

Is Harley Felstein A Beacon of Hope And Heritage for Jews of Lithuania?

By Paul Berger

With crucial help from Lithuania's ambassador to Washington, a Maryland cemetery employee has managed to position himself as a key mediator between Jews and the Lithuanian government in a little more than one year.

Harley Felstein launched his new organization, the Lithuanian Jewish Heritage Project, at a party hosted by Ambassador Zygimantas Pavilionis at the Lithuanian Embassy in April 2011. By that fall, Felstein was invited to the Lithuanian Embassy once again, this time to participate in a roundtable discussion on Lithuanian-Jewish relations that included senior Lithuanian government officials, top Jewish communal leaders and America's special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism, Hannah Rosenthal.

Pavilionis also features prominently on Felstein's marketing materials. A letter from the ambassador, printed on Lithuanian Embassy letterhead, accompanies a request for advertising and sponsorship related to fundraising concerts Felstein is planning for New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and Washington this September.

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FRED SHAPIRO

Alliance: Harley Felstein (right) with Ambassador Zygimantas Pavilionis.

ania's Jewish Diaspora, many of whose members are Holocaust survivors.

Some of those Lithuanian Jews, known as Litvaks, and figures in Lithuania's own small, surviving Jewish community are joining others in criticizing Felstein for generating anger and division rather than good will. Many view as deeply wrongheaded Felstein's solicitous stance toward a government that even today, they say, has failed to come to terms with Lithuania's conduct during the Holocaust.

There are critics, too, who question Felstein's financial management of his not-for-profit groups, his own past financial history and key achievements he claims both here and in Lithuania.

Today, these critics are putting the spotlight on a rising, self-described grassroots activist who says that all he ever sought to do was help.

In an interview at the Forward's offices on June 21, Felstein explained that his passion to restore Lithuanian-Jewish relations was born after his teenage son returned from a school trip to Lithuania in 2010.

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Felstein set up the Lithuanian Jewish Heritage Project in the spring of 2011. He launched a sub-group, the Sunflower Project, that fall.

He said the groups' aims are to improve Lithuanian-Jewish relations through dialogue, youth and cultural exchanges, and restoration of abandoned Jewish cemeteries in Lithuania.

But Ruta Puisyte, assistant director of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute in Lithuania's capital, who lent the institute's name to Felstein's early fundraising, told the Forward, "When I spoke with him I understood he has no understanding of Lithuania, no understanding of what has already been done."

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Activist for Lithuanian Jews Leaves Trail of Questions

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researcher who has run Jewish projects in Eastern Europe for almost 20 years, said, "He doesn't know any of the local languages, he doesn't know Lithuania, he has no academic background."

Felstein is simply a man who works in a cemetery, Swartz said.

Swartz should know. He is listed as a director of Felstein's group.

Felstein is a family services counselor at Maryland's Garden of Remembrance Memorial Park, in Clarksburg. Tall and imposing with an iron handshake that belies his swept back, white hair and bushy, gray-white eyebrows, the 66-year-old Felstein is given to grandiose statements.

When it comes to bringing together Jews and Lithuanians, Felstein said, "I have done more in 18 months than Litvaks and whom ever else have done in 21 years in working with the Lithuanian people. The re-bridging has started, and it will continue."

Felstein said Swartz is no longer associated with his group.

Pavilionis, Lithuania's envoy in Washington D.C., said that since his appointment to D.C. two years ago, he has been trying to find people, like Felstein, to bring together Litvaks and Lithuanians. "We feel the Litvak community as part of our own heritage," Pavilionis told the Forward.

But in reaching out to Felstein, Pavilionis has only exacerbated already simmering tensions with Litvaks. Mistrustful of Felstein's expertise, they are particularly incensed at a couple of opinion pieces Felstein has published in the Times of Israel and The Jerusalem Post, calling on Jews to improve ties with Lithuania.

"Starting today, let's commend the American-Lithuanian-Israeli bond," Felstein wrote in the Jerusalem Post article, referring to a recent United Nations vote in which Lithuania opposed a Palestinian request to join UNESCO.

Grant Gochin, a Litvak in Los Angeles, said he found Felstein's opinion pieces in this vein highly skewed. He and other Litvaks pointed to recent controversies

and that Karimi is "going to have his funds next week."

When the Forward followed up with Karimi two weeks later, on July 13, Karimi said he never spoke to Felstein and that no payment had arrived.

Other businesses have sued Felstein for nonpayment of his debts.

Felstein was a defendant in three civil lawsuits in Maryland last year. Two of those suits related to the Jewish Cemetery Renewal Project of North America, a not-for-profit Felstein incorporated in 2011 with the aim of identifying "Jewish cemeteries which are abandoned or in distressed shape."

A consulting firm settled out of court in a suit over unpaid invoices totaling almost \$2,000. A computer consulting company won a \$5,000 lawsuit against Felstein for unpaid invoices.

Felstein lost a third lawsuit brought by a debt buyer, First Resolution Investment Corporation, related to more than \$6,000 he owed from the time he lived in Oregon, where he ran a company called Premier Israeli Products. Felstein filed for personal bankruptcy in U.S. Bankruptcy Court, District of Oregon, in 2008, the same year that he moved to Maryland.

Separately, the Lithuanian Jewish Heritage Project has come to the attention of Maryland charities officials.

Last September, Felstein organized a concert at Tifereth Israel Congregation, in Washington, where five cantors performed in front of an audience of about 175 people. Tickets cost between \$35 and \$75.

Michael Schlein, a charities investigator in the Office of the Maryland Secretary of State, said that because Felstein has not filed fundraising paperwork with the Maryland secretary of state he is not allowed to solicit contributions.

"It's illegal," Schlein said. "The Lithuanian Jewish Heritage Project and the Sunflower Project, if a part thereof, shouldn't be soliciting any money and should not be [part of] any charitable appeals."

Felstein said the event did not count as a fundraiser because it didn't make a profit. "That's not true," Schlein said. According

Embassy Series (501C3), securing your taxable write-off receipt."

However, an accompanying payment form says checks for advertising or sponsorship should be made payable to the Lithuanian Jewish Heritage Project. Only ticket purchases should be made payable to the Embassy Series, the letter instructs.

In a telephone interview, Felstein said this was an error and that all checks must be made payable to the Embassy Series.

Participants in an email list devoted to Lithuanian-Jewish issues have questioned the substance of Felstein's activities, particularly the extent of his cemetery restoration projects in Lithuania.

In mid-June, after weeks of email list participants demanding proof that he had carried out any work in Lithuania, Felstein said he had restored one Jewish cemetery in Skaudvilė, in the western part of the country.

As evidence, Felstein brought to the Forward offices photographs of a local pastor and a group of young people clearing long grass from around the burial ground. Felstein said he would send carbon paper to the local pastor so that the pastor could "rub" the inscriptions. He also promised to have metal signs produced that could be affixed on each headstone.

Felstein says he has years of experience restoring cemeteries in North America. In several interviews, he has taken credit for ensuring that the Community Association for Jewish At-Risk Cemeteries secured a \$140,000 grant several years ago to renovate Bayside cemetery, in New York.

Gary Katz, president of CAJAC's board, said: "That is completely inaccurate. The grant had already been awarded before I or anyone at CAJAC heard of Mr. Felstein."

Rather than helping secure the grant, Katz said, Felstein arranged for CAJAC to interview three contractors who gave quotes for cleaning up the cemetery, ranging from about \$750,000 to about \$1.5 million. "We wound up doing the entire cleanup for about \$180,000 using other contractors," Katz said. "He appeared to have no expe-

Grant Gochin, a Litvak in Los Angeles, said he found Felstein's opinion pieces in this vein highly skewed. He and other Litvaks pointed to recent controversies over the Lithuanian government's reckoning with its own history, such as its recent decision to reinter with full honors a Nazi puppet leader who died in the United States, Juozas Ambrazevičius.

"The information that he presents is one-sided," Gochin said.

The prominence that the ambassador's support has given Felstein in these circles also comes against a backdrop of suits filed against Felstein for nonpayment of debts.

One of several vendors who complained about being stiffed by Felstein was a Washington-area kosher caterer who has yet to receive payment for food his firm provided for a Felstein event last year.

"What bugs the heck out of you is he tells you: 'I'm coming right now to pay for it. I'll be here this afternoon,'" said Shaukat Karimi, of Signature Caterers, in Maryland. "And each time you talk, it's always the next time."

During his interview at the Forward, Felstein said he had spoken to Karimi that day

[part of] any charitable appeals."

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"That's not true," Schlein said. According to Maryland's Solicitations Act, a contribution is defined as the sale of a ticket with a charitable appeal. "Even if he didn't sell a ticket at all," Schlein added, "the fact he is trying to sell a ticket requires registration."

Schlein sent Felstein a notice in June asking him to register. "We'll be taking care of that," Felstein said in a follow-up interview.

Felstein submitted his application for tax-exempt status with the Internal Revenue Service this past May.

The Lithuanian Jewish Heritage Project has applied for, but has not yet obtained, recognition as a tax-deductible charity from the IRS. Meanwhile, with help from an already established tax-exempt charity, Felstein is advertising his series of fundraising concerts, under the title "Music of The Vilna Ghetto Experience." They will be performed at high-profile venues in September, including the National Museum of American Jewish History, in Philadelphia, and the Center for Jewish History, in New York.

The concerts will be performed by the Embassy Series, a not-for-profit musical group that plays at diplomatic events "to promote international cultural understanding through excellent musical performance in unique settings." The Washington-based group has its own tax-deductible status with the IRS.

In order to allow people to make tax-deductible contributions to the Sunflower Project, the Embassy Series has agreed to accept money for ticket sales and to pass profits on to Felstein.

The arrangement is "not completely unusual," said Ellen Aprill, a tax specialist at Loyola Law School. "While people are waiting for an exemption to come through they can ask other charities" to accept money on their behalf.

Felstein is selling advertising in concert programs for up to \$1,750 and concert sponsorship for up to \$5,000. His letter soliciting contributions for the concerts promises donors they can make payments "to The

about \$750,000 to about \$1.5 million. "We wound up doing the entire cleanup for about \$180,000 using other contractors," Katz said. "He appeared to have no experience [that would enable him] to actually clean up and restore a cemetery."

Felstein bristles at the insinuation.

"I have 45 years experience in the world of cemeteries," he said.

So which cemeteries has he restored?

"Well, we have one in Trenton [New Jersey] that we're working on right now."

Can Felstein name a project he has completed?

No.

The chorus of anti-Lithuanian critics can at times seem shrill. And not everyone is critical of Felstein's work.

Ruth Franklin, a co-chair of the board of governors of Jewish genealogy website JewishGen, said, "Harley seems to be being vilified for his attempts, and I'm not sure he's so mal-intentioned or scandalous."

Franklin spoke at an event in June co-sponsored by the Sunflower Project at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture, in Chicago. She said the event successfully brought together Lithuanians and Jews of Lithuanian heritage.

In his interview with the Forward, the more Felstein was questioned about what he's achieved, the angrier he became.

"I put in all the time, and I put this together. Me. Myself. My time. My effort. And all you can do is sit here and criticize," Felstein said.

He claimed to have made more progress "with the reconnection of the Jews and the Lithuanians" than his critics have made since Lithuania gained independence.

"I am an individual, I am a grassroots movement and I am making progress," Felstein said. "I speak on behalf of those who are buried in Lithuania, our forefathers, our history in Lithuania and not the current people who are running around, ranting and raving."

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