



3 LEBANESE JEWS REPORTED EXECUTED

By Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, Jan. 1 (JTA) -- Israeli officials expressed outrage Wednesday over the reported "execution" of three Lebanese Jews held hostage by an extremist Shiite group.

The hostages were identified as Yehuda Youssef Benesti, 33, Henri Menn, and Elie Srour, 68. Benesti, kidnapped from his home on May 11, 1985, was the brother of Ibrahim Benesti, kidnapped the same month, who was found shot to death last February 15.

Srour, an electrical engineer, was kidnapped on March 28, 1985. There was no information available on Menn whose name is not on the list of nine Jews kidnapped in Beirut in 1985-86, four of whom, including Benesti's brother, were killed a year or more ago.

The Shiite group which claimed responsibility for the latest hostage murders identified itself as "The Organization of the Oppressed on Earth."

It is believed to be linked to Hezbollah (Army of God), a pro-Iranian Shiite terrorist gang.

It announced the killings in a note delivered to the Beirut newspaper An Nahar early Wednesday and said they were in retaliation for an Israeli shelling of a Shiite village in south Lebanon.

No bodies have been found by Beirut police. The gang set conditions for return of the bodies which include "release of all strugglers in Zionist prisons" and "complete withdrawal" by Israel from the border enclave in southern Lebanon.

Israeli officials have refused to respond. The earlier known Jewish victims of Shiite kidnappers are Ibrahim Benesti, Haim Cohen, killed December 25, 1985, Isaac Tarab, killed January 1, 1986 and Dr. Elie Hallak, killed on February 1, 1986.

Clash Over A Reform Conversion:

INTERIOR MINISTER PERETZ RESIGNS

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, Jan. 1 (JTA) -- Interior Minister Yitzhak Peretz resigned Wednesday rather than confirm the Jewish identity of a person converted by a Reform rabbi.

In his letter of resignation to Premier Yitzhak Shamir, which he read to the media before reading it to the Knesset, Peretz, who heads the Orthodox Shas Party, denounced Reform conversions as a "travesty" that threatened "the survival of the Jewish people."

According to the law, a Minister's resignation takes effect 48 hour after it is submitted. Some coalition members, mainly Likud MKs, tried to persuade Peretz to withdraw his resignation, but he insisted his decision was final.

Nevertheless, Shas, with a four-man Knesset faction, is expected to remain in the unity coalition government, though without Cabinet representation.

Peretz resigned to avoid having to comply with a Supreme Court order to issue a Jewish identity card to Shoshana Miller, a recent immigrant from the U.S. who was converted to Judaism by an American Reform rabbi three years before she came to Israel.

When, on arrival here, she was denied the automatic citizenship to which every Jew is entitled, she took her case to the high court. Peretz, trying to avoid a hearing, agreed to register her as a Jew with the word "converted" stamped on her card. But the court rejected that subterfuge and it was criticized by many Orthodox rabbis on grounds that Jewish law forbids stigmatizing converts.

Peretz proposed other variations, including a law that would make it mandatory to include the "previous status" of the holder on identity cards. That too was rejected.

Letter Of Resignation

Peretz, an Orthodox rabbi, decided to resign apparently after consultation with the Torah shas of his party. Shas is regarded as the Sephardic equivalent of the Ashkenazic Agudat Israel party which is also governed by a council of sages.

His letter of resignation, to be formally presented probably at Sunday's Cabinet meeting, was widely broadcast by the time it was read to the Knesset. Peretz read it in reply to Shulamit Aloni of the Citizens Rights Movement (CRM) who asked him when he would abide by the Supreme Court ruling to register Miller as a Jew.

In the letter he refused to refer to the complainant by her Hebrew name, Shoshana, only as Susan. He said his conscience did not allow him to register her as a Jew, as ordered by the Supreme Court, because "Reform conversions are a travesty of Jewish law. They can only lead to intermarriage." He made it clear he was referring to intermarriage between Jews converted by Reform or Conservative rabbis and those converted by Orthodox rabbis.

"In my entire period as Minister of the Interior, I never once registered a Reform convert as a Jew. Reform conversion is false. It is not conversion at all and it poses a threat to the survival of the Jewish people, a threat of intermarriage and assimilation," Peretz's letter said.

He expressed regret that the high court, in its ruling, was not aware of that danger. He also regretted that Likud had failed to live up to its promises on this issue, an apparent reference to the consistent failure of the religious parties to push through the Knesset the controversial "Who is a Jew" amendment to the Law of Return. The amendment would recognize as Jews only those converts converted by Orthodox rabbis.

New York Prelate Apologizes:

O'CONNOR DENIES ILL WILL TOWARD ISRAEL

By Gil Sedan and Hugh Orgel

JERUSALEM, Jan. 1 (JTA) -- John Cardinal O'Connor, the Archbishop of New York, began his four-day visit to Israel Thursday morning with profuse apologies for any offense he might have given by his refusal to meet with Israeli leaders in an official capacity in Jerusalem.

The prelate expressed his contrition from the pulpit of Saint Savior Convent Church in the Old City where he held Mass only hours after he crossed into Israel from Jordan over the Allenby Bridge. Speaking extemporaneously to the congregants, mainly Palestinian Christians, his words

were clearly aimed at the scores of reporters packed into the rear of the church.

"I deeply regret and apologize for any offenses that might be perceived by the people of Israel and those who govern Israel," O'Connor said. "My very presence and remarks I will make will clearly indicate to our friends here in Israel that far from bearing any ill will, I bear them nothing but love and wish them nothing but peace." He added that he was certain the Vatican shared his feelings.

To the apparent discomfort of many of the congregants, the Cardinal read a long passage from a book by Nobel Peace Laureate Elie Wiesel about the Holocaust. He also quoted from the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, and scriptural passages from King David.

O'Connor conveyed the annual peace message of Pope John Paul II in which he appealed to terrorists to abandon their methods.

A Trip Fraught With Controversy

The Cardinal's trip to Israel was fraught with controversy before he left New York. O'Connor, who said he had scheduled meetings with President Chaim Herzog, Premier Yitzhak Shamir, Vice Premier and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Mayor Teddy Kollek of Jerusalem, asked that they meet him outside their offices to avoid any semblance of official contacts.

He also declined, in advance, a tour of Christian holy places with Kollek as his escort to point out how the Israeli government protects and cares for them.

The Cardinal acknowledged that his predicament arose from instructions from the Vatican which has never formally recognized Israel or the status of Jerusalem as its capital. He said he had made a mistake in originally scheduling meetings without Vatican approval.

The Vatican was accused of a "double standard" by American Jewish leaders and many Israelis. It does not maintain diplomatic relations with Jordan but raised no objections to O'Connor's meeting with King Hussein at the royal palace in Amman.

Avoids Making Anti-Israel Statement

If his Israeli hosts were nonplussed, the Cardinal was clearly embarrassed and sought to make amends before he reached Israel. He used a Jordanian television interview from Amman Tuesday night to extend his "apologies and regrets" that he had to abide by "certain restrictions" because of "the unsettled status of Jerusalem." He avoided an attempt by the interviewer to elicit an anti-Israel statement from him.

When pressed to agree with her statement about Israeli injustice and the justice of the Arab and Palestinian cause, O'Connor said he would not be drawn into those matters. He was a friend of both Arabs and Jews, he declared.

"I am in no way politicizing this trip," he said. "As I was getting ready to leave I came to realize what I should have recognized before but simply didn't, that there are certain restrictions, for me because of the unsettled status of Jerusalem...It has nothing to do with Israel as such--there is no question about the reality of Israel..."

Herzog Delivers Sharp Criticism

Apologies and explanations notwithstanding, O'Connor was excoriated by President Herzog Tuesday night, though not directly or by name.

"Those who would be messengers of peace" should know that "peace is not a subject for lip-service. It is a subject for encounter, for dialogue, for understanding all points of view," Herzog said in an address to church leaders at the President's annual Christmas-New Year reception for the heads of the Christian communities in Israel.

He added, "Men of good will and those would-be messengers of peace must face (realities) by not allowing themselves to become engaged in unproductive political gestures based on age-old prejudice which apparently, despite protestation to the contrary, die hard."

Peres Suggests A 'Private Pilgrimage'

Peres, who extended the invitation to O'Connor when they met in New York last October, suggested Tuesday that the Cardinal designate his visit to Israel a "private pilgrimage."

"Cardinal O'Connor must decide himself on the nature of his visit. He can come as a pilgrim or give the visit an official formal tone," Peres said. "If he decides it's only a pilgrimage... We would respect his decision and there would be no official meetings."

When O'Connor crossed the Allenby Bridge Thursday morning he was greeted by a low-level government official, Daniel Rossing, who heads the Christian Communities Department at the Religious Affairs Ministry.

During his stay in Israel, which will end Sunday, O'Connor will visit the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial. He will also meet with Mayor Kollek and Religious Affairs Minister Ze'evulun Hammer at their offices. The Vatican placed no ban on meetings with Israeli officials necessary in the daily conduct of church affairs.

COURT REJECTS PREVIOUS INCARNATION AS EXCUSE FOR PRESENT AWOL FROM IDF By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, Jan. 1 (JTA) -- A Druze soldier, Mohammed Zayed Salem, was sentenced to three years' imprisonment for desertion Thursday by a military court which refused to accept reincarnation as an explanation for his eight years' absence from the Israel Defense Force.

Salem, who lives in Shafr-Am village in Galilee, is a believer in the transmigration of souls, a tenet of the Druze religion. He told the court that he had been a Syrian soldier in a previous incarnation and was crushed by an Israeli tank. In his present existence he has a deadly fear of tanks and skipped from the IDF for that reason.

The Druze are the only minority in Israel allowed to serve in the IDF. They are considered brave fighters, partly because their faith teaches that upon death, the soul takes residence in the body of a new-born infant. Even though death is a family tragedy, it is considered only a way station in a series of existences.

UNDOF TROOPS EQUIPPED WITH ANTI-CHEMICAL WARFARE GEAR

TEL AVIV, Jan. 1 (JTA) -- The 1,400 troops of the United Nations Disengagement Observers Force (UNDOF) on the Golan Heights have been equipped with gas masks and other anti-chemical warfare gear and are being trained in their use, UNDOF commander Maj. Gen. Gustav Welin disclosed Tuesday.

Welin, who is Swedish, insisted however that the precaution does not mean that UNDOF anticipates the use of chemical weapons in a future conflict between Israel and Syria on the Heights.

He made his remarks during a Chanukah-New Year reception given by the Israel Defense Force liaison unit with UNDOF at the Ganei Hamat Hotel in Tiberias.

Welin and his deputy, Brig. Gen. Douglas Joel, said there were no signs of suspicious activity or massing or redeployment of troops by either side on the Golan Heights. In fact, the level of forces at the moment is below the strength permitted by the 1974 disengagement agreement signed by Israel and Syria in Geneva after the Yom Kippur War, Joel said.

LAVI PASSES MUSTER

JERUSALEM, Jan. 1 (JTA) -- A prototype of the Lavi, Israel's second generation jet fighter plane, completed its first test flight Wednesday with flying colors.

According to test pilot Menahem Shmuel, the supersonic aircraft handled better than any he has ever flown. He said it was too early to tell whether the Lavi has a technological advantage over other fighter planes.

The initial test flight was limited to 30 minutes and an altitude of 12,000 feet because of weather conditions. Shmuel said it was airborne more quickly than expected and its response to controls was "very crisp and smooth."

The landing was also precise and the performance of the aerodynamic brakes was "excellent." The plane stopped a good 300 feet from the end of the runway, the test pilot said.

EX-NAZI STRIPPED OF U.S. CITIZENSHIP

NEW YORK, Jan. 1 (JTA) -- A former Waffen SS concentration camp guard who fled to West Germany last August after admitting to the Justice Department that he had killed a Jewish inmate in cold blood, was stripped of his U.S. citizenship by a Federal District Court Judge in Newark, N.J., Monday.

Stefan Leili, 77, a resident of Clifton, N.J., was denaturalized on the orders of Federal Judge Harold Ackerman when he failed to appear in court for a hearing on his case. Ackerman also instructed the Justice Department to advise West German authorities that Leili is no longer a U.S. citizen.

The Justice Department obtained a sworn deposition from Leili last August in which he confessed that he shot and killed a 17-year-old Jewish inmate at the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. The youth, identified as Leon Axelroud, was running away from two other SS guards when Leili shot him in the back, even though he knew there was no way for the inmate to escape from the camp.

He also admitted punitive acts against Jews and slave laborers at the Styr concentration camp in Austria to which he was transferred from Mauthausen.

Leili was captured by Allied Forces in March, 1945. He concealed the fact that he had joined the notorious Waffen SS "Death Head" Division in July 1943, claiming he was a private in an infantry division and later a prisoner of war. On the basis of his sworn affidavits he was issued a U.S. visa and entered the country on February 14,

1956. He was granted U.S. citizenship on November 15, 1962.

CATHOLIC BISHOP, JEWISH LEADER AGREE ON SUCCESS OF ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

CHARLESTON, S.C., Jan. 1 (JTA) -- "Harmony among Catholics and Jews is the really great project and theme of the 21st century," a prominent Catholic bishop and a Jewish leader agreed here.

Participating in a discussion of Jewish-Catholic relations at an ecumenical symposium held at Synagogue Emanu-El last month, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, American Jewish Committee's director of international relations, joined Bishop Ernst Unterkoefler, head of Charleston's Diocese, in a review of fundamental theological differences as well as central similarities between their two faiths.

The two religious leaders voiced confidence that Jews and Catholics could present a common front against racism, persecution, and social injustice. They also advocated that Catholics and Jews study each others' beliefs and get to know each other socially to a much greater degree.

In a warm approach to the Jews in the audience, Unterkoefler said: "Catholics are spiritually Semites. We really should say we are Jews or Hebrews." Stating that Catholics draw some of their theology from the Old Testament, he added, "I feel the rhythm of Jewish-Catholic relations being renewed in your hearts."

Unterkoefler, who has been prominent in ecumenical relations during the past two decades, said that "one of the Vatican Council's great accomplishments was that while it was once common for Catholics to consider the Jewish people responsible for Jesus' death, it is sinful to teach that today."

'A Revolution In Mutual Esteem'

Tanenbaum noted: "We have reached a moment today when not a single Catholic school has a single hostile or negative reference to Jews."

Tanenbaum, who represented the American Jewish Committee in Rome 20 years ago at the time of Vatican Council II, the historic ecumenical council, said that a new era of understanding had begun at that time, and the old Catholic-Jewish hatreds had been replaced by "a revolution in mutual esteem."

"The Gospel of hatred of Jews is no more," the AJC spokesman said, "and today we are united in our recognition of obligations to the poor and hungry, a respect for human life, and visions, with different perspectives, of a Messianic kingdom."

In a question-and-answer period, Tanenbaum was asked to comment on the lack of formal diplomatic relations with the Vatican and Israel. "Israel does not depend on relations with the Vatican in order to exist," he said, "but it would like such ties for moral, symbolic and political reasons."

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JERUSALEM (JTA) -- Tourism between Israel and Egypt is increasing. The Ministry of Tourism said that 20,500 Israelis visited Egypt up to last October, a 10 percent increase compared to the same period last year. The number of Egyptians visiting Israel was 4,700, a rise of nine percent.

LEGAL EXPERTS ADOPT DECLARATION ON THE RIGHT OF EMIGRATION AND RETURN

NEW YORK, Jan. 1 (JTA) -- A conference of legal experts at the International Institute of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France, has adopted a highly significant declaration on the international right to leave and return, it was reported by Sidney Liskofsky, director of the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights of the American Jewish Committee.

Co-sponsored by the Blaustein Institute and assisted by a grant from the Ford Foundation, the conference called for all nations to: adopt legislative or other measures ensuring full enjoyment of the right to leave one's country, temporarily or permanently, and to return; prohibit penalties or reprisals against those seeking to exercise that right; invoke restrictions based on "national security" only in situations where the exercise of the right poses a clear, imminent and serious danger to the state.

Also, to impose no taxes or fees, other than nominal ones related to travel documents; tolerate no lengthy or burdensome procedures in issuing documents or notification of decisions; allow appeals of decisions to higher administrative or judicial bodies; permit communication with international organizations or other bodies or persons with regard to the right.

Designed To Serve As A Model

The conference has forwarded its Strasbourg Declaration to the 35 participating states in the Helsinki Accords review conference taking place in Vienna, the Human Rights Commissions of the Council of Europe and the Organization of American States, and other inter-governmental as well as non-governmental organizations.

The conference was chaired by Alexander Kiss, Secretary-General of the Strasbourg Institute. The Blaustein Institute was represented by Liskofsky. The participants included experts from Europe, the U.S., Latin America and Africa as well as observers from the UN Secretariat and Council of Europe.

The declaration was designed to serve as a model for the expert member of the UN Subcommittee on Discrimination and Minorities, Mbonga-Chipoya of Zambia, in carrying out his mandate from that body to prepare for the Commission on Human Rights a preliminary draft declaration on the subject. The Subcommittee had recommended nearly a quarter-century ago that the UN adopt such a declaration.

Assessment Of New Soviet Decree

In elaborating their declaration, Liskofsky said, the experts drew upon several model drafts, in particular the historic Uppsala Declaration on the same subject adopted 14 years before at a conference co-sponsored by the Strasbourg and Blaustein Institutes, at the University of Uppsala, Sweden. He added:

"The issuance of the Strasbourg Declaration came on the heels of the Soviet government's publication of a recently promulgated decree to take effect January 1 adding 11 new provisions to others now made public contained in a 1970 statute of the Council of Ministers. Presented as an easing of the emigration and travel process, the new regulations fall short in fundamental ways of the standards in the Strasbourg Declaration.

"They do not recognize emigration as every person's inherent right -- as affirmed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the legally binding International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. They also refuse permission to leave to applicants without relatives in other countries."

Moreover, Liskofsky noted, they narrow the family connection basis for emigration to applicants seeking to be reunited only with their closest kin -- spouses, parents, and children and siblings.

Also incompatible with the Strasbourg Declaration, Liskofsky stated, are the broad and unqualified grounds for denial of emigration, among them, "knowledge of state secrets," "reasons which affect state security," the "basic rights and legal interests of the USSR," and "preservation of the public order," as well as the failure to provide legal means of appeal to higher administrative or judicial bodies.

'Closed Door' Policy Continues

Some analysts, he said, find reason for optimism in the fact that the Soviet government for the first time officially recorded its emigration rules, which specified among other seeming liberalizations, that applicants refused permission to emigrate or travel would be told the reasons. However, the overwhelming tendency of the rules point to a continuing, mainly "closed door" policy.

The Strasbourg Institute, located at the site of the Council of Europe, was founded in 1969 by Rene Cassin, renowned French statesman and Nobel Laureate and co-author with Eleanor Roosevelt of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Blaustein Institute, established in 1971 to perpetuate the memory of Jacob Blaustein, encourages projects in human rights, inter-religious understanding and international affairs, areas with which he was closely identified. Its chairman is Richard Maass, honorary president of the American Jewish Committee.

SOVIET JEWISH EMIGRATION 'REMAINS AT A STAGNANT LOW'

NEW YORK, Jan. 1 (JTA) -- Only 914 Soviet Jews were permitted to leave in 1986, a 20 percent drop from the 1,140 Jews who were permitted to leave in 1985, according to figures released Wednesday by the National Conference on Soviet Jewry. The 1986 figure was 98 percent below the high-water mark of 1979 when Jewish emigration was 51,320.

Emigration requests last year by long-term refuseniks and released Prisoners of Conscience were repeatedly denied, the NCSJ report stated.

In November, the Soviet Union further impeded the emigration process by issuing a new decree codifying emigration, purportedly a liberalizing document, but actually one which tightened restrictions, the report added.

It maintained that despite Soviet gestures in high visibility cases, such as those of Anatoly Shcharansky and David Goldfarb, "Jewish emigration remains at a stagnant low."

While the release of Shcharansky in February, and Goldfarb in October, generated "great rejoicing" in the Jewish community, there is "justified apprehension concerning the situation of thousands of other Jews," according to the NCSJ, including 11,000 known refuseniks and 14 Prisoners of Conscience.