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Free At Last

IOSIF MENDELEVICH RELEASED FROM THE SOVIET UNION AND IS ON HIS WAY TO ISRAEL; ROLE OF WJC CONGRESS IN OBTAINING HIS RELEASE REVEALED

VIENNA, Feb. 18 (JTA) -- Iosif Mendelevich, the last Jewish imprisoned 1970 Leningrad hijack trial defendant, arrived here today after his unexpected release from a prison camp in the Soviet Union and departed shortly afterwards for Israel on an El Al flight due at Ben Gurion Airport this evening.

The 33-year-old Orthodox Jew, soon to be reunited with his mother and sister who live in Israel, looked haggard from the effects of his prolonged detention and a hunger strike he began late last October.

He said on his arrival at Vienna airport, "I thank the Almighty for having secured my release." He was in tears when he was presented with a prayer book and tefilin (phylacteries) by Israel Singer, director of the North American branch of the World Jewish Congress, who met him at the airport along with Dr. Gerhart Riegner, Secretary General of the WJC, and Israel's Ambassador to Austria, Elissar Ben Yaakov.

The surprise release of Mendelevich, who served nearly 11 years of a 12-year sentence in prisons and forced labor camps, was arranged privately by the World Jewish Congress, specifically its president Edgar Bronfman through his personal relationship with Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet Ambassador in Washington.

WJC sources said the major factor in the unprecedented negotiations between a private organization and the Soviet government was Bronfman's relationship with the Russian envoy. According to the WJC's Geneva office, when Mendelevich left the USSR he was directed to ask for a Mr. Singer, the WJC official, and identify himself to him when he reached Vienna. Singer was apparently involved by Bronfman in the negotiations for Mendelevich's release.

Fearful Mendelevich Was Seriously Ill Or Dead

Mendelevich's family in Israel had not had direct contact with him for several years. Because of his hunger strike to protest the denial of religious artifacts and other maltreatment, they were particularly concerned for his health. Recently, his sister, Rivka Dori, a resident of Gush Etzion, received a disturbing message from friends in Moscow who said that their inquiries into the condition of Mendelevich, who was transferred to the Perm 36 prison labor camp in the Urals a year ago, had elicited a reply from the camp commandant that the prisoner was no longer there.

His apparent disappearance gave rise to fear that he was seriously ill and transferred to a hospital or that he may have died. Premier Menachem Begin who met with Dori in Jerusalem Monday, told her that Ambassador Dobrynin had promised over the weekend that he would make inquiries as to Mendelevich's whereabouts. Begin did not elaborate.

On Sunday, after he raised the question of Mendelevich's disappearance at the weekly Cabinet meeting, the Cabinet decided that Israel would mount a world-wide public opinion campaign to ascertain his whereabouts and obtain his release. It is not known whether Begin or his government were aware of Bronfman's negotiations with Dobrynin.

Mendelevich was one of 12 persons charged at the Leningrad trial with being the ringleaders of a plot to seize a Soviet aircraft, fly it to a neutral country and make their way to Israel. Two others, Eduard Kuznetsov and Mark Dymshits were sentenced to death, later commuted to 15 years imprisonment. They were released in 1979 in a prisoner exchange that also included imprisoned Soviet Jewish dissident Aleksander Ginsburg. Their release was reportedly in exchange for two Soviet spies serving 50 year sentences in the U.S. Two remaining defendants of the Leningrad trial, Ukrainians Yuri Federov and Aleksei Murzhenko, are still imprisoned.

Release Seen As Good-Will Gesture

Mendelevich had been sentenced to 15 years, later reduced on appeal to 12. Singer told reporters here today that he considered the release as a sign that the Soviets want to improve relations with the United States, especially since it was a unilateral gesture and no prisoner exchange was involved. Other Jewish sources indicated that Mendelevich's release was "not an isolated case" and that the release of other Soviet dissidents had been discussed.

During his imprisonment, Mendelevich became known as "the rabbi of the labor camps" because of his strict adherence to Orthodox religious practices, including observance of the Sabbath and dietary laws. For that reason and because he gave Hebrew lessons to other Jewish inmates, he was allegedly singled out for especially harsh treatment by the camp authorities.

Mendelevich declined to speak to reporters here today, saying he was "worn out" from his ordeal. Jewish sources told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that he was brought to Moscow from the prison camp only yesterday without being told that he was about to be released.

JEWISH GROUPS ELATED OVER THE RELEASE OF MENDELEVICH

NEW YORK, Feb. 18 (JTA) -- Jewish groups here expressed joy and gratitude at the release of Iosif Mendelevich. Commenting on his release, Burton Levinson, chairman of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, said:

"We have long held that the confinement of Mendelevich, and that of other young Jews and two non-Jews sentenced in the so-called Leningrad trials was unjust. Since then Iosif was repeatedly and continuously subjected to punishment for his attempts to observe the practices of the Jewish religion. While tried under Soviet law, in my view Mendelevich's real crime was his stubborn desire to go to Israel at a time when it was virtually impossible to do so, and for his desperate efforts to flee the country with friends and colleagues."

Levinson suggested that "this new move might be a traditional act of amnesty -- one which is most welcome -- in view of the forthcoming 26th Communist Party Congress." He noted that Soviet authorities have on such occasions granted amnesty to or pardoned prisoners, either political or criminal.

In a message to the General Secretary of the Communist Party, Leonid Brezhnev, in his capacity as Soviet President, Levinson stated: "We are pleased to learn that your government has granted an early release from labor camp to Iosif Mendelevich. The young man is now on his way to Israel to join his mother and sisters. This was an action worthy of praise. We hope, Mr. President, that two men still remaining from the same trial, Aleksei Murzhenko and Yuri Federov, will be released to join their families and friends."

A Symbol of Jewish Determination

Rabbi Moshe Sherer, president of Agudath Israel of America and chairman of the Agudas Israel World Organization, said Mendelevich's "coming into the free world gladdens the hearts of all Jews throughout the world who prayed and worked for his release. Mendelevich is a living 'kiddush hashem' (sanctification of God's name) because, by continuing to observe the Jewish religious faith under harsh prison conditions, he is the symbol of the eternal Jewish determination to keep the fires of Torah alive."

The Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, which had mobilized numerous actions on behalf of Mendelevich and had staged a rally together with the Jewish Identity Center 10 days ago opposite the United Nations, said "We are exhilarated at Mendelevich's release. A decade of persistent pressure and protest by thousands of Jews and non-Jews around the world has paid off." The SSSJ added that if Mendelevich "can be sprung from hell, so can the rest" of Soviet Jewish and non-Jewish dissidents.

The Jewish Identity Center expressed its "gratitude to God for his (Mendelevich) release from a labor camp where under inhuman conditions, like his Biblical namesake, Joseph in Egypt, he clung to the faith of our age-old religious heritage. Despite those who say that God does not hear the prayers of a Jew, Mendelevich's release proves otherwise."

Rabbi Meir Kahane, founder of the Jewish Defense League, credited the JDL with Mendelevich's release. At a press conference here he said the JDL viewed the release as a result of pressure it has been bringing to bear on Soviet diplomats in New York. He said that if the Soviets continued to hold other Jewish dissidents, such as Ida Nudel and Anatoly Shcharansky, the harassment of Soviet officials by the JDL "will intensify, escalate and reach new, serious levels."

Zeesy Schnur, executive director of the Greater New York Conference on Soviet Jewry, stated that the release of Mendelevich "comes as welcome news to freedom loving people everywhere. We interpret his release as a positive signal to the Reagan Administration, the Madrid conference participants reviewing the Helsinki accords and the representatives who will be attending the 26th Congress of the Communist Party in Moscow next week." She added: "The last two Leningrad defendants Yuri Federov and Aleksei Murzhenko continue to be held in prison camps in the Soviet Union and we will continue to work for their freedom. The joy of Mendelevich's release must be tempered by concern for them and for all other Soviet Jewish Prisoners of Conscience."

Emigration For First Half of February

Meanwhile, the number of Jews who left the Soviet Union during the first 15 days of February was 562, according to Charlotte Jacobson, chairman of the Soviet Jewry Research Bureau of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry. Though this figure reflects an increase over recent half-monthly figures, it seems unlikely that this February's total will reach last year's February figure of 3,023, she said.

Recent reports of a more lenient Soviet emigration policy and unofficial estimates of the issuance of exit visas of 1,500 to 2,000 per month in Moscow alone, have not yet been confirmed by the actual arrivals of Jews in Vienna, Mrs. Jacobson said.

HEAD OF SOLDIERS WELFARE GROUP IN ISRAEL HOPING TO RAISE FUNDS IN THE U.S. TO HELP MEET BUDGET

By Yitzhak Rabi

NEW YORK, Feb. 18 (JTA) -- Brig. Gen. Nathan Nir, chairman of the Association for the Welfare of Soldiers in Israel said that his organization hopes to raise some \$3.5 million in the United States to meet its 1981-82 budget of \$18 million.

Speaking at a press conference at the Israeli Consulate here yesterday, Nir said that special fund-raising dinners are scheduled to be held in the next few weeks in New York, Los Angeles and Miami to raise that sum. He said that the Soldiers Association obtains 60 percent of its budget from contributions outside of Israel.

"As a result of inflation in Israel we have to increase our fund-raising efforts here and elsewhere," Nir said, noting that the Soldiers Association is providing housing, cultural centers, education and other services to soldiers in Israel. He said that a major challenge for his organization is to provide basic education to some 14,000 illiterate Israeli soldiers.

On Israel's Independence Day this year, May 7, the Soldiers Association will have a special "Song and Donate" program on a local radio station here, Nir said. The program will enable the listening audience to call in their requests for Hebrew songs accompanied with regards to their relatives in Israel, and to pledge what he termed modest donations. The requested songs and the messages will later be broadcast by Israel's army radio station.

According to Nir, the Soldiers Association is also undertaking an estimated \$45 million project for the establishment in Galilee of an education center for soldiers. The project is to be completed in 1986-87, Nir said.

U.S. MUM ON MIDEAST AUTONOMY TALKS, SADAT'S PROPOSAL FOR A PALESTINIAN GOVERNMENT-IN-EXILE

By Joseph Palakoff

WASHINGTON, Feb. 18 (JTA) -- With the U.S. and Israel holding high level talks here later this week, the Reagan Administration continues to maintain discreet silence on Egyptian-Israeli autonomy negotiations and on Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's proposal to the Palestinians that they organize a government-in-exile including the Palestine Liberation Organization.

State Department spokesman William Dyess evaded discussion yesterday of Sadat's suggestion that the Camp David agreements need broadening to include a European initiative to solve the West Bank-Gaza District autonomy issue nor did he discuss U.S. views on the resumption of the stalemated autonomy talks between Israel and Egypt. Israel has been pressing for their early resumption but Sadat, so far, has shown no inclination to reopen them.

Dyess said Israel-American relations and Arab-Israeli negotiations will be taken up when Israel's Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir meets with Secretary of State Alexander Haig at the State Department Friday.

Immediately after those talks, Shamir will go to the Pentagon for discussions with Defense Secretary Casper Weinberger. Shortly after his arrival in Washington Thursday, the Israeli Foreign Minister will meet with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee in separate sessions at the Capitol. These meetings will be the first major contact of the Israeli government with the Reagan Administration and the new Congress.

Sadat's Press Conference

Meanwhile, the English transcript of a live Cairo radio broadcast yesterday of the press conference held there by Sadat and visiting Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky, was made available to the news media here. Sadat recalled that in 1973 he had proposed to the Palestinian Council, when it was attending the Arab League meeting in Cairo with "all the PLO members" present, that the Palestinians set up a government in exile on order to "be rid of the pressures of Syria and the Soviet Union."

He renewed that proposal at his press conference with Kreisky in the course of which he was sharply critical of PLO chief Yasir Arafat for indecisiveness but insisted at the same time that he was not suggesting that Arafat be replaced. He noted that Arafat is the leader of El Fatah which "consists of 80 percent of the PLO" and he was not suggesting anyone else as a substitute. But the leader should be one "who will not be hesitant or one who agrees today and disagrees tomorrow," Sadat said.

When Kreisky observed that "any representation" of the Palestinian people "can be achieved through a compromise solution among the various parties concerned living under different conditions" and that "Arafat can be part of this compromise," Sadat said he agreed. "The decision on this matter should come from the Palestinians themselves" he said.

Disagrees With Israel's View

Sadat said "I do not agree at all" with the Israeli view that his proposed Palestinian government-in-exile is out of line with the letter and spirit of Camp David which, he said, "forms the cornerstone of peace in the area."

Replying to a question, Sadat said he has not basically decided not to continue the autonomy negotiations with the Israeli government until after Israel's elections on June 30. However, he added, the Israeli government is preparing for the elections and will not be ready for negotiations. He compared this with the "situation we faced before the U.S. elections" last November. "Let us wait until after the Israeli elections and the Israel government will play its role," he said.

Observers here were divided on the meaning and intent of Sadat's proposal. Some indicated he was seeking to send a signal to the Reagan Administration to take a milder approach to the PLO and to indicate to the Europeans who are looking for PLO "association" with the peace talks that he agrees with them. Sadat was also seen as trying to improve his position with a strong pro-Palestinian expression since they have ostracized him for making peace with Israel.

Rather than overturning Camp David, which would be an impossibility with Washington, Sadat is seen as breaking it down by weakening major provisions, including the meaning of United Nations Security Council Resolution 242. He is also seen as seeking not to offend the Reagan Administration because he is dependent upon it for military, economic and diplomatic support. But he is also opposed to the Reagan view that Jordan should be brought back into the peace process at this time.

TEACHERS STAGE ONE-DAY STRIKE

By David Landau

JERUSALEM, Feb. 18 (JTA) -- Schools throughout Israel shut down today as the teachers unions called a one-day strike to back their pay demands. The teachers are due to return to their classrooms tomorrow while their union representatives continue negotiations with government officials over the Etzioni Commission report on teachers pay and conditions.

The negotiations broke down only three days after they began. The government had committed itself to implement the Etzioni recommendations, but gradually. For the present, the government is offering the teachers pay rises that would cover the "erosion" that has affected their salaries in recent years. The teachers, for their part, demand a much fuller implementation of the Etzioni pay recommendations. The government countered that fuller implementation would trigger a wave of pay demands and industrial unrest throughout the economy.

The teachers pay issue in effect led to the call by Premier Menachem Begin's government for early elections. When former Finance Minister Yigal Hurwitz resigned rather than support the government's commitment-in-principle to implement the Etzioni recommendations, Begin lost his Knesset majority. A teachers' strike was averted at the time by Education Minister Zevulun Hammer's undertaking that talks would be held with the teachers on the implementation pledge.

The teachers' leaders warned today that the one-day strike would be followed by longer walk-outs if the government did not come up with more generous terms.

STUDENTS FROM VATICAN FINISH SPECIAL COURSE AT HEBREW U.

JERUSALEM, Feb. 18 (JTA) -- A total of 16 students from the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome recently received their certificates -- in Latin and Hebrew -- from the Hebrew University at the completion of a special seven-month study program at the University's School for Overseas Students.

They are all ordained priests and come from Canada, Haiti, India, Italy, Yugoslavia, Mexico, Nigeria, Philippines, Portugal, Sri Lanka, Uganda and the United States. Dr. Zev Klein, Provost of the School for Overseas Students, presented the students with their certificates, and the valedictorian, Gianantonio Borgonovo of Italy, who spoke in Hebrew, said that he and his fellow students had learned much about Jewish customs during their half year in Jerusalem.

Over the past six years 120 Vatican Institute students from 33 countries have taken the course at the Hebrew University, studying modern and Biblical Hebrew, archaeology, historical geography, readings in Bible, Jewish sects and ideologies in the inter-testamental period. The Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome prepares priests from all over the world to teach the Scripture at colleges, seminaries and universities and for other scholarly pursuits.

CANADIAN PARLIAMENT ACTING TO FACILITATE THE PROSECUTION OF WAR CRIMINALS LIVING IN CANADA

By Ben Kayfetz

TORONTO, Feb. 18 (JTA) -- A special joint committee of both houses of the Canadian Parliament drafting a national constitution has accepted a recommendation by the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) that would facilitate the prosecution of Nazi war criminals living in Canada. The CJC also had input on other matters covered in the constitution which is to be presented to the full Parliament for ratification, although not all of its recommendations were adopted.

The war crimes clause would prevent a war criminal from claiming immunity if the acts charged were not crimes at the time and place where they were committed. The CJC recommendation, invoking the United Nations International Covenant, permits prosecution of a war criminal by stating that "any person charged with an offense has the right not to be found guilty on account of any act or omission unless at the time of the act or omission it constituted an offense under Canadian or international law or was criminal according to general principles of law recognized by the community of nations."

The joint committee rejected a CJC proposal that reflected fear that total freedom of speech might countenance hate propaganda. It accepted a suggestion by the CJC and many other groups guaranteeing rights and freedoms subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.

The drafters basically followed the legal rights clause recommended by Profs. Maxwell Cohen and Irwin Cotler, representing the CJC, which secured every person's right against "unreasonable search and seizure" and arbitrary detention or imprisonment. A suggestion by the CJC and others, that the choice of language schooling as between French and English for children be extended to non-citizens as well as citizens, was rejected.

CJF SAYS \$1 MILLION CONTRACT WITH THE D.O.E. REMAINS VALID

By Ben Gallo

NEW YORK, Feb. 18 (JTA) -- The director of the Washington office of the Council of Jewish Federations stressed today that the CJF, one of four national organizations which each received \$1 million from the outgoing Department of Energy (DOE) special counsel, did not seek out the money.

Mark Talisman, the director, also told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency in a telephone interview, that the \$1 million was made available to the CJF on a contractual basis. He said the contractual agreement provided that the funds, slated to help needy families to cope with severe weather conditions, were to be distributed on a non-sectarian basis.

Other contractual terms were that the funds would go directly to the most needy households and that the entire \$1 million would reach needy beneficiaries, with no deductions for administrative expenses.

Talisman said that when the allocation of the money by Paul Bloom, the outgoing DOE special counsel, became public last week, leading to reports that the new Energy Secretary James

Edwards wanted the \$4 million returned to the federal government, he met with Eric Fygi, the acting DOE general counsel, "to ascertain the facts."

CJF Arranges For A Study

Talisman said that, on the assumption that the \$1 million grant to the CJF was valid, he had arranged for a study of areas of below-average temperatures. Talisman said his office took the position that the change in federal administrations did not affect the contract signed by the CJF for distribution of the funds.

Bloom said, when the \$4 million distribution became known, that he had done nothing wrong in sending the money to the Salvation army, the National Council of Churches, the National Conference of Catholic Charities, and the CJF.

Talisman added that he had made a survey of all CJF-affiliated Federations with the goal of setting up a system for prompt distribution of the federal funds to the most needy families.

Checks Waiting To Be Mailed

The CJF official said that during his meeting with Fygi, the CJF had asked for a written statement on the situation. He said that checks had been prepared, to have been mailed to needy families yesterday, covering about \$750,000 of the DOE grant, but that the checks had not been mailed, pending the requested statement from Fygi.

Talisman said he assumed that the CJF was one of the four beneficiaries of the federal funds because it was known that "we have an effective delivery system, without red tape and without bureaucracy." He said he had not dealt with Bloom but with the DOE's Department of Compliance.

ARKIA MAY BE ALLOWED TO OPERATE CHARTER FLIGHTS TO EUROPE

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, Feb. 18 (JTA) -- Arkia, Israel's internal airline which mainly serves Eilat from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, may be allowed to operate charter flights between Eilat and Europe, as a way of getting around the airline's demand for higher fares on its local flights.

Finance Minister Yoram Aridor and Industry, Commerce and Tourism Minister Gideon Patt yesterday instructed the Transport Ministry's Director General, Arye Grossbard, to investigate the charter flight issue. Arkia spokesmen said that if they are allowed to operate charter flights to Europe, they would choose routes which do not compete with the regular or charter flights run by El Al but would instead compete with foreign charter companies flying to Israel.

Arkia plans to operate new Boeing 737 jets on its new routes if permission is granted.

TEL AVIV (JTA) -- A chair in journalism named in memory of the late Dr. Azriel Carlebach, founder and first editor of Maariv, was dedicated at Tel Aviv University last Sunday, the 25th anniversary of his death. The chair, whose first incumbent is yet to be named, will deal with research into the press and its role in society.

TEL AVIV (JTA) -- Israel's exports of potash rose by 50 percent in value last year, from \$83 million in 1979 to \$124 million in 1980, but by only 11 percent in tonnage, to 1.3 million tons. The larger financial increase was due to higher prices on the world markets. The government-owned potash works at Sodom on the Dead Sea are completing plans to hike production by another 450,000 tons a year.