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Belzec memorial dispute turns dirty

JOE BERKOFSKY
Jewish Telegraphic Agency

NEW YORK - A dispute over a Nazi death camp memorial pitting a New York activist rabbi against the American Jewish Committee and the Israeli and Polish governments is turning personal and, literally, dirty.

The rabbi, Avi Weiss, went to the Belzec death camp in Poland last week, spending the wee hours of the morning of July 30 blocking construction of the memorial in the camp.

After Weiss and a fellow rabbi delayed the digging into the camp's soil, Weiss went to the presidential palace in Warsaw to demand that the Polish government halt the project.

At issue is a below-ground walkway under construction at the site, which Weiss says disturbs the remains of the dead. The AJCommittee - the main backer of the project, along with the Polish government - denies that charge.

The AJCommittee contends that the memorial not only shores up a site that has fallen into disrepair but will protect Jewish remains by ensuring that pedestrians no longer walk freely around the area.

The group's executive director, David Harris, said the AJCommittee never would have supported the project had it not secured the approval of "the highest rabbinic authorities."

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Harris suggested that Weiss, president of Amcha-The Coalition for Jewish Concerns, might have ulterior motives for fighting the memorial.

He was alluding to the fact that Weiss is the brother-in-law of a former director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, Walter Reich.

Reich was supervised and later fired by the man, Miles Lerman, who is the Belzec project's chief backer.

Weiss, who has made headlines for crusading against other death-camp memorials and projects, such as a Catholic convent at Auschwitz, vehemently re-jected any notion that he has a hidden agenda.

"It has nothing to do with a vendetta at all," said Weiss, who lost seven relatives at Belzec.

Last week Amcha took its protest to a religious court, asking the Beit Din, or religious court, of the Or-thodox Rabbinical Council of America to mediate the dispute.

The Beit Din's director, Rabbi Yona Reiss, sent a letter to Harris saying it would be willing to mediate or arbitrate the conflict.

The AJCommittee has yet to respond to the Beit Din.

The new conflict-of-interest charges center around a 1998 controversy at the museum involving Palestinian Auth-ority President Yasser Arafat.

Lerman forced Reich to resign as museum director for opposing a State Department request that the museum host Arafat.

It was Lerman who first proposed the Belzec memorial, which the museum took on in 1995 under Reich's leadership. Lerman also has led fund-raising efforts that have netted nearly \$4.5 million for the project.

Lerman refused to comment on any alleged tie between the Arafat matter and the Belzec protest.

Reich, now a professor at George Washington University, said the attempt to link the Arafat snafu to Weiss' Belzec protest was "pitiful."

"It's as if those who make that misattribution can't understand the idea that some people are actually motivated by genuine matters of principle," Reich said.

The Belzec conflict took a dirty twist - literally - on July 30 when Weiss visited Belzec along with Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld, who is one of Amcha's national vice presidents and an associate rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, Weiss' New York pulpit.

The two showed up at 5:30 a.m. to try to block construction of the 600-foot, 30-foot-deep below-ground ramp through the death camp, where an estimated 600,000 Jews were killed between 1942 and 1943.

Construction for the ramp, which Weiss calls a "trench," is unearthing the remains of Jews whom the Nazis buried at the site to hide their murders, Weiss contends. The AJCommittee denies the charge.

The Nazis ground up and burned corpses and buried the remains at the camp. Test drills the museum conducted at the site in 1997 pinpointed 33 mass graves.

Weiss and his supporters say there are human remains blanketing Belzec, which the AJCommittee denies.

"You can see small fragments" around the camp grounds "that you could mistake for stones," Weiss said, "but it's bone."

He and Herzfeld managed to delay construction at the site for nearly five hours, Weiss said.

AJCommittee officials said the memorial is due to be finished later this year.

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