political, religious, or both. For quiet many years, I studied this subject in the Lithuanian sphere, while being involved in a number of conservation and reconstruction projects. In my lecture, I will discuss several prominent examples of this dilemma, along with some ideas of how to preserve representations of the Jewish heritage in this region, alongside the understanding of the local population's feelings and the needs of urban development.

Key words: Tourism, Holocaust, Preservation,