

Macedonian Jews Erect World-class Holocaust Museum

Written by Michael Berenbaum
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The country's tiny remaining Jewish community is building a \$23 million center.

Building a new Holocaust museum

John Dyer — Special to GlobalPost / May 30th, 2010

By John Dyer — Special to GlobalPost

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SKOPJE, Macedonia — The construction cranes, heavy machinery and plumes of dust in Skopje's city center herald the final chapter in one of the Balkans' saddest tales. After years of delays, Macedonia's Jews are building a world-class museum to remember their near-extinction in the Holocaust.

"The highest percentage of Jews destroyed anywhere in the world — including Poland — was in Macedonia," said Rahamin Mizrahi, vice president of the Jewish Community, a nonprofit overseeing the project. "It was 98 percent of the Jews. From our people, no one came back. At least with this museum they will have a grave, not ashes spread around the fields."

Boosters hope the center's mission will resonate throughout former Yugoslavia, where genocide was committed in the 1990s for the first time in Europe since World War II.

"Final solutions don't exist," said Mizrahi. "You remember the war in Bosnia. You've seen what happened in Kosovo. This museum will teach the next generation — not us, because we know — that there is no final solution."

The Holocaust Center also illustrates a recent trend in Macedonia to more strongly assert the country's identity as an independent nation. The project dovetails conveniently, for example, with Skopje 2014, the government's controversial, \$273 million plan to transform the city from a provincial seat into a full-fledged European capital.

The center and Skopje 2014 are technically unrelated. But if the center is completed next year, as expected, and Skopje 2014 remains on schedule, the new center will eventually stand in a radically redesigned downtown, near a new Macedonian history museum, new national theater, a massive triumphal arch and other proposed monuments.

Taxpayers are footing the bill for Skopje 2014, making it a subject for public debate. The center's costs, alternatively, are covered by a special fund created in 2000 from the assets of Macedonian Jewish families who perished in the Holocaust and left no heirs. But critics within the Jewish community nonetheless link the two, arguing the center's backers are overreaching in the same way the government is trying to do too much with Skopje 2014.

"It's become big, maybe too big," said Samuel Sadikario, a former president of the Holocaust Fund, a quasi-public organization that administers the center's budget. "Maybe such a project

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should be done in Poland.”

Located on a 30,000-square-foot parcel near the River Vardar, in Skopje’s former Jewish quarter, the Holocaust Memorial Center will commemorate the 7,200 souls sent to the Treblinka death camp in 1943, when Nazi-ally Bulgaria occupied Macedonia, then part of Yugoslavia. The \$23-million center is slated to contain a museum, arts center and hotel.

Michael Berenbaum is the conceptual developer of the Kleinman Family Holocaust Education Center.